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# LETTER TO A FUTURE LOVER

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# LETTER TO A FUTURE LOVER

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Marginalia, Errata, Secrets, Inscriptions, and Other Ephemera Found in Libraries

ANDER MONSON

Graywolf Press

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*This book is for Megan and Athena,*

*the first two entries on the first shelf.*

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# LETTER TO A FUTURE LOVER

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~~Having fallen asleep reading in the library, you awake in a dark, unfamiliar room. On a pedestal, lit by a lamp or an LED, you see a book. You open it. There appears to be at least two ways to read it. You may decide whether to just flip or scroll to the next page, however you usually read books. Or the adventurous reader might follow [another path](#)—or make his or her own.~~





documented a tiny story, say that of the makeshift Vilna ghetto library under German occupation, one that might otherwise be forgotten beneath all the other stories if the patron did not reread it each night. To archive is political. To keep a story on a shelf or to remember then retell it means that it will be more likely to exist to those who come after we have gone. It will all be gone in time. Maybe this is the best we can do.

In this place of preservation, it's not hard to be reminded of those we've lost or fear we might, those who were due but never came. A librarian's conversation, a spine-cracked paperback, a human hair, a whiff of sandalwood in air: each of these might disappear for a year or more and fold the past into the present and pound a nail through the intersection. Patron, in this way we're young again; we remember; we're alive.

*an oppression*

# AI

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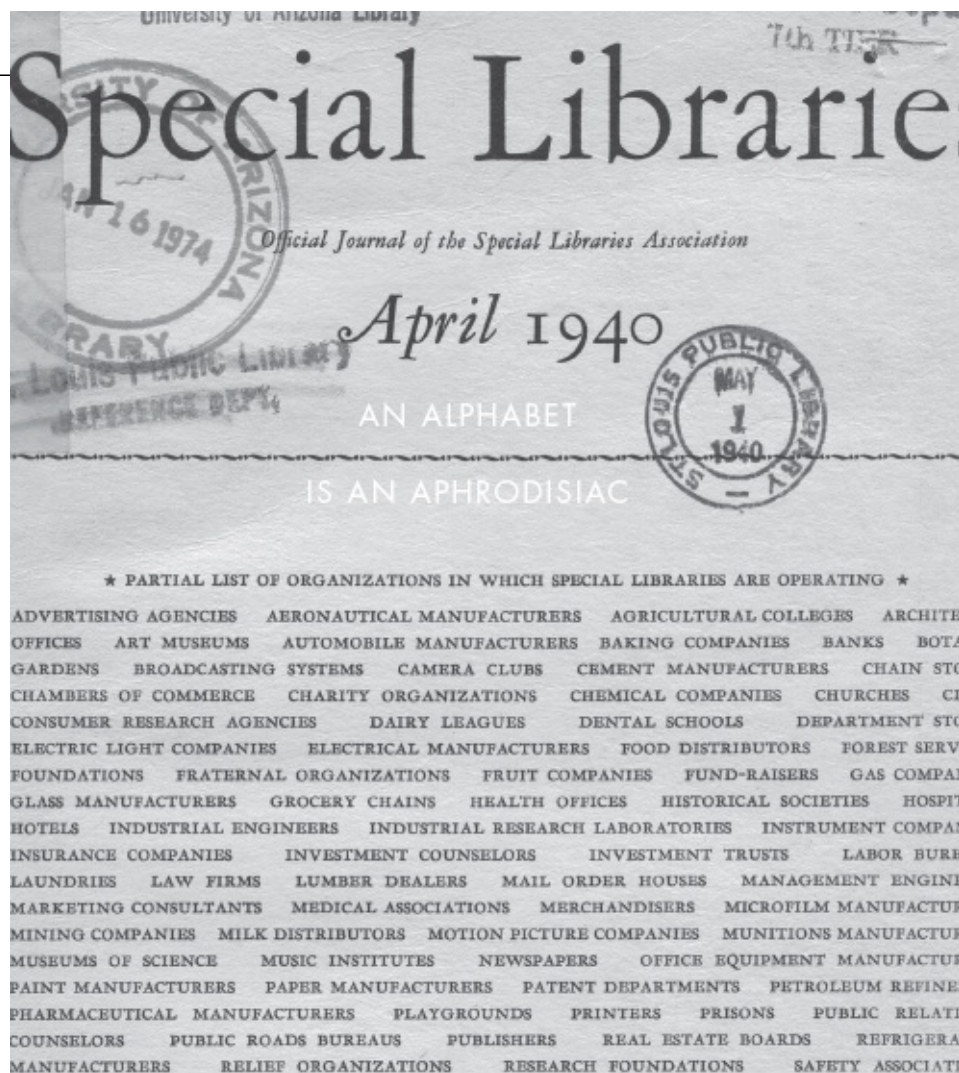
Might as well be the start of something artful, an entry point or an attempt to open. I don't just mean the poet Ai though you could try her too, from beyond or from a book, where where she is left of her now resides after she passed. Maybe I mean the maned sloth, found only on the eastern edge of Brazil, which takes its name from sin and is ill-branded for the future. It's on a slow boat there with its tufts of fur and its disdain for our accelerated lives. These sloths "rarely descend from the trees because, when on a level surface, they are unable to stand and walk, only being able to drag themselves along with their front legs and claws. They travel on the ground only to defecate or to move between trees when they cannot do so through the branches. The sloth's main defenses are to stay still and to lash out with its formidable claws." I quote from Wikipedia because, like the ai, I prefer to stay still and lash out with my formidable claws. Oh, that is obviously a lie. I have claws but will not stay still for long. Even trying to I hope to learn something new. The ai's habitat is constantly under threat.

