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Girl from Detroit



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#1 *New York Times*  
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Andrews McMeel  
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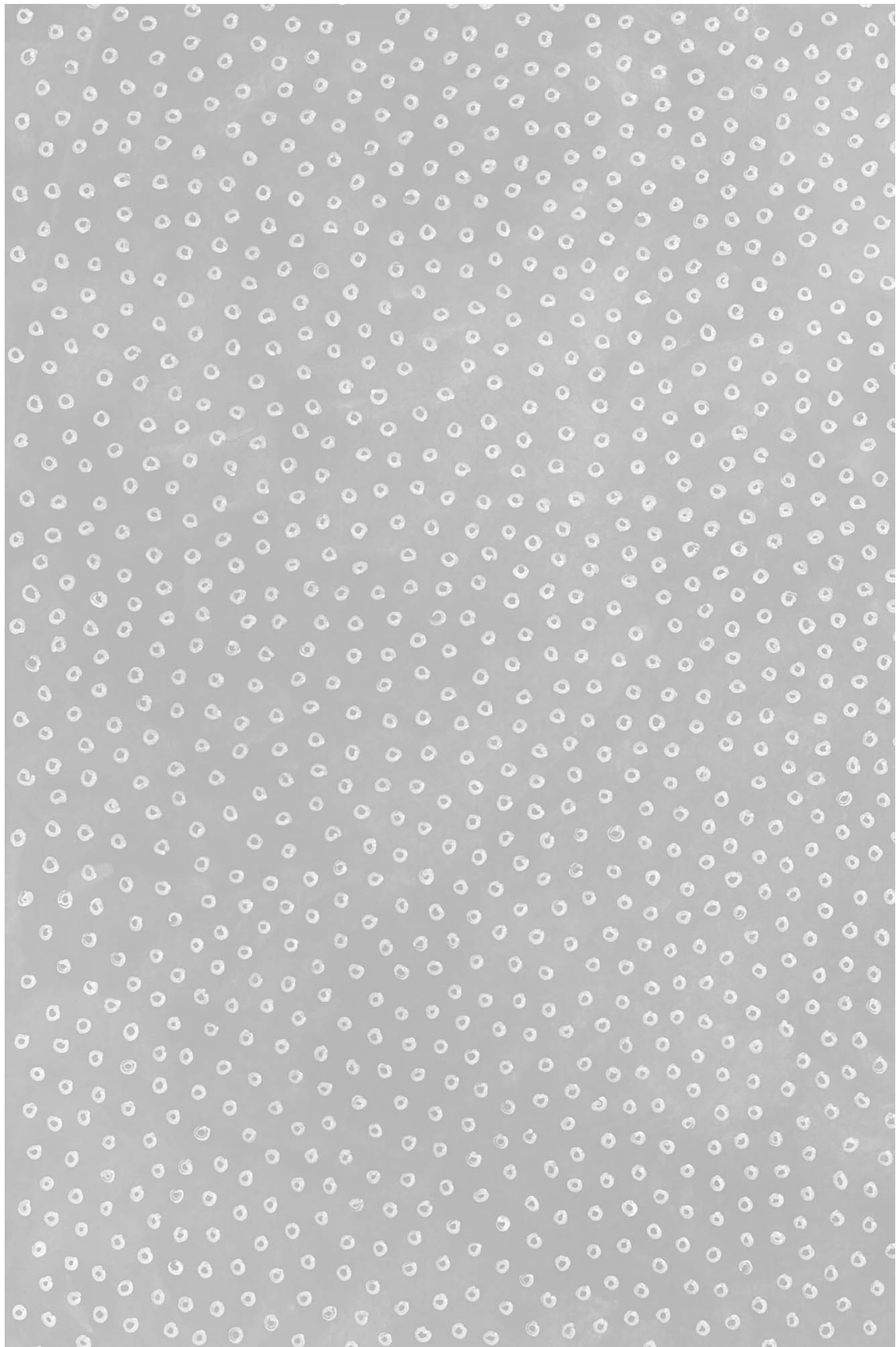
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For my grandmother and her six great-grandchildren.



Mary 

*DETROIT, MICHIGAN*

1934

**Grief**

consumes  
like a brush fire.

It begins  
with a glowing cinder.

You think  
you can smother it  
with your boot.

As you tap  
and kick and stomp,  
it spreads  
across the grass.

Once the spark grows,  
it has a will  
of its own.

It changes everything  
in its path.

All you can do  
is stand there.

With a useless

bucket in your hands.

As you watch  
the entire field  
burn.



**I wish**

I could spin my body  
so fast  
it could rotate  
the earth.

I wish  
I could reverse  
the months, the days,  
the hours.

Go back  
to the beginning.

I wish  
it could have been  
me.

Mary 

*DETROIT, MICHIGAN*

1933

**They say**

twin souls  
can communicate  
without talking.

Marguerite and I  
never stop.

Not even  
when we're asleep.

I put my head  
next to hers.

I imagine her thoughts  
traveling faster  
than the speed of light  
into my brain.

All the static  
vanishes  
and we become a radio  
tuned to the same  
frequency.

**I wake to a swarm**

of mosquitoes  
tickling my cheek  
and buzzing my ears.

I swat them  
from the air.

*You're breathing on me.*

I open one eye  
and see her.

*I'm still asleep.*

*So am I.*

*Good.*

We close our eyes.

After a moment,  
I feel a tickling on my cheek again.

*Are you awake?*

My sister is as warm  
as a log on a fire.

She fuels me.



**We walk down the hall**

into the crowded  
living room.

Shield our bodies  
from our three  
long-limbed  
younger brothers,  
who snap  
and twist  
against each other.

Cerberus,  
the three-headed dog,  
guarding the gates  
of the underworld.

They look up  
and greet us in unison,  
*Good morning!*  
before they rush us.

John puts me in a headlock  
and tugs my braid.

Gus wrestles  
Marguerite to the ground  
while she kicks  
herself free

until my dad  
looks up  
from his newspaper  
and yells

*STOP!*

*Or I'll send you back  
to the old country!*

Sometimes  
I wish he would.

## **Our apartment**

is as small  
as a rabbit den.

Just like rabbits  
my parents keep adding  
new babies  
that take up space.

I look at my mother.

Hands over her eyes,  
wondering  
what to do  
with her brood.

Her belly swells  
with yet another  
mouth to feed.



**Why did my parents come to America?**

If I had  
a quarter

for every time  
I asked this question,

I'd be richer  
than Henry Ford.

## **Mama ladles the batter**

for crêpes onto the pan  
and turns it—just so.  
With one flick  
of her wrist,  
she flips  
the thin  
golden pancake  
onto the plate.

The first one there  
gets the crêpe.

So you have to be fast.

My brother Jim  
wins the prize  
and slathers it  
with strawberry preserves.

Rolls it and eats it.

All hot  
and gooey.

Not me.

I just keep grabbing  
and grabbing  
and placing the crêpes  
in my lap.

After breakfast,  
I will hide them

in my drawers  
underneath  
my folded clothes.

It's good to have  
a crêpe on hand  
when you need one.

And a few  
for your sister  
too.



## **My brother John**

leans back.

His hands crossed  
behind his neck.

His dirty boots  
on the table.

Ρεμάλι! (*Remáli!*)  
*Slob!*

My father cuffs him  
on the back of the head  
so hard  
his teeth rattle.

Gold tokens  
in a slot machine.

John sits up  
and smirks  
as if someone  
has made a joke.

I half expect him  
to spit gold coins  
into his cupped hands  
and scream, *Jackpot!*

Just to spite  
the old man.

*Mary!*

I look at him sideways.

*Yes, Baba?*

I can't remember  
the last time  
he addressed me.

*Dimitris Nicolaides came to the shop.  
He asked about you.*

My mother's eyebrows rise  
as her lips form  
into an "O."

I can hear the silent,

*O, Mary!  
O, what luck!*

She clasps her  
hands together.

Her mind slowly opening  
a cedar dowry chest  
as she prepares  
to make  
my wedding bed.

*A husband.*

An old, rich, *Greek*  
husband.

To put me  
in my place.

*Your eyes are the color of cultures clashing*

she says,  
as she kisses me between my lashes.

The dark brown  
of the Greeks  
mixed with the stormy gray  
of northwestern France.

My eyes turn green  
with anger.

*Oh, Mary,  
calm yourself.*

*You must  
get used to the idea  
of marriage.*

Marguerite pats my hand.

Her eyes calm  
as a fox.

Liquid pools  
of the sweetest  
amber.

My eyes glow  
like a serpent.

## **The sixteen-year-old girls**

in our town  
are precious candies  
waiting  
in a crystal dish.

The boys  
get to reach in,  
choose  
whichever treat  
they want.

Marguerite  
will be taken  
by a man  
from a good family.

She is sweet  
and brings a smile  
to your mouth.

When I talk,  
boys look like  
they've bitten  
on something  
bitter.

**I imagine I'm pulling on a silk dress**

with a feathered boa  
and matching slippers.

Instead,  
I squeeze into a wool dress  
that is two sizes  
too small.

The fabric  
barely buttons across  
my growing breasts.

I am filled with defeat  
even before I arrive  
at the battlefield.

School.

I tuck  
mother's rouge,  
a secret,  
into my pocket.

Secure my stockings  
with hidden red ribbons  
around my thighs.

A little color  
just for me.



**I try to fix my hair**

never sleek  
and kept.

A dark-brown,  
wild, tickling  
monster  
that longs  
for the inside  
of my mouth.

I've always felt  
a woman's power  
is in her hair.

The problem is

I have more of it  
than most.

And I have no idea  
how to tame it.

## **We climb down the stairs**

pass through  
our father's store  
and enter  
the busy street.

Our neighborhood  
smells like  
trash  
metal and oil  
ammonia  
slaughtered chickens  
and roasted goat meat.

Folks  
from Greece,  
Romania, Poland, and Mexico,  
and many Black families  
who've come up from the South  
inhabit  
the row houses and duplexes  
along our street.

Most of our neighbors  
came to Detroit  
because Ford  
paid his workers well.

\$5 a day.

Word spread far and wide.

My mother says  
I'll never have to travel

to learn  
the ways of the world.

The whole world lives in Detroit.

**For twenty years**

the factories fed  
and nourished  
every part of this town.

Food on the table.  
Money in the schools.  
Doctors for the sick.

Every morning  
the citizens  
walked in one direction  
toward the factory floors.

The River Rouge.

Animals gathering  
at the watering hole.

Detroit drank deep.

Sustenance.

Now,  
water is scarce.

We pray the source  
won't run dry.

## **Marguerite and I hold hands**

as we pass the lines.

Neighbors wait  
in the courtyard  
of the  
Sacred Heart Church.

A nun  
ladles soup  
into wooden bowls.

The priest rips bread  
and places it  
into waiting mouths.

A woman stands  
on a soapbox,  
speaking so vehemently  
spittle flicks  
from her teeth.

*I say to you, it is easier  
for a camel  
to go through the eye of a needle,  
than a rich man to enter  
into the kingdom of God!*<sup>1</sup>

**It's difficult to decide**

where to look.

A town  
of weathered tents  
lines the streets.

Families living  
in the dirt.

Women beg  
for coins  
with their children  
on their laps.

Children  
so thin  
you can see their bones  
through their  
worn shirts

skin peeling  
from sitting in the sun

teeth brown  
from hunger.

A hollow-cheeked man sits  
underneath a cloth banner  
that reads,

*Hoover's poor farm.*

He holds a cardboard sign



painted with angry words  
about our last president.

*Hard times are still Hoovering over us.* <sup>2</sup>

His son  
stands beside him.

He bounces a ball  
and chants,

*Little Pig, Little Pig, let me in!  
Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin!  
Then I'll huff and I'll puff  
and I'll blow your house in!* <sup>3</sup>

## **Folks know**

once you  
find yourself  
sitting on the road  
in Hooverville, <sup>4</sup>

it's hard  
to get back  
on your  
feet.

**I hear a rumble behind us**

I look up  
to see a boy  
my age.

Driving  
a brand-new, red  
Ford Cabriolet.

Through the open cab  
I can see  
his pinstriped suit.

He looks  
as if he has never had  
to worry.

Curly blond hair  
bounces  
as he speeds  
down the road.

The rest of us  
getting covered  
in dust.

## **When we get to school**

two boys  
are dragging each other  
through the yard.

Gus climbs on top  
and pulls them apart.

He winds up with a bloody lip  
before the bell rings.

We file into  
the classroom.

I hear Evie Williams  
talking about me.

*Two sizes too small!*  
*You can see EVERYTHING!*

Her friend Fay  
looks at me  
and mouths  
an apology.

Evie stares  
at the popping buttons  
on my dress.

Eyes wide  
like the barrel  
of a gun,  
loaded  
and ready

to fire.

My whole body  
feels hot  
and panic  
swells my brain.

I am a sack of grain  
with a target  
painted  
on my chest.

## **I settle on a bench**

between Marguerite  
and Elena.

Elena's parents  
are from Romania.

She was born  
in America  
just like us.

Elena's cheeks  
are ripe, round  
plums.

Her black, straight hair  
smells like cooked  
cabbage.

We link  
our elbows together.

If our school  
were a garden,  
I think Elena,  
Marguerite, and I  
would be growing  
on the very same  
vine.

**We rise and pledge**

*allegiance  
to the flag  
of the United States  
of America.*

We all speak  
in different accents.

Our voices ring  
in unison.

*Liberty and justice  
for all.*

For a brief moment,  
it feels like  
we might  
have something  
in common.

Then I see Evie  
sneering at me again.



## CAREER

Our teacher, Mrs. Patterson,  
scribbles the word  
on the blackboard.

Asks us to write  
a paragraph about what  
we want to do  
when we graduate.

*What are your dreams?*

My brothers  
start writing immediately.

John wants to be a pilot.  
Gus wants to be a soldier.  
Jim wants to build skyscrapers.  
Marguerite wants to be  
a homemaker.

I don't write anything.

*Good Greek Girls*  
know better than to dream.

***Good Greek Girls***

never speak before spoken to.

*Good Greek Girls*  
never ride bikes.

*Good Greek Girls*  
marry at a young age.

*Good Greek Girls*  
take care of the babies at home.

*Good Greek Girls*  
don't have jobs.

*Good Greek Girls*  
don't dance and smoke and drink.

*Good Greek Girls*  
never complain.

I don't know if I want to be  
*a Good Greek Girl.*

## **My mother calls her daughters**

to the kitchen.

We carry serving dishes  
filled with  
stuffed tomatoes and peppers  
and large bowls  
of cucumber salad.

We eat outside  
in my father's garden  
under the climbing grapevines.

Amidst the aroma  
of the blooming roses  
and carnations  
planted  
to remind him  
of Greece.

My mother loves  
when we eat and drink  
and laugh together  
at the table.

After dinner,  
she serves  
the bright-red cherries  
that we canned  
last fall.

She ladles them  
into small crystal bowls  
with silver spoons

*souvenirs*

memories  
from her life  
in France.

*I saw a fight in town*

my brother Gus says  
from the corner of a full mouth  
as he reaches  
for a second helping  
of cherries.

My mother glares at him.

*A real doozy.  
The whole works.*

*One guy was calling  
the other guy names.*

*He didn't like it much.  
Pulled out a blade.*

*The crowd gathered in a circle  
around them.*

*I didn't stay  
to see how it turned out.*

He shovels more fruit  
into his mouth

and doesn't notice  
the bloodred juice  
staining his chin.

## **My father holds his worry beads**

clicks them  
between his forefinger  
and his thumb.

*Too many men  
out of work.*

His voice  
accents each word  
like the beads  
on the string.

*The factories  
were the only thing  
keeping peace  
in this town.*

My mother puffs air  
out of her mouth  
in exasperation,

*Now everyone is praying  
that the immigrants  
will go home.*

This is our home.

*What would it feel like*

*to have blond hair and blue eyes?*

My sister asks  
with a dreamy voice.

I look at Marguerite's  
big, beautiful, black, curly hair.

Her amber eyes  
and olive skin.

I can't help laughing.

*What would it feel like  
to have a name  
like Smith or Jones?*

I retort.

*What would it feel like  
to have great-great-grandparents  
who arrived on the Mayflower?  
she giggles.*

*What would it feel like  
to drink Coca-Cola  
at the beach  
under an umbrella?*

I act like I'm opening  
a parasol.

*What would it feel like  
to not speak Greek,*



*eat Greek food,  
go to Greek church?*

*Normal?*  
my sister asks.

*“Normal” is not a word  
I have ever used.*  
I say with a flourish.

I take her hand  
and spin her  
around the yard.

**There's a pharmacy and a soda shop**

on the corner.

Marguerite and I  
don't have the ten cents  
to buy a copy of

*Ladies' Home Journal*

so we stand in the aisle  
and suck  
penny candies  
and read the articles,

"Keep That Wedding Day Complexion"<sup>5</sup>  
"A Man's Idea of a Good Wife"  
"Hints and Suggestions for Helpful Girls"

Just as we are about  
to dig into  
a particularly juicy story,

"Promiscuous Bathing"<sup>6</sup>

Mrs. Banta,  
the owner's wife,  
finds us huddled  
in the corner whispering.

She sweeps us out  
of the doorway  
with her broom.

**We look into the shop windows**

to examine ourselves.

Dab our lips and cheeks  
with red rouge.

We pose like starlets  
in the magazine.

Jazzy flappers.

Imagine  
we have short, cropped curls  
and flasks  
tucked into  
our knee-highs.

Girls who drive  
in cars with boys  
and dance.

***Come look!***

I pull Marguerite's arm  
until we're standing  
in front  
of a dress shop.

A mannequin  
with a surprised expression  
gestures  
toward the heavens  
like she just felt  
the first  
drop of rain.

An emerald green  
evening dress  
draped  
across her form.

Rose beige  
patent leather  
T-straps.

A gardenia  
in her hair.

*Oh, Marguerite!*  
*Isn't she divine?*

*She's beautiful.*

*I wish*  
*we had matching dresses*  
*just like this*

*and a place to wear them.*

*I wish we had new boots.*

I look down  
at our worn boots  
and my dreams  
fizzle.

The clouds turn gray  
and disappointment  
falls  
from the sky.

## **Our boots are practical**

Black.

Sturdy.

Thick soles.

They're meant to last.

We will wear them  
until the thread unspools  
and the leather cracks.

Until the rainwater  
soaks through  
and our bones  
are cold.

We will stuff them  
with newspaper.

It won't make a difference.

Only then  
will we beg our mother  
for a new pair.

She will look  
at all of our shoes  
and decide.

Whose feet are the coldest.  
Whose lips are the bluest.

Who needs the warmth  
the most.

## **After church on Sunday**

there is a man waiting  
at the carved doors  
of the entryway.

My father embraces him.

Dimitris takes my hand  
and brushes it  
with his dry lips.

His striped vest  
bulges  
with his belly fat.

Dimitris tells me  
he owns a shop,  
a haberdashery.

He sells men's clothing.

Silk and felt hats  
of all shapes and sizes.

Fabric and thread  
ribbons and zips  
buttons and clasps  
and small notions.

Dimitris lives alone.

In a sad house  
that smells like  
soup.

**I tell my father**

if that man  
comes in the front door,  
I will go out  
the back.



**My mother yanks me**

into the kitchen.

*Control your temper.*

My sister  
is peeling carrots  
at the table.

In my frustration  
I blurt out,

*What about Marguerite!*

*Why doesn't she  
have to get married?*

As soon  
as the words  
come out of my mouth,  
I feel sorry.

Marguerite  
looks up from  
her work  
with a panicked  
expression.

A fox  
caught in a snare.

*I am more concerned  
about you, Mary!*  
my mother snaps.

*What man  
would choose a girl  
like you?*

## **I imagine the day of my wedding**

I walk down the aisle  
toward a man  
I do not love.

Surrounded  
by hallowed images.

The priest blesses us  
as the chorister chants,

Ἡσαΐα χόρευε,  
ἡ Παρθένος ἐσχεν ἐν γαστρὶ.  
(Isaïa chóreve,  
i Parthénos éschén en gastrí.)  
*Isaiah dance,*  
*the Virgin is with child.*

He signs the cross  
and lays a wreath  
of flower buds  
on my black curls.

Another  
on the gray hair  
of my groom.

Entwined together  
by the Father, the Son,  
and the Holy Spirit.

We drink from one cup.

Servants of God.

**Marguerite is lying on her back**

in the garden.

Her arms and legs  
spread like a starfish  
on a rock.

I lay down beside her.

We look like stars  
in the same constellation.

*I don't want to leave.  
I don't want to get married.*

*I'm happy in this home  
with you.*

She holds my hand  
and says,

*It can't stay the same forever.*

*Even if  
we wish it could.*

I feel like someone  
has thrown a stone  
into the heavens  
and smashed the stars.

We are falling  
from the sky.

**I lie for a long time in the grass**

even after Marguerite has gone.

I turn on my shoulder  
and spy a shovel  
lying on the ground.

I stand and pick it up.

Walk down the cellar steps  
to return it to where  
it belongs.

The cellar smells  
of the dark, moss, fungus  
that lives  
in the packed dirt floors  
of this subterranean space.

Shelves hold  
boxes of potatoes,  
garlic, apples, and onions.

I lean  
the heavy shovel  
against the wall  
and it falls  
with a loud crash  
onto a shelf.

Boxes topple down.

Heads of garlic  
fly across the floor.

I groan and bend to gather  
the rolling bulbs  
when I notice  
an ancient wooden box  
covered in dust.

The clasp sprung open.

A stack of letters  
tumbling  
onto the ground.

**I hold an envelope in my hand**

There's no name  
no address  
no stamp.

I open  
the folded paper  
and begin to read.

**Letter #1**

*October 7, 1918*

*My dearest,*

*I woke this morning afraid. No one knows where you are.*

*How can I find you?*

*I don't even know where to send this.*

*I pray you are alive.*

*Always Yours,  
Petit Oiseau*



**Letter #2**

*October 10, 1918*

*Love of my life,*

*Lying in this field surround by smoke and fire, I feel as if our moments together never existed.*

*How could I have been so happy? Loved you so innocently?*

*I am sure by now the bed that I slept in is occupied by another wounded man.*

*Have you forgotten me?*

*I am afraid I will become what I most fear.*

*Le Loup*


**I read**

until my eyes blur.

My skin grows cold  
with cellar  
darkness.

Who were these people?

Where are they now?

*Giorgos (Gio)* 

*KOMNINA, CENTRAL GREECE*

1915

**The church bells chime**

through the windows  
of our house on the hill.

My mother  
hums softly,  
a song she repeats night  
after night  
until it becomes a part of me  
and the air we breathe.

It feels as if the wind  
might come from the sea  
and take me on its back

a white Pegasus  
or a boat,  
with wings  
for sails.

## **I go to school with the mountains**

the rocks  
the olive trees  
that grow in a tangled grove  
next to our house.

My teachers are the lizards  
that love the dusty soil  
and explore the world  
with their flicked  
tongues.

I go to school  
without books  
without the brick walls  
of a building  
with my fifteen-year-old twin,  
Violetta.

Wiry and tough.

Her hair braided  
in a black crown.

A sweet-smelling halo  
curled around  
her head.

## **Mother asks us**

to gather quail eggs  
from the low grasses and scrub  
on the hillside.

We listen  
for the *chuck-chuck-chuck*  
of the hen  
as she scratches out  
hidden hollows  
at the bottom  
of a tree trunk.

Startled,  
she leaps into the air  
in a quick burst  
of flight.

We see  
the brown and white  
speckled eggs  
camouflaged  
against  
the undergrowth.

Still warm from  
their mother's breast,  
we cradle them  
in our palms.

As we walk away,  
guilt rips  
at my chest.

The thought  
of the mother  
frantically searching  
for what  
has been lost.

*Giorgos, come quick!*

Violetta has found a cave.

There are wild animals,  
beasts,  
that live in these hills.  
Muscle cats, brown bears,  
and jackals.

We imagine  
the great Spartan warriors  
of Thermopylae.

We enter the mouth of the cave.

All we find  
is a γίδα (*gída*),  
a small goat.

Her bell jingles  
from a leather strap  
wrapped  
around her neck.

She is staked to the ground.

Miles of wilderness.  
No freedom.

A circle of grass  
mowed down  
around her.

**We name the goat Alethea**

It means truth.

She is stubborn.  
She will eat your clothes.

And also trash.

You have to watch her closely.

She's always trying  
to get away  
with something.

I scratch her  
and she curls her head closer  
to my hand.

When I stop  
she stares at me  
with her vertical  
amber eyes.

A creature  
from the underworld  
who knows  
everything

but will tell me  
nothing.



## **The old men in the village**

are sighing  
and talking about war.

The elders know what is coming.

Young men puff up their chests.  
They will join the army.

I do not want to fight.

Why do I need to carry a gun  
to prove  
that I love my country  
and my home?

## **Violetta ties her skirt**

in a knot between her legs.

She wants to wear  
pants instead  
of the dress and apron  
she must wear  
everyday.

She puts on my vest and hat  
when our mother is out.

*Ωπα! (Hopa!), she says.*  
*I look very brave!*

One day, Violetta falls asleep  
wearing my clothes.

My mother comes  
home.

She spits  
in Violetta's face,  
*Our house will be shamed*  
*because of you!*

I wipe the tears  
from Violetta's eyes.

She would be  
a very brave boy indeed.

**When my mother's eyes are red**

like the juice of a blood orange,

that is how I know  
she has been crying.

She tries to do it in secret,  
but we all know it happens.

She misses my father.

She never says  
that she loved him,  
only that he was good  
to her.

Most of the men from the village  
are not good to their wives.

One time, I saw a man  
throwing stones at his wife  
while she covered her head  
with her hands.

One day, I will become a man.  
I will try to be good.

**There are stories**

of dolphins  
and mermaids

who push  
their heads  
out of the water.

Offer  
their breath  
to men  
who are  
drifting.

Sometimes  
I wonder  
if this happened  
to my father.

Perhaps  
they saved him  
and took him

to an island  
with fresh water  
and fruit growing  
on trees.

I like to think of this.

Rather than his boat  
on the bottom  
of the sea.

## **My sister and my mother**

clean the house  
bake the bread  
feed the animals  
milk the goat  
tend to the garden.

