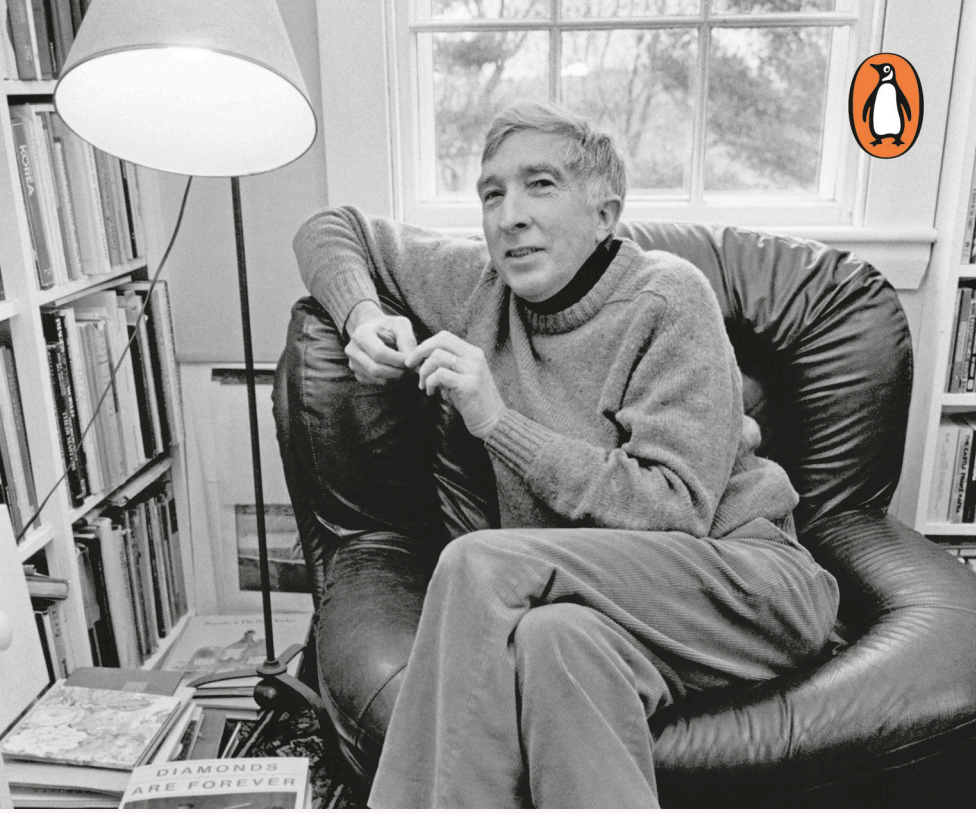



# JOHN UPDIKE

'Brilliant, riveting and essential'
*THE TIMES*

'Profoundly poignant'
*TELEGRAPH*

'His letters are gold'
*FINANCIAL TIMES*

# A LIFE IN LETTERS

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## Praise for *A Life in Letters*

'Wonderfully copious . . . Updike simply had it: an instinctive feeling for the shape of American sentences, for the murmuring music of nouns and verbs and the way they could pin reality to the page' *New Statesman*

'The letters and postcards (Updike loved a postcard) contain more than just pretty phrases. He talked shop – the writing, reading and manufacture of books – but also engaged in brave and sometimes anguished explorations of ambition, lust, love, guilt and shame' *Spectator*

'[Updike's letters] have the repleteness of his fiction, the springy, unexpected notice of the smallest particulars. This huge volume is readable in a way that too many collections of writers' letters, however useful to scholarly research, simply are not. Lovely flourishes remind us of Updike's talent for light verse . . . [his] tenderness, a natural instinct for conciliation, always re-emerges . . . These letters make plain [his] ability to marvel and thank [and the] willingness to take America to his bosom . . . that guarantees his permanent place in this country's literature' *Wall Street Journal*

'In the aggregate, Updike's letters could constitute the outline for a never-published Updike novel . . . Updike is, as ever, captivating on the page' *Atlantic*

'The book's editor James Schiff's footnotes provide illuminating context and help to bring Updike and his world charging into the present with such force that, at times, it is difficult to accept that the man who wrote these letters is dead . . . Updike was a prodigious correspondent but this selection is also a paean to the vanishing art of letter writing. Will such a book be possible in the future? A dashed off email is not going to reveal a personality as vividly, no matter who writes it. Updike would not have accepted a sombre ending so I'll just say his letters are gold, shining with insights about literature and life, and an opportunity to hear his voice as clearly as anywhere else in his oeuvre' *Financial Times*

'An epistolary account of much of Updike's life, which follows him through childhood, college, his literary career, his relationship with this magazine, his two marriages, fatherhood, multiple affairs and more. The result is an inadvertent self-portrait, written with wit and grace. Updike maintains a certain ebullient positivity, even in his darker moments' *New Yorker*

'A dizzyingly great collection, from undergraduate to world-striding voice, of the loves and deep interests of an American titan' *Big Issue*, 'Books of the year 2025'

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'One of the greatest American writers of the twentieth century . . . Shockingly salacious enough to enthral the remotely curious and cleverly annotated for easy reading . . . The best letters are those to his wives in the 1970s, where you realize that Updike's greatness as a writer lies not in his much-lauded descriptive powers, nor in his ability to weave arcane areas of computer science or theology into his fiction, but in his ruthlessly honest psychological acuity, as he lays himself bare – right down to admitting he likes to beat his wife's lover at golf' *The Times*

'Evocative . . . A profoundly poignant portrait, an invaluable historical document and a timely reflection on the eternal tensions between societal conventions and free speech' *Sunday Telegraph*

'Updike reveals himself here to be just as sharp, charming and humane in correspondence as he was in fiction. These letters confirm what admirers have long suspected: that his gift for language was not confined to the printed page but thrived in the everyday act of writing to others . . . For readers of his fiction, it enriches and reframes familiar themes; for newcomers, it provides an introduction to one of America's most distinctive writers' *Voice Magazine*

'The old cliché of never being at a loss for words is evident on every page of these letters, and they match perfectly with the behaviour of Updike the novelist . . . James Schiff's editorial guidance, here and everywhere, is clarifying, always helpful and refusing to take sides . . . Both extensive in fullness and unfailingly perceptive in critical viewpoint, this edition is a model of what such an edition should be' *Hudson Review*

'Missives from the mountain . . . A sprightly and revealing collection by the writer who captured postwar American life, love and loss' *Kirkus Reviews*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Updike was born in 1932 in Shillington, Pennsylvania. He graduated from Harvard College in 1954, and spent a year in Oxford at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art. His novels, stories, poetry and non-fiction collections – more than sixty in total – won numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Howells Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He died in January 2009.

James Schiff has published six books on contemporary American fiction, including *John Updike Revisited* and *Understanding Reynolds Price*, and is professor of English at the University of Cincinnati. His work has appeared in *American Literature*, *Southern Review*, *Tin House*, *Critique* and elsewhere, and he serves as the founding editor of *The John Updike Review*.

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*Buchanan Dying*

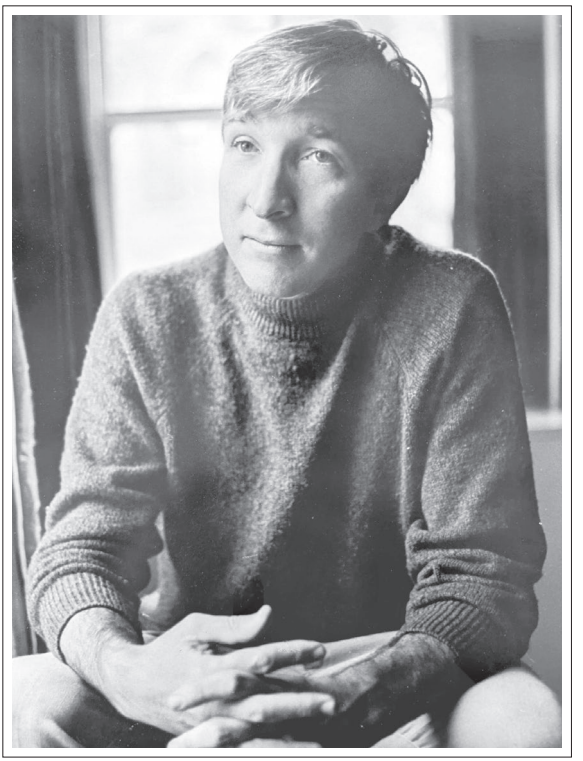
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*A Life in Letters*

# JOHN UPDIKE

EDITED BY

JAMES SCHIFF



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# *Introduction*

BORN IN 1932, John Updike came of age when letter writing—not texting, email, Twitter, or telephone—was the primary means of communication. As an ambitious, artistic adolescent eager to publish his poems and cartoons, Updike, who was living in a remote farmhouse in Plowville, Pennsylvania, began sending submissions to magazines in 1945, when he was just thirteen. Around the same time, he was typing precocious, adulatory letters to cartoonists he revered, such as Milton Caniff, Harold Gray, and Saul Steinberg. "Your draughtsmanship is beyond reproach," the fifteen-year-old Updike tells Gray, creator of *Little Orphan Annie*, before pivoting to his request: "All this well-deserved praise is leading up to something, of course, and the catch is a rather big favor I want you to do for me. I need a picture to alleviate the blankness of one of my bedroom walls." No doubt flattered, the artists often obliged by sending a drawing or cartoon. And so, through these youthful fan letters and magazine submissions, Updike began his lifelong effort to connect himself and his artistic aspirations to the distant, romantic realm of print.

After spending his first eighteen years in Pennsylvania's Berks County (thirteen years in the town of Shillington, followed by five on a family farm in rural Plowville), Updike departed, in 1950, for Harvard, to which he had won a scholarship. At the time, long-distance telephone calls were extravagantly expensive. The only way to communicate with family back in Plowville, who craved his news, was by post. During his four years in Cambridge, Updike sent his parents and maternal grandparents more than 150 letters, most of them witty, eloquent, and substantial. By the time the last of those four adults died (his mother, in 1989), he had written her approximately two thousand letters, notes, and postcards. A similar compulsion to put his thoughts to paper guided his life as a freelance writer. When, in 1954, Updike began publishing poems and short stories in *The New Yorker*, then

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books with Alfred A. Knopf in 1959, business was conducted largely through letters, and over the next fifty years, he would compose thousands of them to editors and staff at both of those institutions. Thousands more went to literary friends and colleagues (John Barth, Muriel Spark, Joyce Carol Oates, Philip Roth, Ian McEwan, Edward Hoagland, and others); readers, fans, and aspiring writers; booksellers, collectors, and bibliographers; academics, critics, journalists, and students. Many of these people had written to him first and, like the thirteen-year-old Updike, were asking for something: an autograph or note, an interview, an essay, a public appearance, advice, assistance with their manuscript, a few paragraphs on Strindberg, Karl Barth, or Tiger Woods. One stranger offered to babysit Updike's children and proofread his novels, another invited him to play basketball in East Boston, and yet another wanted him to judge the Miss USA Pageant. While Updike said yes many times, perhaps more than he should have, he more frequently said no, though usually with a kind and amusing note. And so, over the years, those letters, notes, and postcards accumulated.

The typewriter was Updike's primary tool for correspondence—he even typed postcards—and occasionally he would comment in a letter on the feel of the keys or condition of the ribbon. With the advent of word processors, Updike purchased, in 1983, a Wang, which he used for his fiction, book reviews, and eventually his correspondence. A series of personal computers followed, together with printers and fax machines, but Updike resisted most other new technology. Unlike many of his peers, he never used email or owned a cell phone. As the planet, before and after the millennium, transitioned to cell phones, email, and texting, Updike remained committed, until his death in 2009, to both the traditional letter form and the practice of typing, whether on a computer keyboard or typewriter.

While being born in the 1930s has much to do with why Updike became a letter writer, one wonders what led him to be so prolific, authoring more than sixty books, nearly two thousand short stories, poems, essays, and reviews, and thousands of letters, postcards, and notes.* Such vast production

* Recognizing that readers may wish for a count of the number of letters Updike composed, I nevertheless feel incapable of producing a final tally, except in highly speculative terms. In addition to the thousands of letters Updike wrote to family, friends, and readers, each of his nearly two thousand published pieces generated multiple notes or letters, some as short as a sentence or two, others several pages. Occasionally, these communications are written on Post-it notes or newspaper clippings. Should they count as letters? The same question applies to the thousands of postcards Updike composed. Though some are brief and unexceptional, others are substantive. Further, while archives have preserved many of the most important Updike letters, thousands more are likely sitting in attics, basements, or drawers; others, no doubt, have been lost or destroyed. This is of course true of the correspondence of all writers, yet given his prolificacy, the number of lost or discarded Updike letters is probably quite large. If pushed, I would speculate that Updike wrote more than twenty-five thousand letters, postcards, and notes during his lifetime, though the number could be substantially higher.

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suggests more than simple industriousness. For whatever reasons—lifelong graphophilia, his family's limited means, close witness of his mother's literary ambitions and father's personal sacrifices, a desire both to see his name and work in print and to use art "as a method of riding a thin pencil line out of Shillington"—Updike needed to write the way the rest of us need to breathe or eat. Eventually, over six decades, he would express himself in written form as copiously and as elegantly as any American writer before him. This fullness of expression is evident not only in the magnitude of his outpouring but in his possession of a range of almost preternatural gifts and rhetorical skills, which allowed him to work successfully in many genres and to address, as if effortlessly, any topic. His letters display the intellectual finesse, wit, and eloquence found in his fiction and essays, and so his correspondence figures not as an adjunct to but rather an integral part of his astonishing literary output. Filled with comic observations, opinions, and news, his letters collectively chronicle, over more than half a century, his daily existence.

It's hardly a surprise that Updike excelled at a genre which required, on occasion, just a few sentences. Even his harshest critics were quick to grant his stature as a major stylist, and so his letters, like his other writing, are striking for their verbal precision, intelligence, sharp eye, and humor. Even when conducting routine business, Updike's letters were seldom boring or perfunctory. His intent seemingly was to provide pleasure, for both writer and reader, even when complaining about the recipient's request. Humor was his default mode, through which he could delight, yet maintain distance. There is little tragedy, trauma, or pain in these letters—Updike had a good, accomplished, and satisfying life. However, there is drama, along with conflict and problems. But mostly there is watchfulness. The letters provide a lifelong record of someone who absorbed the world around him with a high degree of intelligence and alertness.

ANY ATTEMPT TO understand Updike as a writer should begin with his mother. An extraordinarily bright farm girl from Plowville, Linda Grace Hoyer skipped multiple grades, graduated from Ursinus College at nineteen, earned a master's degree in English from Cornell in 1925 (the same year she married), and devoted much of her life to writing fiction. As Updike explained to me many years ago: "I can remember a moment in the front room in the house in Shillington . . . when I was sick in bed and had a lot to say to my mother, and she finally indicated—she was at her desk trying to write—that she wanted me to be quiet. I was an only child, and much indulged, and I'd never before been asked to be quiet, so I realized this was a very momentous activity she was engaged in." Sitting in the front bedroom,

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his mother typed her stories and sent them to popular magazines such as *Collier's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Liberty*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Redbook*. As Updike recalled, "I was invited as a child, as a sympathetic child, to read these things, so at about the age of eight I became one of the youngest unpaid editors in the country." Unfortunately, the brown envelopes containing her stories were always returned, though occasionally with a note of encouragement on the rejection slip. Thus, at an early age, Updike witnessed firsthand the life of an aspiring writer, who, he recalled, "was frustratingly close to being publishable. And I could feel, even as a child, the closeness, and I didn't have it in me to boost her over that perilous edge into print."

Updike's mother prepared him for his career, passing down "her love of words, her love of the right word," and a sense of "the devotion it takes and the solitude of the craft." She also arranged for his art lessons and took him to the Reading Public Library, where he encountered "these towering walls of books," which made a deep impression: "being one of those authors seemed to me like being an angel in heaven." In addition, she was the driving force behind their unsettling move, when Updike was thirteen, from the town of Shillington to her farmhouse birthplace in the rural isolation of Plowville. Forced to leave his peers just before embarking on a high school experience that would have taken place almost literally in his backyard, Updike suddenly found himself displaced, living ten miles away on eighty acres in a tiny sandstone farmhouse with his parents and maternal grandparents. So small and tight was their living arrangement that his bedroom was not an actual room but rather the upstairs hallway, located between the grown-ups' bedrooms—hardly an ideal situation for an adolescent. Yet in Plowville Updike had ample time to read, write, observe nature, and converse with four articulate adults, each of whom poured their love and hopes into him.

It's hard to overstate the importance of his family during those early years, and it didn't stop when he enrolled at Harvard. Within a few days after his arrival at Hollis Hall, his freshman dormitory, Updike became aware, if he hadn't already anticipated it, that his primary correspondent, his verbal volleying partner, would be his mother. During a busy first year in which he studied hard, submitted writing and artwork to *The Harvard Lampoon*, and sought to assimilate into an unfamiliar and privileged environment, Updike composed fifty-four substantive letters to his family. Commonly addressed "Dear Plowvillians," these letters were read not only by the four residents of the sandstone farmhouse but also by neighbors, friends, and relatives. They became a source of entertainment and were often reread; as his mother revealed, "We all read your letters six, or is it sixty, times." Further, the letters were not the crabbed, laconic, dashed-off notes often composed by college students of that era to ask for money. Filled with news and observations,

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considerable humor and wit, occasional anxiety, and much thoughtfulness and love, they are among the finest letters Updike wrote.

