

Letter to an Amazon by Marina Tsvetaeva

translation from the original French

by Sonja Franeta

(first published in *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*)

I have read your book. You are close to me like all women who write. Don't be offended by this "all"--all of them do not write: certain women write.

So, you are close to me like any unique being and, especially, like any unique feminine being.

I think of you ever since the day I saw you--was it a month? In my youth I was quick to say to myself: I always fear letting go of the wave rising from me and carrying me to another [...] I always fear that I will not love anymore, that I will not learn anything anymore. But I am no longer young and I have learned to let go of almost everything--irretrievably.

To have everything to say and not to unclasp one's lips. To have everything to give--and not to unclasp one's hand. This is a denial of self which you call a bourgeois virtue and which, bourgeois or not, virtue or not, is the principal springboard of my actions. Springboard? Self-denial? Yes, for the repressing of a force requires an effort infinitely greater than its free expression--which does not require any kind of effort at all. In this sense, every natural activity is passive, and all conscious passivity is active (effusion-effortless, repression-action). What is more difficult: to keep a horse from running or to let it go, and, since the horse we hold back is ourselves--of these two which is the more difficult: to be held back or to set our energy free? To breathe or not to breathe? Do you remember the children's game in which the person who wins is the one who can stay the longest in a suffocating chest? A cruel game and not very bourgeois.

To act? To let oneself go. Every time I deny myself I have a sensation of an earthquake inside of me. It is I, the earth, that quakes. Self-denial. A struggle petrified.

My self-denial is called up once more: do not condescend--do not question the existing order of things. And in our case, what is the existing order of things? To read your book, to thank you for it in words empty of myself, to see you again from time to time "smiling so they do not notice you smiling"--behaving as if you have never written anything and I have never read anything: as if nothing had ever been.

"I could have done that, I can still do that, but this time I don't want to."

Listen to me, you do not have to respond to me, you have to just listen. This is a wound that I inflict right at your heart, at the heart of your cause, of your belief, of your body, of your heart.

There is one big gap in your book, only one, an enormous one--is it conscious or not? I don't believe in the unconsciousness of thinking beings, even less so in thinking beings who are writers, I absolutely do not believe that women write unconsciously.

This gap, left blank, this black hole--is the Child.

You return to it constantly, you give him in frequency what you should give him in importance, you plant him here and there and then again there, depriving him of the one shout you owe him.

This shout, is it possible you have never even heard it? "If only I could have a baby with you!"

This jealousy, fierce and unique in the world, implacable because it is incurable, incomparable to any other, any "normal one," even incomparable to maternal jealousy. This jealousy is a premonition of the inevitable break, those wide open eyes fixed on a baby she would one day want and that you the beloved cannot give her. Those eyes riveted on the child to come.

"Lovers do not have children." Yes, but they die. All of them. Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Iseult, the Amazon and Achilles, Siegfried and Brunhilda (these all-powerful lovers, these disunited units, whose loving disunity transforms them into the most complete union...) And there are others... And others...in all songs, in all times, in all places... They don't have time for the future, which is the child, they don't have a child because they don't have a future, they only have the present, which is their love and their death always present. They die--or their love dies (degenerates into friendship, into maternity: the old Baucis with her old Philemon, the old Pulcheria with her old child, Athanasius--couples so monstrous they are touching.

Love in itself is childhood. Lovers are children. Children never have children.

Or--like Daphne and Chloe--we don't know anything more about them: even if they continue to live--they die in us, for us.

One cannot live by love. The only thing that survives love is the Child.

And that other shout, haven't you ever heard that one either?--"How I would love to have a child--without a man!" The smiling sigh of a young girl, the naive sigh of an old maid and, even, at times the hopeless sigh of a woman--How I would love one--solely my own!

And here the smiling young girl who does not want anything foreign in her body, who wants neither him nor anything of him, who wants only mine, meets at the crossroads another me, a she, who she does not have to fear, from whom she does not have to defend herself, for this other cannot do harm to her, just as one (at least in youth) cannot do harm to oneself. Certitude is most illusory and it vacillates from the first glance of distrust toward the girlfriend only to collapse under the heavy blows of the heart of her hatred.