I am not allowed to help.

If I lift a plate,  
my mother slaps my hand  
and screeches,  
*Women's work!*

I hear the crack  
of my mother's voice,  
*Violetta! Come!*

I watch  
the anger rise  
on my sister's pink cheeks  
like she has been struck  
by a willow switch.

## **My mother has found a match**

for Violetta.

She clasps her hands in triumph  
and grins as widely  
as a fisherman's net  
spread across  
a harbor.

*He's from a good family!  
I have been listening at the market,  
I have been talking to the women.*

*She will go to a good home  
to a man  
who will care for her!*

*We will wait  
until you turn sixteen,  
my mother says.*

Her hands  
placed firmly on her hips.

My sister puts her cheek  
on the cool  
wooden table.

Mother spoons  
large portions  
of tomatoes, feta,  
and beans  
onto our plates.

She does not see  
that my sister  
has completely  
lost  
her appetite.

**I find my sister**

in the garden.

She's holding a small bouquet  
of wildflowers.

*I don't know why  
I picked these.*

*They will wilt by tomorrow.*

I put my hand  
on her shoulder.

Think of all the words  
that could comfort.

None of them seems right.

She holds the flowers  
out to me.

*They would have been happier  
staying right where  
they were.*



**My father told me**

the three most important  
things in life:

the boat, the sea,  
the family.

That's all you need.

**My father is missing**

My sister is about to leave me.

And I don't have  
a boat.

# *Jeanne*

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1915

## **The smell of the sea**

climbs the walls  
of our city  
like a salty,  
dangerous  
pirate

who steals  
into my bedroom  
and whispers  
in my ear.

*Come with me.*

The night turns me  
into a sparrow.

Wings tipped  
with golden arrows.

The stars sing  
in the firmament  
a song that belongs  
to me alone.

*Come home.*

**We live in a house**

on the top of a hill

filled with beautiful  
things

and a maid  
to dust them.

We live in a house

with a small black dog  
named Felix  
who eats  
out of a crystal bowl.

We live in a house

filled with visitors  
who drink champagne  
and dine on oysters  
and canapé  
in the rose garden.

We live in a house

as old as the cathedral

with a balcony door  
that opens  
to the emerald sea.

We live in a house

filled with books,  
tales of adventures  
and voyages.

I wonder  
if these stories  
will ever be written  
about me.

## **A letter arrives**

Papa breaks a government  
red wax seal  
to open it.

He is needed in the war effort.

They know  
he will be a wonderful doctor  
in the French Foreign Legion.

It is time  
for him to fulfill his duty  
to his country.

He will leave  
the day after Christmas.

He throws the letter  
into the fire.

It crackles and spits  
and rises up the chimney,  
black as smoke.

**It is mid-December**

and we gather  
with our neighbors  
for *la fête de Noël*,  
our winter festival.

It is my favorite day  
of the year.

We eat crêpes filled  
with sugar and jam  
and *galettes saucisses*,  
spiced sausages.  
Drink cider and *chouchen*,  
a honey brew.

My father's friends  
pat him on the back,  
wish him luck.

Neighbors  
thank him for his service.

The music begins.

We laugh and breathe hard  
as we dance and sing  
in a circled chain  
to the bagpipes, the accordion,  
the fiddle, and the drum.  
Two sisters join the stage  
and sing  
an a cappella song.

We stop to listen.

Their voices wind  
around each other,  
a threaded bobbin  
whirling inside  
a spinning wheel.

They sing *le chant des marins*.

A sailor's song  
for our people.<sup>7</sup>



## **The Bretons**

are wild  
like the purple heather  
that grows  
on our rocky shore.

## The Bretons

are sweet  
like the gold  
we squeeze  
from the depths  
of the honey's lore.

## The Bretons

are brave  
as the northern wind  
and we know that  
we must pray.

## To the Lord, our God

to keep our ships  
from that dark  
and watery grave.

O keep us from  
that watery grave.

O keep us from  
that grave.

## **Maman closes her eyes**

I see tears escape.

We listen to the music,  
but I know we are both  
thinking of the boat  
that will take Papa  
to a country  
far from here.

She hugs me close.

My head fits perfectly  
in the curve of her neck.

I can hear  
her heart  
beating.

A lonely bird  
trapped in a cage.

## **The day before**

my father leaves,  
the townspeople gather

to see Louis Blériot  
and his amazing  
flying machine,  
the *Blériot XI*.

My father and I  
join the crowd  
to watch  
as the daring Frenchman  
turns on the throttle  
and steps  
to the propeller.

With several huge pulls,  
the airplane begins  
to hum  
like a swarm of hornets.

I grab my father's hand,  
frightened by the sound.

He shouts into my ear,  
*Don't you see, chérie?*  
*This will help us win the war.*

Commandeur Blériot  
places his goggles  
over his eyes  
and waves to the crowd  
before he mounts

the open frame  
of the two-seater plane.

Within moments,  
he speeds straight ahead  
into the fallow field  
and lifts  
into the bright,  
blue sky.

## **On the way home**

my father  
places his arm  
around my shoulders.

*I have to go,  
mon petit oiseau.*

I nod  
as tears escape.

*I have been trained to heal people.*

His voice breaks.

*I will try my best  
to make you proud.*

He looks  
over the walls of our city  
to the ocean  
beyond.

*I don't want to leave you  
and Maman.*

I put my arms  
around his neck  
and he lifts me  
off the ground.

Tears roll down my cheeks  
onto the shoulder  
of his suit.

*I will try  
to make you proud too,  
Papa.*

**My mother dresses me**

in my best dress.

Black stockings  
and black-buttoned boots.

A large white ribbon  
tied on the top  
of my auburn curls.

I look like a present.

I wish  
she would let me  
sweep my hair up  
on the top of my head.

Instead,  
she dresses me  
like a toddler.

We hear  
the whistle  
loud and clear.

My father points  
through  
the crowd of people  
on the dock  
and says,

*See that  
beautiful boat, chérie?*

*It's going to take me  
all the way  
to Siam.*



## **That night I dream of water**

I am a selkie.

Half-girl and half-seal  
who has found  
her white coat  
and can finally return  
to the sea.

I swim alongside  
my father's boat,  
jumping  
in the foam waves  
as the ship cuts  
across the dark water.

I can save him  
if he needs to be saved.

Up above,  
an airplane looms,  
sputtering  
its hot fumes  
into the clean air.

I wake  
in sorrow.

I am just a girl.

Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

1933

**Letter #3**

*October 12, 1918*

*My darling, my love,*

*My hands are so cold I can hardly hold a pen.*

*I worry you will never get this.*

*You will never know how much I loved you.*

*Will these pages end up scattered like poppies across a field?*

*Perhaps they belong to no one.*

*Only God and the wind.*

*Your always faithful,*

*Loup*

**Letter #4**

*October 15, 1918*

*Every day, I grow more tired.*

*Tired of waiting. Tired of the war. Tired of my own loneliness.*

*How could you have left me without a word?*

*I am without a husband, without a father, without faith.*

*Living in a city surrounded by granite walls.*

*Did you ever love me, at all?*

*Forever yours,*

*Petit Oiseau*

**I fold the letters, exactly as they were**

return them  
to their hiding place

a doorway into

another time,  
another world.

These notes  
are not meant for me.

I am intruding,  
spying  
far beyond  
into someone else's life.

Marguerite's footsteps  
on the back steps  
wake me from my dream.

I emerge from the cellar  
just in time.

*Ready to go to school?*

I want to tell her about the letters.

The envelopes  
without addresses,  
without stamps.

Written long ago.

My mouth stays sealed.

**Mrs. Patterson tells us to be proud**

*We live in the City of Transportation.*

*Founded on  
Henry Ford's  
original idea.*

*The busy hands of builders  
forge and lathe, work and tend,  
spin and weave, form and transform  
the ideas of men into objects  
for the world.*<sup>8</sup>

She stands  
in front of the class.

Her hands clasped  
under her chin.

Wonder spreads  
across her face  
as she says,

*We are proud of our city  
and our brothers and fathers*

*who have built  
the foundation*

*of our modern  
nation.*

**Yes. We are proud**

of our brothers and our fathers.

But I want to ask:

What about  
our sisters and our mothers?

Who carry generations  
in their wombs

who rise and feed us,  
clothe us,  
and tend to us

who birth each day  
into being?

**She calls me to the front**

of the class.

*Mary, please list  
the ways  
Henry Ford  
and the factories in Detroit  
are helping  
America's economy.*

My heart flutters  
as I walk  
to the board.

She hands me  
a piece of chalk.

It rolls  
out of my hand  
onto the floor.

I reach down,  
balance on one foot.

Barely reach  
for the chalk  
and . . . rip.

Just like  
a molting insect  
that has grown  
too large  
for its shell,  
my dress



tears  
down my back.

Everyone in the class  
laughs.

Especially Evie,  
whose long arms  
are spread  
across her desk.

A spider poised  
and ready  
to eat me.

Elena stands up.

Leads me  
back to the bench  
with Marguerite  
who wraps  
her sweater around me  
in a hug.

**My mother claws through**

her bulging basket  
of fabric scraps.

Chooses a triangle  
of dark-brown corduroy.

Stitches it  
into the seam  
of my shredded dress.

I try it on  
to make sure it fits.

I am a walking quilt.

## **To console me**

she lets me sit on the counter  
while she makes  
the baklava  
for the store.

She gives me  
the first piece.

As I bite into it,  
the honey drips  
down my arm.

I am as happy  
as a bear  
that has stolen  
a honeycomb  
from a hive.

**In the store, we sell:**

1. fruits and vegetables
2. soap for dishes
3. soap for laundry
4. coffee and tea
5. candy
6. whole watermelons  
and cold soda pop,  
submerged in a big case  
filled with water and ice
7. cans of soup
8. loaves of bread
9. pickles and eggs, in large barrels  
filled with brine
10. meat, which my father carves  
at the wooden counter
11. feta, a Greek cheese
12. spanakopita, a delicious spinach pie
13. moussaka, an eggplant casserole
14. baklava, a crispy dessert  
made with nuts and honey

**I call Marguerite *Little Mama***

She loves to be in charge  
of the house.

I'd rather  
work at the store.

I love the smell  
of the wooden floorboards

the food resting  
on the counter

the sweat and perfume  
of the customers.

Even the money has a smell.

*Mama, do you think we could*

*convince father  
to let me work in the store?*

*Why would you  
want to work  
in the store?*

*I like the store.*

*I need your help at home.*

*You have Marguerite.  
I need you both.*

***Mama, don't you think***

*it would be a good idea  
for me  
to learn the business?*

*Why would you want  
to learn something  
that you will never use?*

*Learn how to feed your husband.  
Learn how to raise the babies.*

She pats her belly.

Then she points  
her forefinger  
in my direction.

*Learn how to keep your opinions  
to yourself.*

*Mama, I've been thinking about Dimitris*

Her ears perk up.  
She lifts her chin  
and her eyebrows.

*Yes?*

I straighten my skirt  
and spine  
to make myself  
seem taller,  
like I'm frightening  
a bear.

*When I marry Dimitris . . .*

*Yes?*

*That is, if he'll have me . . .*

*Yes.*

*Don't you think  
he would want someone  
who knows something  
about a store?*

The mother bear  
takes two steps back.

*Lots of girls  
can have babies.  
Hopefully, I can.*

*Yes.*



The bear stomps the ground  
and snorts.

*Maybe, if I can help  
with Dimitris's store  
it will make me seem . . .  
useful?*

*Yes.*

*Yes?*

**I stand behind the counter**

place my palms  
on the smooth varnished wood.

The store is empty  
and quiet.

I take a deep breath  
and savor my victory.

## **When I'm bored**

I wipe each shelf.

Tally up receipts.

Record sales.

Dance with a mop.

Restock items.

Make tea.

Try not  
to eat the candy.

Draw  
monsters and angels  
on the frosty  
cold cases.

Look at myself  
in the shiny cabinet.

Wonder  
if I'm beautiful.

I also think about  
what we could change  
to bring more customers  
into the store.

Since, it appears,  
there are not

very many.

**You know that look**

when the sun  
is horizontal in the sky

and someone is lit  
from behind?

You can barely  
see their face  
because they are bursting  
with light.

And you wish you  
had a camera  
to capture  
all the shadows  
and shine.

It was like that.

When I looked  
at the shop door  
there was a man  
who was glowing.

I had to shield my eyes.

Light escaping  
every edge  
every surface.

Streaming  
from his fingertips  
each strand

of hair.

I couldn't  
see his face  
until he stopped  
right in front  
of me  
and smiled.

Holding  
a polished red apple  
in his hand.

**He looks American**

like he was raised on a farm  
in Nebraska.

Tall and blond.

I stare at his blue eyes  
and white teeth.

*Who are you?*  
I stammer.

*I'm Billy Smith.*

*What are you doing here?*

*I'm . . . buying an apple?*

He places a nickel  
into my hand.

*Can I help you  
find anything else?*

He flashes his smile  
one more time and says,

*I think I've found everything  
I'm looking for.*

He walks backward  
five steps,  
staring at me.

Turns  
and walks  
out of the door.  
I hear an engine rumble  
and make it to the window  
just in time  
to see the rear bumper  
of his shiny, red  
Ford Cabriolet.



**My heart stops beating**

for five seconds.

*What would it feel like?*

*To have a name  
like Smith or Jones?*

**I feel the weight**

of the nickel.

The warmth of it.

All good shop owners know  
we buy with our eyes  
then our hands.


Feel the cold  
pleasure  
of a voluptuous grape  
pinched between  
our fingers.

Admire an apple  
that's impossible  
to indent.

Weigh  
the smoothness  
of a scrubbed potato.

Press  
the thick skin  
of a ripe melon.

Choose  
what our hands  
and our minds  
want.

*Giorgos (Gio)* 

*KOMNINA, CENTRAL GREECE*

1916

**The ground is covered**

with pine chips  
and tools.

I sand  
the wood smooth.

Cut and curve  
the long strips of pine.

Create a frame.

With each  
movement,  
I think about the day  
when I will be able  
to stand on the deck  
of my own  
wooden boat,  
my *kaiki*.

Just like my father  
and his father  
before him.

I will feed my family

with the fish I catch  
from the cerulean waters  
of the  
Aegean Sea.

## **Violetta's betrothed**

invites her to take a walk.

He is twice her age.

He arrives with flowers  
and a jug of wine  
he has made  
from the grapes  
that he grows  
on his land.

My mother tells me  
to walk behind them  
at a distance.

I clench my teeth.

Try to concentrate  
on the birds  
and the blue sky.

Think of stories  
about how I will  
stop the wedding  
just in time.

I notice Violetta  
smiling.  
She even laughs  
once.

When we return  
she tells my mother

she will marry him.

Maybe  
she will be happy.

Maybe  
Costas will love her  
and not be  
the kind of man  
who throws  
stones.

**It takes a moment**

for my eyes to adjust to the dark.

The air is thick  
with frankincense  
and beeswax.

Every surface in the church  
is painted.

Icons glimmer above  
a red velvet carpet.  
The dark-blue ceiling  
is covered  
in golden stars.

The dome of heaven.

Father Yiannis  
appears  
from an arched door.

His black robes  
and Orthodox cross  
swing back and forth  
as he walks.

His furrowed brow  
softens.

*Giorgos! I'm so happy to see you!*

He immediately puts me  
to work.

I gather branches and leaves  
and sweep the courtyard.

When I finish my chores  
Father Yiannis  
teaches me to read  
and write passages  
from his bible.

The old man  
sits beside me.  
Folds his hands  
and closes his eyes  
in prayer.

I break  
from my work.

*Father,  
will my sister be happy  
married to Costas?  
Will she still . . .  
my voice cracks,  
need me?*

He sighs deeply.

*It is a brother's duty  
to always protect  
and watch over  
the life of his sister.*

*Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.  
And we ought to lay down our lives*



*For our brothers and our sisters.*<sup>9</sup>

Then he stops  
and sticks one finger in the air.

*Life is work. Life is duty.*

*The important part  
is to enjoy the small pleasures.*

He stands up  
and pours himself  
a small  
glass of wine  
from the decanter  
behind the altar.

His eyes twinkle.  
*Don't tell the women!*

**I walk down the stone steps**

and almost collide  
with Violetta's friend,  
Mariana.

Her arms full  
of folded  
embroidered cloth  
for the church.

Underneath  
her white headscarf  
I can see  
there are red ribbons  
woven  
into her hair.

My mother and Violetta  
walk behind her,  
arms loaded with flowers  
and Violetta's  
linen wedding dress.

My mother scowls at me  
and hisses,

*She has been promised  
to another!*

*She does not belong to you!*

**Violetta will have a life of her own**

What will I do?

The weight of loneliness  
is an anchor  
pulling me  
toward  
the bottom  
of the sea.

It feels like I cannot move.

The promise  
of the current  
tugs at me.

## **The night before the wedding**

Costas arrives  
with a present for Violetta.

It is a bundle  
wrapped  
in the soft white skin  
of a lamb.

Violetta opens the package.

She runs her hands  
over yards  
of dark pinstriped  
cloth.

Costas sits beside her.

*We will wrap  
the lambskin around  
our first child  
to keep him warm.*

*The fabric is for you.*

*You can make  
a pair of pants,  
and we can work  
in the fields  
side by side.*

Violetta's eyes fill  
with tears.

*What will the village say?*

Costas takes Violetta's hand.

*I'm not marrying the village.*

*I'm marrying you.*

## **The leaving ritual**

Violetta kneels in the dust  
in front of Alethea.

She feeds the goat a coin.

*If we give away  
our most precious things,  
it will bring us wealth.*

*We will have everything we need and more.*

She feeds the goat a flower.

*It will spread the flower's seeds into hills  
beyond our home.*

*We will bring beauty to the lives of others.*

She feeds the goat a ring.

*A circle with no end  
and no beginning.*

*We will always be family.*

## **On the day they marry**

Costas wears a gray suit.

Violetta wears an embroidered red dress  
with a belt made of coins.

Her head covered by the same scarf  
our mother wore at her wedding.

I give Violetta to Costas.

Father Yiannis chants  
and swings a golden bowl  
filled with incense  
blessing them both.

After the ceremony,  
I cradle our goat, Alethea,  
in my arms.

I thank her for her cheese  
and mischief.

Soothe her  
as I run the blade  
along her throat.

She struggles and finally  
gives her life to me.

We feed both families, our only gift.

The music begins.

One man strums a λαούτο (*laóúto*)  
a long-necked lute,  
while the other keeps beat  
with a νταούλι (*daóúli*) drum.

We dance into the dark-blue night  
in a circle  
holding hands.



# *Jeanne*

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1916

## **After my father leaves**

my mother  
takes to her bed  
and cries  
for two days.

We both know  
life must go on.

She spends hours  
in her garden  
tending the sweet-smelling  
roses that climb  
the trellises  
on the side of our house.

She clips lavender  
and delphinium  
and my favorite  
*marguerites*, white daisies  
with a bright-yellow  
center.

She places them  
in a vase  
by my bedside.

She lies next to me  
and curls her body  
around mine.

*Je t'aime, chérie.*  
*We will survive this.*

**Papa is not the only one**

to leave his family  
behind.

There are no more men.

All of them  
have gone to war.

Women drive the boats  
in the harbor.

Women  
butcher the meat  
and run the factories.

Women  
grease the rails  
for the trains  
at the  
Gare de Saint-Malo.

Some women like the change.

They are even  
wearing their husbands' suits  
and ties  
and smoking  
thin cigars.

Not my mother.

She puts her hand  
over my eyes

when they pass us  
on the street.

I want to look.

I think they  
are beautiful  
in their pinstriped  
pants.

**We go for a picnic**

in the country.

Lay out a blanket  
in a green field.

Eat cold chicken  
drumsticks  
and thick slices  
of Camembert cheese  
smeared onto  
a baguette.

My mother  
takes off her shoes  
and rests her head  
on my lap.

For a second,  
she looks like a child.

## **On the drive home**

I see three peasant women.

They are hitched to a plow  
like horses.

They pull the heavy equipment  
through the fields,  
carving  
lines in the dark earth.

Their husbands are gone.  
Their horse is gone.

But they still  
need to eat.

**Days pass**

and leaves drift  
to the ground.

The first snow falls.

Maman and I  
decide to stay  
on the sofa,  
protected  
by a warm blanket.

Instead of joining  
our friends and neighbors  
for *la fête de Noël*.

We both realize,  
but we do not say it  
aloud.

Papa has been gone  
a full year.

Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN  
1933

**Letter #5**

*October 18, 1918*

*Mon Petit Oiseau,*

*Missing you is like missing a season.*

*I would like to lie in the grass, eat a peach, swim in the ocean,  
but the gray days of winter won't leave me.*

*The sun never shines.*

*In the morning I wake, hoping for your warmth once again.*

*Your ever loyal,  
Loup*



**Letter #6**

*October 19, 1918*

*I read fairy tales as a child—and I swore I would never be the damsel in distress.*

*The problem is this: I am alone and I miss you.*

*I am worried you need rescuing too.*

*Please come back.*

*I am in my tower, overlooking the ocean.*

*I will leave the light on so you can find me.*

## **A meeting is arranged**

My mother rakes  
a comb through  
my unkempt  
black, curly hair.

A trainer, combing  
the barn  
and dust  
out of a horse's  
mane.

Marguerite  
stands in the doorframe  
looking sympathetic.

She knows  
my mother's comb  
is coming for her  
next.

I want to lift both  
my legs  
and kick  
like a stubborn  
mule.

Not the prized  
sleek  
racehorse  
my mother is grooming  
me to be.

*Why can't I choose*

*to marry  
a man that I love?*

My mother stops  
brushing my hair.

She looks around  
our tiny apartment,  
throws her hands  
in the air.

*Look where that got me.*

## **Mother slices the cake**

Father pours  
sour cherry liqueur  
into small glasses.

*Mary made this herself,*  
he says  
and pats my arm  
with pride.

Dimitris takes a sip  
and smiles politely.

They leave us alone  
in the parlor.

Golden icons  
of Mary and baby Jesus  
look down at me  
from high  
on the shelves.

Dimitris scoots next to me.

The side of his body  
is touching mine.

*You are a beautiful young girl,*  
he says as he takes  
a lock of my hair  
and twists it around  
his finger.

His breath smells

like death  
and onions.

**Who is this wicked old man?**

He wants a child.

I want  
to grow the claws  
and wings  
of a Gorgon.

Feed his eyes  
to the hungry  
creatures  
that live  
in the depths  
of the swamp.

Turn him into  
stone.

## **When I was twelve**

my mother and I  
embroidered

a soft white gown,  
two sheets,  
and two pillowcases.

Every single piece  
decorated  
with pink  
and yellow flowers.

We folded them  
carefully  
into my cedar dowry chest.

I imagined  
with each stitch  
how excited  
I would be  
to wear a nightgown  
in front of a man  
for the first time.

Now, I know  
I have sewn  
the bed  
that I must  
lie in.

These linens  
will be my prison.

## **For our birthday**

Mama has a surprise  
for us  
downtown.

As we turn the corner  
we see a lighted sign:

**The Showplace of Detroit**  
**Fox Theatre**  
**Most Magnificent Temple**  
**of Amusement in the World**

We enter the movie palace.

Carved golden columns  
and two winged lions  
guard the door.

The orchestra plays and the choir sings.

The red velvet curtain pulls aside.

The words  
*Le Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*  
scroll across the screen. <sup>10</sup>

Mama and Marguerite and I  
hold hands and cry.

As we watch  
Joan of Arc  
kneel  
before her accusers.



She listens  
to the voices.  
Listens  
to the spirit she can feel  
but cannot name.

Listens  
to the ringing  
in her ears, her heart,  
her throat.

Not to the men  
who are sworn to protect her.

Not to those  
who would manipulate  
her power.

Not to the judge  
who sees her fire  
burning

her strength  
building

her understanding  
growing.

Not to the bishop  
who with a clear conscience  
sends her  
to the pyre.

*I have always felt close to Jeanne d'Arc*

my mother tells us  
as we ride the streetcar home.

*I wanted to be her  
when I was young.*

Why?  
asks Marguerite.

*She died  
the most horrible  
death!*

Yes,  
but she had  
the most powerful  
connection  
to the world  
beyond.

*We women have so few choices.*

*There was a time  
when I thought I could be brave  
like her . . .*

She falls silent.

Then her eyes fill with light.

She holds both  
of our hands  
and says,

*It is silly, but I believe  
she watches over  
all the women  
in our family.*

Then looks  
directly at me.

*Even when we must endure  
that which we cannot choose.*

## **When we arrive home**

my brothers  
are playing baseball  
in the street.

Gus hands me the bat.

John lobs a ball.

I swing  
and hit the edge,  
ground it  
and barely  
make it  
to first base.

Marguerite whoops  
with excitement.

*Mama! You try!*  
I squeal, as she heads  
toward the apartment.

To my surprise,  
she turns around.

Grabs the bat  
and slings it  
across her shoulder.

She bends her knees.  
Ready.

John tosses the ball

and it connects.

It flies over all of our heads.

She smiles  
as we all cheer.

She waves  
to her adoring crowd  
then heads up the stairs  
to make dinner.

**I walk toward the store**

to make sure  
everything is secured  
for the night.

There's a piece of paper  
jammed  
into the door.

It has my name on it.

Marguerite and the boys  
climb the stairs  
to our apartment.

I call to them  
as calmly  
as possible,

*I'll be right up.  
I'm just going to check  
on the shipment!*

Close the door.  
Sink to the floor.

I hold the letter  
to my chest.

My banging  
heart.

Breathe.

Open the note.

*Mary,*

*Meet me  
at American Coney Island<sup>[11](#)</sup>  
after school  
on Thursday.*

*I'll get us a table.*

*Billy*

**I stare at the paper**

shaking in my hands.

This is not  
a note from a lost time.

A note of war and sorrow.

Separation and longing.

This is a note for me.

From a real, live boy.

Who knows my name.



# *Giorgos (Gio)*

*KOMNINA, CENTRAL GREECE*

1916

## **I help Costas**

harvest olives.

We lay thick nets  
beneath the branches of the trees,  
then raise our rakes  
and rattle them through  
the sage-colored leaves.

The purple ovals  
fall to  
the ground.

