

REVELATOR PRESS
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LETTERS TO MY SISTER



ANGELA VASQUEZ-GIROUX

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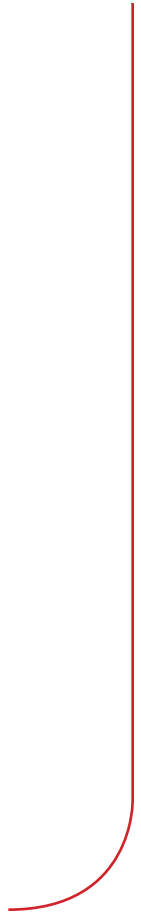


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For Zelda.





CONTENTS

- 03 **FIRST LETTER TO MY SISTER**
Judging the Distance
- 05 **SECOND LETTER TO MY SISTER**
The Dead Ground in Between
- 06 **THIRD LETTER TO MY SISTER**
- 07 **FOURTH LETTER TO YOUR SISTER**
- 08 **FIFTH LETTER TO MY SISTER**
Soldiering is Not Such a Beautiful Thing
- 09 **EIGHTH LETTER TO MY SISTER**
Tangents
- 10 **ELEVENTH LETTER TO MY SISTER**
After your letter, saying, *I am so worried about you. You are smoking too much. You look so small. What is happening to you?*
- 12 **TWELTH LETTER TO MY SISTER**
After drawing the Eight of Pentacles
- 13 **THIRTEENTH LETTER TO MY SISTER**
I probably shouldn't tell you this, but there is a WAR here.
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*The human beings, now: in what direction are they,
And how far away, would you say? And do not forget
There may be dead ground in between.*

FROM THE LESSONS OF THE WAR:
"JUDGING DISTANCES", HENRY REED



FIRST LETTER TO MY SISTER

Judging the Distance

We were once so close that our hands
made small foothills, clasped together,
our knuckles snowcap-white.

I don't know how we lost each other—
it must have started with
some idea of space, freedom, spreading our
fingers, not knowing how to catch
again.

It is another Saturday in the town where we spread
out of our bodies, you stretching from the waist
until you reached Oklahoma City. Today,
I feel every mile elongated along state lines,
unrolling one shoulder from Lansing.

You call after a dream, terrified that we have been somehow divorced.
The image that haunts you: my hand, flattened against your shoulder,
pushing.

In two days I am with you, flying to your military post.
We find the smallest bar in town, each of us
hunched over the table hunched over our bottles
of Sierra Nevada Pale Ale, smoking.

I never understood any of it—you leaving home
for a husband, the army, leaving your husband
for the army. Seeing you now, ten pounds lighter,
fingers shaking around the cigarette filter, I know
I have somehow failed you. Your marriage crumbling
so slowly it was tectonic, spilled through your fingers
even as you held tighter.

I tell you the story from our childhood:
furiously pulling up the soil of the backyard
looking for treasure, coming away only with ruined kitchen spoons.

Can it be that we have never stopped? You sifting the red sands of
Oklahoma,
me still trekking different cities each night;
we have been archaeologists, our great digs have left
small mounds between us—and once again you are seven
and I am five, tiny palms building something
from what we have displaced.

SECOND LETTER TO MY SISTER

The Dead Ground in Between

It all happens quietly:

the commander delivering your orders
Ash Wednesday, the Vatican issuing
a prayer for peace. The silence of
papers in your hand, boarding the plane.

There is no way to know where you are, only
that by now you are there: the distance most
like a gulf, each day without your voice
ten thousand miles.

At mass, the woman
misreads the scripture: she says,
Behold, now is *not* the acceptable time; behold, now
is *not* the day of salvation.

Zelda, this water has been burned to a hush,
has ashed, but even now I am not saved, not
as I dream of you
lacing your new white boots for war.

THIRD LETTER TO MY SISTER

You are two days gone when our mother finds it:

the video clip from a station in Syracuse covering the deployment of your division. What luck, she says—a small miracle.

The camera pans to show a soldier on the phone. You are in the background, an afterthought; for these two seconds we glimpse you in profile, sitting on a stack of desert-colored boxes—your whole form a shadow. I think of Caravaggio painting himself from the darkness of his greatest works, *The Raising of Lazarus*.

I watch the video again: for the first time, I see you turning your head once to look at the reporters, and then back to something off-camera, the shadow of the war smudging your features, your eyes squinting out the light.

FOURTH LETTER TO YOUR SISTER

You are folding laundry
when you see it, every channel broadcasting
the night-vision green of Baghdad, clusters
of light veining the sky. You are folding laundry
when the President speaks, says he is praying
for the troops, their families. You throw a towel
at the screen, bend your face into her sweater; it
still shoulders her scent.

How scared you are, watching CNN, not sleeping,
not eating, unable in those first days to turn away.
You layer your clothes, four or six shirts, even as
the new leaves are coming in. It makes you cold,
a constant shiver of a woman.

Tonight, you dream you are with her again
in a cathedral; it is white and gold, a daunting Christ
above where you sit with her, hands clasped together
above the knotty pattern of the wooden pew. You dream
that finally, you are both safe; you say this to her
as the walls chatter, great teeth of marble.