But let's not anticipate: for the moment she is still happy and carefree, free to love from the heart, without the body, to love without fear, to love without doing harm.

And when harm is done--she discovers this is not harm at all. The harm--is [...] shame, regret, remorse, disgust. The harm the betrayal of her soul with a man, the betrayal of her childhood with the enemy. But there is no enemy because it is all still me, always me, a new me yet one who has been asleep inside of me and awakened by the other me, there, before me, externalized at last, and finally lovable. She did not need to deny herself in order to become a woman, she only needed to let herself go (from the very depths of her being)--to let herself be. No crack, no break, no stigma.

And these words sum it up:

--Oh me! Oh darling me!

Oh! It is never out of shame or disgust that she leaves her. It is out of and for something completely different.

In the beginning it is almost a joke. "What a beautiful little baby!" "Wouldn't you like one too?" "Yes." "No." "One with you--yes." "But...Well, I'm just kidding."

Another time it's a sigh. "How I would like..."

"What?" "Nothing." "Yes, yes, I know." "Because you know--that is--I want one by you..." Silence.

"You're still thinking about that?" "Because you said it...it's you who are talking about it."

She herself doesn't need anything, but she must give much too much, all that is left of herself to her. "I would have liked to have loved you as a little girl"--Just like a woman would say: I would have liked to have loved you as a little boy. Again you. Again a you. A you given birth by me.

Finally, it becomes a shout of desperation-- stark, irrevocable. "A child by you!"

The one who will never come. The one whose coming one cannot even pray for. One can ask the Virgin for a child from a lover, one can ask the Virgin for a child from an old man--the first a sin--the second a miracle--but one does not ask for something insane. A union which absolutely excludes a child. A state of things implying the absence of a child. Unthinkable. Everything but a child. Just as at a king's or gentleman's dinner, everything is there but bread. The great daily-feminine bread.

It is never simply the urgent desire of the one, the younger woman, the one who is more she. The older one does not need a child, she has her girlfriend to experience motherhood with. "You are my girlfriend, you are my god, you are my everything."

But the other doesn't want to be loved like a child, she wants a child to love.

And the one who began with not wanting a child by him will end up with wanting a child by her. And it is because this cannot be, that one day she will leave her, still loving but harassed by the obvious and helpless jealousy of the other--and that again one day she will fall, shipwrecked, into the arms of the first person who comes along.

(My child, my friend, my all, and your ingenious words, Madame--my feminine brother, never sister. One could say that the word sister evokes a certain fear in them, as if it might forcefully reinstate them in the world, which they have left forever.)

In the beginning, it is the older woman who fears the child more than the other does not wish it. One could say that the older one instills in her friend despair, transforms the smile into sigh, the sigh into wish, the wish into obsession. It is the older woman's obsession that creates the younger woman's obsession. "You'll leave, you'll leave, you'll leave. You want the baby by me, you will want it by the first man who comes along... You are thinking about it again... You looked at that man. What a good father he would make for your child--right? Go away, I can't give that to you..."

Our apprehensions evoke, our fears prompt, our obsessions incarnate. Forced to be silent about this, the young woman thinks about it constantly, she only has eyes for young women with their arms full. And the thought that I will never have one, for never, never will I leave her. (That is the very moment that she leaves.)

The child--a fixed point from which she will henceforth not remove her eyes. The child repressed rises to the surface of her eyes like a drowned person. One must be blind not to see him there.

And the one who in the beginning wanted a child by her will end up by wanting a child by it doesn't matter who: by the very he [...] abhorred. The persecutor becomes the rescuer. The Friend--the Enemy. And the wind returns to its circling...

The child begins within us well before its own beginning. There are pregnancies that last for years of hope, for eternities of despair.

And all the women friends who marry. And all the husbands of these friends, so fun-loving, so open, so close... And to think that I could also...

