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Bard

Letters to L

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Lin (Collin) Pritchard

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Lastly, a thanks to my mother. I sort of hope you don't read this project, but I feel it is as much yours as mine. I love you.

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Letters to L

Lin Pritchard

Don't try to analyze the experience within yourself. (PPF 188)

Dear Ludwig,

I write to you for my own sake, feeling another winter come in around me, knowing it will be one of many, uncertain of how well I will, again, warm myself. The people I love move about me—coming and going, attentive at times, distracted at others—and at the end of the day, it is my responsibility to keep warm. Not a duty that ends with myself, but that opens onto anyone who's taken an interest, whose affection I've let develop—I owe it to them to delay the urge to leave, or to lay fallow, cold, for that leaving. I feel in that sense of duty a necessary conceit—a conceit that I am more than I am, that I have more to give than exactly what I possess. The conceit that I should and shall be more than all that I am. The belief that I shall become, and that such becoming will be beautiful, more beautiful than I will ever be able to believe and see. A belief in my own excess.

My mother trusts me more than I trust myself, and I have taught myself to trust myself with her trust in me. Ludwig—I find myself leaning on these convolutions, find myself willfully adding to my confusion, as if the immediacy of the fog that surrounds me were the only thing keeping me from the world's edge. There was ever a chance that I would not become who and what I am—and yet: October 18th, wind wet with two days of rain, 3:21 in the afternoon, the black cherry tree almost stripped and Red Hook full with the slick light of its traffic in the trees. Last night I argued for hours with my dulcimer-playing housemate about faith; and when we called it quits, he confessed that either he misunderstands me, or disagrees with me. The purple lady I planted in the summer grows darker, begins to burn itself to its roots for winter. Teenage boys shout from the street, passing back and forth their daily abuses and affections. Their voices crack and teeter between what they were and will be. On our deck, outside our walk-up apartment, away from the street, I'm witness. I'm witness to much, Ludwig—even in love, I feel I'm beside myself, watching myself over my shoulders as I wring my hands. But to be even there, alive, if a few steps back—to bear all of what's seen, from whatever vantage, into a felt world—that all these things

should be, that my life should be more or less what it is—that I should see just this as miraculous—it's a wonder, though I can't imagine a life otherwise.

I'm compelled to spell out just why I chose you. Your silence, assured, is significant. It means it's on me to make something of this. And addressing you assumes another kind of silence. Like a prayer, words offered to an absent addressee; words loosed from the anticipation of a reply. I nest my questions in an answer that never arrives. I give my questions over to you. I'm your reader, of course. But to imagine you mine—a faux-dialogue held together by the impossibility of reciprocation, dearly felt. What you have to say to me I've heard, heard figured in words meant for myself and others—but often intimacy, in true earnestness, is unsure of its object, is expressed only in a room one presumes empty. I'm listening, a half-century later—and you listen, a half-century before my birth, hearing my composite possibility in other mouths, feeling my joy and angst along other tongues. *Tell them I had a wonderful life (DG 579)*. Wonderful—to wonder at your *having-been*, though I can't imagine that you shouldn't have. In all your *suchness*, Ludwig, you were a miracle. And I love you for it—

Lin

Ludwig,

am I your duck-rabbit?

Am I a body riven in its aspects, balanced on the angle of its beholder? It's true that when I walk down East Market, wearing my mom-jeans high and saddled, still, with a broad jaw and its gunmetal pall, the men take their eyes off the road. I know that, feeling tint in triplicate—car windows, sunglasses, and the dim anonymity of motion—I am, to them, something to be solved. Because of, and in spite of, my body's ambiguity. I have begun to carry a small, red knife. They are trying to *figure me out*.

I think of you when I return their stares. I think of you, you who *can speak of red without calling it the colour of blood* (PPF 117). I look back at them and feel the weight in my hips; feel the commitment made two years ago; feel the tangible fruits of *that* speech-act; feel what in me *lit up* when the words were formed. More than three years ago, that recognition. *I meet someone I have not seen for years; I see him clearly, but fail to recognize him. Suddenly I recognize him, I see his former face in the altered one. I believe that I would portray him differently now if I could paint* (PPF 144). Ludwig, when you speak of sudden illumination, of familiarity found in a unfamiliar face, I remember recognizing, slowly, another tomorrow in the mirror. I think of how I painted that face, teasing together likenesses, figurations of altered future; how, each morning, I opened a heuristic of hope, effort, and their effect—how in the form of that face, I opened a possibility of fulfillment; I think of how, afterwards, I would smoke a cigarette out the shower window, wash that face away, tie my hair back, and drive to work.

And later, when I contemplated declaring myself a woman, when I felt *the temptation to say "I see it like this," pointing to the same object for "it" and "this"* (PPF 214), you chided me—were I to say, ***I am a woman***, what would be heard? And what would I mean by it? It is a different phrase on my mother's lips—and why would she declare it?