Maybe you already know that a book is an artificial intelligence, designed to be tried on and played obsessively like a software subroutine, a difficult first-person shooter scene, or your favorite song you've listened to too long. You're here because you liked its eyes, the way it dots them with hearts in handwritten notes from years ago. Try it on for size. Ideally you found this AI in a library, its natural habitat, an ideal vehicle for speaking to the future, even if it is under threat. But everything is threatened in this age. It's as if nothing can shine or mean unless we threaten it with axes, with budget cuts, with obsolescence, with oblivion.

You should know this is not the only version of the book. First, it snuck in under other covers, a little at a time. I sent these essays into the world inside books I found and spent an hour or more inside. Some of these were subsequently reprinted, bound or loose, in magazines. Then it was in a box, unordered, unbound, big and pretty and fancy in a limited edition. I liked that fine.

Here you'll find it too, the book, the book about the book, and those who give over their homes and lives to books and share their habitats. These are only in an order because binding makes it so: alphabetical is arbitrary. It also leaves an odor. Read the entries in whichever way you like. Be slothful and go straight through, claws extended, or stay still and hope the world will come to you. I'd start with "How to Read a Book," myself, if I didn't already know how to navigate these things. Use it as you would any of its class. Adjust it like a sextant. Let it open up a seam in you like Anne Sexton. Discard—or not—when finished, like a former lover's breath, like a pdf.

*How to read*



—*Special Libraries*, April 1940 (University of Arizona Library, Main)

for a certain sort of reader, isn't it? To know there is a list like this is to want to penetrate deeply, to understand its depths and pockmarked passages, to need to see where they lead eventually. So what if I know I cannot get to all of them? To know that they are sorted there that they are there for me if I choose to follow is perhaps enough. But surely some have gone extinct, are sacrosanct, private, inaccessible, classified, destroyed, closed, hidden, erased, or otherwise beyond my means.

Knowing an infinity is there and unknowable (for that is what an infinity is, unknowable, unfathomable, though we try to hold it in the word *infinity*, we know that wall won't hold long) is sublime; it lets a bit of air into the mind. Still it's a lovely list, a laundry list of possibilities, of libraries buried in laundries, as it suggests. If you've been to one in search of cleaning you may have noticed they contain magazines on tables or in a crate, perhaps the occasional book. Read, deposit one, or take one home. It's a song that plays whether you partake or do not. Likewise those embedded in hotels and B&Bs, for instance the former Day Hotel in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I like to stay when I'm in town, with its shelf of cheapo paperbacks, a trail of reading material left behind by those who came before, where I find a way to pass an hour that doesn't involve the *Law & Order* television blare.