Immured.

Buried alive.

And the other one gets worked up. Allusions, suspicions, reproaches. The young woman: "Don't you love me anymore?" "I love you but--you will leave me anyway."

You'll leave, you'll leave, you'll leave.

Before leaving she will want to die. Then, in the throes of death, without knowing anything, without premeditating anything, without thinking anything, by the pure and triple instinct for life--youth, time, womb--she will agree to a rendezvous, never needing to laugh and joke on the other side of town--and of life--with whomever--with the

husband of one of her friends or with a subordinate of her father, as long as it is not with her.

The man, after the woman, what simplicity, what kindness, what frankness. What liberty! What purity.

Then it will be the end. The beginning of a lover? The lover's chase? The stability of a husband?

It will be the Child.

I omit the exceptional case: the woman without a maternal instinct.

I omit also the common case: the corrupted girl, whether by nature or by fashion: the creature of pleasure, generally not worth considering.

I omit also the rare case of the soul in pain, the person who, in love, searches for the soul, therefore--predestined for a woman.

And the great lover, the woman who, in love, searches for love and takes the good anywhere she finds it.

And the clinical case.

I take the normal case, natural and vibrant, of the young feminine being fearing men, going toward women and wanting to have a baby. The being who, among the stranger, the indifferent one, indeed the enemy-liberator and the woman lover-repressor, ends up choosing the enemy.

The one who wants to have a child more than to be in love.

The one who loves her child more than her love.

For the Child is an innate property, it exists in us before love, before the lover. Its desire to be is what makes us open our arms. A young girl, I'm speaking about those from the North, is always too young for love, but never too young for a child. At thirteen she dreams of it.

An innate property that must be given to us. Some begin by loving the donor, others finish by loving him, some end up giving in to him, others by not giving in.

An innate property that must be given to us. The person who does not give this to us takes it from us.

And we will find her again, with her arms full and a heart full of hate toward the woman whom she will henceforth characterize as ungrateful like all who don't love any longer, unjust like all who still love--a youthful mistake.

She cannot be tempted anymore.

Don't be upset with me. I am responding to the Amazon, not to the pale feminine image that wants nothing from me. Not to the one who gave me the book but to the one who wrote it.

If you had never mentioned the child, I would have seen this as a conscious omission, a complete renunciation by silence, a scar that I would have respected. But you always come back to the same thing, you bounce it like a ball: "What right do women have to create or destroy life? Two children--two neglects," etc.

This is the only weak point, the only vulnerable point, the only tear in this perfect entity which is two women who love each other. The impossible thing is not resisting the temptation of a man but resisting the need for a child.

The only weak point that undermines all of this. The only vulnerable point through which the enemy army can enter. For even if one day we would be able to have a child without him, we will never be able to have a child by her, a little "you" to love.

And even if the miracle came true, open your eyes and what would you have: two mothers.

(Is it an adopted daughter? Not yours, not mine? With two mothers, on top of it all? Let nature have its way.)

The child, the only vulnerable point that ruins this relationship. The only saving grace for men. And for humanity.

An entity too complete. A unity too one. ("Two makes one." No...two makes three.) A road that leads to nowhere. A blind alley. Let's retrace our steps.

You are beautiful in vain, you are the Only One in vain--the first nonentity will triumph in you. A nonentity that will be blessed. Meanwhile you will remain cursed.

--But this is the same case as not being able to have a child with a certain man. Is that any reason to leave him?

An exceptional case cannot be compared to a law that has no exception. It is the entire tribe, the entire relationship, everything that is condemned in each case of love between women.

To leave the sterile man for his fertile brother is one thing, leaving the eternally sterile woman for an eternally fertile male enemy is another. There I say farewell to only one man, here I say farewell to the entire species, the entire cause, to all women in one.

Replace only the object [...]. Switch river banks--and the world.

Oh! I know sometimes this goes on until death. A touching and terrifying scene [...] on a wild Crimean shore, of two middle-aged women who have lived their lives together. One of them is the sister of a great Slavic philosopher, who is now being read in France.