What becomes apparent in Updike's letters home is not only his mother's influence but also her need to converse with her son. While his letters were addressed more broadly to his parents and grandparents, his mother was the one who wrote back; during that same freshman year, she sent him ninety-eight letters. Both mother and son kept a loose tally of their exchanges those first couple of years. When Updike fell behind, during the fall semester of his sophomore year, his mother, in a letter of October 25, 1951, comments, "I am drawn into a whirlpool of doubts concerning our correspondence . . . my pride will eventually prevent my writing three letters to your one." Expressing curiosity about "the doings at the Salamanca of the twentieth century"—a suggestion that Harvard resembled the Spanish city that was once a leading cultural center of Europe—she writes: "all your social adjustments become very interesting to us who have not been as successful in these delicate matters as we would have liked." Though sharp and intelligent, Linda felt herself less adept at certain forms of social interaction than her son or her husband. His mother goes on to list her recent adventures in Plowville: trying to run a neighbor off their farm, discovering that after a lifetime of high blood pressure she now has low blood pressure, and peering through a nearby open stable door at what appeared to be "wall-size tapestries." She concludes with a series of questions: "Shall I file all of these strange and wonderful experiences away for some future use? The heart asks what use? What future? Wouldn't it be better to spend them now, hoping that the smile they have brought will somehow be carried through the mails to another? Answer me, John." His reply, dated three days later, is a three-page, single-spaced letter, both humorous and defensive, in which he questions her tabulations on the imbalance of their correspondence and laments how uninteresting his life currently is, posing as "a letter writer . . . Who Has Nothing to Say." He also mentions his mother's writing instructor (in 1949, Linda began a correspondence course, "Fundamentals of Fiction," with Mr. Thomas H. Uzzell, a writer and former fiction editor), who claimed that "an author should strive for an emotional effect," which Updike then declares his mother achieves in her letters, while "mine, it seems, bring about consternation."

What these early letters reveal is his mother's desire, despite several hundred miles between them, to sustain their conversation, along with their mutual interest in chronicling daily activities. Unlike letters from the battlefield or romantic correspondence between distant lovers, these familial exchanges revel in the mundane. Linda offers descriptions of the farm's inhabitants, both human and animal; provides anecdotes about selling hay bales and planting strawberries; delivers updates on her writing struggles and

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Updike's high school girlfriend; and gives her son advice about his classes and health. In turn, Updike discusses, with characteristic self-deprecation, the challenges of his courses and professors, the behavior of his roommate and friends, and his success with placing writing and drawings in the *Lampoon*. Though his letters are by no means confessional or deeply emotional, they are remarkably mature and perceptive for a college student.

The Harvard letters also mark Updike's rapid rise as both a writer and a socially adept adult, two things with which his mother struggled. The farm-boy from Plowville, living on a tight budget, quickly acclimated to a cultured, elite realm. Though it was not necessarily a world Updike loved, he thrived at Harvard: making friends, finding a girlfriend, placing an extraordinary amount of his work in the *Lampoon*, and receiving feedback on his writing from well-known, knowledgeable professors, which Linda was eager to hear. While he was more talented and possessed better working habits, both mother and son were drawn to similar material, the domestic mundane, and there was clearly reciprocal influence. After reading one of her son's pieces in the *Lampoon* in 1954, Linda wrote to say she was "flattered that you stooped to steal two of my favorite images"; Updike replied, "Mother, let my theft of the square bowl of sunshine in no way impede your continued use of that excellent image. And as to the people who dig their heels into things—I was sure that was all my idea." When Linda, in 1960, sold her first story to *The New Yorker*, Updike's editor, William Maxwell, told him, "It is so interesting to see the same quality of mind running through both of you," which led Updike, in a congratulatory letter to his mother, to write, "I take [Maxwell's comment] to mean that for the last six years now I have been freely pillaging my mother's imagination and memories to make fictions, a theft I feel guilty about now that the original has found her voice."

While Updike's mother was his most frequent correspondent during those first semesters at Harvard, his life changes dramatically during his sophomore year when, in a medieval art class, he meets Mary Pennington, a bright and pretty Radcliffe woman two years his senior. In his courtship letters to Mary—written mostly over the ensuing summer, when he worked as a copy boy at the *Reading Eagle*—Updike's voice finds a new register, becoming more unleashed and intimate as he confesses his love and shortcomings, all the while plotting their future together. These letters are bursting with creative energy. One takes the form of a playlet, depicting a lovelorn office boy lamenting, to a talking pencil and telephone, the absence of Miss Mary E. Pennington; another is a full-page cartoon of his slumped body with comic descriptions of various body parts above the caption "picture of a young man as seen by the parents of a young lady." These letters to Mary

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reveal how adept he could be at romancing a woman, and the speed of their courtship is testament to his skill: they would marry after his junior year.

Updike goes on to graduate among the top ten students in his class and wins a fellowship to study at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford, England. A month later, he places his first poem in *The New Yorker*, followed a few weeks later by a short story. Over the next fifty-five years, he will publish more than 750 short stories, poems, articles, and reviews in the magazine. While some may view his success as having come easily, a consequence of genius over sweat, that is not altogether accurate. Recall that Updike had been submitting creative material since he was thirteen, and claims to have received hundreds of rejections before that first major acceptance. Further, while many of his subsequent submissions are accepted, quite a few are not, leading him, in a 1954 letter to his first *New Yorker* editor, Katharine White, to explain his recent failures through this analogy about the creative process: "I once saw a movie in which a chimpanzee, let loose in a laboratory, proceeded to mix, by accident, with his elbows, some sort of highly potent elixir. I know now how he felt when they wanted him to stir up a second batch." In these early *New Yorker* letters, Updike is respectful and modest with his editors, yet simultaneously firm and confident about how his writing should appear in print.

After their year in England, Updike and Mary, with their first daughter, Elizabeth, return to the States, where he takes a job at *The New Yorker*, writing "Talk of the Town" pieces. Though it had long been his dream to work at the magazine and live in the city, he soon discovers Manhattan is not the place to nurture his talent, and as he and Mary have more children, additional living space is required. So the Updikes, less than two years into their New York adventure, move to Ipswich, Massachusetts, a small town north of Boston where they spent their honeymoon. There they will remain together for nearly two decades. (With the exception of a year in London with family, and eighteen months solo in Boston, Updike will spend the rest of his life in small North Shore towns.) While his personal and professional life would continue to evolve, at this early point in his career the major strands of his letter writing were already established: weekly missives home to Plowville; daily professional letters and notes (concerning submissions, proofs, edits, and queries) to editors and staff at *The New Yorker* and Knopf; and occasional bursts of romantic expression, similar to the letters he had written to Mary during their courtship. Within a few years, as his reputation and fame spread, a fourth strand would emerge: responses to those requesting either his time, presence, opinion, or a piece of writing. Over time, the recipients of these four established strands would change and expand: letters home to

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Plowville would eventually be replaced by letters to children and grandchildren; professional communications with *The New Yorker* and Knopf would be augmented by exchanges with other magazines as well as fellow writers and critics; and romantic letters to his first wife would be succeeded by those to lovers, including his second wife, Martha.

In Updike's early professional correspondence, several things become apparent—first and foremost, his ability to write quickly. During a visit to the *New Yorker* offices on May 21, 1964, Updike leaves a note for the editor William Shawn that reads, "Being here for an hour this morning, I thought of coming to see you, but figured it would be more to our purpose if I spent the time writing a 'Comment,' which is attached."* When Harper & Brothers rejects "Home," the six-hundred-page novel manuscript he completed in 1957, Updike produces a second, briefer novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*, in just a few months—and accomplishes this while placing dozens of items in *The New Yorker*. On a five-week family vacation in Anguilla in January 1960, he not only spends time on the beach with his young children but also reads books, writes letters, and composes four *New Yorker* stories, including "Pigeon Feathers." The speed at which Updike could generate polished writing is remarkable. One also sees in his early correspondence with book editors a painstaking attention to detail regarding his published work (from punctuation to typos), along with his involvement in every aspect of the production of the physical book: jacket design, flap copy, font and point size, headers, margin, and topstain.

The central drama that emerges in his early professional letters pertains to potential charges of both libel and obscenity. After Updike's first *New Yorker* story, "Friends from Philadelphia," appeared on October 30, 1954, a man from his hometown wrote to say that "your father told me that old man Venne was the 'Father' in your story." In a subsequent letter to Plowville, Updike urged his father not to "spread around these identifications," going on to assert that the story "is not strictly true. A person in a story is never really a real person, and Mr. Venne never said any of the things I make him say, though he did let me drive his new Buick." The threat of libel becomes more imminent upon the publication of "Snowing in Greenwich Village," Updike's first story about Joan and Richard Maple, which appeared in the *New Yorker* of January 21, 1956, and for which he borrowed the character and anecdotes of a family friend, Gulielma "Gulie" White, who visited the Updikes in their Greenwich Village apartment in December 1955. The story was published quickly, only nineteen days after it was submitted, which

* A "Comment" was the topical lead piece for the magazine's "Talk of the Town" section. This particular submission, in which Updike describes returning to New York City and witnessing its "palpable, audible atmosphere of love," opened the May 30, 1964, issue.

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means the interval between Gulie's actual visit, which inspired the story, and its appearance in *The New Yorker* was no more than a month. In a letter to Plowville of January 22, 1956, Updike wrote: "Gulie called up from her bathtub audibly shaken; all she could say was, 'It's spooky'—spooky, that is, to read a *NYer* story in which the main character emerges as you." As Updike explained in another letter to Plowville, dated three weeks later:

> Max Krook, Gulie White's off-and-on physicist boyfriend, berated me more or less steadily for writing "Snowing in Greenwich Village" . . . The incidental people in the story have been teasing Gulie . . . Barbara, the girl who lived with the boy, came back from a visit, picked up an old *New Yorker*, and called Gulie, bawling her out for gossiping about her.

In an earlier letter to Plowville, Updike wrote: "everything in the Greenwich Village story (except the general import) was true. So a lot of the details about peripheral characters . . . had to [be] changed—slightly, but this was one of those stories in which the value seems to lie in the literal truth of what is described, and our changes seemed, in comparison with the fact, either dull or fanciful." The possibility of libel would recur with his novel *Couples* (1968), to the extent that he had to resituate the novel from Boston's North to South Shore as well as change various details about the geography and his characters. What is most telling, though, is the degree to which he mined his own life for material, and his belief that what made his fiction successful was something literal about its truthfulness.

In spite of these legal concerns, Updike, for nearly the first half of his career, was generally free to write about whatever and whomever he wished. That changed in the mid-1970s when he separated from Mary, took an apartment in Boston's Back Bay, and developed a relationship with Martha Bernhard, who would eventually become his second wife. In a letter to Mary of May 27, 1976, he explains of his story, "Killing," recently submitted to *Playboy*: "I don't think they'll take it . . . but do you concur with me that the story, though intimate (indeed, it is about intimacy, if I could write it right), betrays no secrets, offends no children, etc." When Mary objects, he is forced to pull the piece, which *Playboy* had already accepted and paid for. On December 16 of that same year, he publishes a story, "Domestic Life in America," in *The New Yorker*, that draws a strong response from Alex Bernhard, Martha's first husband. In a registered letter sent to *The New Yorker*, Bernhard, a Boston attorney, suggests the possibility of legal recourse if the magazine publishes another Updike story that invades his, or his children's, privacy. Thereafter, Updike avoids writing explicitly about his stepchildren, with whom he was then living. Though never at a loss for material, he must have chafed at being

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constrained in such a manner. Neither Mary nor his parents had ever stood in the way of his earlier work, and while it could not have been easy for Mary to see their unraveling marriage chronicled fictionally in *The New Yorker*, she had always been helpful to and supportive of his writing. Updike greatly valued her input as a reader, though as he explained in a letter, written just prior to their separation, "What you must realize is that once I begin a story you become a character, not a person; Monet's haystacks didn't complain that they weren't really purple. A person is much better than a character in every respect except that he or she doesn't fit into a story."

The other issue that crops up early in his letters is concern over obscenity and sexuality. While Updike's *New Yorker* stories were written so as to not challenge the magazine's somewhat prudish conventions at the time, his novels were a different matter. *Rabbit, Run* (1960) included muted description of sexual acts, including fellatio. In addition, it deals with a character who generates considerable domestic chaos and is never truly punished for his actions. In December 1959, Updike sent the manuscript to his good friend Goldy Sherrill, rector of Ascension Memorial Church in Ipswich, after Mary expressed concerns as to whether Sherrill would be upset by his depiction of the novel's minister, Jack Eccles. In his letter to the rector, Updike writes, "He doesn't look like you, act much like you, play golf like you, have a wife or a parish like you"; however, he adds, "I know for a fact . . . that home-town folks . . . do read with an overavid eye for real-life counterparts." While Sherrill did not object to Updike's depiction of Reverend Eccles, he expressed such strong reservations and disappointment with the novel's immorality that Updike, then vacationing in Anguilla, sent him two more letters attempting to explain himself: "I am uneasy in the robes of a would-be prophet and pornographer—it offends all my social instincts, against which I wage a constant battle. The Rabbit in me is a furtive creature who is easily scared, and who was given a nasty start by your wrathful letter." He goes on to say, "I had not intended to reply at all . . . But I kept hearing your disappointed voice plucking at my side, and the vision of you joining my mother, my father, my wife, and the other dear friends who wonder why in my writing I am so ugly, so brutal, so unsympathetic, so *un understanding*, was too much to bear in silence."

Several months later, Alfred Knopf has two of his lawyers read the manuscript of *Rabbit, Run*, then asks Updike to come to New York, where they can all sit down together and examine passages. Over the ensuing days, this leads to uncertainty about the novel's future: Will it be published? Will offensive passages be edited, or replaced with asterisks? Could the author and publisher could go to jail? Eventually Updike makes changes to the text, and it is published to considerable attention and acclaim. Curiously, at the

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same moment *Rabbit, Run* is being scrubbed of obscenities, Updike, as he explains in a letter to his parents, is teaching summer Bible school at his Ipswich church. A few months later he receives a missive from his mother-in-law, Elizabeth Pennington, voicing her strong disapproval of the novel. His response, of October 27, 1960, is characteristically diplomatic. Thanking her for her letter, he writes, "Your reaction to Rabbit, while somewhat severe, is not inappropriate," and explains that "trying to tell the truth is not really a welcome service, but I haven't figured out any other way to go about my business." Before ending his letter with the send-off "Love, Johnny," he writes, "I'm sorry that through the accident of marriage you have been thrown into close familial conjunction with a writer you don't really like; honestly, I don't ask you to read me. I send you the books as a token of my esteem and affection." What these exchanges reveal is the extent to which Updike, as a young writer, was under pressure, arousing considerable disapprobation from family and friends, leading him to explain in a 1960 letter to Sherrill, "I feel, in writing [*Rabbit, Run*], that I was working against the grain, although some scenes felt good. But if you are ever going to improve you must keep biting off more than maybe you can chew; otherwise, the bites get smaller and smaller and eventually all you have left is the taste of your own saliva."

Updike of course was also working against the grain, drawing the censure of others, when he separated from Mary in 1974 and then, in 1977, married Martha. His letters to the two women during this turbulent period are memorable as well as strikingly dissimilar. Those to Martha, as they begin their affair in January 1974, are vibrant and intensely erotic, spilling over with joy and pleasure. Upon receiving a letter from her while in Australia, he immediately responds: "I walked down King William Road laughing out loud and had I been a rooster I would have crowed." Feeling newly liberated by their affair, Updike writes to Martha several times a week that first year, extolling her virtues, celebrating their intimacy, and imagining a future together. At the same time, his letters to Mary, composed in a sadder key, are practical, patient, and thoughtful, as he seeks to mitigate the pain of their separation. Though it's Updike who wishes to end the marriage, he strives to ensure that his wife and children, in spite of the distress he causes them, will be all right. The letters written to both women from 1974 to 1977 are among his most compelling, and collectively they chronicle his passage through one of several marital crises. The letters from this period reveal Updike navigating domestic turmoil, trying to reimagine his life amid painful circumstances. They also mark the end of his time in Ipswich, where he and Mary had been socially active, immersed in a "swim" of other couples, and where, he confesses, he had become "greedy for my quota of life's pleasures."

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Following his divorce and remarriage, Updike's domestic life calmed, leading to far fewer letters to both Mary and Martha. Although he continues to write to his mother until her death, the increasing ease of telephone contact made those letters less frequent. Thus, his letters from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s are weighted more toward the professional. Many are to fellow writers. Updike is generous with praise not only to younger authors he admires, such as Nicholson Baker and Adam Gopnik, but to contemporaries like Donald Barthelme, as seen in this 1986 letter: "Thank you for the gift of *Paradise* . . . What sticks in my mind is the linoleum knife one of the girl's boyfriends used on her, and the details of his having a skin cancer on his forehead removed, and the 'hooking' gesture one of the heroines uses in the moment of supreme intimacy . . . As usual, you make the rest of us look as though we're shadow-boxing, or being nice nellies." Updike can also be self-deprecatingly funny, as in this 2005 letter to Ian McEwan: "It occurs to me that since you interviewed me that first time in a BBC studio you have risen to be generally called the best novelist of your generation whereas I have fallen to the status of an elderly duffer whose tales of suburban American sex are hopelessly yawnworthy period pieces."