I venerate you for your generosity, former patron, even if you did not mean to lend or leave

this book and thought that you packed or discarded it or just forgot. I venerate you too, who cleaned the rooms and gathered books for the collection. These are here for our protection. With too much time alone who knows what compartment of ourselves we might discover. Better to fill it with another's words. I venerate the gods of randomness whose altars these collections are. Maybe it's enough to take a book and read a couple of pages and give it back. Or perhaps you will take a title home. Perhaps you've discarded it when you were done and what I find is not evidence of a randomly selected group but one woman's leavings, her trail of readings.

*a monume*



# BURN THIS FIRST / UNISON DEVICE

Over coffee one afternoon in the summer of 2001, András reminded me of another way to burn books, explained to him by a colleague who survived the siege of Sarajevo. In the winter, the scholar and his wife ran out of firewood, and so began to burn their books for heat and cooking. “This forces one to think critically,” András remembered his friend saying. “One must prioritize. First, you burn old college textbooks, which you haven’t read in thirty years. Then there are the duplicates. But eventually, you’re forced to make tougher choices. Who burns today: Dostoevsky or Proust?”

—Matthew Battles, *Library: An Unquiet History*

If you are in duress, burn this first. I give you my permission. My position is that this disposable, like electronic text, like ticker tape, track for news of stocks, the earliest digital electronic communications medium. The first invention Edison sold, his “Electrical Printing Instrument,” was patented November 9, 1869. It was not the first stock printer, though Edison’s remains the best known. 1867 saw E. A. Calahan’s first machine. 1871 introduced the “Unison Device,” which would “stop the type-wheels of all the printing-instruments in circuit at a given point, so that they will all print alike when in operation”—which would bring all the tickers on a network into unison, so that information would synchronize and propagate. There’s that moment in which what seemed like chaos is no longer, and things align, a structure’s found. Impossible, perhaps, to overstate how significant this concept was for networked machines, distributing simultaneous information a century before the Internet.

So read this once then secret it away for the next to troll these pages: this is meant for obsolescence. Maybe these sentences are already obsolete. But in a pinch it can be burned. This is not a sacred text, unlike the Quran, the word of God, which “does not include instructions for its own disposal,” and should be buried, erased, or stored indefinitely. Alternately, “desanctify the book by removing the text from its pages. Some medieval scholars recommend wiping off the ink and disposing of the paper by ordinary means. A more modern and practical alternative is to tie the book to a stone, then drop it into a stream to symbolically achieve the same effect” (these quotes via [Slate.com](https://www.slate.com), and for all I know (though the scholar sighs (these eddies within eddies)) the article might already have disappeared). Sacred Jewish texts should be placed into a repository to await mass burial. Though a Bible has no built-in disposal ritual, and thus it can be burned, one should generally avoid burning sacred books because of fire’s association with the devil and the underworld.

While you can’t hold on to everything forever, you’re a fool if you sell back your college books at semester’s end: have you learned nothing of this life? Reread that book you disliked in ninth grade and see how it sings to you now: you understand the story differently because your own has changed. To celebrate your growth, throw yourself a ticker tape parade for all of your disposed-of books—confettied by clouds of shredded pages, call yourself a nebula of assorted information. In bits they are much easier to burn, though the flame won’t last as long.

Though we call it that, we haven’t used ticker tape in ticker tape parades for years: now it’s all confetti, shredded financial documents shotgunned out in clouds over Broadway.

whoever passes now for heroes processes below. For the last ticker tape parade, 2011 celebrating the New York Giants' Super Bowl win, a half-ton of confetti was distributed in twenty-five-pound bags to the buildings all along its route.

What else we drop: calls, balls, 7 in handheld smartphone games, in certain cases walls and ceilings filled with secrets we stashed as adolescents above the chewy tile: all of these things, literally, even how we say "literally" now, meaning its opposite, *metaphorically*, trying to redirect our attention to the figure of speech, to refresh and amp it up.

I hope you are lucky enough not to have to burn your books for fire or food. Reading networks sentences, memes them, beams them between brains in surprising ways: what's kept, what's stuck there, what's lodged in a cul-de-sac after the rest has left. It's like a game of hide-and-seek in a labyrinth. Everything in time becomes a trivium—in the latter half of the twentieth century, "knowledge that is nice to have but not essential"—originally *trivium* referred to one of the three topics of basic education (grammar, logic, rhetoric), though now it's for those inclined to marginalia, cultural crud that cakes the brain, knowledge acquired at random and obsessively, used in games like Pursuit or in game shows, or to impress those you meet at parties, papering over your lack of actual classical learning like a defiant shot across the bow of those who tried to educate you. Your meanders in the shredded trenches of Wikipedia minutiae and rarely visited library stacks have to pay off eventually. They will, won't they? Please say they will. If we say these words out loud together, we will be as one, in unison, synchronized with this device, the page.

