

Letters to Arthur

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LETTERS TO ARTHUR

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Contents

<i>1 / Shme</i>	1
<i>13 / Matrimony</i>	2
<i>14/ A Bouquet of Roses</i>	3
<i>25 / Au Revoir</i>	4
<i>43 / Copenhagen Window</i>	5
<i>44 / Craft Fair</i>	6
<i>45 / Harvest Festival</i>	7
<i>46 / Flight</i>	8
<i>49 / Ottomans</i>	9
<i>50 / Those Monstrous Souls</i>	10
<i>53 / New Forms</i>	11
<i>54 / The Children's Science Museum</i>	12
<i>60 / Train There</i>	13

*for a cat named Kev
who might be a mascot
and for Christina Collins
for everything*

“Little drunken holy vigil! If only on account of the mask you’ve granted us. We endorse you, method! We’ve not forgotten that yesterday you glorified every century of ours. We have faith in poison. We know how to give our whole life every day.

This is the age of ASSASSINS.”

Illuminations XI: Matinée d’Ivresse

Profuse thanks to *Lockjaw Magazine*, in which the following poems were first published: “1 / Shme”; “43 / Copenhagen”; “46 / Flight”; “53 / New Forms”; “60 / Train There”.

The introductory quote is from *Les Illuminations* as translated by A. S. Kline. All other quotes and excerpts are from *Illuminations and Other Prose Poems* as translated by Louise Varese (New Directions, 1957), as indicated by use of italics.

1 / Shme

The face in the mirror needs an elevator to ascend a series of steps. The face is a skyscraper and I climb inside using two hemp ropes. She wants you to climb in with her, Arthur. She thinks you'd like the view.

She is Shme but it depends on what you know of Romanian art. It depends on the 19th century. I wanted to have sex on a balcony with Tudor Arghezi. The moment of longing took place a decade after the end of ideology and two years prior to the birth of revanchist rhinoplasties. A year when I desired to lie half-naked and swathed in lilac silks waiting for the painter to enter.

The year before I wanted to wade through so many rivers that I could no longer move through an image of the landscape. A staph infection in my left foot accomplished my ends and opened wide the doors of rural hospitalure. When the nurse served doughnuts, hospitality ached down the narrow shaft of its word root and I bit in.

We understood that She belonged to her everyday life but you told me the perspective was wrong. Did you want me to watch her like Musil from atop the wardrobe? This is the twenty-first century, an era where insider views abound. An inside-her view panorama perhaps befits us.

She lacks this everyday life you speak of — as if Shme cannot move across time, this eternal present we wrap for future use. Drop the hash pipe, Arthur. We are here.

13 / Matrimony

The hair hangs down her back like a horse whip so when she speaks all one hears is the overture of teeth.

Cross my heart before the stained glass stiffness of cordial exchange then look for another face—a face unchanged by hair—still unspoiled by the expectations we keep of haute and holy things.

How light falls in colors across a marble floor.

How the halo is light's coveted illusion.

God damn give me a taste or some sacred whiff of light, I say, but things get even.

Things get so that even the shards of colored glass stab my throat.

We drive in cars like newlyweds with beer cans clattering behind. After driving we return to the recollection. From the wedding to the hearth, we move in and out machines still *dragging a cherished image*.

Arthur, look at us. Love lingers on in uneaten birdseed.

14/ A Bouquet of Roses

Arthur, you picked the most recent of the two Romantic phases to honor or accept as visionaries. Gautier, de Lisle, de bunville, but only Baudelaire could be *the first visionary, king of poets a real God!*

You said inspecting the invisible and hearing the unheard were entirely different from lit recapturing the spirit of dead things.

But They come bearing this bouquet.

25 / Au Revoir

They said what came to mind under the postcoital pressure of unspent sweat. *The first to enter would come out cured, they said.* He called her words she couldn't pronounce but liked because they sounded French.

She felt the words glide past in costume, not a cheap production this one — his chest hair coiled like a uniform, he could be part of a firing squad, possibly critical to the spectacle itself though there were other men with guns in line and the deadly bullet lacked an initial to signal the other.

