

its “elite table water,” which was supposed to have medicinal properties—largely unspecified—its German cooking, and its homegrown vegetables.

I have a letter Albert sent to her while she was at the Summit Hotel—the only letter I can find that he wrote to her, another relic from my brother’s canvas bag. Written on Cincinnati Conservatory of Music stationery, and dashed off between voice students, he addresses her as “My dear Honeylamb” and begins by describing a party he attended the night before at her sister Helen’s house, complete with “strong” mint juleps mixed by Helen’s husband. A party at which Albert sang, apparently with mixed success (he shouldn’t have had a mint julep). “How I missed you,” he writes, “especially when I am in a crowd. I feel lonelier than ever when you are not there.”

Aside from this doleful confession, the letter is newsy and upbeat. The children, he reports, are “fine as ever and want to know when you are coming home—they miss their Mama, as I do.” He goes on to describe high jinks among pupils at the conservatory (someone turned on the fire alarm in the middle of the night and one girl fainted, “most of the girls are incensed about it”). The house on Indian Hill is still under construction but almost finished (“the painters have done walls and woodwork and made fine progress”). He is looking forward to seeing her the following week but adds with a note of contrition, to atone for sounding needy in the previous paragraph, “I hope you are having a real rest and a good time, too.”



A real rest. People who are sad, who are emotionally and physically worn out, need a real rest. This was a woman who had money, a doting husband, happy children, sisters close by, servants to do all the housework. Spring had arrived. She was not

sick yet. The stock market hadn’t crashed yet. But she needed a real rest at the Summit Hotel. What was going on, aside from the miscarriage (which after all was enough), to keep her from smiling?

Lucile’s silence on this matter is instructive. It is as impossible to understand the intricacies of other people’s unhappiness as it is to understand their marriages. Who knows, for instance, what motherhood may have stirred up for her, motherless herself at nine years old. Maybe my father was right and she never bonded with her little boys, or at least with him. Maybe it really is true that she never felt much for her second son, though he is so appealing in his baby pictures, so darling, a charming big-eared little boy with a shy comical look. But maybe she found him exhausting, disappointing. Maybe he just wasn’t a girl.



I have written an entire book to convince my father that he once had a mother who had loved him, that she was not as remote as she looks in those photographs; but it seems I can’t prove it after all.

I WRITE TO my father’s cousin Nancy to inquire about some home movies of the Kroger family in the 1920s that I hazily recollect being shown at her house the week of my grandfather’s funeral. A month later a packet arrives in the mail. In it are three DVDs, which Nancy has had made from the old silent reel-to-reel tapes she has kept all these years. On my next visit to Charlotte my father and I watch the DVDs together on his computer screen, and there—amid grainy black-and-white footage of children jumping into waves in Florida, children swimming in a swimming pool, men golfing, B. H. Kroger

Details fall together. There's a quarry near Tenino, and that's where the stone came from for the buildings on Main Street. I'm amazed at myself, at how much I can learn from such scant entries.

Imogene was unlike a lot of prairie-raised girls in that she knew how to swim. She'd taught herself in an irrigation ditch near the homestead, floating in the shallow, muddy water and squinting up through the weeds at bursts of sunlight until, plop! A frog thrown by her younger brother or sister, my mother or Uncle Dave, hit her in the stomach and sank her. But—perseverance—she spat and recovered herself, yelled threats and tried again, until, eventually, she did learn to swim and later qualified as a lifeguard.

*Pa is failing.* Yes, his dementia is progressing, Imogene.

*September 25: Got my hair done. Letter from Sylva. Only one week left in this month. Hope my certificate comes so I can get paid. I need money so darn bad.*

However badly she needs money, she's continuing what will become a lifetime habit of having her hair done in the beauty shop. A small luxury, and maybe a small defiance at the old strictures.

Beauty is only skin deep!

Maybe so, but I'm going to have my hair done, all the same.

*September 27: Hot dog—got my 3 yr. Certificate. Teacher's meeting. We have ration book 4 to do soon. I hear they will cut down still farther on gas soon. Spelling [trying to teach it to her third-graders] is about to get me down.*

Her three-year teaching certificate means that she won't have to go back to summer school for another three years. She's thankful for the breathing space, for not having to return soon for the grueling combination of studies and working at a box factory or a cannery until she's ready to drop. She can treat herself to a summer in Montana, she can take her time.

*I know I'll never get a [bachelor's] degree,* she writes at one point, although in fact she does, one day.