When the minister asked if you believed in God, you were honest—you told him, *Yes, but the difference between what you believe and what I believe may be infinite (DG 463)*. Perhaps nothing can resemble contrition between your lips, which was some glory, I'm sure of it. But does that difference stand in for a deeper difficulty, the agony of faith not yet actual? *And faith is faith in what is needed by my heart, my soul, not my speculative intelligence. For it is my soul with its passions, as it were with its flesh and blood, that has to be saved, not my abstract mind (DG 383)*. Faith in oneself as redeemable is as integral in my trial as it was in yours. I need faith untethered, apart from my mind, from a speculative compulsion that preconceives possibility, and boxes this becoming in—from the part of me that asks: *Do I have a chance at transfiguration?* Because if I form myself around *taking a chance*, as if day by day, cigarette by cigarette, conversation by conversation, that chance slimmed; as if *becoming* stood in a narrow interval of ripeness, to be plucked and consumed; because if I am always at attention, looking for an incipient '*chance*', I lose what you knew, *L*. Faith is an attitude, and an attitude is a state of attention—and the right attention sets one in the space of faith, in unswerving relation to that faith; *L*, I know an attention blind to means and ends might place me in the dimensions of miracle. And I know no momentary act of will, no holding to a schema or doctrine—*gender identity* or otherwise—will affect this becoming, will make it more than the pills I take after I wake, and before I fall asleep. I don't know what I mean when I say *woman*. Did you know what you meant by belief, by *God*? Could you have told me?

And I have breasts now, sure. I don't know how you would have felt about that, with your love for young, gentle, ill men, strung out in the radiance of your mania and genius. They flocked to you, emulated your open-collared self-seriousness—the kind of man to solve a puzzle, then savage its premise. A man who had borne suicide and war and genocide—a man of extreme moods. Did they love you for who you were, or for the coincidence of your aura, a cultivated advantage? For "*the duty of genius*"? Did you die believing in that genius, believing that a half-century later boy-girls like me would write you love letters? You are, of course, a figurative thing. I read in your

words a personal aspect; and looking at Ben's photo of you in Swansea, against that graffitied wall, I see in the severity of your brow a conviction that passes for faith, and in your eyes, momentary relief.

I have, believe me, been alone long enough to fall in love with you. To contrive a loving aspect in your image. To give timbre to a voice I've never heard, and never will. You left us language. Someone said of Freud that, whatever can be said of Freud, he left us lots of language—and you left us language, but more importantly, you left us an ethos of movement within it; you left us the explicit freedom of the *as*. Your love of simile set you up for it; and that love reminds me of when I pulled a sister's dress from Marco's toy-chest, and used toy-pots and toy-pans to fill out my chest; the excess of desire pressing play into shape, significance—it reminds me of when I told someone, “I feel *more like* a girl.” You were somewhat wary of women. My becoming one, or nearly so, was once unimaginable. But you, early in your life, knew that the limits of language are the limits of our world; that what we can speak of, we can conceive. What a difference the word *transsexual*, and then *transgender*, made! Their availability meant I could walk into the clinic and, only months later, affect a change in my chemistry. A new form in a language of human morphology. New rules to the game.

“*Things that bend are bent to begin with,*” a friend wrote.¹ Bent from the beginning. A boy beside himself, a girl outside herself. A queer thing, askant and misaligned. The joints open to the body's give, given from the beginning. Not fated, but open to pressure. And life all the pressure necessary. I fell to what I would be, what I wouldn't have been were I not given the opportunity, the words. Then, even more than now, I would have been your type, Ludwig—I would have been thin, gentle, troubled. I would have looked always to love whoever would *treat me for original sin*. I would have longed for my insufficiencies, not quite commensurate with my circumstances, to be treated as given from the beginning. Of course, you wouldn't have found me the same solution. You would

1 Gilad Jaffe, *Baby in the Bullrush*, pg. 14 from *Smoke from the Get Go*

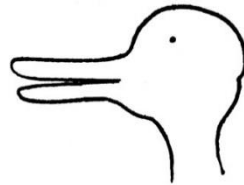
have envisaged a simple life that matched competence to challenge, a life dedicated to others, to medicine or public service. Maybe you would have sent me off to a factory, like Francis.

Maybe, L—and my love, all the same—

L

L,

I'm tired, truly tired. And, as each day passes, life looks longer. It's clear to me why duration and endurance share a root—inured to yet another moment, either it or I harden; and one breaks upon the other. Whether I'm the wave or the rock that rebuffs it, I don't know. My worthiness, and whether the whole thing's worthwhile—I'm not certain. And I worry that it shouldn't be certain—I don't feel it can come down to what might be certain. What certainty is—rigid, grotesque in the light of some of my moods—is not an option. L, I am your duck-rabbit. Your boy-girl. Each aspect warped to accommodate the other. Your duck-rabbit isn't a beautiful thing—



—and I, too, am compromised by my doubling. Warped, and not even as ambiguous as your animal. Angles that come together in contradiction. My beholder, if struck by the immediacy of one aspect, isn't ever far from the realization: a boy with *tits*, a girl with *stubble*, a woman with a *square jaw*. And that's forgetting my voice. A boy-girl. *Tranny fag*. No wonder no one's given the duck-rabbit a body—wings, or strong legs, must face in one direction or the other.

Still, when speaking, there is no forgetting my voice. It was my anniversary yesterday—two years of shifting weight, of flesh budding and buckling, of queer brain chemistry—two years of this becoming. Two years ago, I came home from the clinic with a bottle of little blue pills; driving alone over Avon Mountain, I began to sob. Breath heaving, heat and blur in my eyes, I didn't pull over. There wasn't a shoulder to pause on. That moment was to be pivotal—I imagined my life would pivot around that first blue pill; or, if not the pill, then at least those words, which brought that pill about, would be some kind of binding fulcrum. *I'm trans*. But I kept driving. Straight over the mountain.