Costas looks  
across the field.

I see my sister  
walking toward us.

The sun on her skin.

Her long, black hair tied  
in a red scarf.

A white, billowing shirt  
tucked into her new pair

of pinstriped pants.

She helps  
to gather the corners  
of the net  
and work the fruit  
to the center.

We sort the olives  
from the fallen branches,  
load them  
into burlap sacks  
ready to take  
to the oil press.

At the end of the day  
Costas unveils a bottle of wine  
and three small glasses.

We raise a toast to the harvest.

Στην υγειά σας!  
(*Stin ygeiá sas!*)  
*To our health!*

We take a sip.

*When can I help you  
finish your boat, brother?*

A smile spreads  
across my sister's face  
as wide  
as the Aegean Sea.

## **Soldiers have entered our village**

I am worried for our safety.

They sit in the square and drink  
strong coffee  
and cloudy ouzo.

Their rifles  
resting on the table.

They think they are here  
to protect us.

The captain watches  
the young girls  
at the fountain.

The hungry eyes  
of a wolf  
who has been  
trained to hunt.

**No goat, no milk**

no feta.

Prices are soaring.  
The stores have no bread.

Our village is hungry.

I feel the desperation  
and anger  
bubbling up.

A kettle  
held over a flame.

**I take our donkey**

and follow the switchback trails  
down to the shore.

Maliakos Kolpos, our green-blue  
bay, wrapped by a belt  
of land.

The fishermen dock their boats.  
They empty their nets.

Hundreds of silver fish,  
alive and thrashing,  
spill onto the dock.

We sort the fish by size,  
toss them into wicker baskets.

I load them onto the donkey.

The baskets hang  
from my trusted friend  
who will heft my load  
through the steep hills.

The fishmongers wait  
in the village square.

The women  
push and elbow each other  
to snatch the best catch  
of the day.

They take the silver bodies

in both hands  
and inhale deeply.

The smell of the sea clings  
to the glinting scales.

The fishmongers pay  
three salted fish  
and a few coins  
for my help.

Someday, I swear,  
I will not be a boy on a donkey.  
I will be a man in a boat.

**As I walk home through the dust**

I think about  
my unfinished boat,  
my *kaiki*.

It will be  
my donkey  
of the sea.

Reliable  
and sturdy.

Good  
in all weather.

Whatever  
Poseidon  
sends my way.

I don't need  
a sleek, fast  
boat.

I say to myself,

*It is better  
to get to where  
you are going*

*than to rush  
and never  
get there at all.*<sup>12</sup>

**The trail is lined with almond trees**

and cedar.

I take the air  
into my nose and mouth,  
breathe the deep scent  
of the hills.

Down the path,  
I hear men laughing.

Then I hear someone scream.

A group of soldiers  
has circled a girl  
from our village.

Her dress is torn  
and one of her braids  
has come loose.

There is a red ribbon  
on the ground.

She looks at me  
with eyes that say,  
*Help me.*

I break through the circle  
and scold her.  
*Mariana! Your mother is looking for you!*

One of the soldiers smirks  
and with a high-pitched voice



he teases,  
*Mariana, your mama is calling!*

He lifts the back of her skirt  
with the tip of his gun  
as I pull her  
away from the men.

I swing my leg  
over the donkey's back  
and lift her up.

Wrap my arm  
tightly  
around her waist  
and nudge my heel  
sharply  
into the donkey's belly.

I look back  
and see the soldier laughing.

The gun  
still in his hand.

## **The next day**

Violetta bounds  
through the doorway.

Her cheeks are rosy  
and her eyes are wide.

*What is it?*  
*Is something wrong?*  
I ask.

There is a knife  
in my stomach  
trying to come  
out of my throat.

I will kill  
if someone has hurt her.

*Oh Gio*, she says  
as a shy smile rises  
on the corner  
of her lips.

She grabs my hands.  
*I'm going to have a baby.*

# *Jeanne*

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1917

## **We ride the train**

A pilgrimage  
to Mont Saint-Michel.

The sacred cathedral  
at the top of the hill.

It rises,  
isolated on its own island  
in the middle  
of miles of salt marsh.

My mother wants to pray  
for my father's  
safe return.

After we arrive  
at the train station,  
we begin to walk.

We see the mount  
far ahead,  
swallowed by the mouth  
of the Couesnon river.

We must wait

for the tides to retreat.

We wait until it is safe.

We bare our feet  
to the soft wet silt  
of the channel.

Each step takes us closer  
to the sacred island  
cathedral.

Outside the walls  
of the commune  
the fishermen and farmers  
motion and yell for pilgrims  
to buy their goods.

We walk through  
the barricade.

A drawbridge,  
with a large wooden door,  
so heavy  
it looks like  
it could protect the cathedral  
from an army of giants.

The streets spiral upward  
to the stone ramparts.

I stand  
and look out  
at the miles of sand  
and watch  
the tide come in

as swiftly  
as a galloping horse. [<sup>13</sup>](#)

## **Inside the church**

I light a candle  
at the altar  
of Jeanne d'Arc.

My namesake.

She stands tall and proud,  
a warrior,  
like a man.

She felt the love  
of the spirit

when she rode  
on the back of her horse  
with her banner  
flying

and also  
in the heart  
of the fire.

**I have always felt**

the spirit.

It begins with a tingle  
then my body feels warm.

It's like opening up a dam  
in a river  
and then everything  
rushes through—  
all emotion  
all love  
all.

Sometimes,  
I feel it  
in a church  
and sometimes  
I don't.

I always feel it  
when I stare at trees  
moving in the wind.

And when I hear music.

Today, kneeling  
beside my mother  
in the most beautiful church  
in the world

I ask this Great Spirit,

*Please,*

*bring my father home.*



Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

1933

**Letter #7**

*October 21, 1918*

*How could the stars have brought us together?*

*We were born so far apart. Separated by culture, language, and land, and yet we found each other.*

*Yours always and forever,  
Loup*

**I convince**

Elena and Marguerite  
to go on an adventure  
after school.

*American Coney Island?*

*I just want to try  
something different.*

We see the red,  
white, and blue sign  
from down the block.

An American eagle  
waves us in.

Billy is seated  
at a table with his back to the door.

He looks scrubbed and clean.

Surrounded by men  
of all different colors  
with grease on their faces.

Men, who have been working  
on the factory floor all day.

*Let's sit over here.*

I lead the girls to a table  
in the connecting room  
away from Billy.

We don't have money for food,  
so we order colas.

*Heading to the bathroom,*  
I say, gripping my middle.

*Are you ok?*

Marguerite looks concerned.

*You're acting weird.*

*I'm fine. I'll be right back.*

**I sit down**

next to Billy.

His face lights up  
when he sees me.

*I was afraid you wouldn't show.  
I got this for you.*

He slides  
a chocolate malt  
toward me.

I smile  
and take a long pull  
from the straw.

Close my eyes.

It's the first time  
I've ever tasted ice cream.

*Tell me about yourself*

I laugh.

*My name is Mary.*

*Mary, Mary, quite contrary?*

*My parents  
wouldn't disagree with you.*

Why?

*We don't want  
the same things.*

*Tell me  
what you want.*

*What do I want?*

Yes.

*You mean, like a hamburger?*

No.

*What do you want  
from life?*

I hesitate.

No one  
has ever asked me  
what I want.

*I want to work.*

*What kind of work?*

*Own a business  
like my father.*

*I know that's unusual  
for a woman.  
Maybe impossible.*

*Don't you want  
to have  
a husband  
and babies?*

*Can't I have both?*

*I hold my breath.*

*I guess you don't know  
until you try.*

*And you?*

I place my palms  
on the table and lean in.

*What do you want?*

He takes a sip from his straw.

With a shy smile  
he responds,

*You.*

I choke on my chocolate shake.

*How could you  
possibly know  
you want me?*

*You just met me!*

*You're beautiful.*

*Thank you.*

I'm blushing.

*You're interesting.  
Different.*

*Isn't that a polite way  
of saying I'm odd?*

*I've never met*

*anyone else  
whose eyes change color.*

I put my hands  
over my eyes.

*I thought  
they only turned bright green  
when I was angry!*

*Holy moly!  
Bright green.  
I can't wait!*

*Yes, you can.*

*They also turn  
turquoise  
when you're excited.*

*Gray, when you're calm.*

*The color of olives  
when you feel . . . friendly?*

*That's all  
I've noticed so far.*

*I've only been told  
what they look like  
when I'm angry.*

Why hasn't  
anyone in my family  
noticed  
all the colors



that I feel?

*You have a very fancy car*

I blurt out  
and then feel embarrassed.

*Yes.*

*It's a bit much.*

*Do you work?*

*I'm in school.  
Sales and marketing.*

*A job lined up  
with Ford  
when I graduate.*

*My father  
got me the job.*

He looks annoyed and then says,

*He imagines  
I am incapable  
of accomplishing  
important tasks  
without him.*

*Fathers.  
They imagine they know us.  
But they don't, do they?*

*Not in the least.*

**Then he asks the question**

I've been waiting for.

*Are you Greek?*

*My father is Greek.  
My mother is French.*

*I am American.*

I shrink  
into my dress.

I would rather  
discuss  
a contagious rash  
than discuss  
my parents.

He smiles and says,  
*When I was seven,  
my uncle gave me a book  
on Greek mythology.*

*I was obsessed.*

*I thought about the gods  
and Mount Olympus  
all the time.*

*I tried to imagine  
who everyone would be  
if they were a god.*

*I think I'd be Apollo.  
I love the sun, music, and poetry.*

*I was just  
sitting here wondering  
who you would be.*

*I think you would be  
Athena.*

*She's strong, like you.*

**I want to tell him**

I am not as strong  
as he thinks I am.

*I want to tell him*

about Dimitris.

My father's plans.

The promises  
that have been made.

*I want to tell him*

about his eyes.

They never change.  
Steady.  
Pure blue.

*I want to tell him*

we can't  
see each other again.

*I want to tell him*

I must be  
a *Good Greek Girl*.

But I don't.

I let the sweet

coldness  
of my chocolate shake  
swirl around  
the inside of my skull.

It makes my head hurt.

Makes me forget  
everything.

Except for his hand  
on mine.

**I hear someone**

clearing their throat.

I turn to see Marguerite,  
arms crossed.

Glaring at me.

## **Call me Athena**

She wasn't  
a *Good Greek Girl*  
either.



***Athena, why do you fight?***

Put down your sword and shield  
and make your bed.

*Athena*, come down from your chariot,  
take off your golden helmet,  
and come to dinner.

*Athena*, did you injure your father  
when you leapt from his head?

Why can't you be more like Aphrodite?  
She's pretty and polite  
and she knows how to entertain.

*Athena*, please stop thinking  
you are the queen of Athens.

You're only a girl from Detroit.

# Giorgos (Gio)

KOMNINA, CENTRAL GREECE

1917

## **Faster than a sail**

swells with wind,  
my sister's belly  
becomes round  
with life.

My mother dotes on her.

*Put your feet up, Violetta!*  
*Don't carry that, Violetta!*

One day  
my sister snatches my hand  
and presses my palm  
into her hard stomach.

Costas laughs  
as my mouth drops open.

So many swirling movements  
up and down  
like a ship  
crested on a wave.

My sister closes her eyes  
and sighs.

I wonder  
what it feels like  
to hold the ocean  
inside.

**Costas tries to sell olive oil**

from his groves,  
but the prices have dropped.

I grab his arm.

*We need to do something.*  
*Violetta is hungry.*  
*I'm worried*  
*soon she will be*  
*too weak.*

We eat what we can grow  
in our garden:  
figs and tomatoes,  
lettuce,  
and beans.

We have  
no meat  
no cheese  
no flour  
no bread.

Violetta's cheeks are hollow.

I walk in the village after dark.

The sweet pink oleander  
smells like apricots.

My stomach is as empty  
as my coin purse.

**I love my sister**

I want her to live.

Costas and I  
sneak into the hills  
and find a lamb  
that is fat enough.

After the killing,  
Costas hoists the body  
onto his shoulder.

The legs wrap around his neck  
like a scarf.

We do not feel happy.

We have done  
what was needed.

We are almost home  
when a group of men  
come running up the path.

*Stop! Thieves!*

One of the men  
pulls out a long rifle.

He aims.

Costas turns and screams:  
*Run, Giorgos, run.*

The bullet connects  
with his head.

Costas looks stunned for a moment,  
his expression frozen in silence

and then his body falls  
to the ground.

# *Jeanne*

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1917

**Maman says I should**

be happy.

I get to go to school.

When she was young,  
they didn't allow girls to study.

I love the smell of chalk  
and old books that are foxed  
around the edges.

I wash my black slate  
and dust my desk.

I learn to write sentences  
and solve number problems.

After lunch,  
we put our heads on our desks  
and our teacher reads to us.

The rhythm of her voice  
whirls around us like sea air.

*She's really very bright,*

the teacher tells my mother  
after school.

*Maybe someday she'll be a doctor,  
like her father.*

My eyes open wide.  
I clasp my hands  
in front of my heart.

Maman wipes her eyes  
with a handkerchief.

*Yes. Maybe. Someday.*



**Of course, I dream**

of being a doctor.

No one else in town  
thinks  
it's an appropriate job  
for a girl.

I will prove  
them wrong.

Papa says I can do it.

I can change  
people's minds  
like Madame Curie.

I imagine  
my long, black dress  
covered  
in a lab coat.

Leaning over  
petri dishes, glass vials,  
beakers,  
and Bunsen burners.

After I make  
my grand discoveries  
I will stand on the stage  
in Stockholm.

A Nobel Prize in my hand.

## **My aunt**

Sister Marie-Thérèse  
joins us for lunch.

I ask my mother  
to serve her favorite meal:  
roasted lamb  
with new potatoes  
and asparagus.

My aunt  
is the mother superior  
at the Abbaye Notre-Dame  
de Saint-Malo.

She manages  
Les Filles de la Sagesse,  
the sisters of the convent  
and the hospital  
where they work  
with wounded soldiers  
arriving from the front.

I wait through the entire meal.  
I try to breathe slowly.

I even let her take two bites  
of her flaky, buttery  
*Kouign-amann*  
before I ask  
if it would be possible  
to volunteer at the hospital  
two days a week after school.

She takes her napkin  
and delicately pats  
the corners of her mouth.

I hold my breath.

*You're sixteen now.*  
*I don't see why not.*

I look at my mother.

She smiles and pats  
my trembling hand.

Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN  
1933

**Letter #8**

*October 25, 1918*

*Let us start a life together.*

*Build something new.*

*Find joy.*

*A place of peace in this war-torn world.*

*Yours always,  
Petit Oiseau*

## **Billy circles around me**

both hands  
above  
the handlebars.

I can't help  
but tease him.

*You look like  
a circus performer!*

He slows the bicycle,  
balances on his left foot,  
swings his right leg  
over the bar,  
and trots alongside.

An acrobat  
hopping  
on and off  
a trained  
white horse.

*You should try it.*

*I bet you think I won't.*

*Oh, I know you won't.  
You're chicken.*

He flashes  
a daring smile.

The hairs

on back of my neck  
stand straight.

*Hold this for me, sister.*

I shove  
my stack of books  
into Marguerite's  
arms.

*Mary, no!*

*Marguerite,  
do we really  
have to be good  
all the time?*

## **I mount the metal beast**

My skirt is in the way.

I tie the extra fabric  
in a knot  
exposing my legs.

Marguerite gasps.

I place both feet  
on the pedals.

As awkward  
as a bear on a bicycle.

In a moment  
of quick defeat  
I tumble  
to one side.

*You gotta move  
before you start pedaling.  
Let me help you.*

Billy puts one hand  
on the handlebars  
and one hand on the seat.

His entire body  
touches mine.

Electricity  
runs up my spine.

He begins to push me.

*Pedal, Mary, pedal!*

I force my legs up and down.  
Push and pump.

Billy runs beside me.

A tuft of wind  
escape his lips  
as he gives the bicycle  
a mighty shove

I am  
wheeling and turning  
spinning.

Under the big top,  
on my own.



**I feel elated**

all the way home.

*Marguerite,  
you can't imagine  
how it feels!*

*Like you're flying!*

She smiles a half-smile,  
but I know  
she's concerned.

Have I embarrassed her?  
Is she ashamed of me?

*What?*

My sister  
won't look at me.

She takes a big breath  
and finally says,

*I saw John  
in the square.*

*He's going to tell  
father.*

## **My father slaps me**

My head whips sideways.

The imprint of his hand  
blossoms  
on my cheek.

*Why?*

I brush the hair  
out of my eyes.

Stare him down  
hard  
with my green eyes  
so that he cannot  
hold  
my gaze.

*It was only a ride  
on a bicycle.*

*I am your father.  
I need to protect you!*

*From others and yourself!*

*I know what can happen.  
I have seen . . .*

He stops,  
unable to complete  
his sentence.

*It is my duty  
to make sure you are safe.*

I can see us both from above.

A father  
who is afraid  
for his child.

A daughter  
who is beyond saving.

**Call me Athena**

The girl  
who should have been born  
a boy.

**I wake, and it's warm**

and sticky beneath me.

I think  
I've wet the bed,  
then I realize  
I'm bleeding.

The emotions  
of the night before  
grip my insides,  
wring them  
like a sheet.

Everything  
in my life  
seems harder  
than usual.

Even the wild things  
that cannot  
be controlled.

I roll Marguerite  
to the other side  
of the bed  
and peel the covering.

I wish I could  
hide the soiled cloth,  
my shame.

There's no hiding  
in our tiny

apartment.

My mother's face  
at the door.

## **My mother heats three kettles**

Pours the boiling liquid  
into the porcelain bath.

Mixes  
water from the tap  
until it is steaming  
and warm.

I enter slowly.  
Settle down  
into the deep.

The water turns pink.

I shed a month  
of pain.

My mother leans  
my head back  
pours water  
over my unruly hair  
and says,

*Someday, you will love your body  
and the way it works.*

*It is miraculous.  
It can grow a child.*

She lathers soap  
and pours another pitcher  
over my head.

I close my eyes  
and imagine her saying,

*Then you will understand suffering.*



**I know I was wrong**

*I shouldn't  
have ridden a bicycle.*

My mother clears  
her throat.

*And?*

*I shouldn't  
have ridden a boy's  
bicycle  
because it sends  
the wrong message.*

*And?*

*And I won't do it again.*

*But it makes me  
so angry  
that John told Father!*

My mother  
looks at me.

She kisses my forehead.

*It wasn't John.*

**How could she?**

My sister.

My twin.

Weren't we

once

radios

tuned to the same

frequency?

Now, I feel

my dial

spinning.

I cannot find her.

# Giorgos (Gio)

KOMNINA, CENTRAL GREECE

1917

**Everything is breath, everything is heartbeat**

I run as fast as I can.

I hear men shouting and dogs barking.

*Do you see him? Where did he go?*

I know this land.

I find the opening of the cave  
where Violetta and I used to explore.

*Don't breathe. Don't move.*

I wait.

*Stay hidden. Stay silent.*

Even after  
the sound of the dogs  
and the men are gone

my heart beats like a battle drum.

## **I follow the shadows home**

my steps  
soft and light.

I hide in the  
bushes

check to make sure  
no one  
sees me.

A barn owl calls out  
a warning  
as I enter our yard.

I see my unfinished  
*kaiki*.

The smooth boards  
that I have sanded  
for hours.

I do not have  
the wood and resin  
I need  
to finish the hull.

Without it  
I will not be able  
to navigate  
across the water.

**My mother is asleep**

in her bed.

My heart aches  
at the thought  
of saying goodbye.

I sneak around the house,  
try not to wake her.

Find a sack  
and stuff it with figs and tomatoes,  
then fill a sheep's bladder  
with water.

Pack matches  
and a warm sweater.

Roll a thin wool blanket  
and tie it to my sack.

If I don't leave now,  
I will go to prison.

I open the door  
of my childhood home.

My mother rises.

From her face,  
I know that the men from the village  
have told her.

I cannot open my mouth

to say goodbye.

She holds my shoulders  
as tears stream down my face.

Finally, she looks me in my eyes  
with love, sharp as  
an eagle's talon.

*Go, my child,  
and never come back.*

**In a blur**

of hunger and pain,

I climb onto  
the donkey's back  
and lean my face  
into its hide.

The sky is filled with indigo light.

I fall asleep  
to the rhythm  
of the hooves  
hitting the dirt path.

With a jolt,  
the donkey stops.

I lay my blanket down  
in a field.

The dry grass  
slices into my back.

My cheeks are burning.  
My mouth dry.

Over and over,  
I see Costas fall.

I hear my sister weeping.

# *Jeanne*

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1917

## **Madame Leroux**

inspects  
our starched  
white uniforms.

She leads us  
through  
*l'hôpital du Rosais*,  
instructing us  
with a crisp,  
clear voice.

I feel confident  
until we reach  
the surgical unit  
where the air is thick  
with blood  
and pus-soaked  
bandages.

We hesitate at the door  
and see a doctor  
sawing the leg  
of a screaming  
soldier.



I grab my stomach  
and vomit  
into the closest  
bedpan.

**Leroux points to the pan**

*Around the corner  
to the right.*

*Bring it back, clean.*

I run down the hall  
and locate  
the metal hatch  
for the incinerator.

I empty the pan  
quickly  
into the fire  
below.

The smell catches me.  
I'm going  
to be sick again.

I wipe my brow  
and bump into a soldier  
on a gurney.

*Help me,*  
he whispers.

He grabs me,  
trembling,  
his hands covered  
in blood.

*Please.*  
*Please.*

He closes his eyes,  
his breath labored.  
He places his palm  
on his breast pocket.

*Please.*

I find a small  
photograph.

A woman  
with light eyes  
and yellow curls.

Eyes full of love.

I wipe the blood  
onto my apron  
and place the frame  
in his hand.

*Who is she?*  
I ask.

His eyes  
stare straight ahead.

The picture  
has fallen  
out of his hand.

My new  
white uniform  
stained red. <sup>14</sup>

*What did you learn today?*

my mother asks me

as our maid, Anne,  
ladles creamy asparagus soup  
into a china bowl.

She places a shiny silver spoon  
on my napkin  
and lays a plump cut  
of roast beef  
dripping  
with sauce  
onto a plate.

What should I say to her?

Can I describe  
the wounds from the mustard gas,  
the bubbled skin,  
the yellow eyes?

The sound of more  
than one  
wounded soldier  
screaming for help?

It is only  
a twenty-minute walk  
from my house  
to the hospital.

The difference  
between them

makes me feel  
like I have traveled  
many hours.

Between  
the land of plenty  
and the land  
of the forgotten.

Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

1933

**Letter #9**

*October 27, 1918*

*I wish I could feed every starving child I see.*

*I do not have enough to give.*

*I pray for a time of peace and sustenance—when families can keep the wheat they grow and children can, once again, grow plump from their mother's milk.*

*I am done with the ways of men and the suffering that comes with war.*

*Yours forever,*

*Loup*

**I take the trash**

to the alleyway behind the store.

I hear crying.

Peeling paint.

Gray stone.

The wind is howling,  
an alley cat  
scratching its back  
on the iron rods  
of barred windows  
and gated doors.

I hear something  
whimpering.

Look around  
and see no living  
creature.

The wind lifts  
the tips of newspapers  
strewn across  
the muddy lane.

They flap in a rhythm.

I follow the sound  
to the street.

I see a large basket  
filled with laundry

tucked into  
a storefront.

A small foot  
pushes out  
of the white  
cloth.



**I dig into the basket**

gingerly  
with two fingers.

It's an infant.

Lips blue.

There is a note  
attached to her dress.

*Please,  
help my child.*

*I have no money  
to support her.*

*Forgive me.*

The child emits  
a terrible screech.

*Hunger.*

I unbutton my coat  
and my dress.

I press the child  
to my skin  
for warmth.

She opens her mouth  
sucks hard  
on my neck.

*Milk.*

She breathes  
in shallow  
spasms.

I have nothing  
to give her.

*Help!*

I tuck the child  
into the basket  
and begin to run  
toward  
the firehouse.

I see a woman  
pushing a pram with a tiny infant  
tucked warm inside.

*Please!*  
*This baby is starving!*

She looks at me  
like I am vermin.

*What am I supposed to do about it?*

She walks on.

*Please! Help!*  
*She'll die!*

I look around the square  
for another adult.

My desperation  
growing.

I feel someone pull me  
from behind.

I turn and see a young woman

dressed in clean clothes.

Her blond hair  
a glowing lantern  
against  
the gray stones.

*I have an infant at home.*  
She takes the child  
from me.

*I can help you.*

She sits on a stoop  
shielded from the street  
behind a low bush.

She wraps  
the blanket around her  
like a shawl  
and holds  
the infant to her.

The child latches.

I hear  
famished  
frantic  
gulping.

*Shhhhh.*  
*There.*  
*Shhhhhh.*

I look away,  
overwhelmed

with emotion.

Someday,  
I pray, I will grow  
into the kind  
of woman  
who will give  
everything she can  
to a child in need.

*My name is Lara*

she says and smiles.

We walk to  
to Sacred Heart Church  
around the corner.

Weave through  
the lines of people  
waiting for food  
and donations.

*This is my church.*  
*I know they will help,*  
Lara says.

She finds a nun,  
who leads us  
to a white-collared  
priest.

His eyes drop  
with pity  
and sadness.

He embraces the child  
and disappears  
into the crowd.

## **Lara and I**

hesitate  
outside of the church.

Our arms feel empty.

Throngs of people waiting  
in line to be fed.

*Well, don't just stand there.  
Grab a ladle and help!*

A woman,  
wearing an apron  
decorated with huge red flowers,  
hands me  
a giant spoon.

*I don't work here.*

*You do now!*

She pushes us  
behind the table.

*That's the problem  
with doing one good deed.*

*You get roped into another.*

Her round belly jiggles  
when she chuckles.

*I'm Clarabelle.*

*I'm in charge  
of charitable donations  
at the church.*

She tells Lara  
to tear chunks of bread.

Place them  
on the side of the bowls  
I'm filling  
with thin  
vegetable soup.

We feed the homeless drifters.

Mostly men  
with dirt under  
their nails  
and mud  
on their boots.

Finally, a mother  
and her three  
children.