*September 29: Damn! Daisy is moving into a house—not that I care about that but she wants to sleep here the 10 days between. I won't like it but I can't say no.*

*September 30: One of the Jr. H.S. boys got killed at school today. We had the 1st PTA tonight. A nice crowd. I was asked to be secretary.*

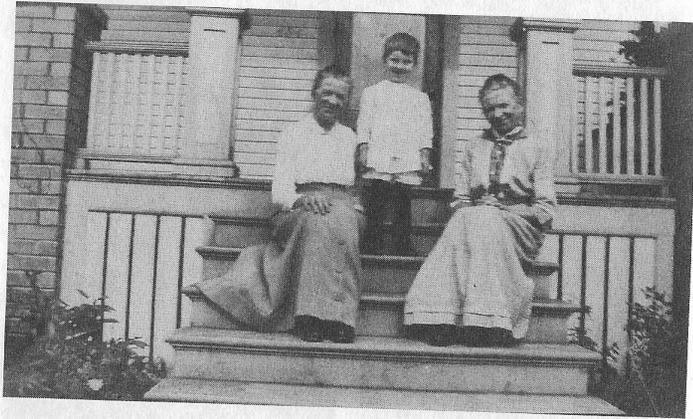
Oh, Imogene! What is the story here? Why do you dismiss the death of the boy in the same line as the PTA meeting?

Because I have the place and the date, I could almost certainly learn the boy's name and cause of death. A social historian researching life in small-town Washington State during the 1940s probably could find a newspaper account of the fall from the tree where he shouldn't have been climbing. Or the dash he shouldn't have made into traffic. Or the rough tackle on the playground, head hitting one of those rocks that never got moved after the construction of the school, the other boys scared and defensive, we didn't mean, we didn't mean. But I'm not a social historian, and why does the boy's death matter, finally, in Imogene's story?

(She's new in town, remember. This is her first year teaching here, so she can't join in the conversation among the older teachers: Oh, yes, he was in my fifth grade in such-and-such a year, I remember when, and so on.)

The writer of creative nonfiction is constantly questioned about the ethics of her craft. What can she decently write about other people? Which secrets should she allow herself to expose? Ought she be writing at all? Because isn't she, in a sense, selling herself? Selling herself and her family and friends, selling her very landscape, her very culture, to prurient readers who at the very least think that they're getting the real thing and, at the worst, that they're getting the low-down, the dirt, the ugly underside.

“Robert, At About 3 Years Of Age”



THEY HAVE MANAGED to keep him clean to this minute, but it's clear he would defy geometry. Slide quicksilver past those two pairs of solid shoes, sideslip through the sluice of skirts, down the vertical axis and off into the garden before they can stand up, flustered, to call him back. He will return with a smudge of dirt on his shorts where he squatted at the edge of the flowerbed to watch a toad, a tear in the slip-stitched hem of his shirt that will cause them both to “ooh” and “oh” that his mother will be unhappy. And she will. Because she is always unhappy. And if he worried about that, he would have to suck in his smile and do what she wanted. If he were to give in to her dismay, he would not be able to catch that toad and hold it up to the light, the little pulse of a heart surging in its

throat, its warty skin dry to the touch, and cool. He would have to stand there, starched and uncomfortable. He would be four. Then five. Then forever.

The white shirt tells him sit still, don't move. Above the collar, his hair is dark. It will not turn red for another year—and who knows why? Maybe because he loves the feeling of not knowing, of wondering what, and why, and how. He loves these two old women—his grandmother and her sister, Tante Maggie—whose stern faces un wrinkle in his presence. He loves the plain lines of their lives that lead directly to his. He thinks they are one, and they are his. It is 1914. They come from somewhere in the century before, when life was a thing to be harnessed and contained. Between them, they have many years of age, many years of moving between German and English, their accents caught between there and here: 484 (even the house number is symmetrical) Somewhere Street, Saginaw, Michigan. Or is it St. Louis? He could have told me. Could have said what it is to escape the isocetes to discover where these parallel lines might intersect. But for now, for this brief moment in someone's sun, he is the good one who comes when they call, filled with the small adventures they have permitted him: grass, toad, the ironed scent of sunshine, the soft, burred sound of his name.

Eastern Cherokee Application # 13598

*For share of money appropriated for the Eastern Cherokee Indians  
by Act of Congress approved June 30, 1906, in accordance with  
the decrees of the Court of Claims of May 18, 1905, and May 28, 1906*

Jan. 28, 1907

Dear Mr. Guion Miller,

Betty Pledge my Great-Great Grandmother was said to be a daughter or granddaughter of Donnahoo a Cherokee Chief whose tribe was located in Surry County, NC, at a point now named Donnaha, NC. I claim through my mother Eliza Webb, daughter of Hannah Webb, daughter of John Poindexter whose wife was Betty Pledge. Please send my money directly to me in East Bend, NC.

Respectfully yours,  
Hannah Sharpe

June 3, 1907

Dear Mr. Guion Miller,

No, sir, my mother did not apply because she is deceased and my father who is not a rightful descendant is also deceased. I have four living children and I reckon if I get my money then they are entitled to some as well, being that they are half mine. Please send my money to me at my residence in East Bend, NC.