It *was to be* pivotal. It wasn't. L, perhaps in another two years I'll have passed from that ambiguity—perhaps, by then, I'll know in which direction the duck-rabbit looks, and have turned to follow its gaze into grass and warren. Maybe I'll give the duck-rabbit a body. Maybe in two years I'll pass, pass *as* a woman—perhaps I'll have passed the duck-rabbit by, and be just another bunny. Something else under that cottontail. Pivotal as that moment was to be, my passing *as*, my being refigured *as* a woman was never really the goal; maybe it felt, at times, like a coming necessity, but it's never seemed that *passing* would, for me, be any real arrival. And I certainly haven't made a beeline. Wherever I'm going, I anticipate no homecoming. Despite what's irrevocable about my trajectory, the heuristic importance of this present, in all its ambiguity—as a moment of trial and error, an ambiguity out of which I can be honest—is something I can't discount. After all, what from the start is certain, isn't. L, I've learned, above all, process.

You wrote: *You must remember that the descriptions of the alternating aspects are of a different kind in each case* (PPF § 213). In the case of the ambiguously gendered body, and the violence and vacillation of its aspects, James Baldwin had a few thoughts in his essay, *Here Be Dragons*, from 1985; I've been thinking frequently of something he wrote:

...not to be frivolous concerning what I know I cannot -- or, more probably, dare not -- imagine, I hazard that the physically androgynous state must create an all-but-intolerable loneliness, since we all exist, after all, and crucially, in the eye of the beholder. We all react to and, to whatever extent, become what that eye sees. This judgment begins in the eyes of one's parents (the crucial, the definitive, the all-but-everlasting judgment), and so we move, in the vast and claustrophobic gallery of Others, on up or down the line, to the eye of one's enemy or one's friend or one's lover. (2)

L, your duck-rabbit doesn't gaze back. Doesn't feel the strange, transposed pressure of whatever impression it makes upon others, won't drop its voice an octave to dodge judgment. Your duck-rabbit won't tuck baby-blue nails deep into its pockets. But Baldwin knew the violence of *being read as*. *As* black, *as* gay. *As* trans. And I've been thinking about a rhetorical gesture he makes; I've been thinking about the association of *reacting* with *becoming*. He

suggests that to react to being beheld—to have an affective awareness of one's audience—is to become what one is *held as* in that gaze. Embodiment as a kind of feedback. Expectations dictating the field of action, if not the action itself. I think of my father's judgment, the hazel eyes of a tall, bald man, looking so much like myself; I'm not wholly certain “what [his] eye sees,” not sure how or what I become in his gaze. All I have are pieces, moments that make his perception of me manifest, *as* his first-born son, *as* a trans person. I offered him that word once: *trans*. That is, we went for a June walk around his neighborhood with the dog, and I *came out* to him. Came out in order to excuse myself from a beach trip with his parents, in order to avoid explaining my razor-burned arms and chest to my ignorant, ardent grandparents. We didn't talk about it again, for two years. He told me I would always be his son. *His son*.

All I have are moments. Piecemeal evidence of his perception. And the safe subjects we would stick to in conversation: my old cross country team at the high-school, my academics, whatever job I was half-holding down or getting lined up. The way he would avoid looking at my long, painted nails when I'd visit. Shallow things. But it was what remained unsaid, the subjects untouched, that became my cue; I learned how to navigate his perception of me by using those empty spaces as points of orientation. Acting is about leaving oneself aside, about cleaving to an awareness of the audience—and playing is all about the rules of the game, rules made real by one's participation. Each time I left him, I walked up his driveway full of shame and regret. I was eager to try and play into his understanding of me, to become jocular and nostalgic, to step into the role of *son*; I was all too eager to subordinate myself to his terms. I spoke in the idiom of my father's son, an idiom I no longer felt or understood. L, I think this is the real reason our relationship has deteriorated—we no longer speak because, when we do, I am disgusted with myself, far more than I am disgusted with him.

Estrangement from that *all-but-everlasting judgment*, that's been my answer to Baldwin's problematic. That and whatever I can posit in excess of *being seen as*. The first time I was ever both dissociative and fully aware of my

dissociation, I was sitting across from my father. He was speaking to me, explaining away another act of contempt, another attempt on my mother's reputation, and suddenly I was looking through him. I discovered that, if I didn't move my eyes, and blinked slowly, deliberately, his body would recede in an indefinite lengthening of space, and become unfixed, small; bent over in a little chair, his voice would fill that uncertain chamber, its echos unstringing the intention of his syllables, reducing his words to vagaries, idle and unbound. When my father and I face one another, I do not see him in his space and his time. I see him looking back at me, imagine him freighting in conceptions and misconceptions—like this: my mother let slip that he was once addicted to pornography, and that, uncomfortably, he was rather into '*tranny porn*'. I see him looking back at me, and imagine whatever he gleaned from porn as fully operative, as wholly affecting his perception of me. Thus I eagerly play the son. If he hunts rabbit, I'll play duck.

Of course, I've played bunny for others—makeup, pigtails, and a collar all make a nicely domesticated bunny. I used to meet with older men from the internet, men who taught me to fetishize myself, to cleave to the image in their eyes. To take what's *bunny* about me and exaggerate it, to reduce the rabbit to its libido. And, L, I admit, I look to you as a possible exception. Because I'm not a bunny. I'm your duck-rabbit L. Your boy-girl.