Her oldest daughter  
drops to her hands and knees,  
crawls under the table  
to kiss my feet.



## **After an hour**

I excuse myself.

Clarabelle  
shakes my hand  
and thanks me  
for my help.

Her red-flowered apron  
soaked  
with sloshed broth.

*Come back next week  
for the clothing drive!*

*We could use  
all the hands we can get.*

*I'll be there.  
You should come!*

Lara says,  
as she squeezes me  
into a hug.

Walking home,  
I pass by the shop window  
with the emerald-green dress  
that I will never own.

I see women  
strolling down  
the avenue.

Fur coats flow  
around their ankles.

Necks wrapped  
in knotted strings  
of pearls  
and beaded scarves.

The parade of hungry  
hollow faces  
still sharp  
in my mind.

**Grateful**

for my family

and the simple meal

waiting for me

at home.

# *Giorgos (Gio)*

*KOMNINA, CENTRAL GREECE*

1917

## **I dream of the gods**

of my ancestors.

Superhumans  
who swoop down  
from Mount Olympus  
on swift chariots  
pulled by powerful horses.

They know I am suffering.

The gods of wine and beauty,  
the harvest, and the sea.

I pray they will help me.

Shower me with  
bolts of lightning  
that will pierce the heart  
of anyone  
who wishes harm.

But I am afraid,  
that the ancient immortals  
have vanished.

And we are left with one god,  
who has turned his back  
on me.

## **I sell the donkey**

to a fat farmer  
for almost nothing  
and hitch a ride  
on a horse-drawn cart  
on its way  
to Athens.

The miles  
rattle through my bones.

When we get closer  
to the city,  
I see the ruins  
of the Acropolis  
poised high  
on a limestone bluff.

Bright-blue sky  
peers through  
the gleaming white columns  
of the Parthenon.

I feel the power of the stone  
pulse into me.

We weave south  
through the streets  
of Athens  
heading to  
the Port of Piraeus.

The harbor looks like  
the gates of hell.

Factories fill the skyline.  
Smokestacks cough  
black sludge.

A huge steamship  
looms above  
like a mountain  
of welded steel.

I have always known.

I have to get on that ship.

## **The farmer slows**

and I hop off  
while the wagon  
is still moving.

I run at a full sprint.

I hear the whistle blow  
and push my legs farther.

*Don't leave.*

*Don't leave without me.*

Hundreds of passengers  
swarm the gangplank,  
pushing and shoving to get on.

I get close and watch  
a small boy drop his toy.

I crouch next to the child  
and talk to him in a soothing voice  
like a brother or a friend.

The parents  
hand their bundle of tickets  
to the attendant.

I walk up the plank  
behind them.



**There is a crowd on the deck**

I blend into the gray jackets  
and caps of the gentlemen,  
the swirling chaos  
of luggage and limbs.

I listen for shouting.  
Wait for a hand on my collar.

No one comes.

I resist the need  
to drop to my knees  
in exhaustion  
and relief.

I lean against the railing  
and hear the rattling  
of a heavy chain.

Feel the anchor lift.

My boat  
steers toward  
the open sea.

*Jeanne* 

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1917

**We don't hear exact**

numbers.

We just hear the words  
*full train.*

We know  
there will be hundreds  
on stretchers,  
caked  
in dried mud.

I help  
the walking wounded  
to their beds.

Cut the bloody  
shreds of uniform  
from their bodies.

Wash their limbs  
and faces,  
black and pocked  
with gun smoke  
and shrapnel.

They chatter to themselves.  
Nonsensical  
strings of words.

Names of boys  
who were wounded,  
boys  
who were left  
behind.

*Where is . . . fallen . . .  
now . . . gone . . . help . . .*

Wounds  
crawling with maggots.

Stinking and tense  
with gangrene.

One boy  
won't stop screaming.

For a moment  
I think,  
*He will drive us all mad.*

And then I hate myself.

One poor lad,  
eyes shot through,  
calmly asks me,  
*Shall I need a surgery?*  
*I can't see.*

I cannot bring myself  
to tell him,

*Poor boy.*

*You will never see again.* [14](#), [15](#)

## **Death walks the halls**

a feeling, a smell.

It lures  
the last oxygen  
from lungs.

Coughs out  
promises  
of freedom.

Through the window,  
past the city gates  
to the deep waters  
below.

## Death walks the halls

naked,  
without pride,  
asking for his mother.

He is angry.  
He is blind.  
He is shameful  
and alone.

## Death walks the halls

not as a cloaked  
demon  
but as a nurse  
with a clipboard

who closes  
a young boy's eyes  
and marks the time  
his heart  
stopped beating.

Death walks the halls

as a child

with his pockets  
full of tin soldiers

his eyes wide open,  
his head full  
of dreams.

Death walks the halls

as a doctor

who says  
to the mothers and the fathers

*There was nothing more  
we could  
do.*

Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN  
1933

**Letter #10**

*October 29, 1918*

*The weather turned today.*

*I wrapped myself in a shawl and stood at the doorway and watched the first snow.*

*There among the crystals and cold, I saw lilting white wings flying higher, the opposite direction as the falling flakes.*

*It was a snow-white moth. Trying its hardest to fight the frost.*

*Yours,  
Petit Oiseau*

**Mrs. Patterson lectures**

about the Ford Hunger March.

My class  
leans forward.

We rest our chins  
on our knuckles  
and listen closely.

*One year ago,*

*six thousand men marched  
from downtown Detroit  
to the River Rouge factory.*

*Sixty men were wounded  
and four were killed  
on that day.*

*Dearborn streets were littered  
with broken glass and  
automobile wreckage.*

*Nearly every window  
in the Ford plant  
broken.* <sup>16</sup>



## **Elena's father was there**

He sits on a stool  
at the front of the classroom.

Tells us of the men  
who marched against  
the bitter wind  
on March 7, 1932.

The Ford Massacre.

*We marched  
from Detroit  
to the River Rouge Plant  
with demands  
for Henry Ford.*

*We held signs that read,*

*“Give us Work”  
“We Want Bread Not Crumbs”  
“Tax the Rich and Feed the Poor”*

*As we got closer  
to the plant,  
Ford's hired goons  
attacked us.*

*Tear gas, fire hoses,  
clubs.*

*Men running everywhere  
trying to escape  
the bullets*

*pelting the crowd.*

*A boy was shot.*

*Blood spread  
across his chest  
like a car dripping oil  
onto the pavement.*

*They called us REDS.*

*All we wanted was health care  
and an end  
to racial discrimination.*

Elena's father  
pauses,  
wipes his face  
and eyes  
with a handkerchief.

*The next day,  
many men  
dressed in their uniforms  
and went to the factory.*

*Stepped over  
red stains  
on the sidewalk.*

*Black,  
where the fires had burned.*

*Men with work  
don't dare complain  
about conditions.* <sup>16</sup>



## **The chalk squeaks**

as Mrs. Patterson writes  
our shared history  
on the blackboard.

*In 1929—Detroit produced 5,337,000 vehicles.*

*October 24, 1929—the stock market crashed.*

*In 1930—3,363,000 vehicles*

*In 1931—1,332,000 vehicles<sup>17</sup>*

*Fewer vehicles = fewer jobs*

*Current 1933 unemployment rate = 26% and rising.<sup>18</sup>*

She doesn't  
have to tell us  
about the unemployed.

We've all seen the families  
waiting for bread  
outside of Sacred Heart.

The violence  
that comes from desperation.

The clash between  
those who have  
and those who don't.

**I remember the parade**

on March 12, 1932.

We gathered together  
as a community.

Sixty thousand strong.

Marched down  
Woodward Avenue  
past the Institute of Arts,  
then turned west  
to the Woodmere Cemetery.

Workers and families  
singing songs of revolution.

Grieving  
for the dead.

The cemetery refused  
Curtis Williams  
because of the color of his skin.

Airplanes scattered  
his ashes  
over River Rouge.

No Ford  
or Dearborn officials  
were prosecuted for  
the deaths. <sup>19</sup>

My father held my hand,

worried I would be lost  
in the crowd.

He held me tighter  
when we saw  
a safety commission officer  
shove his gun  
into the face  
of one of the workers.

*We put four  
of your kind into the graves  
with this.*

*And we'll put a lot more  
if we have to.* <sup>16</sup>

## **On our way home from school**

Billy's red  
convertible  
glides up  
beside us.

*Do you want a lift?*

I look at my sister.

She shakes her head  
vehemently  
and holds up her hands.

*Come on, Mary!*

She starts walking  
quickly.

I lag behind.

Billy drives slowly  
right next to me.

*There's a big band playing  
at the Bob-Lo Island Pavilion  
on Sunday night.*

*I'd like to take you.*

*We could take the ferry to Belle Isle.  
Walk the promenade.*

*Billy,*

*you know I can't.*

*If you're going to talk to me that way,  
you'd better call me William.*

*That's what my mother calls me  
when she's telling me "no."*

*My father would kill me.*

*Come on, Mary!  
It'll be fun.*

*You know I can't.*

*The real question is:  
do you have "the jitters."*

I laugh.

I've only heard  
that phrase  
on the radio.

*Some say there's too much  
"jitter in my jitterbug."<sup>20</sup>*

*Great.  
It's settled.*

*I'll see you at the dock  
at 4:30 on Sunday.*

He flashes me  
a toothy grin,  
presses his foot to the gas.



Glides  
down the road  
before I can say,

*Good Greek Girls  
don't jitterbug.*

## **My father paces around the store**

I look at the books.

We haven't had a customer  
in hours.

I see the red numbers  
floating at the bottom  
of the page.

*There's more money going out  
than coming in.*

*I'm going to have to cancel  
the shipments.*

My father avoids my eyes.

*What can we do?*

I ask,  
feeling optimistic.

*Can we advertise?  
Can we create a sale?*

*It won't help.*

*You don't know that, Baba!  
We just have to try some new things!*

*The banks have failed.  
Less cars are being made.  
The food lines are getting longer.*

*People are living on the street.*

*No one has money to spend  
on colas and cream.*

I walk around the counter  
to stand next to my father.

*We're going to lose the business, Mary.*

Now, I know.

Why he is pushing me  
to marry Dimitris.

# Giorgos (Gio)

ATLANTIC OCEAN

1917

**On a bench, beneath the stars**

*Sister, see me.*

Poised on the edge  
of the earth

hovering between  
the black  
of the ocean  
and sky.

*Sister, hear me.*

I wish  
I could throw a hatchet  
into the heavens

tear a hole  
in the gut of the past.

*Sister, forgive me.*

My rage, my guilt,  
my fear.

I am to blame.

I know the cries  
of a fatherless son.

**I surrender my grief**

to the Furies.

Three sisters  
with snakes in their hair  
coal-black bodies  
bat wings  
bloodred eyes.

I imagine  
the mythical crones  
rip into my flesh,  
punish me  
with their claws.

I try to brush them away,  
but I know  
I will never be free.  
As they whisper and hiss  
into my ear,

*Do not dream, young one.*

*You will never return  
to your homeland.*

**I roam the deck during the day**

No one suspects me.

When night falls,  
I hide in the engine room,  
cover my ears,  
try to block the sound  
of the massive  
whirling pistons  
and the rumble  
of the turbine.

I crouch  
in the coal bunkers,  
calf-deep in oily water.

There are a few  
other stowaways.

Most of them boys  
my age.

For nine days  
we help each other.

Steal food off plates and share.

I can't decide  
what I fear most.

Another night on this ship  
or what will happen  
when we finally  
arrive.





## **My body jerks**

awake  
with the sound of a whistle.

My muscles tense  
and eardrums bulge  
with alarm.

There is a man  
looming over  
our sleeping bodies,  
shouting,

*Stowaways!*

*Jeanne* 

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1917

**Most of the nurses**

have fiancés, brothers,  
and fathers  
in the war.

We throw ourselves  
into our duties.

Transform our  
worry and sadness  
into healing.

All of these boys  
coming from the front lines  
are someone's fiancé,  
someone's son.

We treat each soldier  
like family.

Some days, it is difficult  
to remember

that these boys  
are not ours.

## **When the soldiers**

are homesick,  
I write letters  
to their mothers and wives.

When they are bored,  
I read them poetry  
and novels  
about romance  
and spies.

When they cannot speak,  
I hold their hands.

When they are lonely,  
I sing Breton folksongs  
in Gaelic.

When they need a friend,  
I tell them about Papa  
and his bravery.

I let them call me  
*petit oiseau.*

## **Nurses arrive**

from Great Britain  
and the United States  
by train and by boat.

They have come to help  
the French people  
and also the soldiers  
from their homelands.

I am learning  
to speak English  
more each day  
and I am teaching them  
to say little phrases  
in French.

We laugh at the  
*faux amis*.

Words that sound  
the same  
but mean  
something else.

Brasserie and *brassiere* (bra);  
blessed and *blessé* (injured);  
coin and *coin* (corner).

Speaking a new language  
is like wearing a new  
pair of glasses.

## **My new friend Vera**

hands me a cup of tea  
and leads me outside.

It's a lovely day  
and the roses are blooming.

Vera is blond and beautiful.

A shined-up penny  
in a pocketful  
of dull coins.

She's from Indiana.

She tells me about  
her family and their house  
and their land  
where they grow  
miles of corn.

Her town  
used to be all farmland,  
but now  
there are a lot of buildings  
in the center.

They have concerts  
with brass bands  
and parades on holidays  
and they sit on the curb  
and drink Coca-Cola  
and watch  
the decorated trucks

drive past  
the crowds.

She tells me  
that right before she left,  
her town got a stoplight.

When they installed it,  
people stood on the corner  
and watched the light  
change from red  
to green to yellow  
for hours.

Then she gives a little  
snort-laugh  
like a pink piglet.

*It's not much, but it's my home!*

She also tells me  
about the big, modern  
American cities  
with the tallest buildings  
in the whole world.

I stare at the  
two-story  
buildings  
that line the streets  
of Saint-Malo.

I decide  
someday I would like  
to see buildings  
that scrape

the sky.

Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

1933

**Letter #11**

*October 30, 1918*

*Yesterday, I found a ribbon lying on the ground—abandoned in a field.*

*So blue against the green grass and brown earth.*

*I picked it up and felt the soft silk.*

*Wished that I could tie it in your hair.*

*Forever yours,*

*Loup*



## **A group**

of women and girls gather  
to help with the clothing drive  
at Sacred Heart.

*Mary!*  
*I'm so glad you made it!*

Clarabelle's cheeks  
are shiny with sweat.

Her red-flowered  
apron tied around  
her plump waist.

*I have the perfect job for you!*

She takes me to a room  
filled to the brim  
with donations.

*People have been*  
*dropping things off*  
*all day.*

*We need help sorting it.*

Several women  
look up from their work  
to wave hello.

I see Lara.

She hops up

and gives me a hug.

Clarabelle continues,

*Please make piles:*

*men's shirts*

*pants*

*women's dresses*

*sweaters*

*belts.*

*You get the drift.*

She picks up a pair of pants  
and points at a tear.

*If there's something*

*to mend,*

*bring it to me.*

*I have a sewing machine.*

*Oh, and don't forget*

*to check the pockets.*

She tosses the pants into a pile.

*Last month,*

*a man*

*received a loaf of bread*

*and a white*

*button-down shirt.*

*The next day he returned.*

*There were diamond cufflinks*

*still attached to the sleeves.*<sup>17</sup>

She chuckles  
and pats my shoulder.

*I tell you, honesty  
is still alive  
in America.*

*Although, I think  
those diamond cufflinks  
went directly  
into the church  
donation box,  
she says with a grin.*

## To entertain ourselves

we turn on the wireless,  
and a crackled voice  
whines through the speakers.

*Wearing a white silk gown  
and white gloves,*

*Earhart broke up a dinner at the White House  
by inviting the first lady  
on a flight to Baltimore  
and back.*

*Earhart was at the controls  
of the plane  
most of the flight.*

*Amelia Earhart  
and the first lady!*

Lara grabs my arm.

*A match  
made in heaven!*

I squeal.

We lean in to listen  
as Eleanor Roosevelt's voice  
floats over the airwaves.

*I'd love to do it myself.  
I make no bones about it.*

*It does mark an epoch,*

*doesn't it,  
when a girl in an evening dress  
and slippers*

*can pilot a plane  
at night.* <sup>21</sup>

We both smile,  
eyes full of joy and light.

A sunrise, a blessing,  
a wide open  
horizon.

**I spend the next few hours thinking**

about flying alone in a plane

while digging my way  
through a pile  
of random junk.

Some of it  
makes me smile.

Some makes me  
gag.

I find an itchy pair  
of woolen pants  
with a pair of soiled underwear  
still attached.

A hat  
with an entire pheasant,  
its teal and rust  
wing  
stretched  
across the brim.

Plastic waders  
for fishing in deep water.

A brassiere  
with padded cups  
as large  
as two elephant feet.

I hold it up to my body

and dance.

Lara starts giggling.

She puts on

a pair of Coke-bottle glasses

and pretends to use

a pair of dentures.

The other girls go bananas.

**At the very end of the day**

I see something  
peeking out  
from a pile of gray.

A swath  
of emerald green  
silk.

I pull

and pull and pull  
and it keeps coming  
like a silk scarf  
being pulled  
out of  
a magic hat.



**It's an evening dress**

Sleeveless,  
bias-cut, and soft  
as the inside  
of a rabbit's ear.

It must have been  
worn once.

It's perfect

except for a tear  
running  
all the way down  
the seam.

## **I bring the dress to Clarabelle**

secretly  
hoping she'll  
think it's unfixable  
and throw it  
away.

Instead she takes it,  
turns it inside out,  
and runs it through  
the sewing machine.

The needle  
bobs efficiently along  
the silky fabric  
like she's mending  
a muslin  
housedress.

*That'll probably do.*

*Now that I look at it,  
it's about your size, Mary.*

*Will you try it on  
so I can see if  
it needs any other mending?*

I try to contain my excitement  
as I duck  
behind a changing screen.

Slip my legs through  
the glossy fabric.

Come out  
and present myself.

She looks at me  
with a pained expression.

*Oh, Mary.*

*What's wrong?*

*It looks like it was meant for you.*

She lifts the zipper  
and turns me  
toward the mirror.

All the other volunteers  
gather to look.

I look at myself  
in the mirror,  
covered in soft green silk.

The color  
bounces off my dark hair  
and light eyes.

I've never felt  
so beautiful.

***You must take it home!***

One of the women says.

*What shoe size are you, Mary?  
Will these fit?*

Lara hands me  
a pair of  
silver T-strap high heels.

I slip my heel  
into them  
and they fit.

*Ooooo! What about this?*

Yet another volunteer  
rummages  
through her piles  
and produces  
a silver and pearl hairpin  
in the shape of a star.

*And this!*

Another woman  
produces a silvery ribbon.  
Pins the star to it  
and strings it  
though my black, curly hair.

*I couldn't possibly  
take all this.*

*I've never worn  
anything this nice.*

I stare in the mirror.  
*Could this really be me?*


**Clarabelle hugs me tight**

around my shoulders.

*Consider it a thank-you  
for all your hard work.*

Then she pats herself on the chest  
and smiles.

*How do you think  
I got this fancy apron?*

*Giorgos (Gio)* 

*ELLIS ISLAND, NEW YORK*

1917

**I feel the sting of the handcuffs**

as I stare through the gray fog  
at the Statue of Liberty.

I am in the land of the free,  
but I am in chains.

## **We wait and watch**

the mass  
of ticketed passengers  
disembark.

The attendants sit at tables,  
take names,  
write them into ledgers,  
sort people  
into groups.

After the crowd clears,  
an armed marshal  
barks orders at us.

We line up.

They march us off the boat.

Directly  
into a jail cell.



## **I lie to the guards**

I tell them that I am an orphan.  
I tell them I am seventeen.

They can't understand  
what I'm saying.

They pull up  
eyelids  
with a buttonhook.

They examine:  
mouths  
nails  
ears  
teeth.

They pull a woman from the group,  
mark her with chalk.

The letter H on her sleeve.

They take away one man  
with pink eyes.

They sequester  
a sallow-skinned girl,  
who pinches  
her cheeks  
to make them appear  
rosy, healthy.

The prisoners of Ellis Island

are Italian, Russian, Slavic,  
Arabic, and German.

We do not speak to each other.  
We do not want to be sent back. <sup>22</sup>

**They slide porridge**

under the bars  
of the cell.

It's swimming  
with mealworms.

One of the inmates gags  
and slides it back.

I spend an hour  
picking the  
sleek, brown  
bodies  
out of the oats  
so that I can eat.

**I wake early in the morning**

There is a man in a uniform  
standing above me.

*They tell me you want to be  
a citizen of the United States  
of America.*

*Is that right, boy?*

I don't quite understand.

I hear the words  
*citizen of the United States  
of America.*

I nod yes.

*Well, I have  
a pretty good idea  
how we can make  
that happen  
for you.*

He leaves  
a pressed and folded  
U.S. Army uniform  
at the foot of my bed.

They wait two weeks  
and then load me onto  
a ship.

This time with a ticket

to France.

# *Jeanne*

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1917

## **I teach Vera**

how to pry  
small, black mussels

from the gray boulders  
next to the salty sea.

Just like my father  
taught me.

We search the sand  
for tiny bubbles  
rising from  
the razor clams  
buried deep  
within the silt.

Vera looks out  
at the green water.

I want to know  
what she knows,  
the world beyond  
this harbor.

We fill our baskets

with black and gray jewels.

When they are full,  
we strap them to our backs,  
wade in the shallow water  
and splash each other.

Mouths wide open  
with laughter.

Our freckled faces  
kissed by the sun.

## **At my mother's house**

we rinse sand  
from the shells.

Our maid, Anne,  
helps us  
mince garlic  
and shallots.

We cook them in a large pot  
with white wine  
until the lovely smell  
of cooking garlic  
rises through the house,  
seeps out of the windows  
and onto the street.

The people  
passing by  
stop to close their eyes

and think about  
all the beautiful meals  
they have eaten  
throughout their lives

and the friends  
who have sat at their  
tables

after a perfect day  
at the beach.



Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

1933

**Letter #12**

*November 1, 1918*

*When did you know that you loved me?*

*When you first heard my voice?*

*When you first saw my face?*

*When your lips touched mine?*

*Come back.*

*There are many more first things to experience.*

*Forever yours,*

*Petit Oiseau*

## **On Sunday**

we kiss things.

The icons  
at the entrance  
of the nave.

Theotokos,  
the Mother of God.

We cross ourselves.

The thumb  
and two fingertips  
pressed together  
for the Holy Trinity.

We kiss  
the priest's hand.

We kiss  
each other  
before communion.

*Christ is in our midst.*

*He is and shall be.*

We place the chalice  
to our lips, and we drink.

Leave the church  
walking backward,  
bow and cross ourselves

again.

Grateful.

The service is done.

**As usual**

after the liturgy,

Dimitris  
is waiting for me.

The women  
swirl  
as they fetch coffee  
and biscuits  
for their men.

*That coffee smells good.*

He motions to the table.  
Empty handed.

I am expected  
to serve him.

I walk up,  
pour a cup  
from a bronze urn.

I turn toward him,  
hold my pinky up.

Take a slow sip,  
not taking my eyes  
from his.

*You're right, Dimitris.  
The coffee is good.*

I walk away  
to find my sister.

**My shy sibling**

is surrounded  
by old women.

Her eyes say, *Save me.*

I pull her away  
from the crowd.

*Thank goodness.*

*Mrs. Manikas was talking  
about her gout.*

*Let's leave before anyone  
starts talking  
about needlepoint.*

*Or lower-back pain.*

*Or your  
future marriage  
to an eligible  
bachelor  
in the community.*

*Let me grab my coat.*

## **On the walk**

I prepare myself.

We stop walking  
in front of Sacred Heart.

*Will you tell Mama  
that I'm working  
at the clothing drive tonight?*

*I thought  
we were walking home  
together.*

*They need me.  
I'll be back late.*

*Don't forget  
to tell Mama where I am.*

I open  
the heavy side door  
and slip inside  
before  
she can say  
another word.

I lied to my sister.

I lied  
to my best friend.

For a boy.

## **The last time I was here**

I stashed my dress  
in a paper sack

hidden  
behind a heavy  
potted plant  
in the ladies' lavatory.

I sneak  
through the dark corridors,  
barely breathing.

The door creaks  
as I open it.

It's still there.



**I've always imagined**

what it would be like  
to act in a play.

To wear a costume  
or a mask.

Assume  
the personality  
of another.

Feel the applause  
from an audience  
that adores you.

As I walk down  
the street toward  
the ferry dock,  
I feel like everyone  
in the world  
is looking.

They see me.  
Admire me.

This different version  
of me.

**I arrive early**

circle the landing,  
try to find Billy.

He's not here.

I close my eyes  
and take a deep breath.

*Mary.*

I open my eyes.  
He's standing in front of me.

Wearing a black suit,  
white shirt,  
and a black bow tie.

His eyes are wide.

He's holding  
a white gardenia  
in the palm  
of his hand.

**He tries to secure the flower**

to my shoulder,

stabs himself with the pin  
and winces in pain.

*It's ok, I can do it,*  
I say and take the flower.

His hands are shaking.

I pin the corsage  
above my heart and smile.

The smell  
hits me,  
wild  
and sultry.

I take his hand.

We board the ferry boat  
*Sappho.*

The sun sinks  
lower,  
creating a golden pathway  
over the water

as the sky above us  
turns pink  
and orange.

## **La Belle Isle**

feels like another world.

Across the river,  
the skyline  
in the distance.

My home  
so close, so far.

Throngs of wealthy,  
pink-cheeked  
men and women,  
dressed in their Sunday best,  
stream off the ferry.

The weather has turned  
and the first shades  
of red  
tip the leaves.

Partners  
huddle together to stay warm.

I shiver.

I'm ashamed  
to cover  
my dress with my  
well-worn  
black  
wool coat.

Billy puts his arm

around me and asks,

*Should we go  
into the conservatory?*<sup>[23](#)</sup>

*It's warmer in there.*

We walk toward  
a huge glass dome  
and enter a steamy haven  
of green.

**The plants make me feel**

like a stranger.

Wendy  
in Neverland.

We walk though  
a room filled with  
palm trees.

I've only seen their shape  
in books  
and drawings  
of faraway  
desert islands.

