

Millennium Letter

Millennium Letter is a portion of the unpublished
longer poem-sequence, *Dear Sister*

2001

Mother Duck Press
Just Deserts, Arizona 85617

Millennium Letter

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There is no life apart from our common destiny
- Carolyn Forché

We are not talking about knowing, but about vision, a pointing of view.
- Samuel Beckett

Maybe life is only one long flashback.
-Breyten Breytenbach

What does it take, you asked, *to communicate*.
Isn't that our real subject matter?
And what, I wonder, will it take to make you
if not convinced at least consider me
not just another scribbler contending with couplets
for the honor of being, as you say,
hung on the wall, more editorials
on the limits of your love, or consigned
to flame along with all the basketcases
who believed that their immortal lines
captured your likeness or were otherwise
to your liking. What can I do in mere letters
to turn your eyes this way, seeing yourself
reflected in mine, informed with my vision?

Though I'm not much good at small talk
there's something to be said for plain English,
just telling the stories our bodies know by heart
without ringing up all those mythic figures
or intimating that we're reincarnations
metempsychosing each other as it were
(there's Molly asking, *who's he when he's home?*)
but what else can I possibly say to bring you
out of that solitude of untold years
so deep even your tears can't find you?

If we leave the small laughter of stars
the moans of Venus in her glorious transit,
Pegasus with his over-sized head,
even that shameless Irishman O’Ryan
his whatchamacallit dangling in plain sight,
his blue-eye hellhound Serious at heel,
and leave those perfect knights and ladies lying
in bed awake on either side of the sword,

would I then dwell in your forbidden landscape
the satin highlands of your shoulders and breasts
the tattooed silk of your fragrant rolling lowlands,
a garden spirit in gardens of delight

or recall with you how simply a child
is disciplined by merely threatening
to withhold love, how that child finds vengeance
by weeping, how silence in your hands becomes
a weapon, how a girl can't be free
from her father's ban on promiscuity
until she gives him her virginity
one way or another, or remind you
how the freighters late at night slip
silently as ectoplasm into harbor
their running lights faint on the horizon,
skirting the battleships looming up out of the fog
anchored in National City?

Can we explore
 what makes us each unique within this matrix
 of stuff in flux we're all squeezed from:
 gene pools diet the accidents of birth
 if there are such things as accidents
 you up against Daisy Mae syndrome
 me stuck in a country and western song
 Valentine's Day marked in your date book
 the bull tossing his horns above the earth
 Halloween and Winter Solstice in mine
 the four-legged man-thing firing into the sky
 the myths we make of our given names and places
 the celibacies we celebrate alone

 as well as what we have in common this time:
 fingers burned at the same fires,
 flight feathers clipped by the same handlers,
 Indian-Irish bloodlines driven west
 from post-Jeffersonian Virginia
 showing up in our red-haired grandfathers
 the dream-talkers on our matrilineal side,
 borne in on the wings of war to bear
 witness, children of that goddess too, her taste
 for blood sacrifice, her necklace of skulls:
 conceived and born in the belly of the beast
 the low point of Europe's second Thirty Years War
 between the first blitzkrieg and Pearl Harbor
 the middle of that American Century
 when reason, already on everybody's shit list
 for being the engine of bureaucracy
 bourgeois boredom and dog-eat-dog existence,
 began to get her bad name whoring for war,
 perfecting the oily art of public relations
 to sell us a bill of goods for God country
 technological salvation and kindred
 buy-products of the home front killing machine

 — the first kids to start grade school after
 plutonium poisoned everything forever
 and liberal guilt for that and for Hitler and Stalin
 as well as dismay that the masses loved their masters

had sucked the braintrust who should have been our mentors
back to the arms of the center, born again
to original sin (Freud this time not Marx,
brother to brother as much as class against class),
asking each other after signing the oath
how they could save democracy from the people

— puberty in San Diego County
at the height of the hype for togetherness
the nuclear family values creed: do not
fold staple bend or mutilate,
do not talk about politics sex or religion
do not ever say what's most on your mind,
especially not around the dinner table:
uniformity billed as unity
conformity as patriotic duty
to counter the rising rate of suburban divorce
the rising red star of Sputnik on TV
rising hemlines and unwed pregnancy figures