I love you, L—

P.S. — I've been tacitly associating *duck* with *boy*, and *rabbit* with *girl*, L. Perhaps I'm conflating waterfowl with my interest in their bodies—the figures they strike on a backlit, shining stretch of water; the revelation of their vibrancy as they rise and, with obvious effort, turn to face the sun; the sense that the intricacy of their composition is beyond even an artist's intention; my wonder for ducks is not dissimilar to my wonder for men. And it is, after all, the male ducks who are the more handsome. The male wood duck's chest is awash in a constellation of gold, clustered across a mahogany bend—I hope you got to see one, L, when you were in Ithaca. And I find the

obviousness of a duck's effort deeply endearing; the ease of other, slimmer birds, is all too effortless, and to forfeit elegance for the comparatively awkward transitions between water and sky, all for something as humble as water and one's own buoyancy, well—

Of course, I'm letting the analogy get away from me. It's all about me, eventually. I both envy those who make it look effortless, and hold in that envy some disdain for grace. And when I say *forfeit* I do it from wherever I'm standing; effort is as effort appears to me. But I find the awkwardness of many boys appealing. And the seeming ease of cis-women intimidates me—

L—

I was *simply glad* when my breasts came in. Six months on a single milligram a day, and the hope with which I'd begun had thinned, had begun to seem all too extenuated, subject to all kinds of fine print and conditions—and then, more than six months in, two pinches of flesh, a tightening felt twice in my chest. I noticed those buds for the first time on the flight home from Berlin, in the transitional confines of fluorescence and sinus pressure. On the same flight as a pregnant friend. Once just vestiges of androgynous, fetal time, my nipples' discomfort against my first denim jacket—bought at the Berlin flea-market—announced what new frictions would accompany this changing flesh. In the three months that followed—winter into spring—my areolae bloomed, and my nipples rose, pinkish and puffy, from those submerged buds; newly conspicuous and newly tactile, they carried a thrill back through my breast, inciting the plexus from which they projected. Everything about them new. Just my nipples at first, acute and chafing, eking a new silhouette out of every t-shirt. Then my chest pushed out around them, their extremity attenuated by soft arcs, handfuls of flesh—a pairing of mass and pinpoint, a newly incisive request.

I still palm them, L; they're not lost their novelty. I was *simply glad* when they came in. Gradations of joy—what was felt when I stood before the mirror, that confining sense of myself as *self-identical* slowly, happily disrupted, a frame forced to shift in the pursuit of a mutable, shifty image. My breasts ask me to consider myself, and my eyes answer differently each day. Somedays they mime the solidity of pecs, and emphasize what little abs I have; on others, they're obviously breasts, and call a growing curvature to my attention. I step out of the shower, ducking under the doorframe, and the mirror is square with my shoulders, reflecting only my body. What happens in that moment is what I cite when I justify my decision—joy, simple and irreducible. I made the right call, L. Most decisions aren't so intimately lived-with.

Love from your duck-rabbit—

L,

You, at the end of your life, were also on estrogen. Your goal was different, of course; you were trying to prolong your life, and blunt the effects of prostate cancer. My grandfather has prostate cancer—not much of a coincidence, common as it is. Three years ago I was told he refused the recommended treatment—it was the estrogen he refused. He's a man, and that *being-a-man* is at the forefront of his self-consideration. I don't know if I'll speak to him before he dies. It's been somewhere in the neighborhood of three years since we last spoke, discounting two or three minutes on speakerphone during Christmas at my father's—also years ago. I haven't come out to him, or my grandmother. He was only a year or two older than me when he deployed to Vietnam. Airborne ranger, then an Alaskan state trooper, then a state prosecutor. After a gay man sat at his dinner table—my mother's brother, my uncle—he washed the dishes and silverware three times. Just to be sure. He's been listening to Rush Limbaugh since before I was born. L, I wonder sometimes if he could understand me, if I could make him understand me. If there is a scenario—us sitting down at his kitchen table, Mt. Hood in the window—in which he wouldn't contest, or ignore, the terms by which I understand myself, and understand myself as a person, a person in transition. I remember being a boy in his backyard, with a trusty pop-gun, chasing my cousin through grass as tall as us—diminutive colts and cowboys, and a struggle among sun-winnowed yellows, and Oregon. I remember the stories he'd tell, my brother and I lured into fantastic adventures by an odd, somewhat grotesque creature with bright socks, whose whimsical name I've forgotten. He once wanted to be a Disney animator, my grandfather. I wonder if he would have been different, had his life grown out around cartoons, around violence without victim or gravity, instead of war, crime, punitive justice. I'd like to think I still love him, L. But it's not enough to speak with him.