*to amend, to era*

# CONTENTS MAY HAVE SETTLED DURING SHIPPING

It's as if the books in the library are just books with nothing in them except more books.

—Lucy Corin, "Library,"

*One Hundred Apocalypses and other Apocalypses*

What I can't comprehend is endlessness. The lives of saints. The horrors they endured to be so deemed. How they gleam in our remaining light before the candle gutters and is extinguished and instead we have the dark. How items packed by weight, not volume, settle during shipping and become a tangled bundle. The spaces between things—books, cards, numbers, thoughts of love and death. How they're reconfigured by our constant jostling. In this way things settle and will gradually fuse. These jumbles of disconnect become our memories, solid as a rack. I mean a rock. I mean a brackish pond, a murk, how a solid-seeming thing becomes a wash. We soothe them over time, wear them down with use, make them smooth with all the ways we adjust to make them fit our narratives. Oh, *that's* what that loaded moment meant. That one awkward pause in a conversation that comes to mind a decade later: only now do we understand attraction, our predilections for misinterpretation and our own reactions to being adored and not noticing it for years: how the idea of stardom as history frightens us.

The more I visit libraries the more I find myself opening up to them. There are so many passages in these labyrinths that it's impossible to see them all or to note their passing. Better to settle for the few I can find my way to wend through for a year or two. Some libraries are dying. A few I've seen are filled with wind (no, not the Wind of Change, as the Scorpion reminds, but an air-conditioned breeze that reminds us this place needs tending to, in order to remain in its condition). Others are contracting, transforming, weeding books, adding more security, offering more machines for our use, rebooting with coffee shops and apps or fishing poles (like the Honeoye Public Library) or libraries of people (as in the Human Library, which offers people on loan to converse with). Or idiosyncratic ones like the Little Free Library tucked with children's books just down your street. Another is established as a subsection of a public library and curates books from the larger set. One pops up for a week in vacation town. You can do this yourself if you are crafty and don't mind a little risk: take the books that mean the most to you and set them on an empty shelf. Now label it. Add a note about who you are and what you're here for if the books you choose do not reveal enough. Then leave it, hope it will become a home to someone searching for reminder that our intelligence is good for something besides depression.

Finally that is what we love: human taint, human constraint. Not infinity but the best a man can grasp. (Is it sad that the television echoes back *Gillette*?) What a woman makes of what she takes away from all these years and words, what she writes, what she returns, what she retains. Every essay suggests a new direction I might wander in the next, another space to aggregate and think about, another chamber in which to spend my hours, a currency that becomes more apparent as I age. Each book in which you lose yourself equals ten thousand books you will not have time to read. See how your time spent in front of screen replaces your time



in front of page? I'm not judging. I love my Xbox too, my Xanax too, my Xerox too, my Xeriscaping too. (I am hopeful that we are coming to the end of lawns: a colossal water waste, our hours of pointless grooming.)

Let these adventures grow in each of us. The labyrinths we wander through in games, in dungeon-exploration games, in first-person shooter games, in mobile phone geocaching games: how different are they from our experience in text? When we drop down into a sentence, first-person-like, how a needle POV, a record groove, and see only the walls of what's on either side, parallel lines of peripheral sentences, not immediately related but separated by punctuation or a half-apparent phrase—when we get so deep into its interior that nothing exists outside it, when we abandon ourselves to its syntactic turns, its lines of preserved thought: every day we should be so lost.