— the first generation of teenage rock and rollers,
believing everything they told us in class
about opportunity and land of the free
and so, arrogant in our ignorance
a little ashamed our fathers were just workingclass;
but street-smart before we were old enough to drive,
picking up what we seemed to need to know
by word of mouth, shelves in second-hand stores,
scratchy voices coming over the airwaves:
starting to understand the score, to feel
in post-industrial ranges of scale and tempo
the nervous response to high fidelity
but not yet ready to bury history
completely the way a later generation
might, detached from time and relationship
by hits of impulse-image technology,
plugged into their ears and eyes and tongues:
gone, as the hipsters had everybody saying
but still hearing the heart's own
seditious syllables, the snake beginning
to uncoil there — starting that early to resist,
to read between the lies, deciding that early
to pay the cost of conscience and not let

government of by and for private power
shepherd us into the market they say will provide
the goods that God being dead no longer can,
not buy into the Eisenhower smile
the big-finned ads of his slippery running mate
the pre-fab lobotomized post-electric-shock
thorazined Miltown meltdown kingdom come
ordained by the Human Resource Placement Office

— never adjusting well to nice clean
 white normality assembly-line
 morality clocking in day after day
 doing whatever it takes however demeaning
 however out of synch with real face time
the time falling bodies take to light
 to keep the paychecks coming: bust ass
 our whole damned lives but never get ahead
 then if we're lucky maybe a gold wristwatch
 (how perfectly apropos) and a few years off
 for good behavior before we cash out

— never willing to identify
 ourselves with occupation or preoccupation,
 never willing to be white collar coolies
 expending ourselves in frigid cubicles
 processing endless streams of wasted trees
 facing our own planned obsolescence
 programmed into the public cult of the future tense
 we use to compensate for the disappointment
 being hard wired for instant gratification,
 under such circumstances is bound to produce

— never very good at faking it
 in bed or anywhere else, wanting the world
 to touch and be touched to the quick now
 in our own time but never able to hold
 a job or lover long enough never
 time enough to think it through to get it
 down: notes scribbled in heavy traffic
 phrases recollected at quarter rest stops
 in between trying to make ends meet and keep
 other vital functions happening
 without too much friction or free fall

a line here and there a word while loved ones sleep
 stolen moments trying to catch in ink
 without the falsification ego and reason
 are prone to, without the delusions of id and will:

the rushes of insight sensation meaning and feeling

the intimations of continuity
the intricacies of insect wings in moonlight

blue ice rumbling down a glacial slope
flashes of preternatural clarity
Luminous patterns in the DNA

traced like breadcrumbs to the last sign of that mind
before the one that comes back as the headlights recede
remembering itself as it might have been
as if we could let go without losing it

so what we get is pretty episodic,
lyrical if we're lucky, epileptic
homiletic or worse more often than not,
epic only by leaps of imagination

— dispersed like mendicants of an earlier age
 dispelled by a new economic order
 teaching ourselves to make do with precious little
 like sufis dancing with hunger as our food

called in times disgraced by scarcity models
 to self-restraint semi-voluntary
 poverty and sense of community
 as keystones in building our common wealth,

making an art of saying No to ourselves
 learning the hard way that the man of good will
 may not be the righteous man let alone the one
 the sticks and stones and coins say will cross the Great Water

— living in vehicles instead of houses
 our children brought up without their fathers as if
 our domestic angels had all been killed

while we,

weaving back and forth across the line
 that separates independence from exile
 knowing we can always be found guilty of something
 wanting to kill that pig in our own heads
 without running down the innocent eyes in our lights
 roadtesting totems taboos and rules of thumb
 giving eternal truths the acid test
 in order to protect ourselves from belief
 turning the mind/body split inside out
 subject to object object to subject seeing
 as far as possible not the other but both
 on backroads in beat-up old cars through strange states
 trying to find what we could do without
 what can be taken for granted what's real,

crisscrossed the continent looking for peace
 freedom love whatever we called it
 the timeless inside the tradition of the new
 the consolation of understanding the sadness
 the loneliness permeating our restless lives