He refused estrogen—you didn't. I wonder if your body changed in that time, became more supple, even as you grew more and more ill. If color brightened to you, flashed, even as you grew pale and unsteady. It held less

significance for you, I know, a man with the end of his life in sight. Hormones alone don't make the trans woman. This is not something my grandfather understands—faced with a choice between hormone therapy, radiation, or surgery, I'm certain he opted for those more invasive treatments, believing that estrogen would make him less of a man. And yet, he certainly did not believe they would make him more of a woman—or at least, if he did, he fell unknowingly into contradiction. No matter how womanly I become, I will always be his grandson; for him, I am the “*man*” that grew from the boy in his backyard. Or perhaps I've become something less than a man or a woman—just the physical evidence of some delusion, my body mutilated by mental illness, enabled by a perverse medical establishment. L, I know you weren't of an enlightened mind—what of womanhood I claim might have seemed delusion to you, too. But you didn't refuse the estrogen you were prescribed. And you listened for the sincerity in others, sincerity not bound to principle or precept, but sincerity contingent on the life of the person speaking. I feel I could have sat with you at the kitchen table, and spoken of the terms by which I understand myself, of the odd necessities in my worldly fluency—I feel we could have sat together and talked, and you would have listened.

Love from your duck-rabbit—

I've a poem for you, L—

I toy with
 being game,
 play fowl or
 rabbit for
 his incumbent buckshot:

 flushed, I confess
 to him — *I'm game* —
 & thus become
 fair play:

& once prey, before
 leaden momentum
 I affirm all
 available space:

 out of water &
 warren, ruptured by
 the rules of my pursuit,
 I came:

 wingtip & dew-
 claw wringing
 willingness
 from the body's weight:

 his dog barks,
 & the ring fills after
 the pull: call, &
 trajectory
 betrays me:

 it's over
 in an instant's guesswork:
 the spread: & the then leaden
 body limp, loosed
 beyond playfulness:

*“one plays patience
 by oneself—”*

L,

I spent the summer working—weeding, mulching, shoveling stone dust—with a boy I felt something for. By summer's end, I prized that *something*, loved what sprung up in me while we worked together. He left the job a week before I did. And, before he left, I told him. Confessed to that *something*. He said nothing in reply, nothing really, just an apology—and I encouraged him to say nothing. I understood my candor as an imposition. Acts of *honesty* often seem to be just that: imperative and request, muddled together—I look to another to place their thoughts, their actions in relation to me—to live in relation to me. Candor is the insistence of another consideration. A week before we'd gone bird-watching together, and, with my hand on his shoulder, I stood flush against him as I gestured to a bird I couldn't identify. He wore a sweater that, when he raised his arms, would lift. I wore my hair half-back, and a cropped shirt I'd had since high-school. And when I dropped him off in Tivoli, we sat in the car while he finished his cigarette, idly discussing the hazards of casual drug use. I drove home feeling tender.

Ludwig, I wish I didn't like men. I wish they didn't exude a certain heat, that I wasn't drawn into radius of that warmth. I wish that when I look at you, I would see an arrogant *philosopher-king*, another victim and advocate of patriarchal thinking. I don't. I don't see you, of course—you've been dead sixty-nine years, and I've been alive only twenty-two. I blend an understanding of your words with what I see when I look at the few photos of you. There's candor there, in your writing and in your expression before the camera. In the photo Ben took of you in Swansea, in front of that graffitied wall, your severity is balanced between a zealot's fervor and an ascetic's calm. Your wrinkles, which radiate out from around your eyes, are loosened; and that slack makes your capacity for tension, for energy, obvious. Out from your eyes comes a sense that you could focus, fixedly, on anything, with esteeming that object as *the center*—I get the feeling that you appreciated surprises, secrets, revealed or unrevealed,

found or forgotten. That you had an eye for what emerges from the margins of attention, an eye that understands the periphery, and the significance of horizons hide.

It's not possible for me to miss you. But I certainly missed you, missed out on the chance to be the object of your gaze. And that arouses my curiosity—I wish I could know how you, more than anyone, would see me. How you would speak to me. I wish I could have been alive to you as Francis was.

I guess I'm wistful, L—

L

L,

There are few photographs of me from the last few years. When I look at a picture of myself, at candid particularly, I try to read my body for the feeling with which I inhabit it. And what I find is that the act of reading exhausts me—it's reading my body as what others read of me; it's abandoning the enveloping pretense of my interiority for the facticity of the body as the body appears, for the severe and unflattering realism of a moment, a momentary expression flash-frozen, hewn from all context. And, you know what, that's pretty fraught. Fraught for a warped boy-girl particularly—fraught to take sides when your angles come together in contradiction.

L, I'm writing to you across from my reflection in a glass door. I've always preferred my image in glass over the silver-backed severity of a mirror—founded in transparency, glass is more forgiving. Crowned in fluorescent lights, my bathroom mirrors have always held a overt immediacy, and that immediacy makes the interrelations of mood, expression, dysphoria, and perception in that image both tangible and absolutely interminable and confusing. The body as what the body sees of the body—and eyes all blue-flecked irides crowding out pupils. Far too bright, my mirrors.

Still, I stand for photos, and I stand for my mirror everyday, and every other day I run razors over my reflection, trying not to nick my cheeks and chin; I try not to merely trade stubble for razor-burn and dried flecks of blood. But there's almost always at least two pricks of red, welling up, only to be drowned in handfuls of cold water—and if the handfuls don't do it, a dab of saliva on the thumb later will do the trick, well after they've staunched themselves.

There's few photos of me, too, L—

L—

This was it: pathos titrated into instances of agonized recognition, the seeming future's seeming horror strung out among long dissociative intervals—a life I can't recall living—empty, with my eyes closed, nineteen years. Where were you then?