The same luminous brow, the same stormy eyes, the same full, naked mouth. But they have around them an emptiness more empty than an old sterile "normal" couple, an emptiness more isolating, more emptying.

Only, only for this--an accursed species.

Then again it could be that if the young woman is a deep person, it's the horror of this curse that makes her leave.

"What society says of them" does not mean anything, should not mean anything, because all that it says is badly said, all it sees--badly seen. A malicious look of envy, of curiosity, of indifference. Society has nothing to say, it wallows in evil itself.

God? Once and for all, God does not have anything to do with carnal love. His name, joined or set in opposition to the name of a beloved, whether male or female, sounds like a sacrilege. There are some things that are incommensurable: Christ and carnal love. God has nothing to do with these trifles, except to heal us. He said once and for all--Love Me, the Eternal One. Beyond that--all is vanity. Absolute, incurable vanity. The very fact that I love a human being in this way betrays Him who, for my sake and for others', died on the cross of another kind of love.

The Church and the State? They will have nothing to say as long as they pressure and bless thousands of young men to kill one another.

But what will she say about it, what does Nature say, the only avenger and the only judge of our physical deviations. Nature says: no. Forbidding us this, she defends herself. God, in forbidding us one thing, does so out of love for us, while Nature, in forbidding us this, does so out of love for herself, out of hatred toward everything that is not she. Nature hates the monastery as much as she hates the Island on which the head of Orpheus lands. Her vengeance is our downfall. It is only that in the monastery we have God to help us, while there on the island, only the sea in which to drown ourselves.

The Island--part of the land which is not, a land one cannot leave, a land one must love because one is condemned to it. A place from which everything can be seen, but from which nothing can be done.

A land that is not counted. A dead end.

The great dejected woman who was a great poetess chose the place of her birth well.

A league of lepers.

Outside of nature. But how can a young girl, so close to nature, stray from the path, so completely, so trustfully?

This is a spiritual trap. When she falls into the arms of her older woman, she does not fall into nature's trap nor that of the lover, who is too often seen as a seductress, a huntress, a rapist, even a vampire, while she is almost always, a noble and hurt being,

whose only crime is that she "sees it coming" and--saying so in advance--sees the parting. The young woman falls into the spiritual trap.

She wants to love--but..., she would love only-- if...and then there she is in the arms of the other woman, her head laying against the breast where the soul resides.

Push her away? Ask it of the old and young men.

...Then, that meeting. Unexpected and inevitable for--if from this moment they live in two different worlds--the earth remains ever the same: the one they walk upon.

The heart leaps, an ebb and flow of blood. And the first and final weapon of a woman--that she disarms with, believing she can even disarm death--her final pathetic semblance of courage--a live blade already red--her smile. Then there is a small incoherent trickle of syllables, running one after the other like small ripples of water over pebbles. What did she say? Nothing, for the other woman did not hear anything, just as we never hear the first words, [...]. But here the other woman's eyes having left the animated mouth perceives that this motion has a meaning: ...ten months...love...he likes me better than the rest...he presses... (Swallow this, take this, take this once more, take every bit of it--for everything you have done to me[...]!) ...I said so--he presses... (More than the entire earth, more than the entire sea--on the heart of the Older Woman).

What voluptuous vengeance! And in her eyes--such hatred. The hatred of a slave finally freed. The pleasure she feels treading on that heart.

Finally this little flow is completely dammed up--only the undulations remain--slow, melodious, crystalline: "Wouldn't you like to see me, to see us, my husband and me..."

She didn't forget a thing. It is that she remembers too much.

Then bathing the baby: a daily ritual, sacred.

The visible triumph--almost indecent--of his manhood. For, right away she has a son, always a son, as if Nature, hasty to gather in her rights, didn't want to waste time on a girl. Not a little one you, imploring and impossible--a little he, who comes by himself, comes without asking, on order, a simple result (a grand goal!)