our dream of America the Beautiful
before her addiction to efficiency
before her abduction by parties in uniform
love's body before the corporate designs
industrial cuts and persistent sound bites

or the wars we've lived and are living through:
 the Holocaust and other thermal devices
 the parallel lines where that buck didn't stop
 the MADness of Mutual Assured Destruction
 the ethnic cleansings and subtler genocides
 that characterize our so-called postmodern era:
 the villages they had to destroy to save them
 the tac squads and death squads and torture schools
 the thousands disappeared into mass graves
 while we held bloody hands to our polarized eyes

the Gulf where our bombs and radioactive bullets
 were no smarter than us: the cities burned
 the millions raped and slaughtered the brainless babies
 stillborn in border town free trade zones
 the children who do make it past birth living
 in sewers, starving behind the barricades –
 death as method extinction as tactic love
 of order gone ballistic, desire itself
 a debt owed to the government, the young
 sent off to war marriage prostitution
 by men with bleary eyes over bird-beak smiles,
 our lives eaten up with fear and hate commands
 of the National Insecurity State
 increasingly controlled by and for
 a minority of fundamentalist bigots

— under the desks in class under the table
 at work under God by executive order
 all those sweaty palms and sticky fingers:
 the UN Declaration of Human Rights
 never ratified by the U.S. Congress
 the global ban against patents on life forms
 never ratified by the U.S. Congress
 the Genocide Treaty ratified but not
 for twenty years after the fact, in '88,
 after amendments made sure the stars and stripes
 would never have to face charges under its terms;

hardly a breather between the Cold War
 and Culture Wars when Uncle Strangelove wasn't

bombing someone or paying somebody else
to do the dirty work: the White House
a wing of the Pentagon the Pentagon
a five-star property of Wall St
over half the new U.S. investments
between VJ Day and the Tet Offensive
put into the military-industrial complex
Ike like every President from Hoover
to FDR to Truman warned us about
and every one before and since has bowed to –

the war on poverty sold out for napalm
the peace dividend converted to tear gas
to keep the gooks jungle bunnies ragheads
camel jockeys and miscellaneous beaners
in line in Mesopotamia, southeast Asia,
Latin America, Harlem Watts Detroit
Newark LA DC and south Chicago

to put the red taxi flag down for the count to give
the flagging economy a shot in the arm
to pay for the glitz and greed and disbelief
suspended under a grade B father figure
asleep at the wheel dreaming Buck Rogers plots
while necktied ministers of the state religion
bankrupt the country with junk, high tech toys
and sweetheart deals for moving public resources
into private accounts in overseas banks

— our schools an anti-intellectual joke
our taxes invested in keeping kids off the street,
off balance, locked down in narrow courses
intended to fit them into the machine,
leading not to what used to be called education
and certainly not to creative liberation,
the integration of body mind and spirit,
but to the time clock and credit card, assembly line and cubicle
in order to justify subsidies for research
into novel ways of subverting nature
under Professor Brownose and Senator Pork

our cabinet intellectuals and artists
apologists for the *status quo* at best,

expert mercenaries at worst, as fond
as their lawyers of buttering toast on both sides,
oiling the machinations of the state
in service to some nostalgic notion of things
that might have been before the fall into this
unwashed mess of increasing uncertainty,
this shiftless paradigm of lost tenure
where nothing can hold true from top to bottom,
the center swallowed by the circumference,
the only known path to peace the road to war

— dumbing down the public with cut-rate classrooms,
sheepdip news and pageant plays of sports,
sex and the miracles of science until
it's hard to find anyone but wackos and wingnuts
even keeping an eye on Uncle Sugar
at his *Secret Government* video game
snuffing out liberty in the name of homeland
in the name of fatherland security,

hard to find anyone who doesn't believe
there really is one crisis after another
one Hitler-Stalin avatar after another
that only generals admirals and the eggheads
on their payroll have the know-how to manage,
keeping the permanent war economy state
on the brink of utter catastrophe
where they can count on jobs for themselves and their friends,
while greasing up disposables output
to keep the unemployment reasonable –

billions spent, for instance, to build better mousetraps,
wars begun to try out the latest spear,
leaders put in place who are good for nothing
but the ability to rise on each occasion,
affirm their mettle, take a stand for the right,
light up the little screen and big board,
make us feel again the national glory,
the passionate story of market truths, consumer
goods and beauties digitized and pixeled,
without doing squat to better the common lot