Among his late professional correspondence are letters pertaining to two ambitious, end-of-the-century editing projects Updike undertook: *A Century of Arts and Letters* (1998) and *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* (1999). In spearheading the former volume, which offers a history of the American Academy of Arts and Letters,* he solicited, guided, then edited the contributions of ten prominent aging writers, including Norman Mailer, Cynthia Ozick, and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. In a veritable comedy of correspondence, Updike is continually prompting his famous contributors to meet deadlines and respect contracts; when a problematic draft arrives on his desk, he must cajole the author with a mix of flattery and critical counsel. As he explains to an editor at Columbia University Press during an episode that threatened the project, "I'll try to keep my unruly herd of immortals more in line, though it's not easy." While the work he did in these volumes is exemplary and a service to American literature, the question arises as to

* Located in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Upper Manhattan, the American Academy of Arts and Letters is a three-hundred-member honor society of artists, architects, composers, and writers committed to fostering the arts. The naming history of the institution is complicated. Established in 1898 as the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the organization was originally capped at two hundred and fifty members. In 1904, they established the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a prestigious inner body of fifty additional members, who could be elected only after having already been a member of the larger National Institute. Updike was elected to the National Institute in 1964 and the American Academy in 1976. The bicameral system of membership was phased out in 1993, with the National Institute dissolving and all members of both organizations becoming members of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The academy annually distributes awards, funds concerts and events, and hosts gatherings of its members.

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*Why? Why take on these tasks, which consumed considerable time and energy?* Clearly, he enjoyed the editorial work, which kept him busy and productive during a period in which, his children and stepchildren grown and his personal life stable, he had more available time. In addition, by overseeing two retrospective projects late in his career, both of which sought to chronicle achievement in American literature and art during the twentieth century, he was able to shape the historical record to his tastes and perspective. Though he did not seek out these projects, they allowed him to preside as a literary arbiter of the writing and artistic history of his time, with the work contributing to his stature and legacy.

While Updike in his later years acknowledges that he is no longer at the vital center of his culture, and that his literary stature has diminished, his final letters and books reveal that he never slowed down. When he died in January 2009, Updike was actively working on five books, four of which were in production, the other his never-to-be-completed novel on the life of St. Paul. In between hospital visits to battle stage 4 lung cancer, he would write poems, read proofs, and compose farewell letters. In the final weeks of his life, when his health had greatly declined, he explained to a friend, Dick Purinton, that he could no longer write, and how devastating that was. Yet, as we see in the penultimate letter in this volume, concerning proofs of *The Maples Stories*, he was attempting until the end to find the right words.

HOW THESE LETTERS will alter our view of Updike is not clear. Some readers will be moved by, and wish to explore further, his unique and fluent correspondence with his mother. The thousands of letters the two exchanged will likely play a role in future Updike studies. Other readers may begin to question certain currently prevailing attitudes toward the author. For instance, a few critics, late in his career, labeled Updike a narcissist, lumping him together in this regard with Roth, Mailer, and Saul Bellow. However, the characteristics of a narcissist—grandiose self-importance, need for excessive admiration, sense of entitlement, lack of empathy, arrogance, and haughty behavior—don't describe the author of the letters in this volume. Updike frequently sent notes of praise to fellow writers; he was diligent and generous in answering reader mail, sometimes even providing comments on unsolicited stories sent by strangers; he was attentive to his mother and continually shared news about his children; he was unusually modest and viewed himself as immensely fortunate in all that life had bestowed upon him. Further, his letters were largely written, as mentioned, to give pleasure, both to himself and others. Narcissism seems a term applicable only in the sense, perhaps, that all writers and artists are self-involved.

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Readers will find much to admire in Updike's letters: comic genius, glorious sentences, a remarkable ability to compartmentalize (in navigating the emotional chaos of a marital crisis and adulterous affair, he could still complete his writing and attend to family demands and chores). Yet it's not entirely clear how much Updike valued them. Though these communications were an important part of his daily routine, he made no effort to preserve copies of his outgoing correspondence. Further, in 1970, he referred to his letters, in typical self-effacing fashion, as being "among the dullest perhaps in the world," very unlike Vladimir Nabokov's, which he called "fascinating." While reviewing the letters of James Joyce, he remarked in a letter to Maxwell, "Mine suffer by the comparison. Until I can make jokes in Italian to you, and address the mayor of Zurich in German, I won't be half a man." Funny and self-mocking, the comment also reveals his familiar false modesty, as if secretly he is pleased to be a regular guy, one who cannot joke in Italian. Yet Updike's letters are hardly dull, and they are funnier than those of Nabokov or Joyce. Perhaps a more clarifying remark comes in another letter to Maxwell, after a journalist has requested access to their correspondence: "All of us, had we known our mail would be investigated, would have written less freely as we worked away." Although partly disingenuous—Updike was aware that his letters would be collected and published—there is truth in his having written freely, which is what makes the letters so appealing.

That said, readers who in the past have not been engaged by Updike may find reasons for resisting once more. Some may regard his thinking and language, whether on sexuality, gender, or sexual orientation, to be old-fashioned, problematic, even offensive. Others may view him as yet another privileged white male, the essence of American whiteness, who was overly concerned with himself and little interested in the world beyond (his reading and book reviews, on authors from six continents, would suggest otherwise). In addition, Updike's life, as reflected in his letters, is clearly not as dramatic or as adventurous as that of, say, Ernest Hemingway or Mailer, nor as committed to social justice as that of James Baldwin or Toni Morrison. Updike instead followed Flaubert's advice of adhering to the conventions of a bourgeois life so as to be creative and original in his work; as such, the middle-class mundane became the subject of not only his fiction but also his letters. What he accomplished with the quotidian resembles what Thoreau achieved in writing about Walden Pond and nature—that is, through watchfulness, precise description, and intelligent, eloquent prose, Updike was able to bestow vibrancy and meaning upon that which would otherwise seem ordinary, so that it resonates and hums. In so doing, he offers us a new way of seeing and knowing our daily lives. Though not grand in the way of American skyscrapers and national parks, Updike's letters, in their under-

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stated, comic fashion, nevertheless chronicle a grand American success story, in which the bookish adolescent from Plowville, armed with literary talent, a typewriter, and postage stamps, journeys from an unheated sandstone farmhouse to become one of the world's major literary figures. While writers will continue—through emails and texts, blogs and direct messages, tweets and podcasts—to communicate with the world, it seems unlikely that America will produce another letter writer as adept and as prolific at the form as John Updike.

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# *Note on the Text*

GIVEN THAT UPDIKE was both meticulous and frank in his writing, every attempt has been made to preserve his letters as written. There is no censorship, no expunged passages.

Updike's correspondence, though often typed quickly, was generally clear and correct, with few misspellings and punctuation errors, though minor ones crop up in most letters. Silent edits were made here to correct typos and misspellings. When the misspelling appears intentionally quirky or archaic ("razzberry," "stomache," "literatchoor"), or adheres to a preference for, say, the *New Yorker* style book (the doubling of consonants in words like "unravelled" and "marvellous"), it remains as written. Punctuation also remains largely as written; however, in the case of a clear omission (a missing period) or conspicuous error (a comma that makes no sense), an edit was made. In addition, I looked for overall patterns in Updike's letter writing regarding his use of commas, and added them whenever appropriate. That said, I was cautious about overstepping, so resisted altering the text unless relatively certain. As letters, these compositions have a more hurried quality than Updike's writing in other genres, with fewer pauses, and I wished for that to remain. In addition, trying to insert punctuation according to what I thought Updike would do felt like an impossible task, so I refrained, except when a passage would otherwise be confusing. On rare occasions, a sentence or phrase may appear odd in its syntax, grammar, or punctuation; if an obvious and simple solution was not apparent, the sentence remains as written. In cases where a word was added (usually a preposition) or a verb tense was altered, it is usually not noted. However, if the fix was less obvious, the added word appears in brackets. The titles of literary works (novels, short stories, poems) and films, which in some early letters were either underlined, written in caps, or not marked, have been standardized through either italics or quotation marks.

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Updike's language and thinking clearly reflect the time in which he wrote. Words, phrases, and attitudes, particularly related to gender and race, that were more commonplace in 1955 or 1986, may seem problematic today, even offensive. Because Updike was so candid in his fiction writing, the option of censoring words or passages in his letters seemed inherently wrong. Thus, the letters stand as written, with the acknowledgment that some terms and passages will prove vexing or unsettling.

While almost all of Updike's letters are signed, some, particularly from his papers at Houghton Library, bear no signature. By and large, these are photocopies, or an extra copy from Updike's printer, of letters that were subsequently, perhaps minutes later, signed and mailed. Martha Updike would sometimes make photocopies of what she thought were her husband's more interesting letters. While the original was presumably signed before being placed in an envelope, the copy was typically made before the signature occurred. In these instances, Updike's name, depending on his relationship to the recipient, is inserted as either "John" or "John Updike." In a few personal letters, Updike does not close by signing his name, and in such instances, his name was not inserted. The positioning on the page of the closing phrase and signature varies greatly from one letter to the next, but here they are standardized and positioned on the far-right side of the page.

While Updike generally provided the day and month whenever writing a letter, he seldom included the year and almost never indicated the place or address from where he was writing. In nearly every instance, the precise year and his location could be determined through research, and so both have been inserted to standardize the headings, though they do not typically reflect the original (e.g., while Updike may have only written "March 2," the letter is recorded here as "Lowell House E-51, Harvard College / March 2, 1950"). In a few instances, it was unclear as to whether a letter was composed in, say, 1974 or 1975, and in such cases, the year that made best sense was used, followed by a question mark.

Though Updike sometimes composed letters that stretched to two or three pages, he was mostly committed to the one-page, typed letter or postcard. When he had more to say but wished to confine himself to that single page, he would, perhaps two-thirds of the way down, reduce his line spacing so as to squeeze in more words. If he arrived at the bottom of the page and still had another sentence or two in mind, he would typically scroll back to the top and type his final sentences above the date and salutation.

Though an effort was made to locate the original version of all letters included in this volume, in various instances I found only a copy. While it seems likely the copy is identical or nearly identical to the original, such a determination cannot be certain.

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Footnotes are offered to illuminate names, events, comments, and phrases in Updike's letters that would otherwise be unclear. In some instances, these notes provide context, including, when available, direct quotation from the other side of the correspondence. This practice is most visible in his letters to his mother; given her importance, I felt the reader should *hear* her voice. Though an effort was made to keep footnotes to a minimum, so as not to interfere with the reading experience, the pressure to annotate was felt as a steady counterforce. And because Updike was highly attentive to the quotidian, minor details, at times, cried out for explanation. For those interested in going further, many unexplained names, events, and references can be googled. Other references, however, withstood my detective work and remain, alas, mysterious.

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*A Life in Letters*

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To **Wesley Updike,** *father*

117 Philadelphia Avenue, Shillington, PA
June 3, 1941

Dear Pop,

I hope you're feeling fine.* If you aren't I feel sorry for you. I wish you hadn't got that rupture. Cause, if you didn't have it, you wouldn't be where you are now. I'll be glad when you are back home. How much do matches cost.† When I come to visit you on Sunday. . . . oh, skip it! Everything is fine back home. (I think.)

Yours truly,
Your son,
Who loves you
very much,
*John Hoyer Updike*
(Johnny to you)

* Wesley Updike was at the U.S. Naval Hospital in Philadelphia for a hernia operation; his stay lasted three weeks. In an accompanying letter, Updike's mother writes: "Johnny says everything he is writing to you sounds hollow. But that's because we are hollow when you are away."

† David Updike, John's older son, views the matches as "a sly reference to smoking, and the hint that he will smuggle some matches into the hospital so that his ailing father can have a cigarette."

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## To **The Editors of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine***

Plowville, PA*
June 7 [1947?]

Sirs:

A copy of *To the Queen's Taste* has found its way into my library and from there into my hands. I was impressed and surprised to find in it mystery stories by such writers as Marc Connelly, MacKinlay Kantor, Wilbur Steele, Jim Hilton, and Somerset Maugham, all of whom have made their reputations in other fields of literary endeavor.

James Thurber, one of the best of American humorists, wrote a very unfunny and rather terrifying story called "The Whip-Poor-Will," a story that might very easily be used in your magazine. It appears in the book *My World—And Welcome to It*, published by Harcourt, Brace, and Company in 1944.

I hope that you will find time to look into it, for the story, in my opinion, would stand out anywhere, even in the company of the best available mystery writers.

Sincerely,
John Updike
R. D. #2
Elverson, Pa.†

## To **Milton Caniff,** *American cartoonist*

Plowville, PA
September 6, 1947

Dear Mr. Caniff:

For a long time, I was under the impression that *Terry and the Pirates* was the best comic strip in the United States. Imagine my dismay, then, when I heard that its creator, its mastermind, was going to desert *Terry*, leave it in the lurch, and wander off to some new interest, called *Steve Canyon*. Apprehensively I subscribed to the paper that carried *Steve Canyon* and waited for

* Updike moved, with his parents and maternal grandparents, from Shillington to Plowville on Halloween 1945. Though their house and farm were located in the unincorporated area of Plowville, the postal service recognized the borough of Elverson, seven miles south, as the official address.

† Until he left for college, Updike would close his letters in this manner, listing his address after his signature. Decades later, he would frequently use a blue ink rubber stamp to record his return address at the close of a letter. The address has been omitted in subsequent letters.

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results. It didn't take me long to discover that *Steve Canyon* was now the best comic strip in the United States. Obvious conclusion: Milton Caniff is the best cartoonist in the world.

I have never before expressed my appreciation to you for your work, but I feel that now is the time. I and my family are trying to make the upstairs look decent, and I am trying to find something to cover a blank wall in my bedroom. What, I reasoned, would be better than a sketch by my favorite cartoonist. This brings me to the point of my letter. Would you be kind enough to supply me with an original comic strip, or a sketch of Steve, or anything you would care to give me? I realize that you must be very busy, but any attention you pay me will be greatly appreciated. I promise that whatever you send me will be elegantly framed, hung, and treasured for a long, long time.

Sincerely,
John Updike

## To **Harold Gray,** *American cartoonist*

Plowville, PA
January 2, 1948

Dear Mr. Gray,

I don't suppose that I am being original when I admit that *Orphan Annie* is, and has been for a long time, my favorite comic strip. There are many millions like me. The appeal of your comic strip is an American phenomenon that has affected the public for many years, and will, I hope, continue to do so for many more.

I admire the magnificent plotting of Annie's adventures. They are just as adventure strips should be—fast moving, slightly macabre (witness Mr. Am), occasionally humorous, and above all, they show a great deal of the viciousness of human nature. I am very fond of the gossip-in-the-street scenes you frequently use. Contrary to comic-strip tradition, the people are not pleasantly benign, but gossiping, sadistic, and stupid, which is just as it really is.

Your villains are completely black and Annie and crew are practically perfect, which is as it should be. To me there is nothing more annoying in a strip than to be in the dark as to who is the hero and who the villain. I like the methods in which you polish off your evil-doers. One of my happiest moments was spent in gloating over some hideous child (I forget his name) who had been annoying Annie [and then] toppled into the wet cement of a dam being constructed. I hate your villains to the point where I could rip

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them from the paper. No other strip arouses me so. For instance, I thought Mumbles was cute.*

Your draughtsmanship is beyond reproach. The drawing is simple and clear, but extremely effective. You could tell just by looking at the faces who is the trouble maker and who isn't, without any dialogue. The facial features, the big, blunt fingered hands, the way you handle light and shadows are all excellently done. Even the talk balloons are good, the lettering small and clean, the margins wide, and the connection between the speaker and his remark wiggles a little, all of which, to my eye, is as artistic as you can get.

All this well-deserved praise is leading up to something, of course, and the catch is a rather big favor I want you to do for me. I need a picture to alleviate the blankness of one of my bedroom walls, and there is nothing that I would like better than a little memento of the comic strip I have followed closely for over a decade. So—could you possibly send me a little autographed sketch of Annie that you have done yourself? I realize that you probably have some printed cards you send to people like me, but could you maybe do just a quick sketch by yourself? Nothing fancy, just what you have done yourself. If you cannot do this (and I really wouldn't blame you) will you send me anything you like, perhaps an original comic strip? Whatever I get will be appreciated, framed, and hung.

Sincerely,
John Updike

## To **The Editors of *The New Yorker***

Plowville, PA
March 21, 1949

Gentlemen:

I would like some information on those little filler drawings you publish, and, I presume, buy. What size should they be? Mounted or not? Are there any preferences as to subject matter, weight of cardboard, and technique?

I will appreciate any information you give me, for I would like to try my hand at it.†

Sincerely,
John Updike

* Mumbles, a recurring villain in Chester Gould's *Dick Tracy*, made his debut in that comic strip in October 1947.

† At age thirteen, Updike began submitting poems, drawings, and other unsolicited pieces to various magazines, including *The New Yorker*. Few of these cover letters have survived.

