Arc and the Sediment

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Dear James

Something Gretta read last night bothers her, and it will not wait another mile. She’s back on the highway, some twenty miles past the Sinclair. She parks on the shoulder with engine running and returns to her laptop. She pushes *M. Butterfly* open and braces it with the lip of the laptop.

*M. Butterfly*.doc

Dancers help him put on the Butterfly wig.

GALLIMARD: I have a vision. Of the Orient. That, deep within its almond eyes, there are still women. Women willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of a man. Even a man whose love is completely without worth.

Still, it is not enough. It is not enough to read, not enough to copy it down. Still she is bothered. And it probably has little to do with the opera *Madame Butterfly*, which she was assigned to review in February, or her copy of the play *M. Butterfly*, which she glommed on to in order to justify her resentment toward the production. It is something else, something buried in—maybe the same thing that compels her to pack the book around with her at all times, a Magic 8 Ball she cannot do without, just like the handful of other books she carries with her.

Her jaw aches with nervousness and her fingers necessarily come to rest on the keyboard. She couldn’t begin to paraphrase along her own lines to get a feel for the mess of it all because she is not yet sure whether to cast herself as soldier or Butterfly. Surely she has never
sacrificed for the love of a man. *Even a man whose love is completely without worth.* Who would? Why give in? Nor would she sacrifice for the love of a woman. In a state like Utah…. She could sacrifice *for* her children, but she wouldn’t sacrifice her children *to* a homophobic state with a completely out-of-control DCFS struggling to cover its payroll—not for love, not for anything. *So why—*

And concubine? Butterfly was not a role she wanted to fill for any amount of money. Yet if anyone were a concubine in her marriage, it wouldn’t be Lance. She couldn’t see him as soldier either.

*James, then?*

Not a soldier, but a sailor. *Lance’s brother…shit.*

She gives up for lack of entry. Anyway, her fingers muddle her thinking with their aching—when they are not grasping the wheel, they are clenched in fists or typing like mad or clutching a drink. She stretches them, presses against each palm between thumb and fingers, and still they ache.

Sacrifice—*blood of, for your country, all the little lambs.* She taps palm to forehead. Should she? Might she have? *For the love of whom?* For the love of a man. For the love of a woman. For the greater good. For *Great Expectations.* For God’s sake.

Perhaps it is James—or Gretta’s extensive correspondence with him—that she should sacrifice. Or perhaps it is only James among them who will ever (to use the language of CNN, Fox, and MSNBC pundits) “know sacrifice.” The next-to-ultimate sacrifice: surviving war. Or one step up: becoming a white wooden statement in the Camp Casey outdoor armoire.

*For the love of his country.* For the love of a country offering rotating, bottom-of-the-screen, up-to-the-minute headlines regarding celebrity spats, age-prevention technology, and military obits. For the love of a country who’d rather watch a black man drown than send him a bus to flee a flood. Add to that a suite of ever-diminishing veteran health benefits—reductions of hospital beds in veteran hospitals, limits on prosthetics available for the mutilated, increased copays and deductibles for returned soldiers and their families.
For the love of—
For the love of a country offering ungrateful, unpatriotic, unheroic me.

Of course, James’s choice to join the navy couldn’t have had anything to do with being stuck in a warehouse job in Idaho with no marketable outside skills. Nor did it have anything to do with being turned away by the Navajo Nation for scholarship money, as he had no friend or relative working within the fluorescent-lit walls of the frustratingly despondent and nepotistic tribal scholarship office: “…we did not receive your application…,” “…we did not receive your application…,” “…we did not receive your application…,” “…we did not receive your application…,” “…we did not receive your application….”

Dancers help him put on the Butterfly wig. Dancers help him put on the Butterfly wig. Dancers help him—

Dear James.doc

Dear Cricket,

I’m finally traipsing off to Arizona to see what your big brother is up to. I’m on that big stretch of highway in Utah that you always called The Sleeper.

The desert is not so hot after all: seventy-something degrees. It’s supposed to warm up tomorrow. A late summer, I’m told. Just missed a bout of rain, I’m told. I’ll bet it’s hotter than hell in your neck of the woods.

Having all kinds of problems with the Chev—overheats, engine doesn’t want to turn over, makes a hideous sound arbitrarily, windows get stuck, one wiper’s broken. Your mother hates me more than probably ever.

Heard about all those kidnappings last week. I guess you’re safe onboard, yes? Tell me more about the lights at night. Who is burning the oil, us or them?

Haven’t got a letter from you in weeks, but if you were dead, I assume someone would tell me. Wouldn’t they?

Yes, I know about the bananas. Very talented women, I’ve heard. Next time you’re on leave, send
me a souvenir. Something involving silk or stone. Not bananas.

Listen, I know they said you’re fine, safe, whatever. I’m just saying if you start twitching or something—I mean, if your vision gets blurry and you get swelling and headaches and stuff—tell someone. Outside of the military. Hasn’t the gov’t done enough to fuck up your family? Fish and Game steals all your mom’s and dad’s feathers, and you what? Want to defend their country? Why don’t you ask the southern tribes down by New Orleans whether their country loves them enough to fish them out of a flood. Oh, you can’t! They were washed away. Guess FEMA wasn’t aware they existed so they didn’t send help.

I’m not saying I’m not proud of you. I just want you safe. Take it from a woman whose advice isn’t entirely without worth. I was right about the insurance, wasn’t I? I was right about the pianist. Sometimes I know some things.

Thanks for letting me send you off properly. It was a great trip. I miss you too—missed you even before you left. When we celebrate your return, there’ll be no tequila, I promise. I don’t even like tequila. Surprise. Hey, let’s go to D.C. sometime when I’m out there. But I must say, it’s getting harder and harder to find baby-sitting—and excuses. The kids might have to come visit Uncle James.

Your nephew is, just so you know, fully potty-trained. Thank you, Reece’s Pieces.

Love,
G.