The other woman, clinging to her last hope, or simply not knowing what to say:

"He looks like you." "No (drily and firmly) Gives him a dry and firm name. The final dart releasing perhaps the final residue of the great poison called love:

"He looks like his father. The living image of my husband." There is intentional vulgarity in this vengeful statement. She only chooses words that are the most hurtful, the most vulgar, the most everything (look at me, you've loved a normal person!) By choice or by instinct? This comes out naturally, she hears her own words (like once long ago she heard her own laughter...) Then after the ritual bath, when Moses is saved and wrapped in swaddling clothes, she gives him her breast and--then the supreme vengeance--with the lowered eyes of a wet nurse, she half watches the eyes of the older

woman, which are flashing in envy yet immersed in a mist of tenderness. For in the depths of every woman, if she isn't a monster, for even in the heart of every monster...but there are no monsters among women.

This lightning flash, this smile--she knows them well, but--for one reason or another, she does not lift her eyes.

If the man is sensitive, he will never ask: "What are you thinking?"

Perhaps, when the other woman leaves, she'll want to beat her head against the wall.

Perhaps, when the other woman leaves, she'll not want to offer her lips.

If a man were sensitive, he would not embrace her immediately but would wait--to embrace her--until after the other has left--completely.

(Why did she come? To get hurt. Sometimes this is all that is left to us.)

Then there will be the other meeting, the counter-meeting, a debt to pay.

The very same earth (except for this, nothing else is worth mentioning, for everything that goes on, goes on within).

The same for spectators and audience. (Nature's final vengeance: the fact that they were too isolated, too together, too one-for-the-other, that henceforth they will only see each other in the presence of others and everything will come between them.)

At the same time: Youth is eternal, as long as she exists.

"Look, isn't that your friend passing by?" "Where?" "That one, with the brunette in blue."

Before seeing, she knows.

And here the human wave, more inhumane and inescapable than that of the sea, leads to her friend, leads her...

This time it is the older woman who begins: "How are you?" (and without waiting, without listening) "Allow me to introduce to you my girlfriend, Miss so-and-so..." (a name). If the previous one, whose blood has completely drained from under her makeup, "was" blonde--the new one, the replacement will undoubtedly be a brunette. Charming--strong. Posthumous fidelity? Desire for complete death? Or a final blow to memories? Bitterness toward all blondes? Killing the light with the dark? It's a law. Ask men why.

There are looks that kill. That is not so in this case, the brunette goes away, very much alive, on the arm of the older woman--the lover. The flowing blue waves of her long gown physically place the neverending seas between the one who remains and the one who leaves.

At night, leaning over the sleeper she adores: "Oh, John, if you only knew, if you only knew, if you only knew..."

It's not the day of the child's birth, it is today, three years later when she has come to know what it has cost her.

As long as the other woman doesn't get old, she will always be seen accompanied by a living shadow.

The dark-haired woman will change: becoming light-haired again or red-haired. The dark-haired woman will leave her just like the fair one. Like all walkers set out for their unknown goal--always the same--resting for a moment under a tree which will never walk.

All of them--will pass through. All of them would pass through there, if... But one does not stay eternally young.

The other woman! Let's think about her. The island. Forever isolated. The mother, losing, one after the other, all her daughters, losing them forever, for not only do they not come to her to place their children in her arms but, noticing her at the curve of the road, they will furtively make a sign of the cross on the blonde head. Niobe with her feminine progeny, destroyed by that other hunter, ferocious in other ways. Forever losing at the only game that really matters--and that could be. Shame. Exile. The damned. Pale, ghostlike vision and whose tribe we do not identify except by this knowing look, of recognition, of evaluation [...] where the commissioner-judge is joined to the idolater, the player of chess beatified--a look of various layers of depth, where the last always turns out to be next-to-last, endless, bottomless, where all features are useless, for it is an abyss--an indescribable look, effaced by the wintery smile of denial.

Young women are recognized by their smiles, but older women--it is because of their smiles that they are ignored.