Then a dry,  
hot room with cacti  
as tall as the roof  
and blooming flowers  
the size of my hand.

Underneath the glass dome  
the showroom  
holds flowers  
of all shades of red,  
open and bold.

Then the tropical house  
filled with orchids  
and ferns,  
a statue of a little girl  
pouring water  
from a bowl.

Each room  
more spectacular  
than the last.

We are greedy.

Laugh  
as we nudge  
our noses into every flower,  
gather  
all the sweetness.

## **Before we enter**

the dance pavilion,  
I can hear  
the orchestra playing.

We walk  
from the darkness  
into a brightly lit room,  
stand underneath  
a gigantic crystal chandelier.

The perimeter  
of the hall  
lined with tables  
covered in white linen  
and candles.

We settle at a table.

Billy orders us both  
prime rib  
and mashed potatoes.

The meat arrives  
covered in juices,  
so soft  
it cuts with a fork.

I think of the meat  
we eat at home,  
boiled for hours.

The dessert arrives.



Berries dripping  
over a crisp  
whipped meringue  
pavlova.

It disappears  
in my mouth,  
a heavenly cloud.

**I pull Billy**

onto the dance floor.

He holds me close  
and puts his cheek  
next to mine.

The lead singer moans  
into the microphone.

Billy moves slowly  
around the floor,  
guiding us  
through other couples  
in their own trance.

I close my eyes and stop thinking.

Everything moves slowly,  
sweet and viscous as honey.  
My feet glide,  
trusting  
we will move together.

We sink deeper  
into the velvet notes  
of the music.

Eventually  
the sound of the band  
is replaced  
by the piercing  
staccato  
of couples clapping.

Billy and I,  
nose to nose.

Still breathing together  
on the dance floor.

**The wind is blowing**

as we board the ferry.

My eyes  
start weeping.

I want to tell him  
about Dimitris,  
my father's failing store.

The words are frozen.

The lies I have told.

I wish  
I could make him understand  
this can never be.

## **It starts to rain hard**

We run  
to the corner of the boat,  
behind the stairwell  
to hide.

He squeezes me  
into his chest  
with just the right  
pressure.

He tips my head up  
with two fingers.

He looks worried.  
*You're crying.*

I can't stop  
weeping.

He's so close.

Closer than anyone  
has ever been.

Both hands on my face,  
wiping my tears,  
his entire body  
covering mine.

Still moving around me,  
dancing.

He touches

his forehead  
to mine.

*Mary, please.*  
He does not know  
my yearning.

He does not know  
there is no need  
to beg.

**On Sundays**

we kiss things.

The golden chalice  
of his lips.

## **When you finally have your first kiss**

you may feel slightly dizzy.

You may feel  
like you've been lifted  
by a gust of wind.

You may feel  
so full of air  
that you can't breathe,  
and you may  
have to let it out  
slowly  
all the way home  
like a balloon.

Squealing  
as it floats  
and flies.

You may feel  
deflated.

When you realize  
even balloons  
have to come back  
to earth  
sometime.



*Mary! Where have you been?*

My mother  
is standing in the doorway.

All of the lights are on.

# *Giorgos (Gio)*

*U.S. ARMY, NORTHWESTERN FRANCE*  
1917

**How did I get here?**

An accident.

Two boats  
across the Atlantic,  
a U.S. Army  
uniform,  
and now I am  
in the middle of nowhere  
with people  
who don't speak  
my language.

I miss  
the teal green waters  
of my homeland.

Why am I fighting  
a war  
that I don't  
understand?

For a new beginning.  
For possibility.  
For freedom.

In my dreams,  
the olive groves  
call for me  
to return.

**We walk across France**

in formation.

Our boots stomp  
into the mud.

Our guns rest  
on our shoulders.

The barrels point  
toward the sky.

It feels like  
we have been walking  
for years.

My feet are blistered,  
wet from the rain.

They smell  
like rotten meat.

**One of the soldiers in my company**

helps me learn English  
before we go to sleep.

His name is Pete.

He is kind and patient  
but laughs  
when I struggle  
to make the sounds.

My mouth feels like  
it is chewing  
on a tough piece  
of leather.

A soldier hands us blankets.

*If the Germans don't get you,  
the flu will.*

I wrap myself in green wool  
like a caterpillar  
encircling itself  
in a cocoon.

The cold night air  
reaches its fingers  
through  
the fabric.

I miss my mother.

## **Out of town a little ways**

I find a road lined with apple trees.  
It leads to an abandoned house.

Bullet holes  
scattered across  
the side of the building.

The garden has turned.

The pumpkins  
have spilled their seeds  
and they are waiting  
like soldiers at the front  
finally called to duty.

The pigs are starving in their pen.

A porcelain tea set  
is arranged on the garden table.

There is room for four.

A girl is walking  
the rows  
of fruit trees  
with a bundle  
in her arms.

It's a baby  
wrapped in a blanket.

I am afraid  
to ask

if the child  
is alive.

## **In my imagination**

Violetta holds her new baby  
and walks home  
through  
the olive groves.

The early evening sun  
casts a soft light  
across the fields.

She wears a billowing shirt  
and her pinstriped pants.

The baby is wrapped  
in the white lambskin  
Costas brought  
to our house  
so many  
months ago.

My mother sets the table.

Roasted meat on their plates.  
Baklava swimming  
in honey.

They smile at the baby.

The war  
has not touched them.



*Jeanne* 

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1917

**There's a stove**

in the middle of the room  
to keep the boys warm.

A wood pile  
on the side of the building,  
where I gather fuel.

Each time  
I enter the building,  
my arms overflow  
with logs.

Back busted  
from caring heavy loads.

Leaning over beds,  
changing sheets,  
and dressing wounds.

I check each boy for fever.  
Adjust covers and pillows.

It's my job to make sure  
everyone is comfortable  
and clean.

To keep  
the flames burning.

The more I check  
the more I clean  
the more I disinfect

the more likely it is  
that a boy gets to keep  
his leg.

***We need blood!***

A doctor stumbles  
though the door.

*I'm O positive.*

He pulls on my arm  
and takes me to surgery.

An unconscious boy  
lying on the table.

I sit on a chair next to him.

Turn my eyes  
away from his open  
wounds.

A fellow nurse  
smiles at me  
while she pierces my vein.

Runs a tube  
directly from me  
to the patient.

I think about my father.

Imagine him  
in a land far away.

Trying to help  
one soldier  
at a time.

My blood flows  
from my arm  
into the wounded boy.

I know  
my father  
would be proud.

Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

1933

**Letter #13**

*November 2, 1918*

*My love,*

*I pray I can be the person you want me to be.*

*This fire, this anger, feels like it is consuming me.*

*I have done things for which I am ashamed.*

*How will the guilt and grief ever stop burning?*

*How can I be anything else?*

*How will I be able to go home?*

*I want to be yours forever,*

*Loup*

**My mother grabs my dress**

holds  
the green silk fabric  
in her hand.

Her face  
full of disappointment  
and disbelief.

*Marguerite went to Sacred Heart.*

*It was locked.*

*We know  
you weren't there, Mary.*

*Your sister  
walked in the storm  
for hours  
searching for you.*

*She's in bed with a fever.*

*Where were you?*

*I was safe.*

*Where?*

*I took the ferry to Belle Isle.*

*To go dancing.*

***Enough!***

My father holds his head  
as if  
I am splitting him  
in two.

*You will marry Dimitris  
as soon as we work out  
the details.*

*But Baba!  
I am almost done with school!*

*I could graduate!  
And get a job!*

*Nonsense!  
A girl doesn't need  
a job.*

*Especially  
when her husband owns  
a successful business.*

*It's over, Mary. Stop fighting!*

*Your sister is ill  
because of you.*

*I met a boy, Baba.  
He cares for me.*

*His family has money,  
and he's very sweet*

*and kind.*

*Who is this boy  
who lives outside of our neighborhood?*

*Who doesn't understand our culture?*

*He takes you dancing  
but makes no promises!*

*Doesn't he know  
that lying  
is not the best way to gain  
a father's approval?*

*Baba, I think you would like him.*

*I have already found you a man, Mary.*

*A man of substance.  
A man who understands our family.*

*He has made a proposal.  
I have accepted.*

*I will not go back on my word.*



## **The next day**

my father closes the store.

He looks at me  
like a dog  
that cannot be trained

as he places  
a FOR SALE sign  
in the window.

They say  
God gives you only  
what you can  
handle.

Why  
did God  
give him me?

## **Marguerite's fever**

is high,  
and her throat hurts.

Mama gives  
her warm honey water  
and lets her stay home  
from school.

I walk to school  
with my brothers.

John shakes his head.

*I've never seen  
Baba so angry.*

*You're making  
the rest of us  
look like angels.*

Gus swats John  
in the stomach  
and says,

*It'll get better.  
They can't stay angry forever.*

Jim puts his hand  
on my shoulder.

I don't feel comforted.

Will Marguerite

forgive me?

# *Giorgos (Gio)*

*U.S. ARMY, NORTHWESTERN FRANCE*

1918

## **A foxhole**

sounds so calm.

A den carved into  
a mound of dirt.

A safe space  
for animal babies  
to sleep.

This hole  
that I am digging  
for myself  
feels like a grave.

**At night, we sit in the trenches**

and tell stories.

It helps with the waiting.

Some of the lucky ones  
talk about their girlfriends.

They show letters  
covered in red lipstick kisses  
and perfume.

Pete has a girl, back in Detroit.

He tells me  
her lips are soft  
as a ripe nectarine.

*I keep her letter right here,  
close to my heart,*  
he says as he pats  
his breast pocket.

*Maybe you should keep it in your pants!*  
shouts one of the boys.

Laughter erupts  
all around us.

I light a cigarette,  
and then help Pete  
light his.

We never light three cigarettes

in a row.

Not when it's dark.

One, they spot you.

Two, they sight you.

Three, they kill you.

## **Snow**

We have entered  
a fairyland.

The world is covered  
in white.

The water is frozen  
and so are our feet.

Frost,  
with a hand in the air,  
waves his wand  
and invites the wind  
to dance around  
our sleeping bodies.

Everything is cold.

I can't fill my lungs  
with air.

**I dream that my father**

is standing over my bed,  
watching me sleep.

He has a worried expression  
as if he has lost a lamb  
in the hills  
or there's a snake  
next to his foot.

He reaches out his hand  
to touch my shoulder.

*Giorgos, you need to wake up  
now.*



**My eyes snap open**

I grab my rifle.

There are firebombs  
bursting  
all around me.

Faceless men are everywhere.  
The horses are screaming.

I hear the moan  
of fighter-bombers  
overhead.

I don't know  
in which direction to run.

There's not even a moon.

A corporal yells,  
*Shoot, for God's sake!*  
*Shoot!*

I plant my feet  
and hold my gun tight  
against my shoulder.

I fire as many bullets  
as I can  
into the men  
running toward me.

I don't know  
who I have shot.



**I see a man writhing in the mud**

He's holding his belly,  
crying for help.

I rush to him  
and struggle  
to put his arm  
around my body,  
to pull him up  
from the ground.

I can't see anything.

I wipe  
the mud  
from my eyes.

There's a letter tucked into his breast pocket.

I grab the gasmask  
hanging on his chest  
and place it over  
his face.

*You're going to be OK, Pete.*  
*We're going to be OK.*

The land smells like  
gun smoke,  
blood,  
and urine.

I hear a crack  
and a buzz.

We fall  
to the ground.

Then nothing.

# *Jeanne*

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1918

**Nurses run down**

the hallway  
giggling,  
rushing

to make it  
to the impromptu  
performance

of Shakespeare's  
*Midsummer Night's Dream*  
in the mess hall.

Someone  
blows a toy horn.

Two sheets are drawn  
to create a stage.

## **Vera and I**

circle around each other

dressed like  
the Fairy King Oberon  
and his Queen Titania.

Flowing robes  
and flower garlands  
in our hair.

Unable to stop  
laughing,  
we recite our lines  
from a shared script.

Our audience,  
mildly amused patients,  
slump in their chairs.

One boy drinks  
loudly through a straw.

Milk dribbling  
down his chin.

Another farts in his sleep.

*Quiet!*  
a fellow soldier  
elbows him awake.

The doctor  
playing Lysander

consoles  
his beloved Hermia,

*The course of true love never did run smooth.*

**We hear a siren blaring**

and glimpse the lights  
of an ambulance  
shining  
in the courtyard.

Our jovial moment  
broken.

The doctor  
playing Lysander  
sheds his costume  
and sprints  
toward the siren.

We gather the patients.

*Is it over?*  
one boy mumbles  
in his sleep.

I help him  
back to his bed.

If only  
I could convince him  
the night,  
his injuries,  
the war  
were all  
just a dream.



Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

1933

**Letter #14**

*November 3, 1918*

*This war feels like a virus.*

*No medicine can cure it—only patience—while we wait for the sickness to run its course.*

*I will do my best, as a nurse, to help heal the wounded and my country.*

*I pray that we will all be well soon.*

*Yours,  
Petit Oiseau*

## **When we get home from school**

Marguerite's cheeks  
are white  
and she has a scarf  
around her neck.

I try to cozy  
next to her,  
real close,  
so I can whisper  
into her ear.

But Mama  
starts yelling,  
*Don't you go close to her!*

I give her a kiss  
on her cheek.

That night,  
I get the fever too.

## Everything is blurry

My mother  
places a cold cloth on my forehead  
and sings to me  
in French.

*Celui que mon coeur aime tant  
Il est dessus la mer jolie  
Petit oiseau tu peux lui dire  
Petit oiseau tu lui diras  
Que je suis sa fidèle amie  
Et que vers lui je tends les bras.* <sup>24</sup>

The air feels  
as thick as  
black tar.

I cannot move.

*The one my heart loves so much  
He is above the pretty sea  
Little bird you can tell him  
Little bird you will tell him  
That I am his faithful friend  
And that toward him I extend my arms.*

My mouth is sticky  
and words won't leave  
the tip  
of my tongue.

Marguerite is beside me  
moaning,  
saying my name.

I cannot even reach  
for her hand.

**I dream**

that I'm dancing  
under the crystal chandelier.

His hand presses  
into my back.

His eyes say,  
*Come closer.*

His cheeks say,  
*Soft. So softly.*

His lips say,  
*Please.*

## **My sister and I**

are two sides  
of a coin

molded  
of the same  
metal.

One head,  
one tail

tossed  
into the air.

We hold our breath.

Wishing,  
praying.

**The doctor marks a big, black X**

on our front door.

Everyone in the house is quarantined.

Scarlet fever.

Our throats sore.

A bright-red rash  
across our chests.

I stay in bed for a week,  
sipping broth  
and slowly get better.

Marguerite does not.

# *Giorgos (Gio)*

*U.S. ARMY, NORTHWESTERN FRANCE*

1918

## **I wake in a field**

ears ringing.

My fingers  
shake up and down,  
tapping  
the moist earth.

I am alive.

My vision is blurry.

I can see shapes  
coming in  
and out.

I see a pile  
of bloody soldiers.

My eyes focus  
on a boy rifling  
through pockets.

He finds  
a pack of smokes  
and some coins.



He sits  
on the mound  
of bodies.

Places coins  
in his breast pocket  
and lights  
a smoke.

I hear gunshots  
nearby.

They're killing  
the wounded.

My eyes lose focus

my head slides back  
to the earth.

*Where is Pete?*

A boot  
kicks my leg.

I wince in pain.

Wait  
for the gunshot  
to my head.

## **A host of angels**

lift me,  
place me  
in the hull  
of a wooden boat.

I'm home again.

Bobbing  
in the waves.

Silver fish glinting  
underneath  
the deep-blue water,  
just waiting  
to be caught.

A person hovers  
over me.

Mouth opens,  
mouth closes.

My eyes blur.

He pulls out  
a roll of bandages,  
circles them around  
my head  
until the world  
is covered.

*Where is Pete?*

The armored truck  
speeds along  
a gravel path.

I feel the rhythm  
of my sea  
rocking me.

My boat.

I hear the bells  
of heaven.

Ringling.

# *Jeanne*

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1918

**They tell me he's survived**

a large blast  
and he can't hear or see.

His head is bandaged.

I want this wounded boy  
to know he's not alone.

I run my hand along the side  
of the bedsheets  
and then along his shoulder  
and then down his hand.

He clamps onto my arm  
and his body spasms  
with intensity and fear.

He looks like he is running  
from a wolf.

**I call him**

*le loup*, the wolf,

to remind him  
of what  
he has survived.

I tell him  
we can be  
*le loup et*  
*le petit oiseau.*

*The wolf*  
*and the little bird.*

Unlikely friends.

We can  
work together.

To endure  
even the harshest  
winter.

## **The next day**

I visit *le loup*  
again.

I talk to him and tell him  
someday  
he will be well.

I tell him that his mother  
loves him.

There are people  
waiting for him.

He does not say a word,  
but I hear his shallow breath,  
and sometimes  
he squeezes my hand.

His skin is darker than mine.

Even with a bandage  
covering his face,  
I can see  
he is beautiful.

He is not willowy or thin  
like most of the British  
or French soldiers.

His chest is wide  
and he has the large hands  
and muscles  
of a fisherman.

I feel embarrassed  
when I look at him.

I fumble objects  
and crash into carts.

He's the only soldier  
that make my cheeks flush  
and chest hurt.

He makes me check  
my pulse.

## **I walk the hospital grounds**

after work.

I stand on the rock wall  
on my tiptoes  
and look into  
the dark-blue water  
and the rocky shore.

Run my hand  
along the stone tombs  
in the graveyard  
where *les corsaires*  
are buried.

Privateers who stole  
from foreign ships  
and swore an oath  
to give half  
to their king.

I think about men  
and their wars.

Alliances.

It makes me want to spit  
on the ground.

Now  
*l'hospital du Rosais*  
is filled with soldiers  
from many nations,  
even Germans



who have been taken  
as prisoners.

No matter which side  
they are on,  
they all believe  
it is the right side.

Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN  
1933

**Letter #15**

*November 4, 1918*

*My dearest,*

*I'm so sorry. This is all my fault. I thought we had more time.*

*Loup*

## **After two weeks, I go back to school**

Marguerite stays in our bed  
wrapped in Mama's  
thickest quilt.

Every day,  
I come home  
and tell her stories.

Some days,  
she recognizes me,  
and some days  
she's in a dream.

I make a nest  
of blankets and pillows  
beside our mattress.

I can be near her at night,  
but not disturb her.

It's cold on the ground.

I can hear the wind  
howling through  
the floorboards.

**Gus hands me a note**

*I found this stuck  
in the door.*

*Thought you might want it.*

I open the envelope.

M—

*When can we see each other again?  
I can't stop thinking about you.*

—B

How can I tell Billy  
about the pain  
we have caused?

The guilt I feel.

I fold the note,  
hold it over the candle  
on the table.

Open a window  
and toss the letter out.

Watch  
the burning bundle  
fall  
into the snow.

## **The temperature drops**

My brothers and I  
collect dry sticks and wood  
on our walk home  
from school.

As soon as we enter,  
my mother makes  
a roaring fire in the stove.

We all gather  
around it

thaw our frozen fingers  
still stinging  
from the wind.

The X has worn off.

Marguerite is still sick.

The doctor says  
her fever  
has become rheumatic.

My mother fills  
a hot water bottle.

I bring it up to our room.

Marguerite's thin,  
but she's sitting up,  
supported  
by pillows.

I pray this dreadful  
illness will go away.

I want my sister back.

I tuck the water bottle  
under her legs  
so she can't feel the bite  
of the cold.

**The doctor is here**

for Mama,

heavy  
with her sixth child.

He looks at me.

*She cannot  
get sick  
with the fever.*

*It's bad for the baby.*

*She must do less  
around the house.*

By this  
he means  
all the women's work

that he would never  
ask my brothers  
or my father  
to do.

**My father puts two cots**

in the cellar

for wandering folks  
who have lost their jobs  
and need a place to stay.

He says we must  
help people in need.

Mama hates it.

*I have children here!*  
*These are rough men.*

Baba insists.

White men.  
Black men.

All are welcome.

Even though  
we don't have very much,  
we still have more than  
some.



## **The men join us for dinner**

I listen to them talk to each other  
as I make a big pot of broth  
with the remaining  
onions  
and carrots  
and potatoes  
from our fall garden.

They are angry  
and shouting.

*There's no unemployment insurance,  
no national relief  
for the poor!*

*Half the people  
in Detroit  
are unemployed!*

*Henry Ford's  
still making  
thirty million dollars  
a year!*

## One of the wanderers is named James

He nods his head  
while the other men are talking  
and says,

*My father was a slave.  
He was freed as a boy.*

*I grew up thinking  
my country was offering me freedom.*

*A chance to work and learn.*

*Now I hear you, there's no good jobs.*

*There's even less for Black men.*  
James takes a sip of his soup  
and continues,

*They won't even let us rent or buy houses  
in good neighborhoods.*<sup>25</sup>

*They put on the lease:*

*No negroes.*

*No foreign born.*

*No undesirables.*

He tells us  
they're planning to build a wall  
on Pembroke Avenue.

To separate  
the Black and brown neighborhoods  
from the white ones. [26](#)

## **Foreign born**

Why did my parents come to America?

It feels  
like we have nothing.

No land.  
No family.

We are drifting  
in a world of strangers  
who are as lost  
as we are.

## **After dinner**

one of the wanderers pulls  
a violin from his sack.

Puts the instrument  
to his chin  
and jerks his bow  
over the strings  
in the hopping rhythm  
of a jig.

For the first time  
in months,  
people are smiling  
at the table.

Baba even carries Marguerite  
downstairs  
and holds her on his lap,  
swaying to the music.

The fiddler  
stands in the middle  
of our kitchen.

Pounding his foot  
into the floor.

Marguerite lifts herself to her feet  
and begins to dance.

We all gasp.

Baba jumps up

to join her.

He twists and twirls her  
to the music.

James asks Mama  
to dance.  
My brothers and I  
join too.

I close my eyes

and feel the rhythm  
of the music  
enter my heart.

Hope.

## **In the middle of the night**

I hear Marguerite  
talking in her sleep beside me.

I jostle her,  
but she won't wake up.

I feel her forehead.

She's burning.

I run to tell Mama  
to call for the doctor.

He examines Marguerite.

The fever  
is affecting her  
lungs and heart.

## **In the morning**

I lie next to Marguerite  
and tell her  
a story

about two sisters  
who love  
each other  
so much  
they build a sailboat  
out of their  
aprons

and use  
their mother's broom  
to paddle through  
the air.

Marguerite opens  
her eyes  
and then closes  
them again.

*How will it end?*  
she asks,  
her voice as meek  
as a church mouse.

I grab her hand  
and squeeze it.

*I'll tell you when I get home.*



**All day I think about**

how the story will end.

When I return home,  
she and my mother  
are gone.

I ask our neighbor, Mrs. O'Malley.

*They couldn't wait, love.*  
*They had to go.*

The hospital.

No one  
in our family  
has ever been  
to the hospital.

I start to cry.

## **My father and brothers and I**

stay up all night.

We sit at the kitchen table  
and say nothing.

In the early morning light,  
my mother comes home.

She's alone.

She drops to her knees.

My father runs to her.

She is not weeping.

She looks at him  
with eyes like stones  
that have been dropped  
into cold, dark water

and says,

*I couldn't save her.*

**I run out the door**

down the street

keep running

lungs heaving  
for breath.

I run until I reach  
the apple orchard

filled with the  
gray bones  
of winter trees.

I scream.

Until all the air  
has left my body  
and my lungs  
begin to rattle and moan.

I fall into the snow  
and stay there.

My body shakes  
on the frozen ground.

The sky is  
filled with gray  
storm clouds  
that look like they will burst  
at any moment.

I can't stand up.

A branch breaks  
next to me.

An arm's distance away  
stands a fox.

Her shining red coat  
bright against the white  
of the snow.

She looks at me.

Her amber eyes  
hold me

until she darts

into the rows  
and rows  
of trees.

I am alone.

I am alone.

# *Giorgos (Gio)*

*U.S. ARMY, NORTHWESTERN FRANCE*

1918

## **Through the ringing**

I hear a woman  
whispering to me.

Her voice sounds  
like a forest  
alive with green vines  
and flowers.

She smells  
of perfumed earth.

The weight  
of her hand,  
a river stone  
rolled smooth.

She places her cheek  
on my palm.

*Sing me to sleep.*  
*Sing me home.*

**Everything hurts**

Lift my hands.

Squeeze my hands.

Lift my arms.

Run my hands  
over my belly  
and chest.

Check for holes.

Rotate my foot.

Feel the bandages  
covering my eyes.

**All of my fear**

swims  
under my eyelids

trapped

a blanket  
of darkness.

I can't breathe.

*Doctor.*

*Doctor.*

*Doctor.*

I pray  
for color, light.

Please, God,  
don't take my sight.

*Jeanne* 

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1918

**I walk the ramparts**

on my way to work.

The ball of the sun  
at the edge of the water.

An egg yolk  
breaking  
over the white plate  
of the sky.



## **The hospital**

is unusually quiet.

Vera and I exchange  
*une bise sur la joue*,  
a kiss on each cheek  
in greeting.

She tells me  
about her dinner.

The first time eating  
*loup de mer*—sea bass—  
*au beurre blanc*.

*I could bathe in that sauce!*  
she squeals.

I try to keep a straight face  
as Vera acts  
like a fat man  
stuffing her face  
with fish,  
wiping greasy sauce  
from her chin  
with her apron.

Madame Leroux  
glares at us  
and hands me clipboards  
with charts  
to update.

Vera whispers,

*Out of all the fish in the sea,  
the loup  
is clearly the best!*

Then gives me  
a knowing wink  
and blows me a kiss.

**From across the room**

I hear *mon loup*  
crying out for help.

I run to grab the surgeon.

Several of the trained nurses  
come as well.

They close  
the circle of curtains  
around him.

When they finally  
pull the drapes,  
his bandages are off.

I've wondered  
many times  
about the shape  
of his face.

The color of his hair.

I can't bring myself to look.

For hours,  
I visit each bed  
except his.

What am I afraid of?

Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

1933

**Letter #16**

*November 10, 1918*

*How can we risk love—when it can be lost?*

*It is the most fragile task.*

*Hold this bubble in your hand. Look at the rainbow globe and how it swirls.*

*Imagine a perfect world inside.*

*Then ask yourself, how long will it last?*

*Yours,  
Petit Oiseau*

## **Before my first breath**

before my mother held me  
and called me  
by my name.

Before my body unfurled  
like a fern growing  
into the light.

Before I spoke  
my first word.

Before this, I knew  
I was not alone.

There was another body.

Another heart beating  
next to mine.

## **My sister is in a wooden box**

I speak to her in a whisper.

*There were once  
two sisters*

*who loved each other  
so much  
they built a sailboat  
out of their  
aprons*

*and used  
their mother's broom  
to paddle through  
the air.*

*They traveled  
way up  
into the heavens*

*so they could live  
in the clouds*

*and eat cake  
and chocolate pudding.*

*Sometimes,  
they hurt each other,*

*but they forgave  
everything*

*because they were sisters.*

*Always together  
in the golden light  
of the sun.*

## **Elena holds my hand**

for an hour.

She tries to comfort me.  
She feels the pain too.

I can't talk.  
I sit and stare.

The light leaves the room.  
The guests return home.

Until it is only me.

On the sofa,  
staring at the window  
wondering

how things  
could have possibly  
gone so wrong.



## **I hear my mother weeping in the kitchen**

Other than giving birth,  
I have never heard my mother cry.

She's sitting over a wash bin  
filled  
with the soiled clothing  
of her children.

She's using her treasured  
silver  
serving spoons  
to do the laundry  
so her hands  
won't touch  
the poisonous,  
flesh-eating lye.

Chemicals  
to get the sick  
out of the house.

I sit in a chair  
and wrap my arms around her.

I know she wishes  
she could raise her children  
in a beautiful house on the ocean  
with clean white linens  
and crystal vases filled  
with lavender.

But all she has left  
is a cold house

and a husband without a job.

Her daughter has died.  
And the years  
of hard work, poverty, and illness  
have eroded  
the polished silver life  
of her youth  
into the red, cracked hands  
of grief.

## **My mother is a beautiful person**

She is beautiful  
when she helps people  
in the neighborhood.

She is beautiful  
when she makes her children laugh.

She is beautiful  
when she stands at the sink  
and the light shines  
on her hair and she is lost  
in her thoughts.

My mother  
is also a beautiful writer.

And so she decides  
to write to  
Eleanor Roosevelt.

She tells her how she loves  
this country  
even though there are no jobs  
and Christmas is coming.

She tells her  
she cannot feed her children  
and she is watching  
their cheeks hollow.

She tells her  
she has already lost one child

and she cannot  
and will not  
lose another.

**My teacher pulls me aside**

after school.

*Mary, I can't even imagine  
how much you must miss  
your sister.*

I want  
to say to her,  
I feel like I live  
in a glass case.

Sleeping Beauty.

When I see the animals  
pressing their faces  
to the glass,  
I just lie there.

Do nothing.  
Say nothing.

While the world  
moves around me.

## **I dream**

of children  
bobbing up and down  
on pink and white  
painted ponies.

The carousel spins.

A monkey  
in a scarlet vest  
dances  
as a man  
turns the handle  
on an ornate music box.

The sound distorted.

Speeding up  
and slowing down.

A needle  
being adjusted  
on the surface of a record.

I see my sister spinning  
on the wheel.

No beginning and no end.

She reaches  
to capture  
a golden ring  
from a lion's mouth.

The scene turns dark gray.

My sister  
becomes a shadow.

I see Billy  
standing at the gate.

His cheeks shine  
pink,  
ruby lips,  
eyes the color  
of robin eggs.

He's smiling at me,  
holding out his hand.

A beacon of color  
in a black-and-white world.

# *Giorgos (Gio)*

*U.S. ARMY, NORTHWESTERN FRANCE*

1918

## **Without my bandages**

I can see everything.

Boys crying,  
asking for help.

Wrapped severed limb  
leaking blood  
onto the mattress.

A soldier wanders  
between the beds,  
speaking to his sister  
who's not  
in the room.

I close my eyes.

Cover my ears  
with a pillow.

Where is the woman  
who smells like flowers  
and forest?



# *Jeanne*

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1918

**I tell myself**

to go to him.

His eyes are closed,  
but I sit next to him  
and hold his hand

just like usual.

He opens his eyes  
and they are black  
as storm clouds.

His face looks damaged  
and beautiful

a tree struck by lightning.

*It's you,*  
he says softly and looks at me  
with a fearful expression.

*Are you well? What do you need?*

I feel his head  
to make sure

there is no fever.

*I didn't know  
you were so beautiful,  
he says.*

**I blush as red as a cardinal**

He speaks English slowly  
with an accent  
just like I do.

I wonder where he's from,  
but instead I ask,

*Do you have a name?*

He closes his eyes  
and for a moment  
I think he has fallen asleep.

Then he takes  
a deep breath  
and says,

*My name is Giorgos,  
but my friends call me*

*Gio.*

**Gio's face is weary**

He needs sunshine.

I wrap a wool blanket  
around his legs  
and wheel him  
through the grounds  
of the hospital.

We rest  
beside a small pond  
which provides  
some comfort.

He tells me about  
his sister and mother.

*I miss the smell of the dry hills.  
The warmth of the sun.*

I imagine his home.  
His land.

The view  
of a completely different sea.

He stops talking  
when a fleet  
of fighter-bombers  
buzzes overhead  
so low  
it feels like they  
are coming for us.

Gio jerks and shields  
his head with his arms  
and shrieks  
with the pain of someone  
who has been hit.

The fear  
of the Western Front  
still alive  
in his muscles.

**I think about the plane**

my father took me to see  
so long ago.

The beautiful,  
fragile  
invention

built to give  
mortal men  
the power of the gods

has now become  
a machine of war.

**He shudders**

with cold and fear.

Reaches  
for the blanket  
but can't manage  
to grab the corner.

I fold it over his shoulders  
and tuck it  
into the corners  
of the wheelchair.

I want to make him warm  
and calm.

*I've always wanted  
to have an adventure.*

*To leave  
these granite walls.*

*I'm envious  
of what you've seen.*

He looks at the pond.  
Eyes black, round stones.

He does not look at me  
when he says,

*I'm glad  
that you have not seen  
what I have seen.*





**He tells me**

he will begin a new life  
after the war.

In the United States  
of America.

A country  
with so much land  
they give it away.

A country  
filled with large cities,  
factories,  
and smokestacks

and jobs  
for strong, willing  
men.

Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN  
1933

**Letter #17**

*November 6, 1918*

*My dearest love,*

*When I think I cannot endure another moment of this awful war, I think about our future children.*

*Well-fed and strong.*

*As many as possible.*

*I think they will be our greatest joy when we need it most.*

*Always and forever yours,*

*Loup*

## **My boots**

are made of concrete.

My lungs can't hold breath.

I'm scared  
I'm not going  
to reach her in time.

I knock  
loud and hard  
so she can hear me.

The midwife answers the door  
with disheveled hair  
and sleep in her eyes.

*The baby is coming!*

We run through the alleyway  
and climb the stairs  
to our apartment.

My mother is lying in her bed  
screaming.

My brothers and father  
are gathered  
at the door  
with scared looks  
on their faces.

I pray to every god  
I can imagine,

to anyone who might  
hear me,

*Please don't let my mother die.*

## **The midwife**

makes my brothers  
leave the room  
but lets me stay.

I hold my mother's hand  
as she tries  
to squeeze her pain  
into my body.

I put my face close to hers.

I don't want her  
to suffer alone.

My mother screams  
like a banshee  
and then she is silent.

Just when I think  
she won't ever  
take another breath—

I hear a baby cry.

## **My mother is a flower**

that has been drenched by a storm.

All the women  
climb onto the bed,

a lifeboat floating  
on a turbulent sea.

All eyes are  
on the small creature  
lying on my mother's chest.

He suckles at her breast,  
surveying  
his brand-new  
world.

## **Eleven Greek superstitions for a new baby**

1

Give a spoonful of honey to the baby  
when you visit the house for the first time.

The baby will have a sweet life.

2

Never wash the baby's clothing at night.  
Bad spirits or the devil will come.

Wash them during the day and hang them in the sun.

3

Don't let the baby look in the mirror  
or his soul will slip away.

4

A new mother must not be seen  
in public for forty days.

This is because people are jealous of her.

5

Babies are named after their grandparents.

6

The godparents should buy the baby  
the first pair of shoes.

7

The baby's hair should not be cut  
before the baptism.

8

If you put money under the baby's pillow,  
he will have a prosperous life.

9

Spit to avoid the evil eye.

For example:

*Your baby has beautiful cheeks.*

Ptu, Ptu, Ptu.

10

Put a gold pin with a blue eye  
on the baby to keep him safe.

11

If you do all of these things,  
your baby  
will be blessed. <sup>27</sup>



**This baby is called Pierre**

But I call him *my* baby.

I am the one  
who holds him.

I am the one  
who changes him.

I am the one  
who comes  
when he cries.

I am not old enough  
to have a child  
of my own.

I will practice  
with Pierre.

He is almost  
mine.

**I wish Marguerite could hold him**

In my mind,

I tell her about his tiny toes  
and his little smile.

She would love to see him grow.

He is beginning  
to hold his head up  
by himself.

His cheeks are fat  
with milk.

**My father wanted to give Pierre**

a Greek name.

My mother said,  
*We speak your language,  
we eat your food,  
we live in a country  
of your choosing,*

*but I am FRENCH.*

*This baby  
is going to have a  
FRENCH name.*

When my father protested,  
she slammed her broom  
to the floor.

*You've named all the boys.*

*Augustus after your father.  
John after Yiannis, your priest!*

*I want to honor my family.*

*It is my turn to name a son.*

She named Pierre  
after her father,  
who was a doctor.

I wonder  
if he would like to know

that our new baby  
has his name.

I wonder  
if he would have known  
how to make Marguerite  
well again.

## Uncle Pete and Aunt Irma

arrive  
on Christmas Eve  
carrying dishes  
filled with hot food  
bottles of wine  
loaves of bread.

Hugs and kisses for all of us.

It is the role of the youngest daughter  
to greet guests at the door  
with a glass  
and offer them a drink  
and say the blessing  
of the household:

*May our relationship  
be as sweet as honey,  
as strong as salt,  
as clear as water.*

Marguerite and I used to argue  
about who would greet  
the guests.

Now, I am the only daughter.

The one to say the blessing  
as the people in our lives  
come and go.

## **When Greeks have known a friend**

for a very long time, we say:

*We have eaten bread and salt together.*

That is how my father feels  
about Uncle Pete.

He also fought  
in the war.

When Uncle Pete leaves,  
he puts his forehead  
to my father's forehead

his hands  
around his cheeks  
like a brother.

They are not twins,  
but they look  
like they know

what the other one is thinking  
without words.

**After his friend has left**

my father puts his arm  
around me.

His voice softens.

*Many things have happened  
over the course of my life.*

*Sometimes I feel  
like I have lost all of my eggs  
and also the basket.*

*I am thankful  
for all that we still have.*

He hugs me  
for the first time  
since I was  
a young child.

I am so angry with him.  
I want to scream.

Why can't he accept  
the life I want.

The man I want.

I can't.  
I am too tired.

All I can do  
is lean in and receive

his love.



## **I imagine Billy and his parents**

in my home.

The vast chasm  
between our two worlds.

In my mind,  
my mother  
serves spanakopita  
and olives.

Billy's mother asks  
if there is any meat  
and potatoes.

My father offers her ouzo  
and she holds  
her palm up.

She belongs  
to the temperance movement,  
fighting to keep  
prohibition alive.

His father is an engineer.

My father  
never went  
to high school.

Billy's mother is a  
Daughter of the American Revolution.

I am the daughter of immigrants.

How can I  
build a bridge to join  
our two families?  
Ask them to travel  
such a distance?

**At night**

I quiet all the static.

I tune my brain,  
my radio,  
toward my sister's  
frequency.

*Can you hear me?*

**Who**

will melt this crust of ice  
in my veins?

Start my pulse.  
Help me to breathe.

Who  
will plant a bulb in the frozen earth?

Push and pulse  
under  
the snow.

Who  
will puncture the land?

Where it seems  
nothing  
will ever  
grow.

# *Giorgos (Gio)*

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1918

## **Early in the morning**

I open my eyes.

Clear the sleep  
from my vision.

Focus and blur.

I watch Jeanne  
without her noticing.

She walks  
around the room,  
attending  
to all the patients.

She comes to my bedside.

I pretend I am asleep.

She stays with me.  
Feels my forehead,  
strokes my hair.

Gently nudges me awake.

I open my eyes  
and focus.

She's looking at me  
with kindness  
and concern.

Her cheeks pink with heat.

**Each evening, I feel**

my body improving.

Each morning,  
I wake  
with new pain.

It feels  
like I am running a race  
with a chair  
tied to my leg.

Moving farther  
down the road,  
slower  
than I want.

**My body's entire weight**

rests on the cane.

I move one leg,  
then the other.

Every muscle in my body  
searing in pain.

Jeanne supports me  
as I slowly hobble  
around the room.

The patients cheer.

*Up and at 'em, soldier!*

*Atta, boy, Gio!*

*You got this, brother!*



**I try to write a letter**

to my mother and Violetta.

I write a sentence  
and then scratch it out.

I finally decide on  
one line:

*I am alive.*

# *Jeanne*

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1918

## **In the hospital**

time is slow and sticky.

Each day  
filled with broken  
bodies.

Bodies that weep,  
and ooze,  
and shake.

Bodies that heal  
and are sent back  
to the front.

Bodies that are buried  
in the graveyard  
behind the chapel.

Some of the bodies  
don't even  
have a name.

Those are the most difficult.

Their mothers

don't know  
where they are.

**I spend time**

with each patient.

I try to give them  
the care they deserve,  
but I always find my way back  
to Gio.

No matter  
how hard I try  
to turn away.

I am  
a compass needle  
spinning north.

**Gio's arm linked**

to mine.

We take a short walk  
around the courtyard.

He closes his eyes

and sucks  
the fresh air  
greedily  
into his nostrils.

His chest fills  
like a hot air balloon

and it seems  
as though his feet

might lift off  
the ground.

## **We sit by the pond**

and take turns reading from  
a book of John Donne poems.

Learning  
English together,  
giggling  
at our mistakes.

Gio takes the book.

He reads well  
for someone just learning.

His voice smooth  
and his face is calm.

I close my eyes and listen  
silently to the words,  
until he reaches a poem  
entitled  
“To His Mistress  
Going to Bed”  
and begins to blush  
and hesitate.

I snatch the book away  
and tuck it under my apron.

I can't look at his face.

We fall into laughter.

*Maybe not that one!*



**Every moment of each day**

staring out of my window

lying in my bed

combing my hair

putting on my uniform

tending to my mother's garden

walking on the beach

before work begins

no matter what

I am doing

I am thinking about him.



## **I take Gio to the cemetery**

and tell him  
this hospital was built  
by the King of France

for *les corsaires*  
of Saint-Malo,  
who stole ships and jewels  
for the crown.

*I've always been afraid  
of privateers and pirates,*  
I say, shy to admit  
my childhood fears.

He sits on a bench  
next to a grave  
and hangs his head.

*If you are afraid of thieves,  
you should be afraid of me.*

I hold his hand  
wait for an explanation.

*I killed a man.*

Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

1933

**Letter #18**

*November 7, 1918*

*I get so frustrated—thinking I can do nothing.*

*Sitting here.*

*Staring out a window, while others fight for personal freedom and human decency.*

*What can I do?*

*I am a young woman—without money, without power.*

*I must do something.*

*Start small.*

*Study. Write. Believe in change.*

*Yours,*

*Petit Oiseau*

## **On Christmas morning**

there is a dusting of snow  
on the ground.

We wake  
to the early morning light,  
pull our woolen  
blankets closer  
around our shoulders.

Mama starts the fire  
in the woodstove  
and puts on a kettle.

There is a knock.  
We hear the door open.

Mama begins to laugh  
and then cry.

We rush down the steps  
and out of the apartment.

There is a long black  
limousine  
in front of the building,  
with a Christmas tree  
strapped to the top.

Two men in black suits  
and top hats  
with red poinsettias pinned  
to their lapels  
are singing

“In the Bleak Midwinter”

while unloading  
wrapped gifts  
and food  
from the car.

## **All of the kids get presents**

My brothers get spinning tops  
and toy soldiers  
and a popgun.

And I get  
a white rabbit fur hat  
that covers all of my curls  
and matching mittens.

Marguerite  
would have loved  
the warmth  
and softness.

My mother and father  
get a turkey with stuffing  
and a Christmas pudding  
and decorations  
and candles for the tree.

And my mother receives a card:

*Dear Jeanne,*

*I read your letter.  
I hope these humble gifts  
help to bring joy  
to your family.*

*Please have your husband report  
to the Department of Human Resources  
at the Ford Motor Company on Monday morning.  
I have secured employment*

*for him there.*

*From our family to yours,  
Merry Christmas,*

*Eleanor Roosevelt*

**I stand outside**

watching the snow fall.

My new hat  
makes me feel  
like a Russian czarina  
traveling across the tundra  
in a horse-drawn sleigh.

Just as  
I am about  
to go in  
I hear  
a familiar rumble.

I close my eyes once  
and open them.

A flood of emotion  
enters me  
as I see  
a blond boy  
driving  
a Ford Cabriolet.

*Where have you been?*

I can't answer.

I can't stop kissing him  
on his lips  
on his eyelids.

He places his hands on my cheeks.

*I was worried, Mary.*

*Really worried  
that I had done something  
wrong.*

I know  
eventually  
I will have to tell him  
about my lies.

My grief.

I press him  
against the building  
until he gives in.

Wraps his arms around me  
until I can't breathe.

Until I can't feel  
any more pain.



*Will you marry me?*

he asks,  
holding my hand.

*Billy, you know I can't.*

*Because of your parents?*

*Yes, but also  
because we're so young.*

*And I want more.*

*Another man?*

*No.  
I want to be more  
than just a wife.*

*You can have it all.  
A job, a husband, children.*

*I can give you  
everything  
you want.*

*I just need some time  
to figure out  
what I want.*

*I'm not going anywhere.  
I can wait, Mary.*

*Can you?*

*For a thousand years.*

*As long  
as we keep kissing.*

# Giorgos (Gio)

SAINT-MALO, FRANCE

1918

**She drops my hands**

and backs away  
from me.

*You're scaring me, Gio.*

*Jeanne, listen to me.*

*My sister was pregnant  
and starving.*

*I convinced my brother-in-law  
to steal a lamb  
for her.*

*He didn't want to.  
He argued with me.*

*I told him  
if he didn't want to help me,  
I would do it myself.*

*Finally, he came with me.*

My voice catches,  
and I wait.

*We both went to the mountains,  
but only I returned.*

*I didn't pull the trigger,  
but I killed him, Jeanne.*

I am crying now.

*He would still be there  
with my sister, with his child.*

*If it weren't for me.*

**She looks out at the sea**

and doesn't say anything.

I can't stop telling her  
how I feel.

*I can't go home.  
Not for a long, long time.  
If I go back,  
they'll send me to jail.*

I pause  
and reach for her hand.

*I used to want to be a fisherman,  
like my father.*

*Now, all I want is a family.*

*I want a wife.  
I want children.*

*To be the father I never had.*

*To be the father  
my sister's son never had,  
because of me.*

Her gray eyes are reflective pools.

There's a deep ache  
in my chest.

I take a step closer

and she doesn't move  
away.

*Gio.*

In one swift motion  
I pull her to me.

Press  
her body  
and her lips  
to mine.

**She gasps**

muscles taut,  
aware  
of the newness  
between us.

She stays close,  
her nose touching mine.

I can feel her  
soft, short breaths.

Then  
she looks at me  
with wild eyes  
and pulls away.

Runs  
out of the cemetery  
toward the hospital.

The gate swinging  
behind her.

**In my mind**

I kiss her hand  
when she feels my forehead.

I kiss her neck  
when she bends over my bed.

I kiss her lips  
in the hallway  
when no one is looking.

I kiss her memory  
when she has gone home.

I kiss her  
all night long.



## **The doctor shakes me awake**

Listens to my heart.  
Takes my blood pressure.

Has me follow  
a white light with my eyes.

Asks me to walk  
around the room.

*You're healing well, soldier.*

He scribbles  
some notes in my file.

I want to feel proud  
of my recovery.

Instead,  
I feel a sinking dread.

# *Jeanne*

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1918

## **The Red Cross girls**

and the volunteer nurses  
decide to host a dance.

We decorate the hall with flags  
and banners

and the girls  
wax the floor four times  
so it's as  
slick as a ribbon. <sup>28</sup>

Soldiers come  
from all the bases  
nearby.

They arrive  
packed into their trucks,  
sitting on each other's laps.

They are singing love songs,  
swigging from their canteens.

Cigarettes tucked  
behind their ears.

Arms are wrapped  
around each other's shoulders  
like brothers.

**Every soldier in Saint-Malo**

except Gio.

Who shook his head  
and pointed  
to his cane.

The kiss  
hangs between us.

A piece of fruit  
swinging  
slightly too far away  
to grasp.

### **It is a moon dance**

and there's a big, round moon  
made of tin  
with a painted face.

All the lights are turned out  
except one pointed  
at the big moon.

Six boys sit up in the balcony  
with colored lamps

red, green, blue, and white.<sup>28</sup>

The boys turn  
the colored lights on the floor

and the drums start beating  
and arms start waving

and pretty soon the men  
are throwing the women  
into the air

legs hopping

like popcorn  
in a hot oiled pan.

There are about four soldiers  
for every girl,

so I dance the fox-trot,  
the one-step, and the waltz

about one hundred times.

Some of the boys  
are handsome.  
Some of the boys are meek.

They all smell different.

I feel different  
in each of their arms.

## **Vera and I take a break**

Wave our hands  
and shoo the boys away  
like flies on a pie.

Vera scans the room  
for handsome men.

She wants  
to try all of them  
before she chooses  
one.

Vera dances  
with a handsome captain.

I sit and watch  
and think of Gio.

I wish  
I could kiss him  
again.

Tell him  
what happened  
wasn't his fault.

The music swells  
and I close my eyes.

Imagine him swaying  
to the music.

His cheek next to mine.

Repairing the damage  
between us.



## **On the walk home**

Vera thrums me  
with questions  
about which soldier  
I like best.

She is smitten  
with the American  
she danced with several times.

He's tall,  
wears his uniform well,  
and smells  
like a bar of fancy soap.

*He is one tall, cool glass of water,*  
Vera says with a wink.

I sigh  
and tell her  
the boy I wanted  
to dance with the most  
wasn't there.

## **After we part**

I stop under a streetlamp.

Lean my warm body  
against a cool stone wall.

For a moment,  
I think about sneaking  
into the hospital.

I imagine lying down  
next to him  
in the same bed.

Kissing him  
soft and slow.

I could be with him,  
if I dared.

## **When I return home**

Maman is crying.

A telegram  
written on yellow paper  
has fallen to the floor.

I pick it up  
and read it.

*Chère Madame,*

*It is my painful duty to inform you  
that a report has this day  
been received  
from the War Office  
notifying the death of:*

*(N°) 16929  
(Name) Pierre Prigent  
(Regiment) 156th Foreign  
(Date) 2 March, 1918  
(Cause of Death) Tuberculosis*

*If any articles of private property  
are found,  
an application can be submitted  
for their receipt.*

*I am,  
forever,  
your faithful servant,*

*S.R. Lauren*

*Officer in Charge of Records*

**I stand up**

without saying a word.

I walk out the door  
into the night.

Tears streaming  
down my face.

My body numb.  
My mind buzzing.

I see a group of young people  
huddled together,  
returning home  
from the dance.

They are clutching bottles,  
swaying and laughing  
as they navigate  
the uneven cobblestones.

I walk to the rampart  
and climb the stairs.

Stand on the edge  
of the granite wall.

For a moment, I imagine  
what would happen  
if my body  
fell to the rocks  
below.

The ocean seems endless.

I lie down on my side  
and wrap my arms  
around my legs.

A windless sail  
collapsing  
into itself.

## **When I wake**

the horizon is filled  
with a dark, hazy light,  
which becomes  
an orange glow.

A red orb rises  
clear and brilliant  
out of the daze.

For a moment,  
my body is covered  
in light.

I rise and walk a gravel path  
lined with giant  
magnolia trees.

The branches thick  
with black starlings.

I stand still and watch them.

Hundreds of birds  
shriek and cackle  
a murmuration  
of deafening chatter.

Then with the suddenness  
of raucous applause  
erupting  
at the end

of a grand performance

*tous les oiseaux*  
take flight.



## **Maman won't get out of bed**

I stay home with her  
for several weeks.

I think of Giorgos,  
but I don't want  
to leave Maman.

I sit by her bedside.

Try to feed her  
spoonfuls of soup,  
small pieces of bread,  
like she is one  
of my patients.

She refuses  
nourishment.

It feels like she is trying  
to die.

**Maman is burning**

and she's talking  
in a language that no one  
can recognize.

The doctor arrives.

He touches  
Maman's forehead  
and applies his stethoscope  
to her chest.

There is not much  
we can do  
except wait.

I wish my father were here.

I call for my aunt,  
Sister Marie-Thérèse.

She arrives wearing  
her traditional habit:  
black tunic  
white wimple  
and black veil.

She hugs me fiercely.

Drops down on her knees  
next to my mother's bed.

*Now, she is in God's hands.*

## **My aunt and I**

pray together.

She holds the cross  
around her neck  
and presses it  
to her forehead.

She prays to her Lord,  
her Husband, and her Keeper.

I pray to my father.

*Papa,*

*if she walks  
down the tunnel  
toward that loving light,*

*tell God  
and Saint Peter  
waiting at the gate*

*to put his golden keys away.*

*Tell them to please  
send her back to me.*

## **My God**

doesn't listen.

The coroner comes.  
He places a black blanket  
over my mother's body  
and lifts her  
onto a stretcher.

They take her  
through the front door  
and load her  
onto a wagon  
pulled by six  
black horses.

My God  
turns the sky gray  
and opens up the clouds.