— our inner cities a national disgrace

clogged with human waste and misery
occupied by armies of sadist police

our mentally ill and chronically poor turned out
into the streets begging for food and shelter
so we can play White Father to captive markets,
brokering nations into client states
under threat of hostile takeover

while prisons grow faster than a President's nose:
the highest hard time rate in the First World
more blacks locked up today than the South had slaves
millions of young men (black brown
red white, almost all of them
below the bottom rung of the income ladder)
put in cages and denied the vote
whose only crime besides being born poor
colored or both is believing the killing should stop
or this leaf makes better smoke than that one
or freedom without equality is a lie

— the air and water and who owns them and what
they put in them the nimble clouds seeded
with poison and lies the old growth hills stripped
the farmers made into serfs to corporate giants
or taxed off the land to make room
for subdivisions of sick houses assembled
from toxic panels coated with toxic paint
surrounded with perfectly green toxic lawns

our bodies turning on themselves, unable
in the blood soup of renegade chemicals
electromagnetic mishmash and mutated genes
to tell good cells from bad, disease from health,
our moral fiber twisted into legal
briefs religious tracts and arms brochures,
our holy desires spun into market demands,
our future consigned by nuclear winter or aberrant
planet wobble to hells of fire and ice:
a global greenhouse filled with internal combustion's
off gases, a deep freeze from only a few degrees
drop in the average annual mean

or murder as the great American artform:
 from shower scenes to the silence of Geoffrey Dahmer
(A large OJ and two sliced throats, please)

murder-suicides by teenagers
 our homegrown version of suicide bombers
 hip to how it will play on the world news

fetishes made of selected of body parts
 pure killing machines as box office idols
 pumped up automatons of both sexes

wiping out zillions of unAmerican creeps
 (blood the food of those gone mad, said Olson)
 the only good alien a dead alien

so death devolves to a special effect a thrill
 something that happens to the enemy
 the not-Us the bloodless images bleeding

on screen and paper while real people die
in extremis: in streets in bedrooms in class
 the body blown open in public or falling apart

inside, the mind lost in yesterdays
 as much as in fear of what's to come: more
 of us than we like to admit ending up cold

poor tired hungry and alone,
 learning only very late in life
 how the body's plumbing works, or doesn't,

how important one good movement a day is
 reduced to believing there is no purpose or meaning
 but to get through it as unscathed as possible,

our fathers on their deathbeds wanting our blessing
 our mothers fragile, hair blue and skin grey,
 some in rest homes and care centers some
 in neighborhoods and apartment complexes

some much less, almost all of us
(even of those who can afford insurance)
in isolation the opposite of love,
an obscene ritual starring our wasted elders

so drugged out and with no one singing them through
they have no choice but to do what overworked nurses
make you do for a chorus of family members
so mortified at the inconvenient fact

that their only tune is patent denial
robbing us of all we have left: our rites
of, and rights to dignity during,
our final north by northwest passage

or Sophia's ancient teething ring
 encompassing the fecund world she knows
 she is when she looks that way instead of this,
 that rubbery doughnut everyone
 has chewed on who ever really thought about
 the difficulties of coming through death intact

the way such thoughts turn on the nature of nature:
 the meaning of ideas like time and substance,
 existence and being, self and other and purpose,
 the categories the Learned Doctor prescribed,
 the aboriginal is-ness of what is,

the underlying assumption of everything
 before the voices started, before the colors
 illuminated and movement danced in form:
 the mind set in order to understand
 in all its manifestations and situations
 its usefulness to the real-life questions at hand,

being as eclectic or catholic
 or both as we can be under the circumstances
 while trying to keep our nervous energy
 well-grounded, not fall into the lover's trap
 of believing ideas and feelings are real
 the way a tree or human being is real,
 believing just because we know all we know
is all we know that whatever else may be
 whatever other we define ourselves by,
 whatever impulse of background noise we emerge from
 or find ourselves become emanations of
 is somehow less than Knowing Knower Known;