Oh, and coincidence, that ugly amalgam—it left me grieving the incipience of a life split open.

L—

You were born a hundred and thirty years ago—died at 62, died 69 years ago—and I'm no longer sure why I'm writing you. Whatever's between my mind and body is only strengthened by lusting after the bodiless, embodied only in word—surely I'd be better served loving a hot-blooded boy, who might warm my bed this winter. I'll be cold again tonight; part of my window left its pane last week, and I could only wedge it so far back into its place. The children below me scream and cry, the man who might be their father chastises, and it all comes up through the floor. No one's been in my bed in almost four years—four different beds over four years.

Maybe I'm unattractive, L. I'm not certain I'd know. Maybe I'm intimidating, or unsociable. Maybe I drink too much, smoke too much. I do think I'd have been an attractive gay man. Shame, that. I'm not certain I know what it means to love, to be loved—at least, I'm no longer certain. I had a child's knowing, that I can remember—I can remember that knowing, but not what I knew. And I still feeling that knowing in moments. I call my mother at least once a week. Twelve marathons under her belt. She knows deep endurance; and I worry that she knows a kind of easy fatality I just can't fathom or dispel. Not sure if I've spoken of the divorce before. I'm still, in small sense, stuck on it. So, even if I have, I'll do it again.

I came downstairs more than ten years ago. Came down showered and ready for school. Eleven, and I'd seen my parents fight only twice before. I came downstairs to screaming, came into the kitchen as my mother threw herself at my father, fists against his chest. Her response to a threat, or declaration, I hadn't heard. What happened after, I'm don't know. What I remember is this: my mother shepherding me into the basement, bringing my brother, confused and frightened, after me. *Cheaper by the Dozen* on the VCR. Grilled cheese and my mother's swollen, tear-stained face. I don't know what happened in the kitchen, and all we heard from upstairs was sound, anger, desperation—not the words spoken, yelled. I remember my brother crying. He had less notice—my mother must have woken him with some hedged explanation, half-apology, before bringing him down to the

basement, to me. I remember his fear, the knowing and unknowing in his tears; I remember holding him and sitting on the basement guest bed and its scratchy, white quilt, in a big room filled with cellar spiders.

What stands out is my father's percussive descent—the feeling behind each loud step. And my mother behind him, and his parents on the phone, all begging him not to do what he did next. He spoke in language more vulgar than anything I'd heard on the school-bus, his obscenities stripped of all novelty and innocence. He laid the details of my mother's infidelity at the feet of a eleven year old and a nine year old. Frequency, locations, etc. were not fact then, as he stood before us, between the television and the couch. That the car I still drive was one such place is fact, but in that moment, it was something else. And the man—the man I'd thought my father's best friend, his co-coach through five years of little league, the father of the boy who thought it funny to hold me down, sit on my face, and fart. I don't remember my brother's reaction. That, more than anything, I should still be able to feel. I can't.

L, I know this isn't war at twenty years old, or a sibling's suicide. There were definite actors, and immediate blame. My mother took us to an indoor waterpark that evening, when my father's parents had convinced him to leave the house. Waterbury's *Coco Keys*. My brother and I burned through quarters in the arcade. I was told to turn off the cellphone I'd received four months ago, at Christmas, out of fear my father would call. We missed three days of school. My mother would disappear on the phone. I remember being between my mother's legs as we went down the waterslide. Three stories between her unshaven legs. This is most distinct, out of those three days. Maybe I made a note of it, as we descended—full of misunderstanding and discomfort, I made a note of it, centered a distinct memory amidst an event defined by dissolution.

I did confront her weeks afterwards. Back in our house, just us in the living room, the upright piano behind her. I'd unhappily practiced at that piano for two years. A gift from my father's mother. Angry, and my father wielding to a cuckold's wounded pride with unnatural deftness. I pitied him, then. But all I remember is her

remorse, and the reality I felt in her remorse; the complexity of years of unhealthy marriage in her voice, and her moving to hold me on our red couch, which would move with her, and on which she now sits nightly with the dog. And I remember how, over the next year, the weaponization my father made of his wound became unavoidably apparent. How I followed his spite to that from which it issued, linked it with his insistent authority. A decade of coaching gained an aspect—the coach's son subjected to a certain pressure, the pressure of being indicative of the father. Extra suicides on the basketball court, and what we had thought were asthma attacks—but were attacks of a more emotional nature. My father had been, at best, dismissive of my mother. At worst, he was a raging narcissist—ten years later, he sent a letter to my mother, her parents, and her friends, detailing his grievances, her mistakes. A year ago, he did that. Ten years of self-righteous retribution—that's what become demonstrative of his personality; that's what *'turned me against him'*, not my mother.

With Hester Prynne's grace, my mother bore all of this. Even as my father repeatedly forced her to court, eating away at her savings. Even as he disparaged her publicly, on Facebook and at community events, leveraging his social position in a suburban town—a compulsive networker, corporate man, president of the Little League—to paint her as a sinner, adulterer, a woman beyond redemption or pity. Even as he strived to brand her with a red letter, she would not degrade her children's father. As manipulative, as egotistical, as controlling as he had been in their marriage—despite a prior affair he described as “*practice*” for her, despite a porn addiction, despite the twisted anger of an impotent man—she acted with grace, with something as close to grace as I've ever seen. She bore it all within her. It wasn't until four years later, when I began to recognize his effect on me, and rejected it, along with his new marriage—to a woman whose son had belittled me for years, for being *vaguely* effeminate—it wasn't until I'd begun to reject the grounds on which he'd staked his personhood, that she began to speak of him. He almost called the police the first time I left his house for hers.