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## To **The U.S. Department of the Army/Pentagon**

Plowville, PA
March 27, 1949

Gentlemen:

I am hoping that this request, however vaguely addressed, will eventually find itself in the hands of the men who can supply me with some information and statistics on The Pentagon.

A rather playful geometry teacher of mine has assigned as a class project the preparation of a booklet on the construction of any building. So any pictures, booklets, etc., will be sincerely appreciated. I realize that this might cost, so just let me know and I will be glad to send you the amount required.

I am rather late in getting this letter off, so I would doubly appreciate prompt reply.

Sincerely,
John Updike

## To **Earl B. Milliette,**
*director of the division of fine and industrial arts, Philadelphia Public Schools*

Plowville, PA
April 4, 1949

Dear Mr. Milliette:

Your interest in my work has made me, and Mr. Boyer,* very happy. Having heard that cartoonists bring about one dime per dozen on the market, my enthusiasm does not pile up. Last year's award, however, helped me to believe that I might reach *The New Yorker* before I'm too old to enjoy it.

We appreciate your choice of a cartoon for the Pittsburgh exhibition. One of my boosters thinks it is the best thing I've done. But, with Mr. Boyer's help and your encouragement, we may be able to send you something really spectacular next year. Until then, we thank you for the kind words and wish Harold Ross† were more sympathetic.

Sincerely,
John Updike

* Carlton F. Boyer was Updike's art teacher.
† Cofounder and editor in chief of *The New Yorker*.

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## To **Barnes & Noble, Inc.,** *New York booksellers*

*Postcard*

Plowville, PA
June 15, 1949

Sirs:

Do you have available a copy of

THE SEAL IN THE BEDROOM, by James Thurber,
GOOD HUMOR MAN, by George Price,
FELLOW CITIZENS, by Gluyas Williams,
REJECTIONS, by Alan Dunn?*

If you have one or more of these, kindly hold them and notify me.

John Updike

## To **Gordon Williams,** *sports columnist of the* Reading Times

Plowville, PA
August 24, 1949

Dear Gord:

I think that the question aroused by the recently forfeited game† resolves itself not to pop bottles and tinhorn bettors but to the character of the Philadelphia baseball fan. One who has watched 30,000 of them tumble, snarling and snapping, from the ball park cannot help realizing that these are no ordinary fans, but a horde of vicious fault-finders who not only boo the visiting teams and the umpires but the home team as well. I have read several times that baseball umpires consider Philadelphia the worst town to umpire in the league, and each time I see a game I am amazed by the variety of things the Philadelphia rooter can boo.

He not only is annoyed by each visiting player, by the umpires, and by his own home team, but doesn't seem to like the public announcements, the right field scoreboard, and the ground crew. The one thing that gives him

* All four books are collections of cartoons and drawings.

† The game between the Philadelphia Phillies and the New York Giants at Shibe Park on August 22, 1949, was forfeited by the Phillies after their fans, protesting a call, threw soda bottles and other objects onto the field, hitting several umpires.

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pleasure is the sight of two or more middle-aged men fighting over a foul ball.

While I do not doubt the good intent of your column on Tuesday and the action of the Shibe Park officials in banning bottles, I believe that the fan will now fill his pockets with rocks, and, if that turns out to be impractical, will hurl himself on the field from the upper deck.

The solution is obvious. The Philadelphia games will have to be played on some isolated lot, high on a mountain or deep in the woods, safe from the fury of their fans, and a huge, damage-proof television screen installed in the field, at which the rooters can boo, hiss, and throw bottles to their heart's content.

Sincerely,
John Updike

*Updike's letter was published, almost in its entirety, in Williams's column, "In the Realm of Sports," in the* Reading Times *on August 30, 1949. In a subsequent column that ran on September 9, 1949, a fan wrote to "disagree violently with Updike's views, whether they were serious or not," and offered his own suggestions.*

## To **The Editors of *Life* Magazine**

Plowville, PA
August 29, 1949

Sirs:

I am surprised and dismayed that *Life* publishes the letters of cranks who think they are being both wise and witty when they compare an infant's scrawlings or the dribblings on a garage door to the work of a sincere, unique painter like Jackson Pollock.*

John Updike

* Updike, at seventeen, was responding to several letters in the August 29, 1949, issue of *Life* that were prompted by an article of August 8, 1949: "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?" One letter writer included a photograph of her son, "a 5½-year-old contemporary of the Pollock trend in art," standing beside "his latest effort." Another wrote: "I have an old garage door on which I have cleaned paint brushes for several years. It is rather similar to Pollock's *Number Seventeen*. The first $1,500 takes it."

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To **F. S. von Stade Jr.,**
*director of scholarships, Harvard College*

Plowville, PA
May 14, 1950

Dear Mr. von Stade:

An award of five hundred dollars will make it possible for me to come to Harvard this year.* My parents and I are both grateful and pleased with the prospect. The reasons for wanting to graduate from Harvard are almost innumerable.

I am, however, one of several alternates on the national scholarship list of another school and believe that I should reduce my parents' responsibility for my education to the greatest possible extent. Even without a personal acquaintance with my family and its financial difficulties, you must see how much the possibility of winning a national scholarship tempts me.

So, I hope there will be time for me to consider all sides of my really complex situation before the twenty-second of May. If necessary, may I withhold my decision until the end of the month?

With sincerest thanks for all the consideration you and Harvard alumni of Reading and Philadelphia have given to my problems, I am,

Sincerely yours,
John H. Updike

To **Robert C. Lea Jr.,** *Philadelphia attorney and Harvard alumnus who interviewed Updike in 1949 at the Harvard Club rooms at the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel*

Plowville, PA
May 24, 1950

Dear Mr. Lea:

Perhaps you already know (if you don't, you will as soon as you complete this sentence) that I am going to Harvard.†

Now that all is over but going to the school, I should like to thank your committee for the time, consideration, and food they gave me, and thank you especially for your enthralling talks on Harvard, for the discussion we

* Updike has been accepted to both Harvard and Cornell, and rejected by Princeton.
† Though awarded the national scholarship to Cornell, Updike in the end chose Harvard, where he received a tuition scholarship.

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had on that amazing magazine, *The New Yorker*, and for making me a lot less frightened about the who business of college.*

I hope I will not disappoint you; at any rate, I will keep you informed of my progress or regress at Harvard University.

Gratefully yours,
John Updike

## To **Charles "Jack" Hemmig,**
*supervising principal of Shillington High School*

Plowville, PA
August 7, 1950

Dear Mr. Hemmig:

In a way, my commencement speech† was an attempt to explain what you have called the enigma of my class. Realizing our need for maturity and freedom, we may have been over-zealous. But we are at the crossroads and the signposts are not easy to read. We wanted understanding and sympathy without knowing how to get it. We are, in short, on the verge of maturity and I, personally, believe my class has what it takes.

If you agree with me in this belief, is it not possible that a questionnaire‡ at this time might tend to destroy the satisfaction we feel in our graduation from the Shillington High School? We are grateful for the tolerance we enjoyed there and believe that we are adequately prepared to continue our educations wherever we go. So that a questionnaire might easily be more destructive than helpful. Of course that is only my answer to your question. I am not very well informed in the uses of questionnaires. You may find one very useful.

I thank you for the many happy privileges that I shared with my classmates at Shillington High, for your kind letter of August third, and all the encouragement you and my teachers have given me during the last twelve years.

Sincerely yours,
John H. Updike

* Though "whole business" would seem more likely and appropriate than "who business," the latter is what he wrote, and given his clever opening, it seems possible that Lea had talked to Updike about the people of Harvard College.

† Updike was co-valedictorian of his class and delivered a commencement address on May 29, 1950.

‡ In a letter of August 3, 1950, Hemmig thanked Updike for the copy of his commencement speech and expressed a desire "to know in what respects the school failed" Updike's class and whether a survey of seniors could be useful.

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To **Thelma Lewis,** *teacher of English and German at Shillington High School and faculty adviser to the student newspaper* Chatterbox

Plowville, PA
September 5, 1950

Mrs. Lewis:

Much (or is it many) thanks for the *Songs of Youth*.* My mother, who never did understand my apathy toward the American Poetry Society, was delighted at your kindness, and even I was once again stirred by the sight of my work in print.

It is indeed an interesting book. Perhaps the most interesting thing about it is the clever way the publishers, with the low cunning characteristic of those who print my stuff, obscured the entire point of my poem. By some exclusive process, they have hollowed out each punctuation mark until it is but a shadow of its former self. Since my little effort is dependent on the punctuation used, I suffer a good bit. The spacing is ingenious, too; it gives to the printed page the quality of a conversation between a chronic stutterer and a man trying to talk and remove bits of celery from between his teeth simultaneously.

I wonder how they did it. FM† was up here and saw it, but his inherent fastidiousness prevented him from commenting at length. For a second, however, I saw flicker across his face the expression characteristic of him before he got religion.

My father tells me you wish to see me before I depart for the second biggest atomic bomb target north of Wilmington. I am now in bed with a sinister combination of asthma, nasal congestion, and Updike's Botch. As soon as I can prevail over my afflictions, I will hustle in to the Alma Mater (Latin for No Spitting, Please, Under Penalty of Fine And Prosecution).

Thank you once more for the surprising and welcome gift.

J. U.

* Updike's poem, "Move Over, Dodo," first published in *Chatterbox* in spring 1950, has been reprinted, with Lewis's assistance, in an annual publication, *Songs of Youth*, by the American Poetry Society.

† Fred Muth, high school classmate and co-valedictorian who had been a close friend since first grade.

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To **Bennett Cerf,** *cofounder of Random House publishers*

Plowville, PA
September 7, 1950

Dear Sir:

When, oh when, will Random House throw the palpitating public another *New Yorker* cartoon album? Nearly a decade has passed since the appearance of *The New Yorker War Album*, many changes have taken place. The two proponents of the captionless gag and the subtle series, Claude and Cobean, have become powers to be reckoned with.* The rise and fall of C. E. Martin occurred in the eight-year interval. Anatol Kovarsky zoomed out of nowhere to challenge Steinberg, and fail. Helen Hokinson has died; Mischa Richter has departed to the green fields of syndication; Richard Taylor has faded. Robert Day has switched from wash to a sloppy pen line. Newcomers like F. B. Modell and Dana Fradon flicker briefly. And all the time you twiddle your tomes, recording nothing of this.

Or look at the specialized anthologies. After Carl Rose, what? A book devoted to the superb wash work of Richard Decker or the skilled pen of Daniel Alain? No indeed, another one by Charles Addams. I might be shoving my neck out on this, perhaps Decker and Alain have been done by someone else. I am aware that Price (George and Garrett), Day (Chon), Hokinson, Steinberg, Arno, Dunn, Steig, Hoff, Rea, and (I think) Williams have fallen into the hands of lesser houses than yours, but that still leaves the two old stalwarts mentioned above, as well as the newer Claude Smith and Sam Cobean.

It has been some time since the public has been treated to a cartoon anthology. I have been told that they were (and possibly, still are) considered a drudge on the market. Yet the best of anything will always sell. Arno's *Sizzling Platter* is almost impossible to get today. *The New Yorker* has achieved a new stature in these last eight years. People who once dismissed it as an adult comic book now respect its mature and well-thought-out editorials, its fine, impartial news coverage, its tempered criticism, its contribution to the prose arts, and the fact that its cartoons are a painless commentary and an ingenious analysis. I know little about the publicational world, but I feel that at this time, an anthology of the best cartoons in the world, in an attractive book, with (and this is important) a fetching dust jacket, should sell.

You can be sure, at any rate, that I'll buy it.

Sincerely,
John Updike

* Claude Smith and Sam Cobean, cartoonists known for their work in *The New Yorker*. The many subsequent names mentioned in this letter were also *New Yorker* cartoonists.

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September 25, 1950

Dear Mother, Father, Grandpa, Grandma, Chipper, Jolson, and all the ships at sea:

Harvard is a difficult place in which to write a letter. It would seem that the number of students in Hollis Hall greatly outnumbers the number of rooms; in fact, the overflow seems to be all in my room. I cannot explain why this is, my roommate surely does all he can to discourage callers, a novel attitude that most of them find strangely alluring. I will try not to dwell on my roommate at unbearable length, but perhaps you might be interested. He, too, writes, although not terribly much. He has the nagging feeling that nothing he will write isgood enough, and, consequently, rather than put down an inept word, he plays tennis. He claims he wants to be a writer, but, in the short time I've been there, he has done nothing about it. This does not indicate, to him, at least, any inferiority, to me, a mass producer. In fact it seems to be a mark of fastidiousness that I lack.

Moody would be a kindly adjective; nasty might be better. Not that I dislike him. His faults are a pleasant complement to mine, although perhaps the pairing up of two writers might be as interesting an experiment as rubbing two tomcats together. His posture, for instance, is even worse than mine, and he is even sloppier than I (honest). I wish that he had brought along some of his work. He says it stinks, and I would be very grateful for some confirmation. At any rate, he has dismissed my work with an unconscious sneer, and has persistantly prevented me from getting any work done.

He is surely charming, but no less so than the majority of the people here. I am rather frightened by the immensity of intelligence and variety of talents displayed here. It would not, I fear, by interesting reading to enumerate all my comrades and their charms. One is a Negro who reads Greek and Latin for pleasure, as well as Hamlet six times a year. Another is a big, intense Maine boy with one of the most remarkable voices I have ever heard.

Wood is here. He came up to me the other day in the Union, and he seemed as imperterbable as ever. In this vast lump of intellect, however, he didn't look very impressive.

I sat down the other day to write you a letter, but I was so uneasy that the words were hopelessly confused. I feel much better now. The boys of Hollis, a very sharp bunch, seem also friendly and gay. Whether they will be gay while this poet is trying to study, is unknown.

There are three people here besides myself, all of them talking. This letter is a difficult thing, as I had anticipated. There is little tosay but that I am happy, and see no reason why I shall stop being. I am no longer scared, and I was homesick only after you left. I was glad to get your letter, though it took a long time to get from the hotel to the dorm. My correct address is

John Updike
Hollis Hall 11
Harvard College
Cambridge 38, Ill.

Write soon, and forward
my mail, I have gotten none.

John

First letter sent home from college, September 25, 1950

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## To **Plowville**[*]

11 Hollis Hall, Harvard College
September 25, 1950

Dear Mother, Father, Grandpa, Grandma, Chipper, Jolson, and all the ships at sea:

Harvard is a difficult place in which to write a letter. It would seem that the number of students in Hollis Hall greatly outnumbers the number of rooms; in fact, the overflow seems to be all in my room. I cannot explain why this is, my roommate[†] surely does all he can to discourage callers, a novel attitude that most of them find strangely alluring. I will try not to dwell on my roommate at unbearable length, but perhaps you might be interested. He, too, writes, although not terribly much. He has the nagging feeling that nothing he will write is good enough, and, consequently, rather than put down an inept word, he plays tennis. He claims he wants to be a writer, but, in the short time I've been here, he has done nothing about it. This does not indicate, to him, at least, any inferiority to me, a mass producer. In fact, it seems to be a mark of fastidiousness that I lack.

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* Updike employed various salutations in letters to his mother, father, maternal grandparents, and family pets (Chipper, Jolson—both dogs), who all resided in the sandstone farmhouse, on eighty acres, in Plowville, Pennsylvania.

† Robert Christopher "Kit" Lasch, a midwesterner (born in Omaha, Nebraska, and raised in a Chicago suburb) and the son of progressive intellectual parents.

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John Updike
Hollis Hall 11
Harvard College
Cambridge 38, I11.

Write soon, and forward
my mail, I have gotten none.
Johnny

## To **Plowville**

11 Hollis Hall, Harvard College
Monday night [October 2, 1950]

Dear Mother, family, and Mrs. Benedict:†

Each day your letter finds a pleased, if disturbed, reader. I am at that stage when correspondence, hitherto only a medium of conversation with Bennett Cerf, has become an essential, as well as time-consuming, activity. It is difficult to imagine homesickness when one is home; now the prospect of three months in this cathedral to the rounded man is most unpleasant. The college itself has done nothing wrong; I am delighted by the way the Yard looks on a sunny day, and the way the front of Widener Library lights up at night. I revel in the abundance of food, of independence, of thought. And things seem to go well. My qualms about calculus may be refuted; I may be able to concentrate on my old foe, Latin; perhaps I can conquer the bitter feeling that each awakening brings. Even today I passed the Step Test,‡ an ordeal

* Updike was accompanied to Harvard by his mother and his aunt. His mother's first letter, of September 21, 1950, was written on stationery from the Commander, a hotel located on the edge of the Harvard campus.

† Mrs. Hazel V. Benedict handled insurance and accounting work for the Updikes. It is not clear why he addresses her in this salutation, though likely for comic effect. In addition, now that he is at Harvard, where there are more expenses, communication with Mrs. Benedict regarding family finances has increased.

‡ A cardiac stress test.

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imposed upon each freshman; and a physical test that my husky comrades were confident I could not meet. (How little they know how much their doubt spurred me on.) I paraded my scabby belly,* and received not even raised eyebrows, but courtesy and a blood-chilling disregard of my affliction. Even tonight I was told that of five poems I typed and three cartoons I inked in Sunday night, the *Lampoon*† was considering printing one (possibly two) of the former, and one of the latter. I seemed to be the brightest prospect in sight, as least in my sight.