in contradiction, then, in that respect,
 to the Angelic Doctor who holds in sum
 that what he calls the *intellectual substance*,
 constituted solely of passion and will,
 has priority in every sense
 (logical temporal ethical and moral),
 has primacy in each of the four dimensions
 (formal material efficient and final),

over what he calls the *sensible substance*,
body, which he argues is not primal
but informed with said mentality,
and so, he deduces reasonably enough
(*QED etcetera*),
the less tangible reality
is *in principio*, of the essence,
and so, the psyche's true subject matter,

not this tumbledown lie of collapsing structures,
unsolved equations, flights aborted and hijacked,
keys and glasses misplaced, bridges washed out,
deadend roads and lost opportunities,
but something like the mind looking at Mind,
Faith contemplating Truth and Beauty,
finding room on the pin for millions of angels,
making a trinity of the Triple Goddess,
one abstraction giving forth another,

— one of the biggest problems with which conception
(besides the absence of sensual delight),
and not unlike the problem we would have
if your intellectual substance would let us,
is how not to turn into each other,
not to lose in the illuminated
capital letters and cursive headpieces
incorporated in our manuscripts
The earthiness of the ash, water and salt
we're composed of, the lead, ink and ether
that has made us visible to one another,
these persons we are in this time and place,
these lower case selves we've come to love,
these bodies that kiss and tell our stories

or maybe what we need to remind ourselves of
 instead of headlines, schoolbook teasers and prayer
 is that old (maybe the oldest) conundrum
 among these millions of things we have in common,
 these equal millions of things we call unique,
 cutting to the quick of all relation logic
 ethic metaphysic, all intellection,
 making us look at ourselves in perspective
 in depth seeing with our own eyes
 the question asked long before Pythagoras asked
 the question answered by asking *Who's asking?*
 The question Why are there ever two? *God*
 (you should pardon the expression) *being sufficient*
 (as Jeffers said) *might be still*; but since
 there are, and two together is a kind
 of miracle, and you are there and I
 am here, maybe get into what *that* means
 (keeping in mind as always the *not this, not that*):
 the dialectical possibilities
 of binary systems the magic of metaphor
 imagination and participation
 the paradox Blake called the *cloven fiction*
 the crux of physics biology and mind
 chemistry destiny and justice
 body and psyche gender and sex cleaving
 to one another substance and energy
 masquerading as identities
 the interplay of *atom* and *item* (that
 which cannot be divided) with *atmos* and *atman*
 (the breath of life which rendered endlessly
 remains one) —*mysterium coniunctionis*
 — *coincidentia oppositorum*
 the urge of cells to conceive and split,
 the poem to coalesce out of the tangled
 limbs and visions broken free in the storm,
 the prepositional options for coming together
 given the obvious primacy of chaos
 inertia and plain old heifer-headedness.

Notes

There is no life. Carolyn Forché, Preface to Claribel Alegria, *Flowers from the Volcano/Flores del Volcan*, tr. Carolyn Forché (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1982), p.xi.

We are not talking. Samuel Beckett, *Le monde et le pantalon* (1945), quoted, Breyten Breytenbach, "The Shattered Dream," *The Memory of Birds in a Time of Revolution* (NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1996), pp.135-136.

Maybe life. Breyten Breytenbach, "Writing the Darkening Mirror," *The Memory of Birds in Time of Revolution* (NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1996), pp.1-9;3.

What does it take to communicate. Sharon Doubiago, "Outlaw" *Psyche Drives the Coast, Poem 1975-1987* (Port Townsend: Empty Bowl, 1990), p.3.; cf., Rollo May: "'Communicate' is related to 'commune', and, in turn, both are avenues to the experience of communion and community with our fellow space men," quoted by, Adriana Diaz, *Freeing the Creative Spirit: Drawing on the Power of Art to Tap the Magic and Wisdom Within* (SF: Harper, 1992), p.57.

editorials. . .on the limits. Sharon Doubiago, "His Love," *Psyche*, p.152.

the stories only our body knows. Sharon Doubiago, "Eden Stone," *Hard Country* (Minneapolis: West End Press, 1982), p.4.