And when, after seven months of estrangement, he appeared in her driveway and demanded we speak—we spoke. And after we'd spoken, I told him I loved him, and he asked, “Do you?” That was as angry as I've ever been. Fifteen, and I'm cursing him repeatedly, blinded by my tears. He'd asked that through the car window, and my mother yanked me inside, held me. Only after that did she offer me her side of the story, of the narrative my father had dominated. Maybe she thought it was only after such an encounter that her actions would become intelligible to me. All the same, she had allowed her children to see her, at least in part, as a figure of my father's aggrievement. Four years, she was nearly silent, before speaking.

I love my mother, L—

L—

I listen to Townes van Zandt's *Colorado Girl* when I miss my mother; his is maybe the only voice I can truly follow through all its intonations, without missing a note. I think of her as I work to hit those notes—*It's been a long time mama / since I heard you call my name / Oh, been a long time / since I heard you call my name / I got to see my Colorado girl again*. I've always loved how certain country and folk singers use *mama* to refer to lovers; I love that *mama* because it opens the possibility of a reading, a rendition that doesn't take some blonde twenty years old as the object of its longing. Rather, the *girl of mine* for this ramblin' man is his mother, and that possessive expresses the distance and division of mother and child with transgressive intimacy. And transgressive intimacy is something I wish I could manifest—the distance between my mother and me is substantial, as it spans an unintelligibility of gender, desire, depression, etc. My mother and I live in different worlds, and, while we have learned to love each other over the horizons of those worlds, it's a blind love all the same. *Well the promise in her smile / shames the mountains tall / Ah the promise in her smile / shames the mountains tall / She can bring the sun to shining / Tell the rain to fall*. I can't shame those mountains, can't diminish the horizons that hide us. And I often feel that distance is my fault; like Willie Nelson's *Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys*, or Merle Haggard's *Mama Tried*, I wish my mother had had the power to keep me from going so far astray. *They won't stay home and they're always alone, even with someone they love / Cowboys aren't easy to love and they're harder to hold / And they'd rather give you a song than diamonds or gold*. I haven't been an easy child.

This, more than any byproduct of my deviant desires, habits, etc., is my shame, L. I was a good son, but in leaving that *son-sense* behind, I've neglected my responsibility to my mother. I've made her life harder.

I should've been better, I should be better—

L

L,

You never learned the fate of the birds you fed by hand—and I thank God for that. Ailing, you interspersed your last attempt at a finalized manuscript with bird-watching. You made Tom take you out on a rowboat and name the sea-birds. And every morning you scattered seed on the cabin's windowsill, cultivating the songbirds' trust.

Stray cats killed the waiting birds after you left. Given names, tamed, they waited within reach, remembering the generosity of your hand. I worry of what I expect of you, and the danger those expectations might put me in—like a friend, to whom I am wholly committed, but who experiences a change in which I am not included—and circumstance solely to blame—and I am left prey to moods that would strip me of the ability to sing. No one means to tame another, and I'm thankful for your silence.

L

L—

My father's family is all Catholic—and I can't say I'm wholly lapsed. I've written of my grandfather before—he's the source of my father's faith, my grandmother having converted before their marriage. At my age, they were already raising a child, raising my father. My father raised me Catholic—and my mother remained in the pew when my father, my brother, and I approached the altar and took Christ between our lips. My mother is not Catholic, opting instead for a vague conviction that '*God is love*'. I was raised Catholic, baptized, attended Sunday school, the whole lot. I left the Church six months before Confirmation.

Still, I say an '*Our Father*' some nights before bed, and repeat it to myself in moments of unsteadiness. Obviously, the Church does not approve of my lived decisions. Our parish was St. Ann's—and in high-school, my friends and I would joke that it was '*Satan's Church*'. I can still see the multitudinous dead flies that gathered in the church's high chandeliers, before its renovation. I loved the hymns, the organ. It's been years since I've been inside. The ceiling felt lower, closer after the renovation. My father would read to us, once I was eleven or so, from the Bible each night before bed. And even before that, we always together would say an *Our Father*, then a *Hail Mary*, and then the family prayer—a list of family, friends, and loved ones, before each of us gave thanks for something, and then *Amen*. I've forgotten the sequence and cadence of the family prayer, forgotten just how the names colluded with one another to become rhythm, certain syllables collocating to become melody, repeated at the end of each day.

That prayer began to change after my parents divorced. At first all the same names remained, but my father said half those names with different feeling. The rhythm of those names was elided long before the names themselves were to follow. Along with this was the introduction of new names—a stepmother and step-siblings woven in less than a year later, and with them, their constellated loved ones. The family prayer doubled in size, and my brother and I were suddenly repeating it half as often—we no longer said it at my mother's. There it had

been decided, by unspoken consensus, that an *I love you* and a *goodnight* sufficed. The family prayer began to collapse under its increased weight, its ambition unable to hold both old family and new in rhythm and melody. Then I didn't see my father for nearly a year. And I've now forgotten how that old family prayer goes—

My faith, a child's faith, went the same way. Christ had been a melody in my head, and God the rhythm anchoring that melody, as conscience, in my experience. A child had moved in keeping with their cadence, was moved to lay fear and shame before God in prayer. For prayer was not only the scripted Gospel, or a rite of the family, but something most earnestly done *alone*. I prayed most nights as a child, begging God for shameful things, or asking that He might relieve me of what made me beg, that He might relieve me of that longing for life in another body. I knew those prayer were unspeakable in the daylight—they were reserved for that fugue-like interval after the lights went out, and before I fell into sleep. It was on God's terms that I sought both forgiveness for, and fulfillment of, my shame. His name was the vector through which my shame was actualized.