And yet each new day brings new terror: tomorrow I take my first swimming lesson, tomorrow I confer for the last time with the adviser on my schedule, tomorrow I must canvas for *Lampoon* subscriptions. I have yet to have a section meeting, an exam, a grade, any indication of what sort of student I am. It is unfair to Harvard and to you to be anything but delighted at this wonderful place; no one (but my roommate, who thinks things are rotten) could find serious fault with anything. On each side you find recreation, advice, comfort, beauty, thought, stimulation. The people are all too kind; the big city throbs nearby; we move, casual, sure, laughing in a sheltered little world whose only impositions are upon a parent's pocketbook and a poet's tender temperament.

The week ago you mentioned seems like a month, the months ahead look like years. I am scared; and the most frightening thing is I have nothing to fear. I once said that I enjoyed beginnings and hated endings; I feel now that I don't like either. I am liked, admired for my few talents (and how big they looked in Shillington); thus far I am a success. But the entire thing is too blank, too huge, to look forward to. (Pardon the construction; I'm tired.)

As to elbow rubbing: my time is so fully consumed by my worries and my studies that I have no urge to speak to anyone. I miss my ladies of Shillington; as yet, I seek no substitutes. Your son is much more passive than you would imagine.

I spoke to Mr. Morley‡ once, and we snub each other pretty frequently. I am also insulted by your slur upon my abilities and diligence as a missive-writer: I have written Jean a long and comprehensive letter, and Mary a less complete but equally delightful one, hitting her up for a *Lampoon* subscription.§ The mail is coming along fine, and the popularity of my room is the

* Updike was self-conscious about his psoriasis.

† Updike's desire to attend Harvard was, in part, to write and draw for the *Harvard Lampoon*, an undergraduate monthly. Originally modeled on the English humor magazine *Punch*, the *Lampoon* by the 1950s was imitating *The New Yorker*.

‡ Barry Morley, a Harvard classmate who grew up in Greenwich, Connecticut, home to Updike's aunt Mary.

§ Mary was his father's sister: Mary Ella Updike Updike, known in the family as MEUU. Having married her first cousin Donald, she lived with him and their daughter, Jean, in Greenwich. Updike viewed these relatives as "rich" and cultured: they lived in "a big white house" an hour

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least of my worries. The offer to get me a single room is absurd. I do use the Lamont Library a great deal, as well as the reading rooms in the Harvard Union.

Don't feel bad. This, too, shall pass away.

Johnny

## To **Plowville**

11 Hollis Hall, Harvard College
October 16, 1950

Dear Mother, Father, and all the rest of the Plowville aristocrats:

Deepest and most sincere apologies for not having written before.* A letter takes so little out of one's day that one might write more often. Actually, quite literally, I don't have the time. I do not understand where all the time gets to, for there seems to be the usual number of hours in a day, i.e., 24. But the past three nights I have been working until 2 o'clock in the morning, and I have not gone out a single night. In fact, the only luxuries I have allowed myself are going [to] the Cornell–Harvard game, sleeping until 12:15 on Sunday, and going out to the Square intermittently for a hot dog. Otherwise, my day seems to be a constant chore. Saturday (or was it Friday?) night, I spent three hours on one math problem. In the past 30 hours I have taken 22 pages of notes, 16 on reading and 6 on lectures. I have decided that the best way to impress a fact on one's subconscious is to write it down, and that is what I am doing. My math section becomes more and more incompetent as the days go on, and Professor Havelock† grows more frightening. I am allowed to stay in the Latin class, for I got an average of 82 on the Latin test. This is not much to crow about, especially since there is one smart Jewess in the class who got 100 without even trying. However, perhaps I can assimilate a bit of the spirit of Virgil and calculus eventually, and they will become easier. My two reading courses, Social Science and English Lit, are much more fun. I think that I would certainly enjoy majoring in English Lit. I've never read, after all, and now is the time. Besides, what else is there?

---

from Manhattan; Mary had worked as Edmund Wilson's secretary at *The New Republic* and had given her brother's family a subscription to *The New Yorker*; during a family visit in 1944, she took her twelve-year-old nephew to the Museum of Modern Art.

* This was Updike's ninth letter to his mother and family since arriving at Harvard. Over that same period of just more than three weeks, she had sent him seventeen letters. Throughout his college years, Linda would continue to send him two to three letters a week; he in turn would write at least weekly.

† Eric Havelock, professor of Greek and Latin.

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I keep your letters (unanswered) in my desk drawer, and try to answer them en masse, although they all demand an extensive reply. They are of considerable comfort to me, and I wish that I could do them more justice. Your series on middle age and youth is really a masterpiece, and the only thing that will prevent the eventual publication of a significant volume titled "Letters of Linda Updike to Her Son in College," would be my not lasting long enough to accumulate 200 pages.*

I see no reason why you cannot finish "Dear Juan."† My roommate, in comparison to your page or two per day, spent one whole evening writing two sentences, which I told him were over-adjectived and artificial. He agreed, but only after calling me a rhyming, shallow hack.

Grandma and Grandpa seem to be in their respective fettles, and I am glad. Don't worry about your animosity toward the paternal ancestor.‡ It's dandy material for a novel.

It's time to eat. I [will] finish this later. Hang on, won't you?

Ah! Today, for the first time, I deliberately snubbed a meal at the Union. Thus far I have meekly eaten almost every revolting gooey concoction thrown at me, but today, with the almost regurgitating mixture of spaghetti and cooked red beets, I walked out. I ate two hamburgers at a small luncheonette near the Square, and haven't felt so well since I left Stephens'.§ Then, the whole episode going to my head, I arranged for my overcoat, which I have had to use as a raincoat, to be pressed, I bought some graph paper and a yellow tablet, an entire book of three-cent stamps, four cheap handkerchiefs, and a quarter pound of cashews. My! This has been an exciting day. I figure that I have saved an enormous amount of forsaking social life, hence feel entitled to a spree now and then. One of these days I am going to have to buy a warm coat to wear around the Yard, a pair of slacks (perhaps) and some ties. I hesitate to take the plunge, though; it's been so long since I spent any money.

* Regarding "middle age" and "youth," Linda wrote in a letter of October 9, 1950: "College seems to be an instrument designed by the middle-aged to retard the young (to preserve their own jobs a little longer). That's all it is. But since the old are sitting squarely on all the good jobs, there's no better place to wait your turn than where you are." Linda's letters to her son have not been published.

† "Dear Juan" was the working title for his mother's historical novel about the Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León.

‡ In a letter of October 10, 1950, Linda described her conversation with her husband, Wesley, regarding their son's College Board scores in Latin and mathematics. Linda's father, John Franklin Hoyer, supposedly asleep in a chair, interjected in his "most oracular voice": "Johnny gets entirely too much correspondence and advice from the outside." Realizing that she had left an earlier discarded letter to her son lying about, which presumably her father had read, she concludes: "Sometimes I wonder why Grandpa and I must live together. Yet there is usually enough truth in his pronouncements to make me feel guilty. Why?"

§ Stephens' Luncheonette (Shillington), where Updike often spent his late afternoons during high school.

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Harvard is a contradictory place. Nowhere are you allowed so much freedom, and given so little time to enjoy it. The rules are so few and so basic that they make the Ten Commandments look like a tangle of legal gobbledygook. The proctor (who lives under our room) doesn't seem to mind great noise, horseplay, or drunkenness. In fact, it was he who gave us the idea of sticking burning paper into letter slots. But, regardless of the tolerance, the fact remains that anyone who takes it all seriously doesn't have the time to be naughty. Of all the vices I so painstakingly accumulated at Shillington, the only one I am able to hang onto is smoking, and I am scared to death that is going to go, too.

Another contradiction: Practically every course, as my atheistic roommate has bitterly noted, seems to be a course in theology. I have been exposed in English to an analysis of Anglo-Saxon ethics and beliefs, in Social Science to the factors that enabled Christianity to shape a vast culture, in Latin to the theology of the Roman. Only mathematics has held back. And yet, in the local movie house (in which I saw *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Crime and Punishment*, in French) every time a cross, a priest, a cathedral, or the name of God is mentioned, a rash of coughing breaks out. Furthermore, as a last and to me especially entertaining paradox, on the top of one of the most ancient and traditional buildings is mounted a bright red riot light, which they flash whenever there is a Rinehart Riot,* and the Cambridge police rush into the Yard. I have seen it work only once, one night when about 400 freshmen were throwing words and beer cans out in the yard, but I feel sure as the year goes on it will work many times. After the Cornell game, a group of frosh defended the goalposts against the Cornellians, and then uprooted them and brought them, in one piece, to the yard, where they draped it over the statue of John Harvard. Fun!

My cold is fine. I'm scared to death I'll get one, and miss a few classes. That would be the end.

I think I will now go down and take a swimming lesson. That, and then the long, grim night. I hope to retire at twelve tonight, though.

Johnny

* Though Updike will offer a different explanation in a later letter, according to Harvard lore, John Rinehart, class of 1900, had been in much demand as a tutor. Attempting to see whether he was in, students would sometimes call to his window, "Rinehart, O Rinehart!" As the cry swept across Harvard Yard, other students would loudly repeat it. This campus ritual continued for decades after Rinehart's graduation, with its origins becoming increasingly obscure.

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## To **Plowville**

11 Hollis Hall, Harvard College
October 23, 1950

Dear Plowvillians:

There was a great deal I forgot to tell you in my last letter, and I will try to clean it all up now.

On Thursday, I went to hear Carl Sandburg read, orate, and strum a guitar in front of an audience at the New Lecture Hall. He was an impressive sight, and the man who introduced him compared him to the Bunker Hill Monument (only in institutional value, not in stature or permanency), and indeed, Mr. Sandburg gives that impression. His hair is bountiful, white, and parted in the middle (beware!), his manner is casual and confident, and his poems are idiotic. He ran way over his allotted time, and great herds rose up and thundered from the theatre, but he countered with telling how he used to sing his songs alone in a hotel room, so he'd really feel much more like singing if the hall was empty. It never quite was, for a few people like myself, who were paralyzed from the waist down with sheer fatigue, had to be carried out. He did get a standing ovation, though, although it might have been just a lot of people putting on their coats.

Yesterday I went over to Memorial Chapel to hear a most remarkable reverend orate on "Man cannot live on bread alone." He was colored (in fact, my friend was colored too, the Cincinnati Virgil virtuoso) and had the most theatric manner of anyone I've ever spied in the pulpit. Furthermore, I had an excuse to don my blue suit, and it looked and felt elegant. I believe I will try to attend every Sunday. One feels good all day, even after you've taken off the blue suit.

And, to top this list of celebrities, Ed French, the philosopher from Tacoma, Wash., who has just come out of a five-day fast, went down to Boston and brought back a young bass clarinetist from the touring orchestra of Sir Thomas Beecham. The chap proved to be frightfully keen, and a jolly good time had by all, listening to him speak at length on Socialism, modern England, the English school system, Winston Churchill, and anecdotes about the revered conductor, Sir Beecham. We were all staggered by the effrontery Ed displayed, but the guy claimed he had a delightful time, and said, among other things, that we were the first Americans he had encountered who seemed to read books. We took him over to Howard Johnson's and got him some razzberry ice cream, a delight hitherto foreign to him. Judging from his conversation, England is pretty austere right now. Cripps is a fanatic, Churchill is primarily a war minister, and England realizes it, and

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he was fatigued to the point of staying in bed for a day after watching the speed with which New York City seems to gyrate.

"he" in the above sentence refers to the Englishman. Incidentally, the next time we get to England, he wants us to look him up.

A Rinehart riot is a tradition at Harvard, on par with desecrating the statue of John Harvard and getting drunk on football nights. As myth would have it, there was once a small, maladjusted grind called Rinehart (a freshman) who had no friends. Hence no one stood beneath his window and called for him, as was the custom for other, less anti-social, Harvardians. So he got into the rather irrational habit of standing beneath his own window and yelling, as loud as he could, "Rinehart!" Eventually this got on the nerves of other dwellers in the Hall [so] that they had a demonstration, which is synonymous with riot, just as here Egress symbolizes Exit. Now, in theory, at the call of Rinehart, freshmen stream out into the Yard and throw things at each other, like epithets and fists. This [is] usually presented after an exam period, thus we may not expect a really impressive one until Mid-Years. There was one fairly well-organized attempt, but the cops, who have been rather leery of such goings-on since last year, when about 700 freshmen paid rough tribute to Mr. Conant* at his residence, broke the thing up, but quickly.

I did not yet get my copy of *Different*.† Where is it? I am quite anticipatory.

Tell Daddy to keep quiet about my Latin score. I wasn't at all hot, and I still associate Professor Havelock with God in His Wrath on Judgment Day. The man terrified me to death, although he really is only an oratorical philosopher. I think he is quite intolerant of inferior minds, and I know mine falls in this unhappy category.

Hour exams are coming up within the next two weeks, and, with them, will come a concrete idea of how long I may expect to last at this book-lined Gehenna.

Your af'c'nt, l'ving, and b'fuddled son,
Johnny

P.S. Army = 49
Harvard = 0

* James Bryant Conant was president of Harvard from 1933 to 1953.
† Literary journal that published Updike's poem, "The Lonely One," in its issue of November–December 1950.

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## To **Linda Grace Hoyer Updike**

11 Hollis Hall, Harvard College
December 4, 1950

Dear Mother:

Today's mail has been singularly depressing. I got a bank statement which has a funereal quality about it, to the tune of a $546.70 balance. I have no idea what I do with all the money. I surely don't get any pleasure (in fact, I'm not even aware of spending it) from its drifting away.

Then there was a letter from some figure on the West Coast who wants me to join a club for amateur journalists. The missive was mimeographed in a coal cellar, apparently, and its message was most uninspiring.

Your letter, however, was by far the biggest single influence. You are of course absolutely right about my calling her* instead of home. I sort of thought it was the wrong thing to do, but then I didn't have anything to tell you folks, [and] your last Nancy letter was so overwhelmingly complimentary that I felt compelled to do something by way of celebration. So, on one of those mad impulses that figure in English novels, I did call her up, if only to congratulate her on the class play. I will never do it again. Unless I break an arm, get put on pro, or something else really spectacular, I will never again endure the rigors of long-distance conversation. Kit, incidentally, likes Nancy even less than you do. He is in complete accord with you on this subject, and will back you at every move.

Your biting revealing of Nancy as a sparrow with a broken wing was well-supplemented by the simultaneous arrival of one of the most dismal *Chatterboxes* I have ever seen.† The entire thing is an atrocity, but especially unnerving are the boxes that read "All the food looks Quite Yummy, but do have pity on your tummy." These are, I think, a new low in forced rhyme and unoriginal thought, and I feel sure that no one but Nancy is responsible for them. And it is a matter of record that she wrote the editorial, a masterpiece of ill-stated trite thought. In a way, I am glad for this exposé, for I had almost

* Nancy Wolf, Updike's high school girlfriend, a senior at Shillington High School. In a letter of November 18, 1950, Linda, after attending the senior class play, was uncharacteristically complimentary of Nancy's performance as the lead, which inspired Updike to telephone and congratulate her. As he wrote in a letter to Plowville of November 23, 1950: "It was a mistake. I just lack the ability to make a long-distance call. It really must be a Freudian fear of operators." Linda had long disapproved of the relationship, certain that Nancy was set on charming her son and keeping him in Shillington, a town Linda had never much liked and wanted her son to escape.

† In a letter of December 1, 1950, Linda wrote that "having seen her browbeat her classmates on the stage, I am no longer amused by the flutterings. They are like the broken-wing act some of the other little birds put on when they are in danger and I certainly hope you see them as such." Wolf had served with Updike as an associate editor of *Chatterbox* and continued to write for the school newspaper.

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forgotten how commonplace Miss Wolf is. But the reminder has, as usual, muddled me. And Harvard is a place where one cannot be muddled for very long and live. I am writing this letter, even though I sent one off just this morning, mainly as an excuse for not doing my math. I just don't feel up to an essentially light-hearted subject like calculus.

Further fragments of melancholia: How can Daddy "bleed through his skin," and what can be done to stop it? I'll do whatever I can to prod the lethargic *Lampoon* staff into action, but their purpose at the circulation seems to be of the same general function as a white-shoed paperweight.*

Johnny

## To **Plowville**

11 Hollis Hall, Harvard College
February 24, 1951

Dear Mother Father Grandpa Grandma:

You are quite right. My letters home have been infrequent. I fear I cannot plead perpetual activity, either, for the boy from Plowville has at last gotten sufficiently efficient study habits as to allow him much time for conversation, drawing, and even letter writing. The causes are more subtle. One of them is the paucity of my own mail. I have stopped writing to Nancy, and, after a few vain missives from her deploring my inactivity, she has ceased all correspondence. One time you said that I was not to "overdo this Nancy Wolf business." I have always kept that advice in mind, and our differences in the matter resulted in our various interpretations of the moment when excess was reached. That time has now come, as you shall see from my highly commendable behavior this spring vacation. Furthermore, you write only on alternate days now, Fred, Peggy, and Allen no longer write (and I cannot say that I regret it overmuch), and Joan Venne, the only other correspondee I am keeping, is herself too busy at Webber College to be very punctilious or prolific. Hence my mailbox holds only your letters and an occasional bleak missive from the university. Many days pass with no letter at all, and mail has ceased to be a major factor in my life.