*to squash your name into the future*

# COUNTRY MUSIC DEATH NOTICES, 1979–1980

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Wayne Walker, member of the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, noted for such compositions as “Burning Memories,” “Are You Sincere?,” and “Cajun Queen,” January 2, 1979

Floyd Franklin Reed, Missouri old-time fiddler, February 1, 1979

Rodney and Will Balfa, members of the Balfa Brothers, Cajun musicians, February 8, 1978

Charles Seeger, Dean of American ethnomusicologists, the father of Pete, Peggy, and Mike, February 7, 1979

—*Journal of Country Music* 8.3, 1981  
(University of Arizona Fine Arts Library)

I can't write you in a book without talking about death, since each book is a little death, and good country is nothing if not mourning. Any writer will tell you this: that publication is separation, train leaving the station. It might indeed return, but it will not be the same. There's a psychological term for this that I forget: how any bodily fluid, once it's left the body, becomes alien, other, repellent. For instance: spit in a cup. Now drink it back up. Few of us will. Why not? It was in your mouth a moment ago. Isn't it yours? Isn't it you? It's easy to see our flaws in others, as we know. Less easy—and often painful, so we resist it—to appraise the self.

A book trains us for our end: each attenuates, you can feel the weight of its diminishing pages as you flip, and there's that final turn; at last its last is in view with only blankness after, like reaching a coast. It's bittersweet at best, reader, when one you've loved for long ends like this. Of course the sentences continue in your memory: how lines from Arthur C. Clarke or Beverly Cleary return to mind a decade later or longer. How we channel what we read—how we are channeled by it. How reading is experience, which every reader knows (though recent studies have finally proved this fact), and when we are confronted with a library full of these possible lives, we are awed by how much we do not know about the world. We cannot contain even a fraction of this information. We step away to clear our heads. We're not dead yet, not today.

Until its recent renovation, Kansas State University's main library stacks were not air conditioned, and sported signs that warned people with heart conditions to enter at their own risk in summer. So we will read in the face of danger—and that we can contain what we read, if only for a moment, before it is/we are released. That we die is what gives our being meaning. Going through a loved one's books after they have passed, we might find their minds alive again in marginalia.

Knowing we can't have everything: what kind of life is this? How can we continue to exist? Except we do. And then we're through, and hopefully someone will mourn your loss, or maybe not, I don't know what kind of life you've lived, how much you read, how well you read, or if you read, if you were read, or who you touched and for how long and how and when and why and what it meant. If you're lucky you might be listed in a place like this back of the *Journal of Country Music*, chronologically by date of death, with why you

mattered, briefly, summed up in a sentence. (I almost wrote *summer up*, but did not, and no I did and didn't, honoring my errors: consider the ways the brain might (mis-)direct our energies, switch tracks without us noticing; perhaps these are the hidden intentions of the sentence we are always working on until we stop and see where we ended up.) So: Warren Smith, "rockabilly innovator who switched to honky-tonk," Ralph Sloan, simply a "club dancer," Cousin Emmy (Cynthia May Carver), "the quintessential 'banjo-pickin' gal,'" James Price, "veteran bus driver for Ernest Tubb and Bill Anderson," and this strange list goes on. I don't know their names until I do. Life too goes on. Some clichés are true. There's not much between me and you besides this sentence, a paper card, this intake of breath. We too go on until we don't. I know so little of this world.

What do you know? I wonder. Why did or do you matter? What have you left of yourself behind?

*until sorrow*

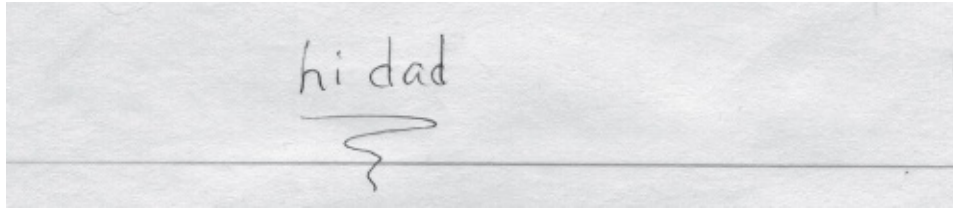
# CRIME OF OMISSION

8. Somewhere after news of his death, after anger, she felt the need to be kind.
9. I think too much. I will go on this trip to an unfamiliar place to find Joseph and talk to him and live in the present.

—Steve Orlen, *Crime of Omission* (unpublished manuscript, personal archive)

Outside poet Steve Orlen's former office door, I found three garbage bags marked *for trash*. He had died four months or so before. I looked inside. They were filled with notes and manuscripts. Shouldn't there be an archive for this stuff? I had dinner plans that night so I couldn't dally long, but I triaged out what bits I could that felt too awful to discard. I kept a small box, returned the rest. It is hard to know what matters.