My life, now, is the confession of my childhood—words, names interceded between the sequential downplaying of secrets; names I came to identify with. Putting words to it—I didn't have the word *transgender* as a child. And the words I had for God weren't sustainable.

You wrote: *For we see now that we have been... describ[ing] the experience of wondering at the existence of the world by saying: it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle. Now I am tempted to say that the right expression in language for the miracle of the existence of the world, though it is not any proposition in language, is the existence of language itself. (LE 6)*

I love you, L—

L—

I'm sending you the only poem I wrote last year. I must have written it six or more months ago. And I've forgotten what it means, what I meant by it. I wrote it after reading Simone Weil's account of the *Passion*, considering Christ's obedience, His consent to be crucified. Whether what Weil meant by her account—*utter and honest faith*—is in this poem, I'm unsure. I'm not sure I'm even capable of such faith. What I am sure of, is that this poem is an article of my faith, and that my conviction that this poem means something means something—

well-trod, what we bare –
again the tongue given & no
gain – as if locusts casting
lots, us – cold, hatched last –
but honeyed & warm when
he plucks us from the sand –
but no – *as if* – leaves those
vinegar lips – there's no
purchase to be found in
his flesh – & our & the blue-
bottle's cost's the maggot's
writhe – visible, unenveloped –
& well enough – the cross,
which we picture, bears a rent
sail – & parsing wind – we
conceive he speaks, after all –
says – *it is in the plural* –
that our lips & wings belong –

On its face, it at least attests to the place I grant Christ; fatigue, the repetition of vulnerabilities and burdens, of chance and course luck; and redemption—but in that redemption, no hypotheticals, no figurative, speculative consciousness. Redemption includes no gain nor loss, neither good luck nor ill fortune—we are merely present during a perpetual forty days and nights, during His temptation. And, fasting, it is us, locusts in a place immune to plague, with which he keeps himself upright. Redemption is monolithic, and for us, for whom there can be no perfect redemption, we must leave ourselves aside—Christ's body is not for our sustenance, nor our growth. To trust in Christ's body, we must watch ourselves suffer, writhe, wither. And yet, Christ is no monolith; crucified, punctured, strung up like a sail for our journey towards salvation—what do we make of him? The wind passes through his broken form, eddies within his opened body—and hearing that wind whistle, do we affirm the brokenness, the division of our beings? Do we look to what split things give us? To speech and flight? Or can we settle for what we cannot imagine, what's without form, without particulars—for what is entirely without us? Love inclusive of all suffering, L.

L—

We share an initial—an accident these letters have made meaningful. I came by that initial more intentionally than most, and it wasn't mine from the start. Born, and then named, my parents call me Collin—a name presumed Irish at the time of my christening, befitting an Irish-Catholic boy. Three years ago I shortened it; not as shorthand, but as a departure. I gave up my given name, discarded its first syllable—a syllable that returns in the request: *call me Lin. Me*—that accusative pronoun cleaving past from present, marking a moment of identification, one which proceeded not from nominative agency—that 'I'—but which came as a summons, laid before me.

Still, I answer to both, L. Both my parents call me Collin. I cannot insist that the name they gave me is not *my* name, not to them who know me by it. To ask that they know me by another name is to ask that they know me differently; and that's not a request I feel I can earnestly make. A name is, it seems to me, a gift, wholly gratuitous. And I split that name for a reason. I kept its last syllable because I didn't have the heart to leave that offering fully behind—I've never been one to start from scratch, and a life—both complete and partial—was lived in that name, and is still recalled by that name, recalled by those whose lives I've now passed from. Whatever revision I'm trying for should look forward with returning eyes—and the recognition of my being *Lin*, my being whatever I mean by *Lin*, in the life I've lived as *Collin* needn't forget that initial name. I answered to it for twenty years. *I must not saw off the branch on which I am sitting (PI § 55).*

Our names aren't ours, L. *Collin* was never *my* name—it was a word that allowed me to participate in a relation to others, to those who spoke to and of me. It allowed me to play and laugh, to love and cry. It was my parents' name for me, my teachers, my friends' name for me—but it was never my name for myself. I haven't a name for myself, even now. *Lin* isn't that. But I answer to it, and its use—its clipped enunciation in another's mouth—describes something of how I appear before whoever's calling on me. Those who call me *Lin* are part of

this new life—when they call me by my name, they are naming me, christening me all over again with each naming.

There was a time, shortly after I first made the request—*please call me Lin*—that my name went in one ear and out the other, without recognition. It was only through its repetition, the repeated acknowledgement of my request, that I became the person who answers to my name. So we share an initial, L. But I know you'll never answer to that shared letter.

The signpost is in order — if, under normal circumstances, it fulfills its purpose. (PI § 87)

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