* Linda's letter of December 1 opened enigmatically: "Despite Daddy's bleeding through the skin and my attempts at evangelism, you'll find that your parents have not made any appreciable progress on the steep path to sainthood." In a later letter, of December 7, 1950, she will try to clarify: "Daddy has been bleeding through the skin at odd times ever since we met. He thinks it establishes his descent from royalty and I think it proves his eventual canonization. At any rate, he does not lose enough blood to worry him and it should not worry you." As for the *Lampoon*, Linda, having taken a subscription, has not yet received the current issue.

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The prime reason, however, is one that requires some skill in stating. In this last month I have undergone the final adjustment: I feel at home at Harvard. And when one likes a place enough to call it home, it seems incongruous to be writing home. Hence my neglect of you, while far from commendable, has been a sort of healthy sign. In the first three months my situation [was] simple: my home was in Plowville, and I was being cruelly retained at a place that frightened and abused me. So it was important to me to maintain constant touch with the Pennsylvania Updikes. Now the two places are both pleasurable to be at, in different ways, perhaps, and no doubt I would still prefer the tired red sofa to the black Harvard chair; but the soul, when accepting at last a new environment, finds that that environment is complete in itself, demanding constant, if leisurely, attention. However, I look forward to Pennsylvania in the spring, and I shall try to write with more frequency and thoroughness.

I feel even more guilty about the negligence with which I have treated the research you asked for.* Yesterday I spent some time on it, and the results were as follows. The book you really should have is *Rise of the Spanish Empire*, by R. B. Merriman, in four volumes (1918). The first and last volumes are not relevant to your period, but the two middle ones deal with your period, and, if you wish, I am sure I can get you the books second hand. Just say the word. The date of the Battle of Olmedo was easy—August 20, 1467. However, the other two are not so easy, and in a couple hours yesterday I got nowhere with them. Anent San Servas: Lamont Library has quite a few huge historical atlases, but none of them had this town in it. I then went to the great Widener Library, and the librarian went to a lot of trouble to decide that they didn't know either, suggesting I go up to the Map Room. The Map Room, however, was closed, and is not open on Saturday, so I shall try to locate this difficult little town on Monday. I will send you the latitude and longitude, and you may decide if it is the modern Hervás. But the biggest stinker is Núñez de Guzmán. Merriman mentioned him only in this connection. He was appointed in December 13, 1527, as president of the first audiencia of New Spain. Describing him as "the notorious Nuño de Guzmán," it said he "proved an unscrupulous tyrant," not very helpful to the picture of a benevolent university professor. The book mentioned him only in this connection, instigating a minor exploration into Mexico which can scarcely be relevant. He was absent from all the conventional historical references, and I lost him in my search for San Servas. Furthermore, I feel

* In a letter of January 17, 1951, Linda asked for her son's assistance with three matters pertaining to her unpublished novel on Ponce de León: find the date of the battle of Olmedo, determine if San Servas is the same place as Hervás on modern maps, and learn "what there is to know about [Perez Núñez de Guzmán] before my 'writer's imagination' makes a university professor out of him."

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that any book doing him justice will be written in Spanish. However, I will pursue the nebulous gentleman with renewed vigor when Widener opens again on Monday.

I feel rather ashamed of my *Lampoon* friends for failing to send you your subscription, but I will see to it, enclosing in it a table poster for PBH* which I think far transcends in excellence the other I did, with the big flaw of the E in "solicitors." -ers is acceptable, apparently, but only begrudgingly. I have been doing cartoons for the *Lampoon* this week, most of them regretfully placed in the dormant, or rejected, drawer, but the next issue should bear some of your son's pen work, plus a lengthy poem on illumination of letters.

The smoker last night was characterized by Sally Rand's amazing dullness, for she fooled everyone by reading a long and trite speech on Communism. Morey Amsterdam, plus some expert local talent, proved entertaining enough to save the evening, though.†

Many thanks for the write-up in the paper; few things give me more pleasure than making news. It was accurate and well-expressed, even down to the number of pages in *Brooks House News*. It is strange that I did not make the *Chatterbox*, but we all aim so high and fall so short.

My English 1 section man, Mr. Ferry,‡ and I have been having some talks on poetry lately that have led him to offer me the special privilege of doing some work on my own, with the advantage of his help, to further my skill at explicating and reading good poetry.

At this point you may observe the principal reason for the evasiveness and brevity of my letters. I simply get tired of typing, and the paragraphs get shorter, the thoughts more incoherent, and the typos more numerous, until, my stamina exhausted, I peck feebly at the closing message, and sign it

Johnny

* Phillips Brooks House, a building and center on Harvard's campus dedicated to social service. Both Updike and Lasch were contributors to the *Brooks House News*.

† The famous fan dancer Sally Rand, along with the comedian Morey Amsterdam, had performed at a Freshman Smoker in Harvard's Sanders Theatre the night before.

‡ David Ferry, then a graduate student at Harvard, who would later become an award-winning poet and translator, known for his translations of *Gilgamesh*, Horace, and Virgil.

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## To **Joan Venne,**
*high school friend enrolled at Webber College, in Babson, Florida*

11 Hollis Hall, Harvard College
May 20, 1951

My dear Miss Venne:

There are several possible explanations for your strange silence.

1. You are dead. However, if this were the case, I feel certain that the event would not have gone so unnoticed as to escape the attention of my father, and would thence have been communicated to me in one of my mother's chatty letters.

2. You are pregnant. While this might have been hushed up whenever my father came around, I do not see why it should bring about a lack of correspondence. My limited understanding of the condition does not include the fact that pregnancy brings about illiteracy. In fact, were I pregnant (just supposing) I would hasten to inform all my friends, and then anxiously await the inevitable deluge of congratulatory cards, letters, et cetera.

3. You have forgotten my address. This is easily remedied by telling you that it is Hollis 11, Harvard University, Cambridge 38, Mass.

4. You have forgotten who I am, or that I ever existed. There is little I can do to convince you that I once knew you, but you might consult Joan, or anyone else to whom you write, and ask about John H. Updike. They should tell you that he was a tall twitchy individual with a distasteful laugh and an irritating habit of agreeing with no one. I had freckles, and very seldom was my hair combed.

5. You have forgotten how to write. However discouraging this might be to Miss Showalter,* it is not unlikely, especially in the peculiar intellectual climate at Webber. If such is the case, please draw me a few pictures, nothing fancy, of course.

6. You are out of stamps. They are available, I am given to understand, at any post office. Post offices have been set up in Florida, although at the present stage of colonial development they are bound to be somewhat inelegant, much like trading outposts in the Great Northwest.

7. You no longer give a damn. This possibility is a likely one, and if it is the case, I express my regret and would like to know how I have offended you.

8. You feel that we will meet soon enough, and written communication is an unnecessary alternate to the spoken communication that shortly should be possible. (I assume that in the primitive land of sand-dune sex you have

* Kathryn Showalter taught college-prep English at Shillington High School and was known for her strict methods in penmanship.

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not forgotten spoken English, all being reduced to a series of grunts, signifying acquiescence and ecstasy, in that order.) However, may I hasten to point out that we will not meet for some time. You will get to Shillington almost a week before me, and, unless there is some exchange between us until then, we are likely to meet as total strangers.

9. Other explanation. Signify.

Please write one of these numbers on a postcard and send it to

Johnny

## To **Linda Grace Hoyer Updike**

11 Hollis Hall, Harvard College
May 22, 1951

Mother, mother:

What is this amazing incident you speak of?* I am delighted to hear it, in my new impotence I have taken on the characteristics of the sterile village gossip, and not nearly enough dirt can be shipped to me about Miss Wolf and her rejuvenated amours. Anent your last letter: We shall skip over the metaphor of Nancy emerging from a sheep's clothing with all her teeth showing, and get right to the core, the pulsating heart, of your letter. You have touched on the most interesting point of all, i.e., what was father doing in the tall grass? I will not offer any solution of this problem of my own, resting assured that his explanation will be far more ingenious. But there are other matters.

Like, where is this tall grass? I wasn't aware that there was any grass in Shillington tall enough to conceal two (at least) rolling people. How tall is this grass? Did it adequately conceal the two rollers, or was it just tall enough to be deceptive, and they were no more concealed than the proverbial ostrich with his head in the proverbial sand? Or was it quite tall, of the height popular in the Transvaal, and did Daddy go into it with shorts and a cork hat on, looking, perhaps, for Dr. Livingstone? Was this grass set aside for the purpose, as sort of a rolling ground provided by the borough, or was it far out in Slate Hill or

* In a letter of May 18, 1951, Linda wrote: "Miss Wolf . . . seems to have taken off the sheep's clothing at last and come out into the spring sunshine with all her teeth showing. Daddy thinks good taste should prevent any mention of it in letters to you. But when he, your father, that is, found Nancy and Barry [Hampe] rolling in the tall grass yesterday he was so pleased that I thought you'd be glad to know. And after a whole winter with a guilty conscience about all the things I've said about Nancy, I was so pleased I forgot to ask your father what he was doing in the long grass. So we find ourselves again in the position of the florist who threw stones. But, with all possible consideration for any sentiment you may be coddling for Miss Wolf, I can't help being glad to know that at least some of my forecasting was correct and that you had the good sense to be realistic about this very romantic young woman."

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near the Dives' residence, and was Daddy taking a long walk? Or was he in the car, driving into the tall grass for the fun of it, as his own method of interpreting the lusty call of spring? What is meant by rolling? Were they doing an impromptu act of the sort seen at S.H.S. gym exhibitions, to be finaled by a two-person pyramid? Or did they roll in the way that Jack and Jill tumbled down the hill, head over heels? Or is rolling transitive, and they were rolling something, logs, perhaps, to the merry tune of "Paul Bunyan's Ox."*

Enough for the details. A more interesting problem is: what happened after Daddy discovered them? Was there a long, embarrassed pause, broken only by Barry Hampe cheerfully saying, "O hello, Mr. Updike. Just rolling, you know." Or did Daddy open the conversation by recounting his rolling days? Or was the encounter less fortunate: did Nancy break down and cry, did Barry rise up and strike Daddy, did Daddy snort and label the entire pastime one of the 21 forms of insanity, Escapism, for example? Was Daddy alone? Or was he accompanied by someone else, Mrs. Schrack, Roy Geiger, Cookie Bidding, Frank Martin, or LeRoy Hill, to mention a few possibilities? Or did the entire faculty come upon them, and Daddy just wants to hog all the credit for himself? Speak up, speak up.

Why should good taste prevent mentioning it to me? Rolling in the grass, *per se*, while somewhat non-constructive, seems to be such an amazing thing for people to be doing as to be beyond the bourgeoise morality that has created the concepts of good taste. In a way, it is a good sign—the last people Daddy saw rolling on the grass were Shirley Hulsizer and Dick Stettler. Shirley, you may remember, was forced into marriage with someone else. Indeed, rolling in tall or short grass is such an athletic exercise that it seems to leave the participants exhausted and harmless.

While my discussion of this problem is far from complete, I hope that I have pointed out the avenues of study with sufficient acumen so I can go on to other, duller matters.

Daddy's plan to get a '37 Chevy does not seem sound to me; it suggests for one thing, the completion of a cycle, and all cyclic views are in essence, stagnant ones. More important, why Daddy should be led to believe that any '37 Chevy can be capable of dependable transportation after surviving fifteen years of earth-shaking events is beyond me. I feel that had a Chevy stood in a garage for that time, it would have degenerated pitifully if only through sheer apathy. However, I'm sure that everybody knows that.

* Responding in a letter of May 26, 1951, Linda will write: "In answer to your question: they were just rolling. Daddy was trundling the Buick along Neatock's Alley and the happy pair were on the playground. They didn't see Daddy and he sincerely regrets having seen them. Why, I can't imagine."

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Mervine* being a "paratroop" (something like being a bivouac?) is rather enticing in itself. What does Mervine do with his three television sets when he is paratrooping? Wouldn't they weight him down?

This typewriter got temperamental again recently, and I just today bailed it out of the repair shop, at the cost of $3. No, I am not treating it roughly; it is just responding to the Updike touch with all things mechanical.

That, I guess, is about all. I hope that I shall hear much more about this rolling in the grass, plus newer developments, like Barry and Nancy being found in the boiler room, doing double crostics.

O yes. While I hate to add to the already formidable number of people telling you to read things, I do advise strongly Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. [*In margin*: I'll bring it home with me. Until then, relax.] It deals with human relations in an extraordinarily vivid way, and the central figure is somewhat of a Supermamma.†

Give my love to Jolson and Chipper, although they never seemed very anxious to get it. And tell Grandmother positively not to look up the road for me before the twelfth of June. Go easy on the snailman, Grandfather, like all government workers, he means well.

Johnny

## To **Lilly March,** *columnist for the* Reading Eagle

Plowville, PA
[August 10 or 11, 1951]

*March reprinted this letter in her newspaper column, "As Seen by Her," on August 13, 1951. Prefacing Updike's letter, she wrote: "We are honored to have on our summertime staff a Harvard undergraduate, one John H. Updike, who is majoring in literature, which he regards as highly impractical but fun. That it may turn out to be practical as well is nicely illustrated in a letter he wrote to me taking me to task for my stand on a well-known periodical, publishing under this heading last Friday. Mr. Updike, who flattered me greatly by stating that I was alive and THINKING in 1925, says":*

* David H. Mervine, a high school classmate of Updike's who enlisted as a paratrooper and whose father, as Linda reports in her letter of May 18, bought him a new Dodge and three television sets.
† A term sometimes used between mother and son, referring to a particularly well-equipped, energetic, and capable mother, with an ability to accomplish almost anything, yet who can easily become the object of satire through her misdirected energy.

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My Dear Miss March:

In a recent column* you explain why you are dropping your subscription to a certain magazine. For reasons of policy, I presume, you neglect to name this unfortunate publication—I shall be equally coy. Even though you refer to it as a "little leopard" (hinting at a jungle-like quality) I have inferred that you speak of a metropolitan weekly with a modest but arrogant circulation. If this inference is incorrect, then you need read no further. You might have meant a ladies' magazine which has a party line as rigid and sterile as that of, say, either the Communist or Prohibitionist parties; if that is the case, let me congratulate you upon this action and I can't understand why you bought the thing in the first place.

If it is the one I have in mind, however, I think you are making a mistake. You were one of those people fortunate enough to be alive and thinking in 1925, when Eustace Tilley discreetly showed his face upon the newsstands for the first time. And I cannot help but think that part of your action is prompted by the gray might of nostalgia. You long for the good old days, that first golden decade when Soglow's little king had not been demoted to the comic strips and Arno's humor was not diluted by good taste; when E. B. White turned out "Talk of the Town" single-handed and Rea Irvin did every other cover; when Dorothy Parker lamented her love life and Alexander Woollcott spat upon the world in a prissy furor; when the Algonquin was more than a memory and Harold Ross entered the office one day to find a telephone booth overturned and in it James Thurber, a large lily in his hand. Many of the golden names—Woollcott, Parker, Robert Benchley, Ralph Barton—are gone now; many, tarnished—White writes scarcely anything any more. Thurber himself is getting nostalgic. And you are unhappy because a gay adolescence has passed. Genius is gone, leaving only talent. You have witnessed (heaven forbid this phrase) the passing of an era.

Is this so? Certainly, the magazine is showing its age. Maturing is a mixed blessing, but failing to mature is an undiluted curse. Eustace Tilley is gray now about the temples, his walk is less buoyant, he pants slightly as he climbs the steep staircase to the humor he attained once without apparent straining. But he is not as ancient as you would have it; he is still wearing a contemplative sneer. Read for "violent impartiality" Wolcott Gibbs attacking a bad musical, John McCarten disdainfully brushing aside a mediocre film, or, specifically, Alfred Kazin's panning of the over-touted treatise *Worlds in Collision*. And impressive indeed was the recent, snarling crusade against the blaring commercials in Grand Central.

* In her column of August 10, 1951, March accused her "once-favorite magazine" of following a "party line," injecting politics into its pages, and growing dull to the point she was about to cancel her subscription. Updike's response is the first of his many epistolary defenses of *The New Yorker*.

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You tell the reader of the guilt complex that led you to sacrifice eight out of 11 magazine subscriptions to aid the war effort. Was it not this same feeling that led this magazine to devote an entire issue to Hersey's Hiroshima, that led a so-called "adult comic book" (a railroad official so called it) into some of the best reporting of the last World War? Is this not the "sense of mission" that, even though you share it, you condemn in a publication that, like yourself, is vaguely troubled? This spirit, this anxiety has forced the irresponsible magazine that once announced it was not for the old lady from Dubuque into formulating a party line, and hewing to it.

I am not sure what you mean by party line. You talk as though it permeated the publication cover to cover, but can it affect the short stories, the cartoons, the columns on tennis and horse racing, the Parisian letter from Genêt, the poetry of Morris Bishop and Phyllis McGinley? Does this party line assert itself in a political essay by Richard Rovere or a thoughtful paragraph in "Talk of the Town"? Does it make one bit less funny a Charles Addams study of the grotesque, an iota less powerful an O'Hara fragment of modern America, a smidgeon less wistful a Thurber dip into the Columbus of his childhood?