that shameless Irishman. "BECAUSE A FIR TREE/SHOOK HANDS WITH ORION/That famous Irish constellation," Kenneth Patchen, *Because It Is* (NY: New Directions, 1960), p.27; also, "'O'Ryan,' Father called Orion, 'that Irishman.'" Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood* (NY: Harper and Row, 1987), p.209.

garden spirit. "those mild fields of happy Eternity/ Where thou & I in undivided Essence walkd about/ Imbodied, thou my garden of delight & I the spirit in the garden," William Blake, *The Four Zoas: The Torments of Love and Jealousy, Night the Seventh*, p.84, ll.4-6, in David V. Erdman, ed., *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (NY: Doubleday, 1965), p.352; cf., also, the *Song of Solomon*: "A garden enclosed is my sister."

to withhold love. "your creed:/ to withhold love/ from your sister." Sharon Doubiago, "Wyoming", *Hard Country*, p.140; cf., "By using love as the reward for renunciation of pleasure, the child is trained. . . conditional 'love' is always the method of authority." David Riesman, "Authority and Liberty in the Structure of Freud's Thought," *Selected Essays from Individualism Reconsidered* (NY: Anchor, 1954), pp.221, 299.

silence in your hands. "my perfect silence/ my own unconscious fascism," Sharon Doubiago, "Heartland," *Hard Country*, p.145.

a girl can't be free. "In a culture where there is no ruling principle of love, no goddess to whom the first fruits of labor are dedicated, it happens that the father is the one to take the virginity of a girl. . . .in our culture it is, for the most part, a covert operation that happens in the mind of the girl. . . .In order to leave home, then, a girl has to sacrifice her virginity to him (or to God). . . .the father's law that she not be promiscuous. . . leaves her unfree to choose." Nor Hall, *The Moon and the Virgin* (NY: Harper and Row, 1980), p.101.

the spirit that always says no. Goethe's *Faust*.

second Thirty Years War. Tom Engelhardt, "The Cartography of Death," (23 October 2000), pp.25-26, 27, 29-33.

still hearing. cf., "our original view of ourselves from inside," D.E. Harding, *On Having No Head: Zen and the Re-discovery of the Obvious* (London: Arkana, 1986), p.38.

between the lies. "The art of being civilized is the art of learning to read between the lies," Kenneth Rexroth, "Greek Tragedy in Translation, *With Eye and Ear* (NY: Herder, 1970, p.143. Quoted, Ken Knabb, *The Relevance of Rexroth* (SF: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1990), p.19.

falling bodies. William Irwin Thompson, *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light: Mythology, Sexuality, and the Origins of Culture* (NY: St Martin's, 1981).

never enough time. "Lonely poets. We need to be alone to think." Diane Wakoski, "Greed, Part 3," *Smudging* (Santa Barbara: Allan Swallow, 1992), p.19.

hunger as our food. "A sense of there always being something missing, a hunger for what we don't know what, a void we are always trying to fill with always ultimately unsatisfying substitutes for whatever it is. . . . Both Plato and Freud called it Eros [144]. . . . It is the force of our searching and striving. ('Hunger is our food,' say the Sufis)," Martha Heyneman, *The Breathing Cathedral: Feeling Our Way into a Living Cosmos* (SF: Sierra, 1993), pp. 143-144.

domestic angels. "In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf writes that in order for women to free their creative energies, they must learn 'to kill the angel in the house,' Wendy Martin, "From Patriarchy to the Feminist Principle," in Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi, eds., *Adrienne Rich's Poetry* (NY: Norton, 1975), p.176.

independence from exile: Thanks to Gilah Yellin Hirsch for this distinction.

death as method. "death as enforceable method. . . extinction as a social method," Daniel Berrigan, *No Bars to Manhood* (NY: Bantam, 1970), p.70.

murder as. . .artform. "the triumph of murder as an American performance art," John Taylor, "Murder: The Ultimate Art Form," *Esquire* (September 1994), p.82.

Angelic Doctor. “Together, the passion and the will constitute the ‘intellectual substance’ which is the form of the body”: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* II lxviii, quoted, Herschel Baker, *The Image of Man*, p.195; Blake, on the other hand, says in “The Four Zoas”