“Come here,” she whispered sympathetically. He was (after all) one of many and no way to tell them apart by their art.

French was your language, Arthur. Slippery as sidewalk rain, French hid things, protected lovers from distended sexual syntax, conjugated so nicely to cover the goodbye fuck.

43 / Copenhagen Window

The drive through backwoods is humbug.

The Count is driving and his kid leather gloves keep him from feeling what it means to drive. Perhaps he is driven and I am driving but we go too fast to read the signs.

Had you warned me, no difference. A warning warms words into campfires and some of us know only the horror of icy cold hands. I keep warm with your warning, Arthur, the countryside pivots past like a gallery of red awnings and buzz cut grass.

At the gas station, *gentlemen savages hunt their news by the light they have invented* as the sky crests mauve; a weak rural mauve, the decay a decoy, a shade no painter would mix if he wanted to tell a Sunday story.

It is Sunday. But not a Sunday story comes loose.

44 / Craft Fair

At the craft fair, one finds silk toothed puppets and coverlets spun from blue factory uniforms. Clay figurines follow us around; the set-up is a circle of stands thronged by entrepreneurial vendors. The crafters vend themselves though only the painter sells her body.

A threnody of road rage foams out from aluminum cans.

When I see a box top, it becomes a school, the schoolyard shrinking each year to grow new rooms. Children are said to be sprouting. They thrive like weeds. The flowers are televised. Students dissect frogs on small computer screens, their eyes overcome by pixelation.

At the craft fair, the music of plucked strings rubs shoulders with the schadenfreude of plucked eyebrows, *the same bourgeois magic wherever the mail train sets you down*. My body is a barge inching through pot roast. Arthur, the swamp is soothing. I feel safe. Fear only the sight of sliced carrots.

45 / Harvest Festival

In the nearby town there is an annual harvest festival. Druid oaks clench gnarled fingers into the ground and raise trunkish fists through sidewalk but families don't look worried.

Omens converse in indecipherable languages— lunar cycles, tiny tongues of fresh-water tides, a star more silver than factory steel freshly expressed. The production cycle is expressionistic. The tongue of the omens is unfamiliar; the subject is someone else.

A bearded man plays the calliope on an electronic device but my eyes turn from faces to trees, *so much the words for the wood that discovers it's a violin*, the lips consigned to lost pagan lyrics.

Arthur, does it please a man to be a poet? It pleases a poet to un-be a man.

46 / Flight

Breathless nomadic foot soldiers of inner city disharmonies, they stand with feet poised near the wings of simple skateboards. There is no wind but flight, the earliest eternal dream, the folly of business class. I watch their ardor smack the concrete; flip the palm's penny; stop counting. Above me, their arms outstretched, who dares speak the truth, say how children hug hardest the sky.

You promised poets would be citizens — their words no longer lyrics to describe the melody of actions, ex post facto, no longer accompaniments but conductors and bearers of mad batons.

My top hat is waiting. A word in the poet's mouth is not a description but a prophecy, the lozenge encrawled, the face enscribbled. We dress up like guides while the masses play Scrabble, look to us for odd words. Politics partitioned like the wine in a chalice.

But the skateboarders fly, Arthur. They flllllllllyyyyyyy past me.

No word which comes can beat them.

I am left behind, eyes wide as spring lily pads, throwing words to ducks who already know how to eat but humor me nevertheless pecking crumbs.

49 / Ottomans

The paper lines, thick leather between thumb and forefinger, the Arabic script curled into paisley patterns across the watercolor page. Inscribed in Turkish, the scent of Ottomans infuses the open nostril. A strophe on the page unfurls the jib of the mind.

Among the 29 ink and watercolor drawings, I pause at Noah's arc, outlined in gold, soils filled with a wind of dust like words in "noshki" script. This Noah harnessed more than prayer to choose direction across the water; pity the implausible dove.

Arthur, I followed your footsteps through Turkey with only this du'a name in hand.

Other prayer books poke without pictures but I needed a translator only Abd al-Qadir al-Hisari obliged. As the prayer guide soothed striving Ottomans, it anointed my journey, the salted winds drove me seaward. No port closed its legs to my entry.