My God  
rains down  
on me  
with the thunder  
of sorrow.

My God  
has made me  
an orphan.

Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN  
1934

**Letter #19**

*November 8, 1918*

*My Petit Oiseau,*

*If I had all the money in the world, I would buy you a house and fill our gardens with roses.*

*I would feed you almonds and olives, and we could sit on the porch and stare at the clouds.*

*We could walk around our town—any town we chose as our home.*

*I would be proud to be your husband. Proud to call you my wife.*

*Your loving and loyal,  
Loup*

## **There's a Ford in your future**

On the first day of his new job,  
my father gathers  
with all the new employees.

The workers fill  
the factory floor.

They wait  
for the initiation ceremony  
to begin.

It is simple.

The employees  
wear  
their native costumes  
from all around  
the globe.

Embroidered vests from Poland.  
Kaftan coats from Russia.  
Sarape ponchos from Mexico.

My father wears  
his fustanella—a traditional kilt,  
a white billowy blouse,  
and black vest  
from Greece.

They walk together  
into a huge  
melting pot  
large enough to fit

ten men.

When the cauldron tips,  
all of the men  
walk out

wearing the same  
Ford factory  
uniform.

Americans. [29](#), [30](#), [31](#)

## **Mama wants us to be presentable**

She twists and ties  
my hair  
with strips  
of cloth.

All night,  
I struggle  
to climb  
the hills and valleys  
poised  
on the top  
of my head.

I wake  
in the morning  
angry.

My head hurts  
but it's full  
of bouncing  
curls.

I avoid the mirror.

Remember  
the story of Medusa?

She was transformed  
into a monster  
because of her vanity.



## **We tour the foundry**

It's red.

It's hot.

It's dangerous.

The floors are covered in sand.

White eyes  
peek through  
layers  
of black soot.

I walk the line.

The noise  
coming from  
the machines  
sounds  
like music  
rising up  
from the depths  
of hell.

**Each day**

my father stokes the flames  
on the factory floor.

Shovels pig iron scrap,  
hammers and drills.

Pours viscous  
white heat  
into the cauldrons.

When he comes home,  
he smells  
of sulfur and coke.

We hold our noses and shriek  
as my mother pushes him

toward the backyard shower,  
where he washes away

the dirt and grime  
of a hard day's work.

He puts on a clean shirt.

We sit down to a simple meal  
of bread and butter  
and tomatoes.

He places both hands over his eyes  
and says to all of us,

*Thank God I have a job.*



## **On Saturday**

my father puts on a suit  
and his best hat  
and walks out of the door.

My mother follows after him.  
*Where are you going?*

He looks over his shoulder and says,  
*Mind your own business, woman!*

My mother sulks all day.

She worries that he's sick  
or, worse,  
he has found  
a younger woman.

**The truth is**

even though

*Modern.*

*American.*

*Women.*

choose their husbands,  
they still  
have to serve them.

And they are tied  
to their houses

like an eagle  
held by its master's tether.

**We hear frantic honking**

in front of our building.

When we go outside  
we see my father  
with his hat tipped  
up like a schoolboy.

He is smiling  
from ear  
to ear.

Standing in front  
of a brand-new,  
shining black  
automobile.

He drives us around all day  
in our new car.

It feels like we're traveling  
on the back  
of a giant  
black dragon.

Shooting fire  
and flying above  
the long, gray roads  
that lead straight  
out of town.

**It takes my brothers a week**

before they learn to drive.

Gus takes his friends  
to see a moving-picture show  
at the theatre  
on a Friday night.

John chauffeurs my father  
to and from work.

I don't even ask.

*Good Greek Girls*  
don't drive cars.

**One night, my brother John**

comes home drunk.

He's swaying  
and can't get up the stairs  
by himself.

*Don't tell Mom and Dad!*  
he hisses.

I bring him his nightclothes  
and assure him  
I won't tell anyone  
his secret.

If he teaches me  
how to drive.



## **The next day**

I get behind the wheel.

The black leather  
feels soft and smooth  
under my palms.

The road opens up.  
I can see the whole world  
in the windshield.

I am finally in control.

And I realize  
nobody is ever  
going to tell me to stay  
in one place  
again.

# *Giorgos (Gio)*

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1918

## **My stomach**

is in knots.

I should have gone to the dance.

Will she  
think of me  
while she's out  
in the world  
having fun?

I pray  
she doesn't meet  
another person.

A better person.

Will she come  
to the hospital  
and wake me  
with a kiss?

**I wait for her**

all night  
and all the next day.

She doesn't come.

**I see Vera scurrying**

down the hallway  
with dirty sheets  
and a bucket.

I ask her about Jeanne.

Her face falls.

*I'm so sorry.  
I meant to tell you.*

*Everyone is worried.*

*Her father has died,  
and her mother is very ill.*

She looks like  
she wants to hug me.

She lifts her feet  
not knowing where  
to place  
the sheets.

*She won't be back soon.  
She's taking some time.*

Vera turns and walks  
down the hall.

*Jeanne* 

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1918

**We bury Maman**

in the cemetery on the hill.

Two names  
on the tombstone.

My mother's body  
in the ground.

My father's body  
lost,  
in an unknown land.

I kneel down  
on the grave,  
place my hand  
on the loose soil.

I wish I could  
dig down  
and lie with her  
in the same bed  
just like  
when I was a child.

I waited so long

for Papa to return.

Now I know,  
it is hopeless to wish  
for things  
that will never happen.

**I arrive at the hospital**

It's a cool night.

I pull my shawl tighter  
around my shoulders.

I can't stop  
shivering.

*What will Giorgos say  
when he sees me?*

I don't know  
if I can even say the words.

*Both of my parents are dead.*

For a brief second,  
I imagine  
that he will ask me  
to marry him.

I turn the corner  
and stop.

Gio's bed is empty.

I search  
the other beds  
frantically.

I look for  
his books  
his jacket

his watch.

Finally,  
I ask the head nurse.

*They shipped him out  
two days ago.*

*Healthy enough  
to go back to the front.*



**No note**

No goodbye.

Did I imagine everything?

I have no one.

Who will love me  
now?

Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

1934

**Letter #20**

*November 9, 1918*

*A storm is coming.*

*The wind sounds like the rumbling wheels of a freight train.*

*From the window, I can see the giant oak.*

*It's been standing in this courtyard for three hundred years.*

*Swaying with each storm but not going anywhere.*

*Petit Oiseau*

***You must have had dreams***

*when you were my age.*

*Didn't you, Mama?*

She stops cleaning the dishes.

Wipes her hands  
on her apron  
and sits down next to me.

*Sometimes  
the thickest dreams  
become just  
thin air.*

*Then  
only the birds  
can use them  
to fly.*

## **A second meeting is arranged**

I can hear  
my parents talking  
and clinking glasses  
in the kitchen.

I see my father  
peer around the doorframe  
to check on me.

To make sure I'm behaving.

Dimitris leans closer.

He places  
his heavy hand  
on my thigh.

A lion trapping  
a mouse  
under a paw.

My skin shivers.  
My eyes turn green.

*Please, don't.*

I try to move  
away from him.

I wish there were a rock  
to scamper under  
and hide.

His grasp tightens.

*You should feel grateful  
that I want you.*

**It is at this moment**

that I decide.

I am not  
a *Good. Greek. Girl.*

I am  
a *Modern. American. Woman.*

There is nothing  
my father can do  
to make me marry  
this heavy-handed  
predator.

I will do as I please.

I stand from the sofa  
and straighten my skirt.

Reach for my glass  
and look Dimitris in the eyes.

I pour  
an entire glass  
of sour cherry liqueur  
over his head.

**Call me Athena**

I live on Mount Olympus

and you  
are only a mortal.

**My father cuts a branch**

from the weeping  
willow tree.

I sit in the snow  
to ease the pain.

Not a single tear shed.

It was worth it.



## **The next night**

my father stumbles  
though the door.

He weaves  
through the hallway.

Calls me  
and my mother  
to his side.

Belt loose.  
Shirt hanging.  
Hair sticking up.

We can all smell  
the firewater  
on his breath.

His slurred words  
ring through the house.

*That man is an outrage!*

*No daughter of mine  
will marry that beast.*

*Giorgos, what happened?*

My mother  
talks to him  
in calming tones.

Smooths his hair.

*He insulted me!*  
*He insulted our family!*

*He would be*  
*LUCKY to have Mary.*

*Such a smart girl.*  
*A loving girl.*

*LUCKY to have us.*

*He deserves to marry*  
*a goat!*

I don't wait  
for him to change his mind.

I run  
to embrace him.

Mama  
comes closer.

Baba teeters  
on his toes,  
puts his arms around us,  
and kisses the top  
of my head.

***You are my only daughter***

*It is my job to protect you.*

*I need to find a husband for you.*

*Don't I?*

*Don't I?*

We let the question ring in the air,  
a bell tolling.

A sunrise.

A prayer.

An announcement.

A new day.

## **Emboldened**

I tell my mother

I want to own a business  
someday.

She laughs in my face  
and tells me

to change Pierre's  
dirty diaper.

# Giorgos (Gio)

SAINT-MALO, FRANCE

1918

*On your feet, soldier!*

I look up and see an officer  
standing over my bed.

I wipe the sleep  
from my eyes.

*You're shipping out today.*

*What are you talking about?  
I can barely walk.*

He looks at me  
with steely reserve.

*Orders.  
Pack your bags.  
Departure at 7:15.*

I look at the clock  
on the wall.

The hands read  
seven o'clock.

*Fifteen minutes.*

*Are you crazy?*

*Pack your bags, private!*

*Unless you want  
to be court-martialed  
instead.*

I scramble to write Jeanne,  
but there's no time.

I'll send a letter  
from the road.

**I feel the breath of the wolf**

smell  
the foul stench  
from his jaws.

I hear him  
snarling behind me.

I must return  
to the front.

The hair  
on the back of my neck  
rises  
in fear.

# *Jeanne*

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1918

**I sit naked on a chair**

cover my breasts  
with my hands.

A nun stands above me  
with a knife  
in her hand.

She begins to saw  
the silver blade  
through my long braid.

My aunt has given  
all of my father's money  
to the church  
to ensure my care.

I have nothing.



**It wasn't so long ago**

I was playing  
with dolls  
on a balcony  
overlooking the sea.

Now,  
our house on the hill  
is gone.

My parents  
are gone.

I will live in the convent  
where my aunt resides

and wear the  
white veil  
of a novice nun.

I return to my cell.

My body shivering  
on a small cot,  
covered  
in a thin blanket.

I do not want this life.

I do not want this life.

**I feel like a silent scream**

I wake.

I pray.

I work.

I pray.

I eat.

I pray.

I sleep.

I pray.

And then

I do it all

again.

## **The aging priest motions**

for me to sit  
on the scarlet sofa  
in his office.

I stare at the ornate  
gold frame  
holding a photo  
of Pope Benedict XV.

His wire-framed glasses  
almost hide  
his sad eyes.

Jesus looms above me,  
blood seeping from the wound  
on his side.

The priest sits  
behind his heavy black desk.

His robes  
the color of heaven.

*Are you ready to say your vows,  
my child?*

I look down,  
my hands folded  
in my lap.

*Yes, Monsignor.*

*Good.*

*We will set a date  
for the spring.*

**That night, I dream**

that I am naked.

Handcuffed and chained  
in the town square.

*Heretic!*

The villagers  
gather in a circle  
around me.

*Nonbeliever!*

They jeer  
and throw objects.

*Witch!*

A man pulls me  
onto a platform.

He ties me to a wooden pole.

There is kindling beneath  
my feet.

He lights a torch  
and holds it close.

*Save me from the fire,*  
I whisper.

The platform slowly

begins to burn.

## **There are quiet moments**

that break through  
the ice  
of grieving.

Moments  
when I feel  
the Spirit moving  
in the hallway

as my robes brush  
against  
the stone floors,

when I close my eyes  
and hear all of the women  
singing  
in unison.

Moments  
when I climb to the top  
of the bell tower  
and look at the sea.

Moments  
when I wake  
in the middle of the night  
and feel that my parents  
are very close.

Moments  
when my only task  
is to sit and read

and fill my mouth  
with hot barley soup  
and buttered bread.

Moments  
when I walk in the graveyard  
and the sun is setting  
and I remember  
the way my life  
used to be.



## **When I miss Giorgos**

my white veil

feels like a noose  
around my neck.

The more  
I struggle,

the tighter  
it gets.

Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

1934

**Letter #21**

*November 10, 1918*

*Dearest Petit Oiseau,*

*When I walk through the villages, I see all the damage that has been done.*

*Bombed churches and schools and homes.*

*When I think about the repair that will happen—when the war is over—it gives me hope.*

*I build towns in my mind.*

*Replace glass and repair fences.*

*Plant the window boxes with red flowers.*

*I imagine men and women working together to rebuild their towns and restore beauty with layers of plaster and paint.*

*Your loyal and loving,*

*Loup*

**Billy takes me to see**

Diego Rivera's  
commissioned murals  
at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

The garden courtyard  
opens up  
with arches and columns.

We gasp and hold hands

as the light  
floods in  
from the ceiling  
windows.

Shines  
on the colorful images.

In each direction,  
a progression.

The history  
of science and technology.

We study  
each of the four walls.

Spin in a circle.

East, north, west, south.

Each direction  
describes

the history of our town  
in images.

**We turn to the east**

where the sun rises,  
a beginning.

An umbilical cord  
runs from the earth  
to the mother  
to the child,  
held in the bulb  
of a plant.

The midnight swirl  
of clouds.

The blood  
of a new generation  
works its way  
into the soil.

Grows  
like tuliped ears  
of corn  
bursting from its silk.

The mother holds  
golden blue  
apples  
to her breast.

The mother braids  
wheat flowers  
into her amber hair.

There is growth

beneath  
the surface.

The fruit is full.

Harvested  
on the table.

Plenty for all.

**We turn to the north**

in the direction  
of darkness.

The interior of things.

Mining of  
coal and diamonds,  
sand and limestone.

The motor assembled.

The blast furnace  
glows orange  
in the background.

Molten steel  
poured into molds.

Men wearing gas masks  
isolate substance  
and dream.

A child in a manger  
receives medicine.

Engineering.  
Precision.

Invention.

## **We turn to the south**

wall of light,  
exterior of things.

The assembly  
of the body.

Maintenance  
of the body.

The goddess,  
creator and destroyer of life,  
maintains balance  
and demands sacrifice.

Buildings  
cobbled over  
the extinctions  
of past life.

Women organize.  
Men calculate.

Humans watch  
as the story unfolds.

Ford himself  
stands over  
the toil.

Push and pull  
of the factory line.



**We turn to the west**

where the sun sets.

Endings  
and judgment.

Passenger planes  
and bombers.

Technology.  
Destruction.

The hawk and the dove.

On either side  
of history. [<sup>32</sup>](#), [<sup>33</sup>](#)

## The men and women around us

whisper  
under their breath,  
shield  
their children's eyes.

*blasphemous*  
*pornographic*

*foolishly vulgar*

*a slander to Detroit workingmen*

*coarse in conception*

*un-American.* <sup>34</sup>

I see none of this.  
I see my town.

Races working side by side.  
Industry and history.  
Medicine and religion.

Fertility goddesses,  
giving birth to life.

**Billy buys**

a box of popcorn  
from a vendor.

It's a sunny day.

We sit on a bench  
and eat  
the warm, crisp kernels  
sprinkled with salt.

After we're done  
his lips are shining  
with butter.

He puts  
his hand on the small of my back  
and draws me closer  
to him.

He kisses me.

And I feel it  
everywhere.

After a moment, he pulls apart.

*I saw an advertisement for a job  
that I think  
would be great for you.*

He hands me  
a square  
cut from the newspaper.

I squeal  
and grab for the scrap.  
I press my lips  
to his  
and won't let him  
come up for air.

**I let Billy drive**

me home.

He opens my door  
and I sink  
into the leather seats.

For months,  
I've wondered how  
it feels  
to ride in this car.

Billy steers  
with one arm around me.

*Can I see you again soon?*  
he asks.

I look at him  
with a determined look.

Eyes narrowed  
and focused.

*Only if I can drive.*

He laughs  
in approval  
and gives my shoulder  
a squeeze.

I close my eyes  
and feel the sound  
of the engine

rumble  
through my bones.

# *Giorgos (Gio)*

*U.S. ARMY, NORTHWESTERN FRANCE*

1918

## **The U.S. Army**

has deemed  
my body whole.

My mind fit.

I am not  
the same soldier  
who marched  
these paths  
so many  
months ago.

A boy  
eager to belong.

I am splintered  
into a million  
shards.

Mind filled  
with violence  
and pain.

My entire life  
has been a story of loss.





## **Women push carts**

filled with dresses,  
pillows, and china.

Villagers dump  
their belongings  
in the streets.

All they cannot carry.

A man walks  
with four horses  
tied to ropes  
trailing behind him.

There is human feces  
in the road.

Everyone  
is running away  
from the German  
border.

We are marching  
toward it.

**I close my eyes**

and see Jeanne  
on the beach,  
light shining  
through her auburn hair.

She's holding  
a shell to her ear.

Her skirt  
curves around her  
in the wind.

She's searching for me.

Remembering me  
in the trapped sound  
of the waves.

**I find a post office**

It's abandoned.

Letters strewn  
across the floor.

News  
that will never arrive.

Words of love  
that will never be read.

I stare at the letters in my hand.

Pray for everyone  
who is lost.

# *Jeanne*

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1918

**I wake to the bells**

in the tower,  
ringing incessantly.

*Are we being bombed?*

I get dressed as quickly  
as possible.

All of the other nuns  
are gathered in the hallway,  
looking drowsy and  
confused.

Sister Agnes  
comes bounding  
up the stairs,  
screaming  
at the top  
of her lungs,

*We've won!*

And just like that—  
the war is over.

**People are embracing**

shouting  
and laughing.

There's a band  
marching in the streets.

Snare drums,  
trumpets, and tubas  
followed by a man  
beating a big, round  
bass drum.

I walk the town  
alone  
in my white veil.

I may be  
the only one in the world  
not celebrating.

**There are so many soldiers**

and they are all waiting

to get their  
deployment papers  
home.

Everyone is restless.

I see two men fighting  
in front of the hospital.

A woman yells,  
*Stop, Jacob!*  
as one man hits  
the other man  
square in the jaw.

Blood spurts  
across my white uniform  
as I pass them.

I am shaking as I enter  
the large, steel gates  
of the hospital.

We need to find something  
for these men to do.

The volunteer nurses  
and I decide  
we should hold  
one last dance.

## **It is almost Christmas**

We decide  
to hold a snow dance.

A large tube  
blows confetti  
from the balcony.

White snowflakes fall  
on the dancers  
below.

All the other girls  
look beautiful  
in their long dresses  
and ruby red lipstick.

I stick out  
with my black robe  
and white veil.

At intermission,  
the nurses serve  
hot roast beef sandwiches  
pickles  
sugar-coated beignets  
nuts, chocolates  
and cigars.

Sixty gallons  
of hot chocolate  
and not a drop left.

Everything tastes divine. <sup>28</sup>





## **When the music begins**

the horns start blowing  
and the strings start singing  
and the snow starts falling.

I imagine  
Gio holding me.

Kissing me  
on the back  
of the neck.

I close my eyes  
and I feel his arms  
around me.

We sway softly  
in the middle  
of the dance floor.

Until I realize,  
it's not a dream.

I gasp  
and turn around.

Gio's eyes  
are shining with emotion.

He takes my hands  
in his.

**I squeal and kiss him**

and then realize  
my mistake.

I push him  
away.

*Where have you been?*

*They sent me to the front.  
I didn't want to leave you.*

*You didn't even say goodbye.*

*I wrote you, but I couldn't send the letters.*

He places a stack of envelopes  
in my hands.

*I love you.*

I hug the letters  
to my breast.

*When they released me  
from my post,  
I traveled directly to the hospital.*

*I couldn't wait to see you.*

*They told me you were here.*

*I love you, Jeanne.*

*I can't love anyone.  
I gave myself to God.*

He touches  
the veil  
that covers my hair.

*Why are you doing this?*

His voice is not  
unkind,  
but I can tell he's angry.

I choose my words carefully.

*I don't have a choice.*

I take a deep breath in  
as he says,

*What if you did?*

He reaches into his pocket  
and pulls out a box.

I open it.

Inside, there is  
a necklace.

A small golden bird.

*I can't go home*

*I want to make a home with you.*

*Come with me to America.*

**The next day, my aunt**

calls me  
into her office.

She squeezes her eyes,  
rubs her forehead  
with her hand.

*In one month,  
you will say your vows,  
and then you will be married  
to God.*

*If this is not what you want,  
you need to tell me.*

*Now.*

Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

1934

**Letter #22**

*November 11, 1918*

*One moment, I think I understand what the future holds.*

*The next moment, I realize that I don't.*

*Yours forever,  
Petit Oiseau*

**My mother and I are doing laundry**

when a neighbor  
arrives at our door,  
breathless.

*There's been an accident!*

My mother is shaking,  
searching for coins  
for a cab.

Our car is parked in front  
of our apartment.

My brothers are nowhere  
to be seen.

Silently, I take my mother's hand  
and lead her to the car.

I open the door  
and take my place  
behind the wheel.

*Mary!*  
*You don't know how to drive!*

She's standing on the sidewalk  
refusing to get in.

I open her door  
from the inside  
lean over the seat  
and say,

*Get in the car, Mama,  
or I'm going to the hospital  
on my own.*



## **When we arrive at the hospital**

my father is mumbling  
in Greek.

*Get off me, you fools!*  
*I have to get back to work!*

But no one understands  
this pitiful,  
wounded man.

His words seem like nonsense.

Both of his hands  
have been wrapped  
in gauze mittens

and he looks like  
a newborn  
who is moving  
its limbs  
uncontrollably

trying to scratch  
the skin

and scream  
into the ears  
of everyone  
he loves.

**My father has lost both of his thumbs**

in a metal press  
at the factory.

He won't speak  
to anyone.

He lies splayed on the bed  
like a wreck, scattered  
on the side of the road.

He keeps repeating  
the same phrase  
over and over  
in Greek.

*I want to go home.*  
*I want to go home.*

## **An hour**

turns into a day,  
a day turns into a week,  
a week turns  
into two.

I bring  
my father tea  
that cools  
untasted.

Toast  
that goes  
untouched.

He lies  
with his back  
to the door.

He will not move  
from his bed.

**Aunt Violetta sends a letter and a ticket**

on a steamship.

New York City  
to Athens.

*My brother needs to return  
to the olive groves  
of his youth.*

*He has been gone  
far too long.*

Our eyes widen  
as we read the words

*My son and I  
will return with Giorgos  
when he is well.*

**My mother holds the letter**

and reaches for me  
with her other hand.

She looks slightly baffled  
as she says,

*I've never had a sister.*

I want to say,

*I had a sister once  
and it was the best  
feeling in the entire world.*

I stop myself.  
I don't want to spoil this.

I just hug her  
as tightly as I can  
around her waist.

**The platform fills with steam**

eardrums bulge

with the screech  
of wheels grinding  
to a halt  
on the track.

My father appears lost.

My mother  
pats his pocket,  
reminds him  
to board  
the correct train.

The *Wolverine*,  
from Detroit  
to New York City.

I wonder how  
he will make it  
across the ocean  
alone.

## Right before we say goodbye

I pull  
a stack of letters  
from my coat  
and hand them  
to my mother.

Her eyes widen.

*Where did you get these?*

*I found them  
in the cellar.*

*Have you read them?*

*Every single one.*

She blushes.

Then rubs her palm  
over the smooth  
surface  
of the envelopes.

*Was this you?  
Are you “petit oiseau?”*

*Yes.*

*I never realized  
you wrote letters during the war.*

*We were so scared.*

*Alone.*

*We needed each other.*

My father  
puts his arm around her  
and kisses her  
on the cheek.

*We still need each other.*

*Why don't you talk about the war, Baba?*

Tears well up in his eyes.

*It's over. Done.*

His voice breaks.

*The past is better in the past.*

He squeezes  
my mother's shoulder again.

*I have what I need—  
what I wanted all along.*

*You were a nurse, Mama?  
Why didn't you continue?*

*Why didn't you tell me?*

*I became a mother  
and that became . . .*



*You  
became the most important part  
of my life.*

She hugs me.

I stand between them  
and see  
how much they value  
our family.

How long they yearned  
for peace.

How much  
they love each other.

And me.

## **I watch my father board the train**

He looks back,  
waves,  
and blows a kiss  
to my mother.

A young man  
saying goodbye  
to his sweetheart.


Only this time,  
she knows he will return.

I try to imagine  
what it is like.

This land  
my father loves.

The land  
of my ancestors.

The land  
I have never seen.

*Giorgos (Gio)* 

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1918

**I post a letter**

to my sister and mother.

*Heading to America.*

## **The line at the ticket office**

winds  
out of the door.

Families yearning  
for a new life.

I purchase two  
transatlantic tickets  
with all of my savings.

I hold them  
in my shaking hands.

# *Jeanne*

*SAINT-MALO, FRANCE*

1918

## **We gather in the courtyard**

My aunt and Vera  
stand beside me.

I close my eyes  
and imagine  
Maman and Papa  
holding me.

Solid as an oak tree.

The monsignor  
binds our hands  
with a white silk scarf  
and pronounces us

*husband and wife.*

## **Two days before**

New Year's Day,  
we travel by train  
to Cherbourg.

The same harbor  
where I said goodbye  
to my beloved Papa  
so long ago.

I turn  
and say goodbye  
to the country of my birth.

Gio hands the attendant  
two second-class tickets  
and we board  
the largest ship  
I have ever seen.

I try to look brave,  
but my stomach lurches  
with the waves.

We walk up  
the lavish, grand staircase  
of the *RMS Olympic*.

Porters take our bags  
to our small room.

It has bunk beds,  
a stiff sofa, and a tiny  
porcelain sink.

We sit in a dining room  
with molded ceilings.  
White linen  
and crystal glasses.

They serve  
roast beef  
with horseradish cream  
mashed turnips  
and cabbage.

After dinner,  
we walk the promenade.

The wind is blowing.

I hold Gio's gaze.