Whether young or old, it is these women who have the most spiritual appearance. All others with a physical appearance are not that, they do not have it in them, or they have it temporarily.

She lives on an island. She creates an island. She is an island. An island with an endless colony of souls. Who knows, perhaps at this very moment, there in the West Indies, at the edge of the world...a young girl, ties back her dark hair...

These "Who knows"--nourish.

And they are the only sure thing.

She will die alone for she is too proud to love a dog, is too full of memories to adopt a baby. She wants neither animals, nor orphans, nor a lady companion. She doesn't even want a girl-companion. King David, warming himself with the inanimate heat of Avizag, was a boor. She does not want paid warmth, an obligatory smile. She does not want to be a vampire or a grandmother. This may be good for a man who, in old age is content with scraps, [...] with touching aimed for other shores, with touching--other

elbows, with smiles moving on to other lips--interrupted, accidentally stolen.--"Go on, girls, go on..." She will never be a poor relation at a celebration of someone else's youth. Neither friendship nor respect nor the other abyss which is our own kindness, she will put nothing in the place of love. She will not renounce the magnificent darkness, the round and black burn--a circle with a magic different from yours, Faust!--from the fire of joy, long ago. She will stay firm--against all springtimes.

Even if a young woman were to throw herself against her like a child throws itself against a passer-by or against a wall--the passer-by, she would avoid, the wall--she will be immovable. This furious lover, when an old woman, remains pure out of pride. She, who all of her life evoked fear, does not wish to evoke fear that way. The young demon will never transform into an old witch.

Benevolence--disdain--distance.

*"Passez vites, folles et belles..."

Sous les murs d'une poudriere
Par le temps presque renverses,
La main devant votre lumiere
Passez, jeunes filles, passez.

He, however--he is surrounded by the legitimized glory of all those blondes of the past, he goes on. She--is surrounded by a mist of horror.

Neither God, nor other human beings, nor her self-pity can do anything about her, about her natural and fatal inclination, only her pride will be able to. And it alone will be able to. And it is able to so well that the eternally young girl, completely intimidated, turns to her mother: "This lady frightens me. She has such a hard look. How have I displeased her?"

And another girl, introduced to "this lady" by her mother--who knows why?--hears the lady speaking in a voice of restraint that seems to crack: "Your mother told me that you have a predilection for painting. One must cultivate these talents, Mademoiselle..."

Never dolled up, never made up, never rejuvenated, embellished, falsified, leaving this to the "normal" old women, those who in the eyes of all, [...]with the blessings of a priest, marry in a lawful ceremony at age 60 a twenty-year old boy. She leaves this for Caesar's sisters.

The natural and fatal inclination of the mountain toward the valley, of the river toward the lake, [...]

Toward evening the entire mountain surges back toward her summit, by evening it is the summit. One could say her rivers flow back the wrong way. By evening she recovers herself.

...Then, again, one day, the one who was once young will learn that somewhere at the other end of this very earth the older one has died. At first she will want to write in order to know. But time hurries on--the letter is frozen in time. Desire remains desire. The "I want to know" becomes "I would like to" then "I don't want to anymore."--And so what, since she has died? Since I, too, will die someday... And courageously, with the great honesty of indifference--For she has been dead within me, for me--already twenty years now?"

It's not necessary to die in order to be dead.

Island. Summit. Solitary.

Weeping willow! Inconsolable willow! Willow--the body and soul of women!
Inconsolable neck of willow. Gray hair falling over her face, so she cannot see anything.
Gray hair sweeping the face of the earth.

Water, air, mountains, trees are given to us in order to understand the human soul, so profoundly hidden away. When I see how a willow despairs, I understand Sappho.

Clamart, November-December 1932.

(Rewritten and revised in November 1934, with a little more gray hair. M.T.)

* "Go on quickly, crazy, beautiful women..."

Below the walls of an arsenal
Almost completely destroyed by time.
With a hand before your lamp--
Go on quickly, young girls, go on.

Translation by Sonja Franeta

With special thanks to Elena Gusyatinskaya and Christine Stockton.