A footprint of the Prophet is holy—a Harlem *kadem* filled with tiny etched calligrams. We need illustrations because the sand keeps no imprint and the wind steals our breath; not even the sacrosanct words remain; a sailboat must know to steer left.

50 / Those Monstrous Souls

The soul has to be made monstrous, you say, for the poet to grow into a visionary.

It takes an extensive *rational disordering of all the senses* where every type of love, suffering, and madness are offered forth. All the poisons and lies within must be consumed again—intent leaves no space for guile.

Arthur, you urge me to consume the “ineffable tortures” and keep only their “quintessences” as souvenirs. The Unknown is where we go when everything has been examined.

My scalpel is rusty with blood and bile; the cuts did not clarify but only exposed more and more interior colors. My soul is post-surgically silent, stiff as morgue slab.

I pick up where you left off in the embers of what you wanted to find adding tinder to a pile, being a poet, a thief of fire when you know by the burn marks on my hands, the scar tissue between fingers. Words once lit devour entire eras; the past is flammable and burns before the story is saved.

A poet is a thief of fire without smoke to hide his face.

You say *a language must be found*, a Universal Language to spill the seeds no that the trees have been burned, the underbrush destroyed, so much richer the soil for our saplings.

You say the future will be materialistic.

53 / New Forms

Inventions of the unknown demand new forms, you confided in an epistle to a male friend.

In the same letter, you said women must be liberated so they might discover new unknowns previously kept from hungry eyes.

Arthur, how my fingers trembled when you offered me sight, how easy to overlook the caveat which requires me to see something pleasing.

You call it “unknown” but what of me have you known and what more supple mystery than the nights of a creature who bleeds by the magnetic force of the moon.

Inventions of the unknown demand new forms. the form of female you create to invent unknowns—will she give your words the life you drain to make her?

I think of the unbearable witch who lights her clay pot fire— the one who *will never tell us what she knows, and what we do not know*. After the deluge, pry open her lips and compel her to speak. Call her compulsion poetry. A baptism of fire to enshrine a new form.

A new form but the bend of her back looks the same.

54 / The Children's Science Museum

In the children's science museum, the skeletons are animated by colorful posters and all the earth's creatures speak the same tongue; English cloud-bubbles loom over the heads of cartoons and fleshpots alike. We are alike in our boredom, eager to move on to the next exhibit. Snake skins and turtle shells. How to make a tambourine.

The healthy young mothers and preteen daughters do not have *eyes full of pilgrimages*; their eyes beckon like empty parking spaces or covered parking lots, the end of the prairies, the girls want only to park, angling for the best slot, the one her neighbor wants. There are no princesses—only misses—and pasture is freely disinhibited.

A stiff book summons no attention. The females more like Venus flytraps only in moving are they filled.

I am one of them, a girl among others. We keep ourselves from pillage by looking vaguely unhappy.

60 / Train There

The train wobbles, batting my reflection from side to side between two metal tracks though the mirror is a box I mostly move in the space left by parallel lines.

Mostly I avoid intersections. Steer clear of traffic lights, yes/no signs, the manufactured consent of road rules. Nod briefly at elderly passengers on the way back to a window seat because they are old enough to read Robespierre's bloody virtue on my brow. Wise enough to fear reformations.

The magistrate judges me from the surly compartments of his Facebook page. Social media tweets against the heart's constant intercourse with blood. The heart has no hands and yet its hands are bloody. Bloody heart, bloody fingers.

Newcomers have a right to condemn their ancestors. Thus the elderly feed looming hawks with morsels of bread. Their chins roll into necks like Twinkies. Rolling chins, Twinkie faces.

A nearby third estate sends text messages in a code one mistakes for mysticism. One must look past the third estate and the garish gold of Versailles to the arterial congestion of traffic jam expressions whereby the bored youth paint their faces a tepid gout.

One regime spawns a change in tempo. Pointillism lost the starting point. No point at which to begin. No point in beginning. We move between tracks, moves coordinated by tracking devices.

Treason is a choice between voting and terror. We vacillate from one day to the next in the schedule, the unmade plans, every day blazed in red letters on a calendar with nothing but the Ninth of Thermidor.

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