*I want to work  
when we get to America.  
I want to be a nurse,  
maybe even a doctor.*

*Tell me we won't let life  
get in the way.*

*Never, he says,  
and pulls me closer.*

I move into  
the warmth  
of my husband.

His dark eyes

full of expectation.

The convent feels  
an ocean  
away.



*I have something for you*

I say, and place  
a stack of letters  
in his hands.

*I wrote to you too.*

Mary 

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

1934

**Letter #23**

*November 11, 1918*

*I had a dream of a seed, small and round.*

*What is this? I asked.*

*A voice said, "All that is made."*

*"How can it last?"*

*The voice answered, "It lasts and ever shall.*

*Everything has its beginning in love."*<sup>35</sup>

*Always yours,*

*Petit Oiseau*

## **Without my father**

once again,  
our pantry is bare.

I tell my mother,  
*I will go  
to the Ford factory  
to find a job.*

I expect her to laugh  
and say,  
*They're not going to hire  
a girl!*

Instead,  
she holds my shoulders  
and kisses me  
on both cheeks.

*Is this what you want?*  
she asks.

*Very much, Mama.*

*If God wills it,  
I am willing to let you try.*

I put on  
my best Sunday suit,  
lace up  
my high-heeled  
boots.

I drive myself.



**I arrive at the Ford factory**

and take a moment  
to breathe.

I smooth my skirt.

I reach down to  
to tighten my laces,  
and I see  
something glinting  
in the dirt.

I dig it  
from its lodgings.

It's a round coin  
on a chain.

I wipe the dust  
on my leg.

There's a picture of a girl.

It's Jeanne d'Arc,  
my mother's namesake.

Jeanne's hands  
are clasped together  
at her chest  
with the words

*Écoutez les voix*  
*Listen to the voices*

carved into the metal.

I remember the day  
at the movies so long ago.  
My sister  
sitting beside me.

I hang the coin around my neck,  
press it to my body.

It feels like Marguerite  
placed this here  
just for me.

I spin the radio dial.  
Listen for the frequency.

I hear her.

**I walk into the hiring office**

at the Ford factory

and talk with the woman  
behind the desk.

She's got horned-rimmed glasses  
and a mug of steaming coffee  
in her hand.

I ask her  
if there are any  
positions available.

I hand her my resume,  
which only has  
my foreign name,  
my address,  
and the high school  
where I just graduated.

She looks at it  
as if it were garbage.

Puts down  
her coffee mug.

Shuffles through  
some pages  
without even looking  
at them.

*There is no work  
available*

*for young girls  
with no experience.*

I take a deep breath in  
and say,

*I saw in the paper  
that Mr. Ford  
was looking for an  
elevator boy?*

A sharp burst of air  
escapes her lips.

*He's been through  
five people in the last  
two months.*

*You see, he's very picky,  
and that position  
has never been given  
to a woman or a girl.*

*It even has "boy"  
in the job title!*



## **I ask to see her supervisor**

He is a tall man  
with a thin mustache  
and oily hair  
combed back  
on his balding  
scalp.

I tell him that my father  
has been injured  
at the factory,  
and I have come  
to replace him.

He looks at me  
like I am a visitor  
from planet Mars.

Then he points  
his long, crooked finger  
out the door.

**I stomp**

out of the office  
into the lobby.

I see red.

My father was injured  
on their factory floor.

How can these people  
sleep at night?

How do they think  
we are going to eat?

They don't give a damn  
about their workers!

**It's lunchtime**

and there are hundreds  
of people milling about.

I can't see over the heads  
of the men wearing suits  
and factory uniforms.

My body is jostled  
back and forth in the crowd.

I end up getting pushed  
into an elevator.

*Eighth floor, please*

says a man in a gray suit  
from behind a newspaper.

We're the only people  
on the elevator,  
so I press the number eight  
and close the door.

I look around.

The elevator is decorated  
with mirrors,  
red velvet, and gold.

I've never been in a room  
this gilded.

It's shooting  
through the sky  
like a star  
with wings.

The man folds his newspaper  
and tucks it under his arm  
and takes his hat  
from his head.

It's then  
that I realize.

I'm on an elevator  
with Henry Ford.

**When the elevator reaches the eighth floor**

my hands start to shake.

The bell chimes,  
and I slide open the gate.

I know I have to say something.

He steps off the elevator,  
and just as  
I'm closing the door,  
I stop  
and pull the door  
open again.

*Mr. Ford?*

He looks up  
with a surprised expression,  
as though he's never  
been addressed  
by a woman before.

*Yes?*

*Mr. Ford,*

I look at the man  
who I admire  
and fear.

The man who built  
our town out of  
metal and smoke.

I take a deep breath  
and surprise myself  
by saying,

*How did you know?*

*Know what?*

*How did you know  
you were going to change the world?*

**Mr. Ford raises his eyebrows**

and a small smile  
blossoms  
on his lips.

*What's your name, young lady?*

*Mary, sir.*

*Do you work here?*

*Not yet, sir.*

He pauses,  
and I can hear  
the second hand tick  
on the golden watch  
dangling  
from his pocket.

*Well, I do need a new elevator boy.*

I look him straight  
in the eye.

*How about an elevator girl?*

He looks  
into the mirror  
and straightens his tie.

He turns back to me.

*See you tomorrow at 9 a.m.,*

*Mary.*



**I close the door**

and press  
the lighted circle  
with my fingertip.

The golden metal box  
slides down the side  
of the building

like a burning ball  
of light  
sinking into the horizon

waiting only  
for the opportunity  
to rise  
once again.

# Giorgos (Gio)

KOMNINA, CENTRAL GREECE

1934

**We heave the weight together**

pushing  
with all our strength.

The sea  
rises up to our thighs.

*Jump on!*

My nephew,  
Costas,  
yells as he hefts  
coiled ropes  
into the hull  
of the *kaiki*.

We jump into  
the sturdy boat.

My boat.

Costas  
smiles at my sister  
as he stands on the deck.

His strong arm

on the tiller.

We fly across  
the harbor.

A white Pegasus  
with wings  
for sails.

**I stand in the olive groves**

and inhale  
the smell of the earth.

I can hear  
the church bells  
chiming  
in the distance.

There is an ocean  
between me  
and my family.

I kneel down  
and take a fistful  
of dry soil  
in my hand.

I will take it with me.

Across the world  
back to my home.

*Jeanne* 

*DETROIT, MICHIGAN*

1934

**My daughter**

drives away  
in a car  
by herself.

I hear the boys  
outside  
playing ball.

The house feels  
empty.

I feel the loss  
of my children  
more and more  
each day.

The taller and wiser  
they become.

I wonder,  
after years  
of giving myself  
to my family,

*What will I do now?*



**I enter the hospital**

and walk  
to the receptionist.

The woman looks up  
and smiles.

*Does she remember me?*

From the night  
I sat in this lobby?

When I held  
and rocked  
my feverish girl?

*Does she remember?*

The moment,  
when the doctor  
opened the blanket

looked at my daughter  
and told me,

*She's gone.*

**I try to keep my voice calm**

my spine straight.

I look her in the eyes  
and say,

*I am a nurse.*

*I was trained during the war.*

*I would like to help.*



Mary 

*DETROIT, MICHIGAN*

1934

**Tomorrow**

is the first day of my new job.

I lie in bed  
and think about  
Billy's proposal.

His kind blue eyes.

*What would it be like  
to have a name  
like Smith or Jones?*

Opera tickets.  
Dinners and movies.  
Honeymooning.

I think about growing older.

What kind of life  
will I have?

A house of my own.  
Children.

Working  
and raising a family.

What will I do  
with this freedom of mine?

Anything I want.

## **In my dream**

air fills my lungs.

My chest  
rises and falls.

I can hear  
my city breathing.

Up and down.  
Rise and fall.

*In my dream*

Marguerite  
and I are flying  
over the river  
that cuts through town.

We travel  
with the current  
until we can see  
the entire  
country.

The rolling hills of wheat  
swaying in the wind.

The mountains  
pushing upward.

The rivers spilling  
their waters  
into the ocean.

The swell  
of the stars close  
above us.

*In my dream*

I can see my father  
and his sister traveling  
over the ocean  
on the wings of the wind.

I can feel  
the joyous breathing  
of the people,  
land, and sky.

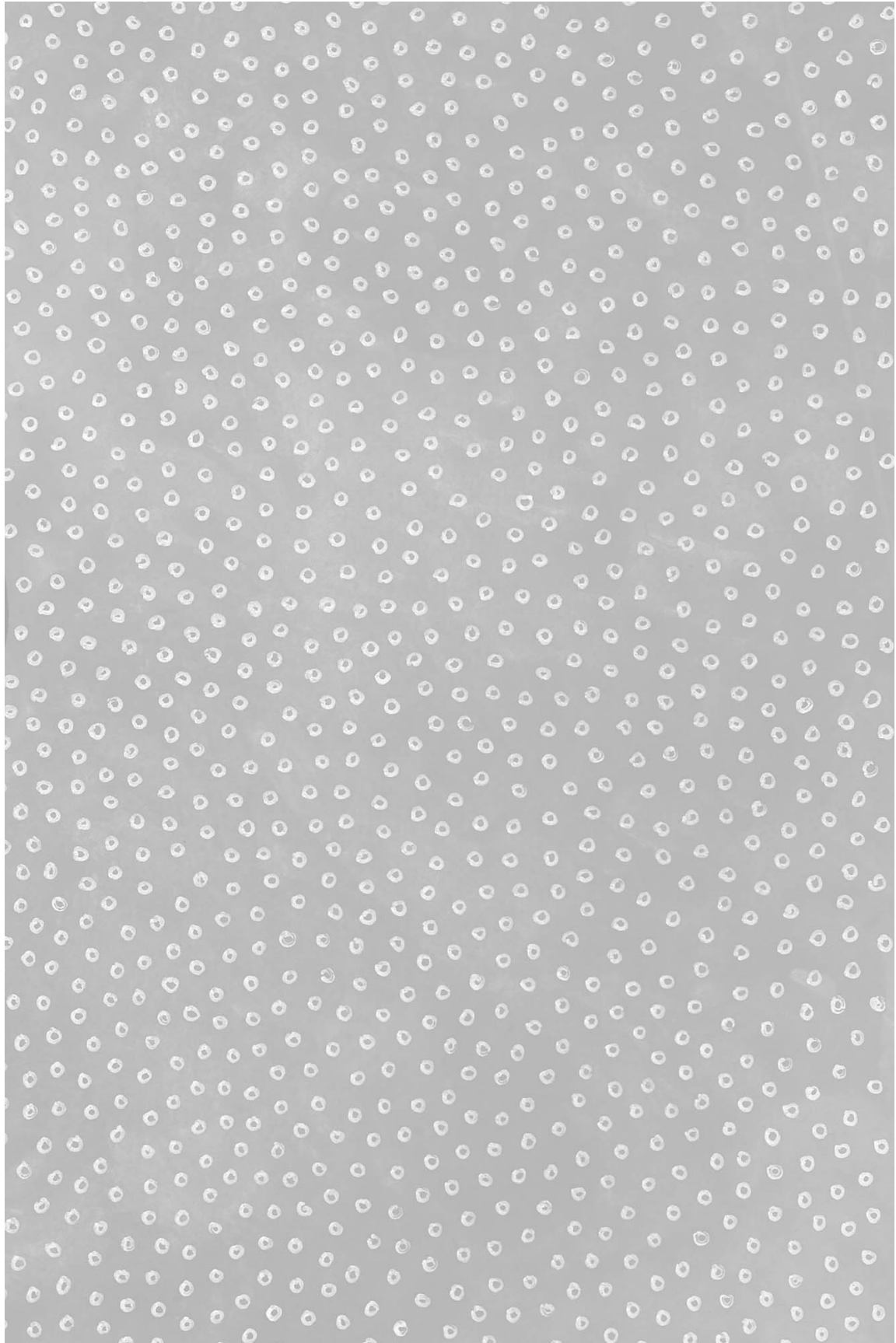
*In my dream*

I know our family  
in the heavens

and with our feet  
on this glorious land

are finally together

traveling toward  
the sun.



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although this book is based on the family stories that I heard growing up, I changed the actual events quite a bit.

I never knew my great-grandparents (Giorgos and Jeanne), so the details of their journeys from Greece and France are based on a few historical documents, research, travels to Europe, and stories from my grandmother and her siblings.

I tried to transport myself to the early twentieth century and visualize what these characters would have experienced during that time. Then I tried to create a narrative with twists and turns and engaging imagery.

My greatest hope is that I represented my family well and that they would have been pleased with this book. At times, the story became so strong and insistent that it felt like my ancestors were whispering in my ear, telling me what to write. And I *listened to the voices*.

Mainly, I wrote this book for my grandmother Mary, who became a successful businesswoman in the 1950s, when women usually never entered the boardroom. She rocked the pantsuit at a time when women were expected to wear aprons and pearls.

She never let her misfortune hold her back and always summoned the courage to do what she needed to do, even when she was afraid. I see this as one of life's most valuable lessons.

My grandmother could tell a fantastic story—she could hold an entire room with her humor, her intellect, and her infectious, high-pitched laugh.

She would tell us about her childhood in Detroit, Greektown, the Ford factory, the poverty her family faced, and how she had to fight for her independence.

The same story was never the same twice, but we loved listening to the rich details and the passion that was embedded in every word.

She died at the age of 92. After years of struggling with Alzheimer's, she forgot almost everything about her life. But her stories live on—in our memories and in this book.



My Great-Grandmother Jeanne (Jeanette) Skandalaris, my Great-Grandfather George Skandalaris, my Great-Uncle Gus, my Grandmother Mary, and my Great-Uncle John.

Apparently, this picture was considered a failure by Jeanette, because Mary couldn't stop wiggling her foot—the photograph was blurred.





Mary Skandalaris (age 18), around the time she became Henry Ford's elevator girl.



Mary Smith (age 21), shortly after she married Bill Smith.



Mary (age 92) hugging my daughter, Phoebe, just a few months before she passed.

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR  
Immigration Service

Report on this blank United States citizens and citizens of insular possessions of the United States arriving as a port of continental United States from a foreign port or a port of the insular possessions of the United States, and such citizens arriving at a port of said insular possessions from a foreign port, a port of continental United States, or a port of another insular possession.

**LIST OF UNITED STATES CITIZENS**  
(FOR THE IMMIGRATION AUTHORITIES)

8/8. *OLYMPIC* sailing from *CHERBOURG* 12 AUGUST 1918, Arriving at Port of *NY Aug 25/18*

179

No. of List	NAME IN FULL	AGE	Sex	IF NATIVE OF UNITED STATES OR INSULAR POSSESSION OR IF NATIVE OF FOREIGN COUNTRY, GIVE DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH (CITY OR TOWN AND STATE)	IF NATURALIZED, GIVE NAME AND LOCATION OF COURT WHICH ISSUED NATURALIZATION PAPERS, AND DATE OF PAPERS.	ADDRESS IN
FAMILY NAME	Given NAME	Yrs.	Mon.			
1	<i>Colby</i>	<i>John</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>Naturalized at New York on 1-8-1917 (111)</i>	<i>Friend Samuel L.</i>
2	<i>Colby</i>	<i>John</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>Naturalized at New York on 1-8-1917 (111)</i>	<i>Friend Samuel L.</i>
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15	<i>Colby</i>	<i>John</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>Naturalized at New York on 1-8-1917 (111)</i>	<i>Friend Samuel L.</i>
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28	<i>Colby</i>	<i>John</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>Naturalized at New York on 1-8-1917 (111)</i>	<i>Friend Samuel L.</i>
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30	<i>Colby</i>	<i>John</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>Naturalized at New York on 1-8-1917 (111)</i>	<i>Friend Samuel L.</i>

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IMPORTANT NOTICE—1. Great care should be taken not to place on this list the name of any passenger who was not born in the United States or who has not taken out final naturalization papers. 2. Where one or more members of a family are aliens, the names of all such members should be recorded upon the alien manifest. Suitable notation may be made on this manifest opposite the names of those members who claim citizenship. 3. Failure to observe the terms of this notice may result in delay to passengers at the port of arrival. 4. List on this form only United States citizens or citizens of an insular possession of the United States.

This is a manifest from the *RMS Olympic* (sister ship to the *Titanic*!). My great-grandparents are numbers six and seven on the list. In my novel, the characters Giorgos and Jeanne travel to the U.S. in 1918, not 1920, but I wanted to keep this ship because I love the history. The actual *RMS Olympic* was in service from 1911 to 1935. From 1915 to 1918, it was used to transport Canadian and U.S. troops to Europe.

Note that my first name, Colby, also appears on the manifest twice in the porter's handwriting. This was one of the many reasons I felt called to write this story.

## NOTES

1. The woman speaking at the church is quoting Matthew 19:24.
2. The lines on the signs in this poem are inspired by a photograph of two children living in a “Hooverville.”  
<https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/historyofus/tools/browser12.html>
3. Lines quoted from “The Three Little Pigs” by Joseph Jacobs’s *English Fairy Tales*, published in 1890.
4. A Hooverville was a shantytown built during the Great Depression by the homeless in the United States. Hoovervilles were named after Herbert Hoover, who was the president of the United States during the onset of the Depression and who was widely blamed for “the downfall of economic stability and lack of government help.” [u-s-history.com](http://u-s-history.com)
5. “Keep That Wedding Day Complexion” was a line from a Palmolive ad printed in *Ladies’ Home Journal*.  
<https://repository.duke.edu/dc/adaccess/BH1209>
6. “Promiscuous Bathing” was the title of an article written by Felicia Holt in *Ladies’ Home Journal* in August 1890.
7. The *fête de Noël* music scene was inspired by “The Goadec Sisters.”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISWwHQXt0d8>
8. The language that Mrs. Patterson uses to describe the Ford factory and Detroit was adapted from a promotional film released by Ford in the 1930s, “The Harvest of the Years.” The term “City of Transportation” and the phrases “forge and lathe / work and tend / spin and weave / form and transform” are from this film.
9. Father Yiannis quotes 1 John 3:16.

**10.** The Fox Theatre in Detroit was one of America's first movie palaces. This prominent Detroit landmark was recently renovated and is now open to the public for events and concerts. The movie Mary, Marguerite, and Jeanne watch at The Fox was inspired by *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, a classic silent movie from 1928 directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer.

**11.** The American Coney Island is one of the oldest businesses in the downtown area of Detroit. It was founded in 1917 by Constantine "Gust" Keros, who immigrated to Detroit from Greece in 1903. The restaurant has remained at the same location for 97 years.

**12.** The phrase "donkey of the sea" and the quote "It is better to get where you are going rather than rush and not get there at all" came from this article, <https://www.kavas.com/blog/traditional-greek-vessels.html>, written by Richard Shrubbs (<https://richardshrubbs.com/>).

**13.** The line "watch the tide come in as swiftly as a galloping horse" is borrowed from Victor Hugo, who was also inspired by Mont Saint-Michel.

**14.** World War I nursing scenes were inspired by: *Nurses at the Front*, <https://www.nfb.ca/film/front-lines-nurses-at-the-front/>. Nothing was directly quoted from this film, but this short documentary helped me gain an emotional understanding of wartime hospitals during this time.

**15.** Some of the nursing poems were inspired by Nurse Edith Appleton, from Deal in Kent, England, who kept a diary while working at General Hospital No. 1 detailing the Battle of the Somme. The poem "We don't hear exact numbers" and the line "stinking and tense with gangrene," as well as the last two stanzas about the blind boy, are all adapted from a passage in her journal. More of her letters can be read in the book *A Nurse at The Front: The First World War Diaries of Sister Edith Appleton* (Simon & Schuster).

**16.** The Hunger March poems were inspired by the article “Diego Rivera’s ‘Battle of Detroit’” by Tom Mackaman and Jerry White, which includes the quote: “We put four of your kind in their graves with this and we’ll put a lot more if we have to.”

<https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2013/10/03/indu-o03.html>

**17.** The vehicle numbers and the story about the diamond cufflinks came from the *Detroit News* article “How the Great Depression Changed Detroit” published on March 3, 1999.

**18.** The unemployment rate in Detroit in March 2020 (when I wrote this book) was 4.86 percent, and the unemployment rate in April 2020 was 22.7 percent.

**19.** Southwest Detroit Auto Heritage Guide provided the quote: “No Ford or Dearborn officials were prosecuted for deaths caused by the gunfire.” <https://www.motorcities.org/southwest-detroit-auto-heritage-guide/ford-hunger-march>

**20.** The line “too much jitter in my jitterbug” was inspired by this article about ballrooms in Detroit during the Depression: <http://blogs.detroitnews.com/history/2002/01/20/when-detroit-danced-to-the-big-bands-8/>. I adapted my line from the line “too much ‘jig’ in my jitterbugging.”

**21.** The Eleanor Roosevelt quote about flying came from the article “First lady rides the night skies with Amelia Earhart as pilot” published on the front page of the *Baltimore Sun* on April 21, 1933.

**22.** The Ellis Island scenes were inspired by a ferry boat ride to Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty National Monument, where I was able to find record of my family’s immigration into the United States.

**23.** Belle Isle Park is a beloved 982-acre island park located in Detroit. It’s a great point of pride and is still in very active use. Notable highlights include: Belle Isle Aquarium, Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory, Dossin Great Lakes Museum, Belle Isle Nature Center,



and the James Scott Memorial Fountain.

<https://www.belleisleconservancy.org/>

**24.** *Celui que mon coeur aime tant* is a traditional sailor's song, a *chansons des marins* from Brittany, France.

**25.** Restrictive covenants were written into housing deeds to discriminate against racial and ethnic minorities. Blacks who were brave enough to purchase homes in white neighborhoods often suffered violence. One of the most famous examples of this brutality is Dr. Ossian Sweet, a graduate of Howard University and a physician. In the summer of 1925, he purchased a home at 2905 Garland Street, an all-white middle-class neighborhood. An angry mob swarmed his house, threw rocks, and broke windows. Shots were fired from inside the house, killing one man and seriously injuring another. Sweet, his wife, and their associates were all arrested and charged with murder. His house is now a National Park site. <https://www.nps.gov/places/dr-ossian-sweet-house.htm>

**26.** The Detroit Eight Mile Wall, or "Detroit's Wailing Wall," was built in 1941 to physically separate white and Black homeowners to ensure the neighborhoods were segregated. The wall is half a mile long and ends just south of 8 Mile Road, which is a stark symbol demarcating the segregation of 78.6 percent Black Detroit and predominantly white Macomb and Oakland suburbs. In 2006, a portion of the Wailing Wall was covered in a mural by residents and community activists, highlighting images of Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, colorful houses, and children blowing bubbles. The mural serves as a recognition of the past but also as a symbol of hope.

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/detroitcitymichigan,MI>

**27.** The list of baby superstitions was adapted from an article originally published on [greekweddingtraditions.com](http://greekweddingtraditions.com). I wish I could thank the author who gave me the inspiration, but the website is no longer working. So, I shout "thank you" into the ether and hope it will be heard.



**28.** The details from the moon and snow dances, and the line “slick as a ribbon,” were borrowed from a letter written January 18, 1919, by a World War I nurse named Orena English Shanks Bourne. Bourne served with the American Expeditionary Forces in France. Excerpts from her letters were printed in a Louisville, Kentucky, *Courier-Journal* article entitled “Hot chocolate, dancing eased wait after WWI” written by Nancy Stearns Theiss on January 12, 2016. The letters were donated to the Oldham County Historical Society, where Theiss serves as the executive director.

**29.** The poems about Ford’s politics and working wage were inspired by the article “Motor City: The Story of Detroit” by Thomas J. Sugrue, published September 16, 2014, by The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

**30.** Henry Ford once remarked: “I am more a manufacturer of men than of automobiles.” The description of Giorgos’s first day at the factory was inspired by Henry Ford’s “Melting Pot” ritual at his Ford English School for employees who were immigrants. Ford built an actual melting pot made of wood, canvas, and papier-mâché. He hoped it would “impress upon these men that they are, or should be, Americans, and that former racial, national, and linguistic differences are to be forgotten.” [tenement.org/blog/adapting-to-america](http://tenement.org/blog/adapting-to-america)

**31.** “There’s a Ford in your future” was an advertising slogan that was used by Ford Motor Company in the 1940s.

**32.** The poems about the Detroit Industry murals were adapted from the descriptions of the individual panels by Linda Bank Downs in her book *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals*, published in 1999.

**33.** You can see the Diego Rivera murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts and also on its website:  
<https://www.dia.org/art/collection/object/detroit-industry-north-wall-58538>

**34.** On March 19, 1933, a *Detroit News* editorial called Diego Rivera’s

murals “coarse in conception . . . foolishly vulgar . . . a slander to Detroit workingmen . . . un-American.” The writer wanted the murals to be “whitewashed.” [npr.org/2009/04/22/103337403/detroit-industry-the-murals-of-diego-rivera](http://npr.org/2009/04/22/103337403/detroit-industry-the-murals-of-diego-rivera)

**35.** Letter #23 was inspired by the Catholic mystic Julian of Norwich. She had visions when she was dying: “And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, it seemed, and it was as round as any ball. I looked thereupon with the eye of my understanding, and I thought, ‘What may this be?’ And it was answered generally thus: ‘It is all that is made.’ I wondered how it could last, for I thought it might suddenly fall to nothing for little cause. And I was answered in my understanding: ‘It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it; and so everything has its beginning by the love of God.’ In this little thing I saw three properties; the first is that God made it; the second is that God loves it; and the third is that God keeps it.” — Chapter V, *Revelations of Divine Love* (*Westminster manuscript*)

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Photo credit: Nic Robinson Photography

**Colby Cedar Smith** grew up in the Midwest, and she still dreams of the cold northern woods and the smell of lake water. She holds degrees from Colorado College and Harvard University. In 2020, Colby received a New Jersey Individual Artist Fellowship in Poetry. Her poems have been published in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Harper Palate*, *Mid-American Review*, *Pleiades*, *Potomac Review*, *Saranac Review*, and *The Iowa Review*. Colby lives with her husband and two children in New Jersey, and teaches creative writing at the Arts Council of Princeton. You can read more of her work at [www.colbycedarsmith.com](http://www.colbycedarsmith.com). Follow her on Twitter: @ColbyCedar, and Instagram: @Colby\_Cedar\_Smith.





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