Your "party line" can mean but one thing: an occasional tendency to take things with seriousness. Not a function of a humor magazine, perhaps, but this one has long ago ceased to be just that. It is above all a timely magazine; and now is not the time for continuous laughter. It has recognized that this is not 1925 but a time when the nation is as sensitive and as jumpy as an exposed nerve. It is to the credit of a magazine when it recognizes the necessity for anxiety.

You speak of dullness. Dullness is a relative quality. I, for example, found the poet Lucretius quite dull, not because he was, but because I thought he must be. Study of Latin was a repugnant idea. Perhaps equally repugnant is the thought that a magazine that once thumbed its nose seems to have shifted its hand and sadly scratches an ear. But however tired it makes us feel, we must acknowledge the integrity of the magazine that has allowed itself to express a very unurbane, unsophisticated, even unfunny sense of mission. I do hope that you and the weekly will not part company. You never needed each other more.

With lamentable haste,
The Office Boy

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## To **Plowville**

Lowell House E-51, Harvard College
September 30, 1951

Dear Father, Mother, Grandmother, Grandfather et al.:

There are various excuses for my not writing before this, at least some of which I shall mention. One very simple one is the typewriter I have been using, an ancient, if amusing, relic of a fonder day which did not respond properly to the touch of my fingertips. Now, as you can see, I have again my Smith Corona, and for the first time it types like a hundred dollars, approximately the sum it cost. It is silent, delicate of touch, and prints firm and neat black letters, all of which pleases me much.

While you compare Mr. Styron to Ellen Glasgow, and find in yourself elements of Jean Shepherd,* I have been classed with Thomas Wolfe, but in an obtuse and ungratifying manner. I gave Mr. Guerard† segments of my book to read, and when he held his little conference with me to determine my admittance in the course, he said "I may be giving you much the same treatment Thomas Wolfe got here at Harvard." Evidently Wolfe was not admired by the English Department at that time when he was a student. Mr. Guerard went on to say, rather kindly and apologetic, "You might be a fine writer, Updike, but at present I do not think it would be a good idea to have two people with such differing notions of prose as you and I in the same course." In short, I was firmly booted out of English J—he called what he had read uneven and uncontrolled. He talked at some lengths of his inability to judge, trying to soften the blow, and suggested that before I consign myself to English C, I let Mr. Morrison, head of the department, see the work.‡ This I have done, and it is in his hands yet, but there is small hope that he will see in it anything but a pretentious and adolescent display of mental confusion. Thus, my literary career has reached its nadir, and the prospect of my (a) finishing "Willow"§ or (b) ever amounting to anything literarily seems dim indeed. I don't know about you, but I found this a bit

* In a letter of September 26, 1951, Linda praised William Styron's first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*: "Technically, it is almost as alarmingly perfect as the *SRL* [*Saturday Review of Literature*] said." Which leads her to express concerns about her own writing: "It is when your writing begins to sound (without your meaning that it should) like Jean Shepherd talks and boys half your age bring out novels that are almost as good as Ellen Glasgow at her best that you do (and should) begin to feel a little afraid that things are not as well with you as you hoped." Shepherd was an American storyteller and radio personality; Glasgow was a novelist who had won a Pulitzer Prize.

† Albert J. Guerard, American critic, novelist, and Harvard professor.

‡ A poet, novelist, and Chaucer scholar, Theodore Morrison agrees to work with Updike on his writing during sophomore year.

§ Set in a fictional place of the same name, "Willow" is a novel about high school that Updike had begun writing over the summer.

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depressing. I will, however, strive to complete the book—the self-confidence you instilled into me cannot be easily quenched, even by the man who has written the book on Gide in our language.

The other academic development is my decision to drop French A. I had hoped, you know, to master the language at Harvard, but I decided, after glancing through a grammar, that the time and energy expended in the feat would not justify the rather slim rewards, especially since so few people ever retain a knowledge of French beyond a slight grasp of the meaning of sophisticated menus. This will give me numerous opportunities to take courses and still do honors English work. I would have taken French A, then French C, and finally French 1, had I started the project at all. This would give me only three courses a year, really, and I feel that my giving myself this leeway I may be able to get a hint of that thing called a liberal education. The literary stalemate I have reached has turned my attention to art, so I will probably take a good many Fine Arts courses. Harvard only offers one course in the practice of art, a thing called Composition which conflicts with a present course. I shall try to get into it later, and now that Bunce* seems headed for the army there is little chance of my forgetting how to draw, what with the *Lampoon* depending entirely on me for art if he leaves. The course in Art I am taking now is a very pleasant course entitled Medieval Art, which is only a half course. I hope you see the logic in wanting to study works of art, which has the further advantage of breaking up the solid wall of heavy reading courses that would otherwise confront me.

The other two courses I am certain of are Shakespeare, a full course under Professor Levin, and Humanities 4, my second required General Ed Course. There is no doubt about my needing to take them, and it turns out they are both excellent courses under excellent men. The fourth will be a composition course, and will be English C (in which I will write assigned stuff, and cannot continue work on "Willow") unless Mr. Morrison suddenly goes soft-headed and lets me into a more advanced and less rigid writing course.

As to rugs: the boys across the hall gave us a large rug which could not fit into their room, so you may tote your rug back into the attic, where it will be happiest anyway. And Kit and Hannaford† both brought curtains, so we are needful of nothing there. Thank you anyway: while Lowell E-51 may not be the peak of comfort, it is a very superior domicile to Hollis 11, and physically I shall be quite happy. And now that I have gotten over the shock

* Douglas Bunce, a *Lampoon* editor who had previously been suspended from Harvard, returned a couple of years later, and was ultimately expelled, at which time he began to live in the *Lampoon* building.

† During his sophomore year at Harvard, Updike rooms again with Kit Lasch, as well as a third suitemate, Reginald Hannaford.

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of Mr. Guerard's rebuttal, the less strenuous array of courses and the work with the *Lampoon* should do much to insure mental comfort. While I have been here over a week, I have not done a bit of real course study, and as soon as this letter is written I shall break the ice with a reading of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, which I suppose is as fine a way to spend a Saturday night as any.

Kit has not read Styron's book, and in fact spent his summer in a rather unproductive fashion, writing a page of a novel and attending many baseball games with his father.

Harvard won its first game of the season, and I have just seen them lose their second game, to Holy Cross by the thumping score of 33–6. Mother: get a new typewriter ribbon, paper, and stamps. Nuff said.

Johnny

P.S. I am sending the *Lampoon* simultaneous with this letter. I sent it once, but neglected to affix stamps, so it was returned. Plenty of stamps this time.

## To **Plowville**

Lowell House E-51, Harvard College
October 4, 1951

Dear Family:

I have just come from a talk with Mr. Theodore Morrison (if you look among my books, you will find his modern translation of Chaucer) about my book. He wavered between having me rewrite what I have done or letting me go on with it. But he read and talked with me for about an hour at the end of which time he agreed to let me forge ahead. So now it is part of my course work to write at least 3,000 words of "Willow" every two weeks, pretty much as I had planned it. This is fine. In other words, I *must* work on my book. I have decided to set aside three hours a day for writing, beginning, as is usual with such schemes, tomorrow.

My other courses are turning out well: they are all fine courses, and I was unexpectedly excited by examples of early Christian (c. 400–600) mosaic art, even to the point of doing some extra reading. I believe that if I am anywhere near as industrious as I was last year, I should have ample time to do all things and still relax a fair portion of the time.

Lilly March sent me a batch of letters—one of her own, one from Mrs. William Weaver of Brookling Manor to her, and one from *The New Yorker* to Mrs. Weaver, all dealing more or less with my column. The one from *The New Yorker* read, in toto:

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Dear Mrs. Weaver:

Thank you for sending us the two columns from *The Reading Eagle* along with your reactions. Enjoyment of the magazine is, of course, a personal matter with each reader; but we can say that the group of individualists who write for *The New Yorker* would hoot at the idea that they are disciplined to a "party line."

Very truly yours,
*The New Yorker*

Mother,

Your own letters, besides being embarrassingly more numerous than mine, are much more literate. Your serialized commentary of Styron's book loses almost none of its charm and perception through the fact that I have not read a word of *Lie Down in Darkness*. It is fortunate that the book is not longer, or your review, which started as a eulogy, might have culminated in a polemic. Even so, your final judgment was, I suspect, much too shrewd for the author's self-confidence. I shall not let Mr. Styron see your review, lest he be frightened into doing mirror-writing or working with hieroglyphs. We can be grateful that he who started as Ellen Glasgow, went through Scott Fitzgerald and wound up as James Jones did not write a book of Jones's length, else he would have collapsed in the python embrace of Frank Yerby, or possibly Jack Woodford.*

If you can find it, *please* send my rhyming dictionary. Yellow, shiny, and pocketbook size. Maybe in my room.

Yrs. Trly,
Johnny

* In a letter of September 29, 1951, Linda likened Styron's novel to writing by Glasgow, Fitzgerald, and Jones, yet concluded: "[I]t struck me as definitely sad that so talented and intelligent a writer had to resort to the spiteful vulgarity of the climax." She advises her son to "skip the last half of this story," and adds: "Either your ma is too immature for reading 'mature novels' or this one is not as mature as it's been cracked up to be." Yerby and Woodford, not mentioned in Linda's letter, were prolific, best-selling American novelists; the former was known for southern historical romances and the latter for pulp novels.

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## To **Plowville**

Lowell House E-51, Harvard College
October 28, 1951

Dear Family:

I received Mother's letter today and was concerned to discover that I have not been handling my correspondence properly. Under the impression that I have been among the most diligent of scribes, it startled me to be informed that the controversy had expanded beyond the family circle into the arms of Mr. Post. But Mr. Post seems to have been baffled by the problem, and perhaps I had better tackle it.*

The principal complaint centers around frequency. The statistic "one to three" is quoted. I have before me two letters, dated October 22 and 25. This is a three-day gap, and hence three would arrive every nine days. Yet I know I write at least once a week. Furthermore, I keep my unanswered letters in the drawer, and if it were as it is claimed, I would have three letters before me, instead of two-thirds that amount.

There is an inequality of exchange, yes; but that inequality has existed from the very first days, when you wrote once a day, an output that has been diminished to one-third its original amount. Also, the letter that seems to be offensive was mailed around October 23, since then I have sent you a postcard saying I am the Narthex of the *Lampoon*† (a matter I had hoped to elaborate upon if this question does not consume all my energy) and this letter, which will be mailed tomorrow, Sunday. This accounts for three missives in a six-day period, and I was conscious of no extra activity, so my normal average must come to only slightly less than that, if at all.

In rereading my letters I am conscious of an overwordiness that might strike you as supercilious, but believe me it is only the attempt of an over-Latinized vocabulary trying to express itself rapidly. In fact, that very sentence sounds pretty obnoxious, but I didn't mean it that way.

* In a letter of October 25, 1951, Linda expresses doubts about their correspondence and writes: "my pride will eventually prevent my writing three letters to your one." Curious for his news, she recounts her own recent adventures: "Imagine me trying to run Marshall Post Jr. off the farm, having a chase from one end of the place to the other . . . finally shaking hands, and going into a discussion of your talents without being able to tell anyone about it . . . Imagine having had high blood pressure twenty-five years and suddenly learning you now have low blood pressure. Or suppose you had taken a little ride across Plow Hill and, walking toward an open stable door, looked into a French drawing room complete with wall-size tapestries." This leads her to pose a series of questions: "Shall I file all of these strange and wonderful experiences away for some future use? The heart asks what use? What future? Wouldn't it be better to spend them now, hoping that the smile they have brought will somehow be carried through the mails to another? Answer me, John." In her concluding paragraph, Linda asks her neighbor, Mr. Post, "how often a young man should write to his parents," to which he replies, "That depends which end of the line you are on."

† One of three editorial offices of distinction at the magazine.

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Even if my letter writing were not up to snuff, there are many wholesome conclusions that you did not draw:

1. I am leading the kind of life in which there is nothing to say. This is surely true. Having neither the vices of sex nor conviviality to provide sparkle for my existence, I am faced when sitting down to type a letter with the prospect of having nothing less dull than dullness to narrate. I am seeing no movies to discuss (except *Place in the Sun*, which is just as good as they all say it is), attend no parties to tell you about, and have gotten so deep into the Harvard spirit that I have no emotions—the fear of my first days here, the joy when I made the *Lampoon*—to express. Actually, I do have something to tell you about—the *Lampoon* election—but there is so much more to say in answer to your accusation that I will never do it justice. (It is now a little before two Sunday morning and I have a finished Humanities paper and an English assignment to show for my day's labor, and am in general tired of typing things.)

2. I think I am writing as often as I ever did but time passes so quickly and pleasantly that it is telescoped for me, and a long period elsewhere passes like a flash for me. This is also true. While there are things in life better, no doubt, my sophomore year at Harvard looms painless and rewarding. I am writing my book, and am under the impression that my writing is improving (probably a false one), and Medieval Art is the most exciting thing I have ever encountered academically—I am doing all sorts of unnecessary reading for the course, and plan to take Fine Arts courses whenever I can.

3. My very necessary contact with the Life that Was in The Good Old Days of Willow, which I tried to maintain through correspondence last year, is being maintained through my book "Willow," upon which I work as often as I can and as long as I can without doing injustice to either the *Lampoon* or my three other subjects.

My position as a letter writer is that of one Who Has Nothing to Say. Each day here is much like the previous, and there is little reason to suppose that the next will be different from either. I rise at nine, breakfast, and then either attend lectures or return to my room and write or read (this is on Tuesdays and Thursdays, when my only class is at twelve). I spend the day in some form of harmless activity, usually academic but sometimes a conversation with Sam Khan or Duggie Bunce (who is heading back to Miami). Furthermore, what there is to say I feel I have said before, a delusion that does not encourage a wealth of possibly repetitious detail. This basic uneventfulness is brought out clearly in the contrast with your letters, which teem with strange and wonderful events.

In fact, the very wealth of material you have sometimes brings about a rather baffling impression. For example, the image of you and Mr. Post

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chasing each other all over the Plow Hill, and then shaking hands and lurching into a discussion of my letter writing (and that is all I was told about the incident) is a fascinating one, but one that could bear a little elaboration like what gave you the idea that Mr. Post should be chased, what was he doing on the farm anyway, and what made him get out of the car and shake hands with you, his pursuer. Or another sentence contains the objects stable-door, drawing-room, French tapestries, and Great Dane, with no connection more edifying than the fact that they seem to be piled up at some spot on the Plow Hill. All these things bear much more discussion, and, in my eagerness to delve into them, I probably neglect the more pallid aspects of my own life. For example, I devoted more space and thought to the doings of Beaver* than I could possibly to anything I have done, which pales in comparison. So it is a compliment of the highest order that your letters should produce the result of making me more interested in your lives than in my own.

Mr. Uzzell† claims that the author should strive for an emotional effect. Your letters almost always do that; mine, it seems, bring about consternation. This is unfortunate. Whether presenting a gayly colored land of animal-fables and Thurberesque chaos, or a less cheerful area hovering on the brink of an iron vein and doom, you do produce your effect. And it is the vividity of this effect that may make me hesitant about answering you shot for shot, as it were, as if we were playing a tennis match. I thought that the understanding in back of our particular correspondence would be that each proceeded at his own speed. To do otherwise would be disastrous. How could I, for example, conceive of a counterpart to the sudden announcement that after years of high-blood pressure, you have switched to low? I do not know if this is good or bad: low sounds much more pleasant than high, so much less explosive, but perhaps this is not so. You don't tell me, and I am not clear on the subject, just as I am unsure about what I am being reprimanded.

"I have no idea how long it has been since I have written," may be read with a blasé yawn,‡ as, indeed, may Shelley's line, "Rain kisses upon my eyelids pale."§ On the other hand, it can be read in a loud, thundering voice, or even breathlessly. Until I start indicating the emotive effect intended, I would be grateful if my letters were read as statements of fact and not of

* A beagle that Linda had taken in, giving them three dogs now: Chipper, Jolson, and Beaver.
† In 1949, Linda began taking a correspondence course in writing with Thomas H. Uzzell, a former fiction editor, who was assisted by his wife, Camelia Waite Uzzell, a literary critic.
‡ Updike opened his letter of October 17, 1951, by stating: "I have no idea how long it has been since I have written." In her lengthy response of October 25, 1951, Linda closed by writing: "But after all, you did open the discussion, by saying (with a blasé yawn): 'I have no idea how long it has been since I have written.' And I, feeling slightly puzzled, answer: 'It's been a long time.'"
§ The passage from Shelley's "Lines to an Indian Air" actually reads: "Let thy love in kisses rain / On my lips and eyelids pale."

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mood. I thought that such frankness would be pleasantly disarming, and lead gracefully into the apology and explanation that followed. Instead, it has produced the precise result I thought it would prevent.

Enough, I think, of letter talk; if anything, I have confused whatever the issue is, and the time is now 2:35.