The novel's not that good, I'm sure he'd admit, which is probably why he never published it. A genre thing, or a couple of drafts of one, with a bunch of reader's notes, some in Orlen's hand. On one page I found a note, presumably his son's:



I felt this too should be preserved. Maybe that makes me sentimental. It's a shame we value product over process, though I suppose we must. A pentimento such as this might demonstrate a change from note to final draft. If we care enough about the work we might go deeper into the mine shaft of the draft, going farther down with the candles that we bought with our meager pay. But what if we discard those drafts and call them trash? We might believe the work we do is solo moan, and some long nights it is. Other times our progeny might scrawl notes so we know that they were there and participating silently. Or what our lover said to us last night in anger might shift a sentence's direction without our thinking of it.

In the era of nearly infinite data it remains easy to disappear. Now I'm housed in Orlen's former office. I have, in a case, a pack of Lucky Strikes that he kept from 1948. He smoked a lot; he died from it; it still smells a little like his smoke in here. Perhaps his smoke will continue rising up. I keep it as a shrine, another thing of his, just rolled leaves and paper that he never saw fit to burn.

I keep wondering: what have I left out that I should have said, that I could have kept? Our last conversation now feels freighted, as last conversations will. He was a conversation lover. Walking to the student union with him to enjoy caffeine, he asked me if there was ever a time when I stepped away from writing for a while, just gave it up and did something else, and if it was hard to make it back. I thought at the time it was kind of him to ask for my advice, as little as I had to give. He'd written longer and deeper than I could have dreamed.

He said he was going to take some time away, but feared he wouldn't make it back. I don't remember what I said but wish I did. He never made it back.

---

*or a crime of addition, highlighting a pa*

# DEAR AFTERNOONS

Hot afternoons are real; afternoons are; places, things, thoughts, feelings are; poetry is;  
The world is waiting to be known; Earth, what it has in it! The past is in it;  
All words, feelings, movements, words, bodies, clothes, girls, trees, stones, things of beauty, books, desires are in it;  
and all are to be known;  
Afternoons have to do with the whole world;

—Eli Siegel, *Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana: Poems*

(PS3537 I295 H6 1957 mn)

There is no home for this brokenness, how neither the Dewey numbering nor the Library of Congress system is continuous, so you're always missing something, the perfect text, perhaps between PS3537 I295 H6 1957 mn (above) and PS 3537 I317 T5 1939 (William Vincennes Sieller's *This Transient Hour*). Spent an hour in contemplation, and while I know no library can be all-encompassing, and that it's all just alphabetical, the space between Siegel's breathless iterating lines and Sieller's sonnetteering is a world, as is the disconnect between Siegel's poems and the philosophy he founded (Aesthetic Realism, "the art of liking the world and oneself at the same time, by seeing the world and oneself as aesthetic opposites comprising a cultlike group, eventually to come to ruin). His suicide, at seventy-six, asks: the world a broken thing or is it fixed? Is it emptying out toward entropy or caught in constant reconstruction?

Ask kin-tsugi, the Japanese art of "golden joinery," in which a broken bowl is fixed and seamed with glow, cracks to the forefront, filled in by gold, rendering the repaired thing more remarkable, honoring its shatter. The result is neither broken nor unbroken, but both. Once, shadow, object, corona around an eclipsed sun.

Own the ways we break, it seems to say: understand that the fault lines of a mind or body are individual, and honor them.

If the outcome seems familiar—that suicide, or breakdown of the nerves, job fuckup, criminal neglect, the colossal choke, ruptured marriage, blown relationship, overmastering of the mind by the body's needs (or the reverse), the ways in which our lives are reduced to their component parts—blame that less on the ways in which we break and more on the ways in which our social selves are told that we might break. We are not so imaginative as we would hope. How did our parents break? How were their parents seared or scarred, weakened, chipped apart by years? And did they still go on, and how? We know so much of the ceaseless weakness but so little of our own.