FIFTH LETTER TO MY SISTER

Soldiering is Not Such a Beautiful Thing

(For Eric and Boog, writing lovely war poems)

The truth is that even soldiers aren't soldiers alone these days. Our friend said that if he'd gone through with it, his mother "would have cried him straight out." My mother, my father, we have all cried, we have all watched as my sister packed her six white pairs of socks, four desert patterned battle dress uniforms, we

have seen the unconscious panic as she grasped for the dog tags at her neck, even as she sat in church. Every good soldier knows they are the only thing that will get you back to your family, if, God save us, you cannot do it yourself. The truth is that we are all of us soldiers now, putting on our grease-paint sergeant faces, congealed to something more solid, something stronger, watching as the man on CNN says our troops are being led into war like pigs to the slaughter.

EIGHTH LETTER TO MY SISTER

Tangents

(Owed to Colin)

There is a letter I haven't sent. It is nineteen days old, and I cannot tell you why I haven't sent it. I wanted to tell you about a man, a man I met who I thought I could love. Perhaps I have held it here, these nineteen days, because I suspected things would change. And they have, Zelda:

I have spent the week at the calendar, charting menstrual days loping in and out of each square like a cosine wave, thinking all day *positive*, *negative*, but never knowing; and that man, the man who hasn't called, coming into my brain again and again—and I can only think of him the way my old calculus professor talked of derivatives, a line touching a circle, trying always to determine that point of convergence, that point both a meeting and a leaving.

There aren't many things I want—a home, a child, to be near you. And I have always wanted them to be mine: my home, my child, my sister. This is nothing that will surprise you: our whole lives, Abuelito called us Meija. I always thought it meant *mine*, his voice ringing us with the word, his voice that I cannot hear now, your voice that I cannot hear, now that I am without you, without a child, your letter here near the bed, and those men, those men always keeping their voices away, those men I never wanted to call mine.

ELEVENTH LETTER TO MY SISTER

After your letter, saying, *I am so worried about you. You are smoking too much. You look so small. What is happening to you?*

This can't be much of a surprise; I am always breaking—a seventy-five percent tear of my quadriceps playing softball one summer, a concussion and whiplash the next. My body, your porcelain unicorn I threw into a wall after an argument. Glued whole when you cried, its hooves, head laid out in your palm.

It's just that the man I loved has shattered me, saying *you and I both knew this was never going to work, you're not marriage material*, me losing twenty pounds since you've been gone and five in the first week he left me. And when I finally hear your voice

through the gray telephone static, I am lighting another cigarette and telling you, *it's like I've disappeared—like he could wave his whole hand through me and I'd be gone*. You tell me, simply enough, that it is time to pick up the pieces.

Look at me: it is terrible here, you say, but falling apart
can get you killed.

And so you do not break, Zelda. You do not break
your sergeant-face when the rockets crackle over
your barracks in Mosul, you do not break retrieving
the body of a soldier from the 101st, even as the convoy
takes fire.

Until today, a full hour into your call, you begin to cry.
I am crushing the cigarette when I hear you breathe out
my name, the sound of it a ring. Why can't you stay strong
without me, you ask? I cannot answer, tracing the edges
of road rash on my shin, knowing that by the time I see you again,
the skin will have seamed.

TWELTH LETTER TO MY SISTER

After drawing the Eight of Pentacles

Today I am thinking again of Caravaggio, his Madonna di Loreto:

almost floating in her doorway, Christ-child in her arms,
and the pilgrims kneeling below, feet blackened
with the long walk to her home.

You asked me to tell you about my job, and I can think only
of this painting, which I send, and tell you, *I knock on the doors of
strangers.*

I do not tell you that I am losing hope.

And so working tonight I meet a woman
whose fiancé died in World War II, the sands
of some beach filling his mouth. On her hip,
an infant with aquamarine eyes.
I tell her about you, how scared I have been.

She touches my collarbone.

I know she will come home; wish her well for me, please.

And I have to tell you: even now, my shoes trail dried mud.

THIRTEENTH LETTER TO MY SISTER

I probably shouldn't tell you this, but there is a WAR here.

In May, I sent you a letter:

The President declared an end to the war today.

I had thought it would be true, thought we would be listening to that old John Lennon song and wrapping presents.

But it is November, and the war is not over.

You tell me a convoy was lost from your base;

four dead. Next it is the collision of two Black Hawks over Mosul.

You call our mother, tell her it will be on the news, and cry. *I had to take the call. They kept asking for more body bags. I had to keep sending more body bags.*

And the war is not over, and no one knows what terror there is, you say, even in your sleep now seeing the Army police-lights spinning across the muted faces of the soldiers.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Angela Vasquez-Giroux is a textbook middle child. Her fascination with words began at age three, when her mother taught her to say *extraordinary*. She lives in Lansing, Michigan, with her partner and daughter.









Composed as a series of letters to a family member serving in Iraq, Angela Vasquez-Giroux's first poetry chapbook is a vivid evocation of the fear, displacement, and uncertainty that war imposes on those who are left behind. Through images of fragmentation and fragility—misreadings of scripture, partial glimpses of a loved one in a news report—LETTERS TO MY SISTER speaks of the challenges of survival, both for those in the field and at home.

