

Francesca Bratton

Letters to Jack

Jack:

I tried stories but I stole the stories from dreams. In the first a sad woman (naturally) crops and crops a garden hedge. Where the hedge used to be she finds mushrooms that resemble vulvas (bright red). Some would argue that this never happened.

That wasn't like me at all, Jack. I'll be honest, I don't see the point in vaginal/womb metaphors.

Francesca

*

Jack,

I do admire people who can do those types of things in public, open things up (think of an old-fashioned kind of can, the type with a steel butterfly attached to it, that you can twirl around the edge, revealing the pink meat that looks like a mouth or perhaps just the tongue. My brother cut his hand this way. Think of it,

two pink gaping holes: the half-open can, his
half-open hand).

I found another can opener:

How pure and big a wound

His imagination left.

I have a friend called Jack. Let's agree you are
both Jacks at once. It's easier that way.

Francesca

*

Jack,

Here's a true story. My friend and I ran into the
woods. We were ten.

She was navy haired and pale. I was tawny all
over. We were in shorts and sandals. Her t-shirt
had a bow on it. Mine said 'Carnac'. The t-shirt
was old and worn, bought by my Dad (the one
I don't see). I went nuts the day I got it. It was
my birthday. At dinner the French waiters
brought me red sugary drink after red sugary
drink, each with a spear of candied cherries.
After, I careened on a swing near the restaurant

in my stiff new t-shirt with a pink stain around my mouth. I was five! My God. What a thing it was to be five!

The true story. My friend and I were in a part of Hampshire with chalk streams, trout and deep voices. I was not born there.

The light in the woods was cathedral green. This phrase got a poem of mine rejected a few years ago. But what I mean is that the woodland floor (a theological purple) was patterned with greenish shapes made by the strong light as it passed through the branches and leaves. There was a pheasant who could only be described as a clergyman. Specifically, our school vicar: gullet, round shoulders, dragging walk.

Beyond the woods there was a field. We lay on our backs at its centre, between the rows of cut wheat.

Here is the bad part: we were rounded up by two men (boys?) on quad bikes. One red, one blue, a sheepdog riding at the back of the red. We were the fixed point for the sheepdog's gaze as the three raced along.

We stood up, back-to-back holding hands. The engines were loud.

The two men (boys?) said to us: 'you must never come here again.' They wore nylon jackets. I thought if only we had a match, we could set them on fire. I would do it now.

Just down the road there is a small white chapel on a hill. Something happened there. My friend and I did not know what. But someone cut down all the trees.

Francesca

*

Jack,

What do you make of this as a final line: 'Hurt not the trees.' That's the end. That poet drank something and died. You did the same. I'm sorry to say it like that, Jack, but it is true. A number of people I love have done that/are doing that, Jack.

Francesca

*

Jack:

My friend says these letters need work (she's a translator). I'm worried about progress. I texted my friend and said I was writing to you. Then I edited this letter (just this one). Now I'm going to send it to her.

Yours,

Francesca

*

Jack:

This morning my boyfriend and I were drinking coffee in bed. I said out loud: 'maybe I should write about Jack Spicer?' I was half joking. I waited a while and then I said: 'Is it too much to ask that people think I'm some sort of prophet' (he choked on his coffee). I said, 'you know, he died of alcohol poisoning?'

I think I had this idea because I don't know what to do. I wrote a book that did come out but might not be any good. It's about Hart Crane. Hands reaching out from poem to poem, not quite touching. The way he broke

things, broke poems apart. Poems returned
from all sorts of places.

Yours,

Francesca

*

-----Just a note, Jack. I am increasingly worried
about structural plagiarism. I'm still trying to
shake it all off. It boils down to not having guts.

Francesca

*

Jack:

Consider this a promise to get outside myself.
All things can be generative in that I felt a
certain way: I painted my nails with overlapping
coloured circles; I threw the cutlery onto the
rack quite hard; I lay in the bath.

Francesca

*

Jack,

Do you believe in coincidence? My boyfriend and I saw Eileen Myles wandering around Tompkins Park with their dog. The park was close to a deli Karl wanted to visit. The sandwiches were too big. Two Danish guys left as soon as they sat down, leaving these tall towers of folded meat on their plates. It was our last day in New York.

There was trash everywhere. The day we arrived we ate breakfast outside. A skyscraper all in tinted glass rose high, a border of black bags and rotting food at the foundations.

Yours,

Francesca

*

Jack:

Another true story. Last night we went to a lecture by a famous poet. It was in Dublin so we had to get the bus. He mentioned you (telling you might be insulting). All I wrote down were his interjections—nothing else. ‘And I hate to tell you this’, ‘and I hate to dwell on it.’ ‘Do you

need some water?’ ‘Here’. ‘I wish I could come with you.’

The lecture was largely argument by juxtaposition. One thing alongside another thing.

I’m not averse to it.

But what happens when this is at scale?

Imagine standing there and knowing that you can hold the parts together simply because you are yourself. He was talking about violence.

He made a lot of jokes. I think he wanted to shock us into seeing it for what it is.

Love,

Francesca

*

Notes

Jack Spicer, ‘Juan Ramon Jimenez’, a translation for John Ryan, *After Lorca* in *Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, ed. Robin Blaser (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow, 1975), p. 13.

Charlotte Mew, ‘The Trees Are Down’, *Collected Poems and Prose*, ed. Val Warner (London: Virago, 1981), p. 48.