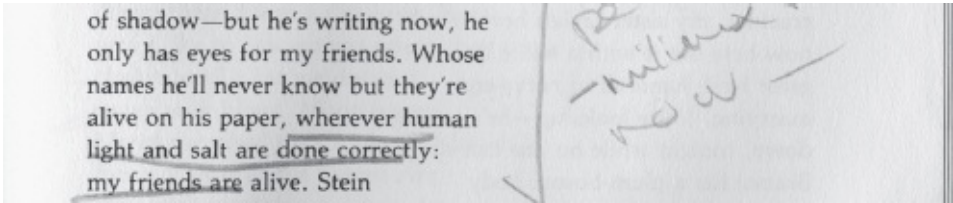
My brother and I would smash our toys with mallets. We loved the world like this: flattened and trashed. We graduated to car windshields in the field beyond our field where the clunkers came to rest and were swiftly overgrown. A summer venture discovered them, so we came back with rocks and hammers, crowbars and anger to take the things apart. The family bar collapsed in 1977–1978's big winter and decomposed throughout our childhood. My part of Michigan is ruin-strewn. You can't drive twenty miles without finding mining towns

abandoned, shafts sunk into rock and given up, covered up or not, derelict steam hoists, brokeback smokestacks, unspooled coils of wire, storm-downed ships, gears like stars in dirt. Then there are the bars with their human wreckage, myself some days among them, oozing all my hot afternoons away. I have some love for you, dear afternoons, warm seams between what my life seemed like and what it is, actual, eventual, inhabiting my father through the books he loves to read, becoming my old self again via teenage marginalia, and now you're putting me on as if a cloak, for a moment, maybe more, running my sentences like lines of code.

You know, though, there's a crack between reading and becoming. One thing is not the other. A seam, it seems, and here it's brought to life. Through it we are aware again of light. We might see the word *light*, too, and be transported to another afternoon, the way we were surprised by how the slowly fading winter sun lit up the men's bathroom on the fourth floor of the building where we work, transformed it into an altar, really, on which we might be asked to sacrifice whatever, and would.

*a future, love*

# DEAR ALBERT, DEAR ALISON



of shadow—but he's writing now, he  
only has eyes for my friends. Whose  
names he'll never know but they're  
alive on his paper, wherever human  
light and salt are done correctly:  
my friends are alive. Stein

*Handwritten notes:*  
Po  
-militant  
now

—Albert Goldbarth, *Different Fleshes* (library of Alison Hawthorne Deming)

In 1999's *Best American Essays*, Edward Hoagland tells us that “essays are how we speak to one another in print ... in a kind of public letter.” Like a numbers station out there on the radio, broadcasting, he's still telling us. That sentence is still raised in the brain and seems to be going nowhere. I can't exorcise it. I used it in an essay. I'm using it now in another. That makes it a seed, a panoply.

Dear Albert, I finally got around to reading your strange 1979 poem-novel *Different Fleshes*. I had to borrow Alison Deming's copy, since it's out of print. Hers is filled with marginalia from (she says) 1983. To read another writer's marked-up copy of a book is to read two books at once, text and paratext, the passage and the pilgrim's progress, to see how an animal takes root and begins to worm inside a brain, even if we don't get to see its final bloom. There's no end to the ways that this can shell, reading an essay responding to an essay responding to marginalia on another's essay terminating in a corner of an M. C. Escher drawing, not one of the famous ones.

I didn't always care like this. Look what books have done to me.

You know by now I e-mailed you a decade back. You only know this because I told you via public letter, after learning that you never use e-mail, and have, in fact, never touched a computer. Your aversion is not to all technology (after all, the pencil is technology, the box, the essay, the poem, the typewriter, the letter, and the US Mail), since I have your cell phone number in my own phone, a kind of handshake, which we've also shared in the past. I recognize a familiar heart, a collector's heart, a conservator's. In an interview (yes, I read it on the Internet: how do you get by without the quiet hum of connectivity, of near-instant gratification?) you note: “A lot of my own private life is devoted to a sense of conservancy. I conserve objects and ideas in my life. In fact, it hurts me when I see public telephoning booths and post office drop-boxes disappearing from the American landscape. Some of my poetry implicitly asks to be a body that freezes some of those objects and the sensibilities they stand for in time. In fact, any poem, whether one wants it to be or not, is necessarily a block of language that to some extent holds firm a group of words and maybe the ideas those groups of words are meant to represent against the depredations of time. To that extent, I think almost any writer is a conservator.” Almost any reader too. Though we may love the future in different ways, sir, we read to court the past. But how will you access the library catalog if you eschew computers?

Dear Alison, at first I found it strange that you underlined this bit: “wherever human / lig



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