Respectfully,  
Hannah Sharpe

August 21, 1907

Hello again, Mr. Guion Miller,

I only have one name that I have ever been told and that is Hannah Anne Sharpe so for your record you can put that down as my English name and my Indian name. I am still in East Bend waiting.

Yours truly,  
Hannah Anne Sharpe

Dec. 31, 1907

Dear Mr. Miller,

Sir, has my application 13598 been examined and do you

need any more information. I can get all that is necessary to prove I am a descendent from the Eastern Cherokee tribe.

Sincerely,

Hannah Anne Donnahoo Sharpe

Jan. 31, 1908

Guion Miller, Special Commissioner,

I do not agree with your decision because I have been told all my life that I was Indian and I will prove it to you if you will come here to East Bend and see for yourself. I meant to tell you Donahoo was suppose to be part of the Snowbird clan which now is pretty big if you consider that all us Poindexters belong to it and we are all over the county. I would like for you to rethink your action and all of us here in East Bend feel the same.

Awaiting your reply,

Hannah Anne Donnahoo Poindexter Sharpe

Feb. 25, 1908

Dear Commissioner:

I am a Christian as well as Indian and whatever your people in Washington say I know who I am and where I come from. One day right will win out. You mark my words.

Yours most sincerely,

Mrs. Hannah Anne Donnahoo Poindexter Sharpe

Mar. 13, 1908

Guion Miller—

No, sir, I do not mean to threaten you. I just want you to see the truth for yourself. There's nobody in East Bend who will hurt you. I don't think.

Signed,

Hannah Anne Donnahoo Poindexter Webb Sharpe  
East Bend, N.C.

## ***Kitchen Spoons***

New

My spoon of Spanish olive wood  
from the Olive Pit in Corning,  
Tehama County, California,  
just off the I-5,  
is light but has a good heft.  
Short and well rounded,  
the right size to stir with,  
it's at home in my hand.  
Matte brown of olive meat,  
dark streaks like olive skin,  
its grain is clear and fluent.  
The grain of a wood  
is the language of the tree.  
I oil the spoon with olive oil  
and it tells me grey-green leaves,

from Late in the Day  
by Ursula K. Le Guin

brief fragrant blossom-foam,  
tough life, deep roots, long years.  
Spain that I have never seen.  
California, and summer, summer.

Old

My plated steel mixing spoon  
is from our first apartment,  
on Holt Avenue in Macon,  
Georgia, in 1954, the downstairs  
of widow Killian's house, furnished  
with her furniture and kitchenware.  
An ordinary heavy tablespoon,  
plain, with a good balance,  
the left side of the end of the bowl  
misshapen, worn away  
by decades, maybe a century,  
of a right-handed person  
mixing and beating with it.  
First Mrs Killian, then me.  
I liked it so well that when we moved  
I asked her could I take it.  
That old thing? My goodness, yes,  
with a soft laugh,  
take it if you want it, child.

The dissemination of scientific and technical information relating to atomic energy should be permitted and encouraged so as to provide that free interchange of ideas and criticisms which is essential to scientific progress.—The Atomic Energy Act of 1946

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a critic al scientific  
progr A m

**REDACTION I**

**FROM PLUME, BY KATHLEEN FLENNIKAN**

Sonic Boom  
(Smoky Hill AFB, Kansas, 1954)

My best friend's name is Tommy Avery.  
His mom talks funny because she's English.  
The have a little toy Winston Churchill  
that puffs real smoke when she lights its cigar.  
She made Tommy's fancy birthday dinner  
from a recipe in a magazine:  
Fiesta Peach Spam Loaf with canned string beans.  
Eight candles on his chocolate birthday cake.  
Lieutenant Avery was in uniform  
and Tommy was wearing his Cub Scout neckerchief.  
His mom said, "We can all sleep well at night,  
safeguarded by such good-looking soldiers."  
While we were singing, a jet made a sonic boom,  
like a hammer on an iron curtain.

Marilyn Nelson  
How I Discovered Poetry

The House on Bishop Street

No front yard to speak of,  
just a porch cantilevered on faith  
where she arranged the canary's cage.  
The house stayed dark all year  
though there was instant light and water.

(No more gas jets hissing,

their flicker glinting off  
Anna Rettich's midwife spectacles  
as she whispered 'think a baby'  
and the babies came.) Spring  
brought a whiff of cherries, the kind  
you boiled for hours in sugar and cloves

from the yard of the Jewish family next door.  
Yumanski refused to speak so  
she never bought his vegetables  
at the Canal Street Market. Gertrude,  
his youngest and blondest,  
slipped by mornings for bacon and grits.  
There were summer floods and mildew

humming through fringe, there was  
a picture of a ship she passed  
on her way to the porch, strangers calling  
from the street 'Ma'am, your bird  
shore can sing!' If she leaned out she could glimpse  
the faintest of mauve-- no more than an idea--  
growing just behind the last houses.

Rita Dove  
Thomas and Beulah