Yes, the boy from Plowville, in his sophomore year, has achieved one of the three literary posts of distinction on the *Lampoon*.* All this, of course, was brought about by D. Bunce's classification as 4-F. He is not a member of the University, and, as such was asked to resign as *Lampoon* President, although his term runs to December. In the resultant shuffle of offices, the struggle over the presidency was resolved by making co-presidents of Arlen and Osborne,† bringing Tom Edwards (whom Bunce wanted to be President) up as Ibis, and making the only other active lit member the natural for the position of Narthex. I won handily, and I think the holding of an office cuts my dues in half, which should be welcome news. But I am not sure; it was policy up until some time ago, I don't know if they have returned to that rule or not.

Also, I have done my first professional poster for the Bengal Ball, a Lowell House dance planned for the Princeton Weekend. It is a full-color treatment, and I wish you could see it. Impartial spectators called it better than the best Gifford‡ poster, which is high praise indeed. Beyond these two financial notices, I have nothing to report save that I am trying to live as inexpensively as possible, liquor and women being the logical things to avoid. I have a genuine distaste for alcohol (I hate to lose any degree of consciousness, witness my insomnia) but occasionally I would like to talk to a girl on a subject more personal than naturalistic tendencies displayed in the ornamentation of the Book of Kells.

Sadri§ had no drawings in the last issue, you have seen the others, and he has one in the forthcoming issue. I have several poems and drawings which I hope you will like.

There was something else I want—oh yes, Mr. Morrison continues to approach my work with a mixture of frank admiration and a nagging feeling that something is wrong, somewhere, somehow. I hope he doesn't discover what it is until the book is done, else he will have me rewrite it on the spot, and cease all further forging ahead.

* Updike would consecutively hold, from 1951 until 1954, all three offices of literary distinction at the *Lampoon*: Narthex, Ibis, and President.
† Michael J. Arlen and Charles C. Osborne.
‡ Lewis Gifford, a cartoonist for the *Lampoon*, class of 1951, who would later make his career in television animation.
§ Sadruddin Aga Khan, Harvard classmate and son of Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III.

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The time [is] ten minutes of three, my study schedule is ruined, Lasch has probably been kept awake all this time, and my wrists hurt.

So (with a tired yawn) may I say good night,
Johnny

[*In margin*: Many thanks for wonderful picture of Miss Norma Cash saying "hi."

Also—my Harvard played great ball until half-time (H-20, D-6) but finally lost 26–20 in a heartbreaking game.]

## To **Plowville**

Lowell House E-51, Harvard College
November 3, 1951

Dear Plowvillians:

The wild wind whippeth over Cambridge, and bashes its head against my window pane, and I realize what thin partitions separate us from the wrath of the elements. It had been raining so hard that everything in my room seems dampish. My hands slither over the slippery typewriter keys, my bottom is absorbing water from the saturated cushion, my cigarette is continually being put out by the all-pervading damp.

After the three-page letter I wrote defending my habits, I seem to have refuted myself by not writing for a week. I took the Shakespeare exam, and I was so anxious to please that I overprepared, i.e., memorized so many quotations, etc., that when I got the blue book before me I felt obliged to put it all down regardless of the question they asked. I do not know what I got on it: I knew enough to get an A, but I probably wound up with a C.

The *Lampoon* leans heavily on the bony shoulders of the boy from Strawberry Hill.* Mr. Bunce, while he has not departed, has withdrawn himself from action, and I should crank out cartoons, poetry, prose, decs, and possibly a cover. I am no longer able to work three hours per day on my book, but I hope that when the *Lampoon* deadline and the hour exams have passed, I can again return to my schedule.

I find the cowardice of the dogs (all three of them) unsatisfying. When their mistress is capable of braving the cold dawn and lifting a Plymouth

* Name for the small sandstone farmhouse in Plowville where Updike lived with his parents and maternal grandparents.

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from a ditch, it seems unfitting that they should tremble at a few men in red hats and one or two bullets ricocheting off the house wall.*

Jolson's skin may be improved, but my skin, in a way that both baffles and alarms me, threatens to surpass even my foulest dreams. Steadily expanding and working its way onto all parts of my body, my psoriasis should by Christmas completely encrust me, leaving me, perhaps, two small holes from which I may peer into the mirror occasionally. I am eating no chocolate, applying Siroil frenetically, avoiding all greasy things made in restaurants, but my scabs laugh and wax mighty.

Mr. Aldridge sounds like a very shrewd little man, but, however expert his delineation of our troubles, his solution [is] really no solution at all.† We do not need men like Proust and Joyce; men like this are a luxury, an added fillip that an abundant culture can produce only after the more basic literary need has been filled. This age needs rather men like Shakespeare, or Milton, or Pope; men who are filled with the strength of their cultures and do not transcend the limits of their age, but, working within their times, bring what is peculiar to the moment to glory. We need great artists who are willing to accept restrictions (and herein Joyce, who may have seized upon the element of his time, fell short) and who love their environments with such vitality that they can produce an epic out of the Protestant ethic, or dramatic masterpieces out of fierce Elizabethan nationalism, or impeccable couplets from a self-conscious artificiality. We need a writer who desires both to be great and popular (and in the distinction between the two, literature has suffered: "The Waste Land" on one hand, Clarence Budington Kelland‡ on the other), an author who can see America as clearly as Sinclair Lewis, but, unlike Lewis, is willing to take it to his bosom. We need to revive the notion that the groundlings can appreciate Hamlet, and that Falstaff can be brilliant and crude simultaneously. Shaw was willing to be popular, but he could never forget the difference between

* In a letter of November 1, 1951, Linda described the arrival of small-game season, the sound of gunshot frightening the family dogs, and how she dug the family Plymouth out of the mud and back onto the road with a "shovel, bucket of ashes, can of gasoline, and a bale of hay."

† John W. Aldridge's *After the Lost Generation* (1951), a critical study of American fiction writers from the 1920s through 1940s, made a deep impression on Linda, who "read it with even more interest than I read Styron's novel" and quoted from it at considerable length in her letter of October 31, 1951. In one passage, Aldridge writes: "What we need today to give us a literature of vitality and significance, in spite of the prevailing inertia and confusion, is a few writers of genius . . . They would have to be as strong as Proust and Joyce in order to survive in the midst of isolation and paralysis." It is worth noting that Aldridge, who will later write several sharply antagonistic reviews of Updike's novels and become a kind of critical nemesis, provided the opening salvo leading to Updike's early manifesto.

‡ Though largely forgotten today, Kelland (1881–1964) was a prolific and well-known literary figure who described himself as "the best second-rate writer in America."

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himself and his readers; he was not willing to submerge himself in his audience, or to write for them and not for himself. He was, in a way, his own audience; and because of this self-containment, his works have the quality of isolation, of a man talking to himself and hoping the world would overhear. In short, we need not a man of great courage, willing to accept the scorn of society for his art (sic Joyce) but a man who will consciously and undeviatingly strive for the approval of his age, and, by so doing, not define or criticize his age, but fulfill it.

Perhaps that is why I can justify "Willow." It is now, I see, a bad book, a bad piece of fiction. I know now what it is, though. I am trying to paint a picture, to see a little world, knowing that I lack the power to transform it into a vehicle for art. But the very attempt to see clearly a particular phenomenon of our age indicates a respect for that age, a belief in it. And whatever the many failings of my work, let it stand as a manifestation of my love for the time in which I was born.

Johnny

## To **Theodore Morrison,**
*professor of English and creative writing at Harvard*

Lowell House E-51, Harvard College
[Early December 1951]

Mr. Morrison:

At our last conference, you asked me if my light verse was any good. At the time I was quite unprepared to answer this extraordinary question, but since then I have decided that the most coherent answer would be to show you some of it.

The immediate result of our conference regarding "Willow" was to make me dubious as to proceeding with the project in my present frame of mind. I submit ten pages which I had done up to Friday, ten pages which may be the last, if I cannot find over Christmas vacation the confidence that made me start the thing at all.

Thus liberated from my little creation of adolescent difficulty, or the saga of coming of age in Eastern Pennsylvania, I think I have a story possibility in which no character has even the slightest stain of puberty, the motivation is completely non-sexual, and not a single obscene word is spoken. This I will make my reading period project, and a novel one it promises to be, too.

You said I need not bother to hand in an assignment this Wednesday,

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but I think I should take advantage of your criticism while it is available (I discovered with some alarm that there is no English Kb this year, for I had hoped to vindicate some of my errors in the second semester.) You need not consider this an assignment intended for credit—the verse is submitted for whatever pleasure you may derive and whatever criticism I can receive.

*What follows in pencil script are excerpts from Morrison's one-and-a-half-page response, split into two parts, the first addressing "Willow" and the second Updike's light verse:*

> *1) Nothing I said, so help me God, was* ***intended*** *in any way to be discouraging, in general or in particular. I think myself that you* ***ought*** *to finish "Willow" (Not, of course, as a matter of credit for English K, but because you wouldn't want to risk letting the sense that you hadn't finished it rankle in your own mind.) If you do finish it, I'd like to see the end if you want to show it to me. I've lived with it for some time too, less intensely and less connectedly than you, but enough so that I too could use the catharsis of going through with it to the close.*
>
> *You have so much—word-sense, command of sentence form, feeling for pace and tone, understanding—that your work calls for criticism on a high level. I felt that the best I could offer you would be the most searching questions I could find words to raise . . .*
>
> *2) I have enjoyed reading the verse. It confirms my feeling that you have gone a long way toward learning a lot of things about how to write. You've learned a good deal about the handling of metres and have a good natural ear. I'm left with the sense that verse writing will probably be a second string to your bow—though who's to say at this stage? . . . Keep the proficiency and keep your own mind and sensibility, and you should be worth someone's bet in the horse-race!*

## To **Plowville**

Lowell House E-51, Harvard College
December 9, 1951

Dear Plowvillites (not to be confused with stalagmites):

The first lap of my sophomore [year] is wheezing to a close, and I am not at all unhappy about it. I figure that this should be the second [to] last letter I send, since any I mail after the end of this week would arrive sometime after I do.

After two weeks of restless inactivity, I find myself with a great desire to be efficient for the remainder of my stay here. I have little between me and the exit. A few hundred pages to read, a small Fine Arts paper to compose, a

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few financial matters to be tended to, two suitcases to be packed, and I shall once again be well involved in the dual role of Plowville's Bard and Willow's sole exponent. There is a difference in my attitude toward the vacation this year and last: I left last year like a man rushing out of a burning theatre; my attitude [now] is more composed but still fervent, like a man wishing to get out into the lobby for a between-the-acts smoke.

Mr. Morrison and I have been doing some talking, centering mostly around light-verse poets and Mr. Morrison's past experiences, but also dealing in a glancing way with my work. I have done over ninety pages under his benevolent eye, and his general opinion is embarrassingly profuse praise of my writing style, which he thinks has improved vastly since I came here, qualified by a discomfiture about the work as a whole. He says he feels uncomfortable when he reads my stuff. This stems from such technical flaws as failing to keep my means of perception consistent and more aesthetic points like my recent and unrelenting emphasis on the adolescent version of sex behavior, as well as an occasional attempt to catch the peculiar idiom of the truly vulgar mind. He is not especially fond of this tendency, and called my treatment of Emerson Gundy an "outrageous burlesque,"* and did not seem much happier with a story dealing with the reaction of my heroes and heroines to Miss Wolf. Both these stories, besides trying to show certain things about the temperament and method of an adolescent gang (the gang rejects both these specimens of premature adults, in a pair of stories called "Son of the Soil" and "Daughter of God"), went in for fairly brutal and explicit exposition of the adolescent rebellion at its height, and Mr. Morrison found them a bit too much for him. He is an extraordinarily shrewd critic. He told me he thought there was a basic lack of adjustment between myself and my characters. He tried to define this by saying that he thought I was compressed in their world, indeed, that I had willfully imprisoned myself in it, and yet was not happy about it. I suggested to him that I might be being spiteful, and he thought that spite can be a sound basis for writing, but that I was being spiteful without really thinking that my characters deserved spite. At this point I realized I had met my match, so I took the book from him and said I would try to finish it on my own so he wouldn't have to look at it any more. He has made me thoughtful enough to pause before I write the twenty or thirty pages that remain. I agreed to write a story dealing with something other than Willow for my reading period assignment, and already I have a dandy all figured about in my head. He said that I had submitted work in such quantity and quality that I needn't turn in any more, but it seems there is going to be no English Kb this year, so I would like to get the

* Gundy was a Shillington High School-classmate and Updike's cousin.

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opinion of Mr. Morrison on as much as I can while the getting's good. He is, I am beginning to realize, an exceptionally shrewd and sensitive, as well as a kindly and encouraging, man.

As to the Christmas card: I think you should not bother trimming it, unless there is an envelope problem involved. For one thing the top, if it is hand-cut, is bound to be crooked, which will be annoying to the recipient. The space at the bottom is not that much wider, once the cut is made, to provide a distinct or tangible effect as opposed to the other, which has the cut centered between the top and bottom. Indeed, uncut, it seems more sophisticated, possibly because we have become overweary with seeing things so placed that three margins are equal, with the fourth wider. When cut, the shape of the card itself tends to seem square, and that pleasing height of the uncut is lost, sacrificed to an effect that doesn't quite come off. Something cut by hand never looks like anything else, and, unless you obtained a trimmer like Mr. Boyer has, the attempt to cut the top should be dismissed. And, even if you do get such an implement, it would still be unwise, I think. So: Don't Cut the Top.

The Stella–Daddy alliance* must be broken up if its sole purpose is foisting on you books that neither have any intention to read. I can't picture Stella grappling with the Faulkner any more than she would wrestle with Marvin Mercer,† and I see no reason they should expect you to fight their battles for them. Neither *The New Yorker* or Albert Guerard thinks *Requiem for a Nun* is up to Faulkner's (or anybody's) usual standard, so it probably isn't worth understanding.

Johnny

I wrote to Mary‡

* Stella is Estella Pennepacker, a teacher of Latin and French at Shillington High School whose classroom was next to that of Wesley Updike's, who taught mathematics. The two had conspired to provide Linda with a copy of Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), leading her, in a letter of December 6, 1951, to write: "Why can't I just go to the library and get my own books?"

† A native of Berks County, Pennsylvania, Mercer was a well-known professional wrestler and top junior heavyweight champion.

‡ His aunt.

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## To **Plowville**

Lowell House E-51, Harvard College
December 14, 1951

Dear Family and Friends:

Mother, I am more than delighted that you have procured *The New Yorker War Album*. I would have forced you to get it for me at Christmas, and meant to tell you as much on numerous occasions. I, too, regret, that I came too late for Ross.* I hope you can read E. B. White's page in *The New Yorker* discussing his death. It is written loosely, almost abruptly and casually, but it has about [it] the true ring of sorrow and loss.

And also it should be brought to your attention that *Life* has found the Supermamma and pictured her with such awful fidelity that it verges on satire.† Kit read the article and became so alarmed that he is writing a story about the woman now, in which she looks so young that her children become ashamed of her and snub her at a football game. This article brings home to me the ghastly truth of what you have been saying. The poor husband, you will notice, who supports five children and this cosmetic-eating monster is not mentioned once in the body of the article.

I hope that the eye tooth came out easily and with a minimum of aftereffect. My teeth might be looked at, although they do not hurt except when I eat something and bite a chunk of hard matter into a nerve that is pretty close to the surface. Could you make an appointment with the dentist and the barber for me? My hair will be pretty long, and definitely in need of Ludy's care. "The barber and the dentist are the enemies of Fate . . ." (From a poem of the same name).

I have just written a long letter to Joan George telling them not to meet me, or even try.‡ If anybody tells you when I am coming home, tell them you don't know for sure. This, indeed, is the truth. I have encountered a *girl*§ [*line leading to margin*, *where he writes*: very unlike Miss Wolf] in Medieval Art who I find very impressive, and, even though I have done nothing but plod

* Harold Ross had died eight days prior. In her letter of December 10, 1951, Linda wrote: "I heard that Mr. Ross had died in Boston. And I had so looked forward to your comments (when you started to work for him)." There seems to have been an early plan, shared between mother and son, that Updike would be writing for or working at the magazine.

† The December 17, 1951, issue of *Life* magazine includes the article "Mrs. Logan Is 41," which profiles Jeanne Logan, a housewife and mother of five who "represents a new generation of American women, the still-young woman over 40." Much is made of Logan's slim figure, which she maintains through housework, gardening, bicycling, and tennis, and her facility for fashion and glamour, which she does inexpensively.

‡ Joan George is a high school friend who, with other classmates, considers meeting Updike's train when he arrives home for Christmas break.

§ Mary Pennington, a Radcliffe senior, two years ahead of Updike.

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through a few ineffectual conversations (centering around the Avignon capital of Samson) just her presence makes Harvard seem a very pleasant place. I will attend Medieval Art on Wednesday, and then, the cup of life drained to the full, will catch the quickest train out of central New England I can get. This might be a twelve or one o'clock train, so I will get into Philly late at night. I will call you from that venerable town.

I am very glad that Grandfather has picked up his spirits, despite Beaver's efforts to help. I think that both he and I are becoming toughened with age.

This map business* sounds almost cinematic, and I visualize returning to a smoke-filled valley of feuding, signaling a return of the land barons trying to uproot by force the worthy homesteaders. Fend them off till I get there, for only I can shoot the .22.

I got another exam back in Shakespeare, in which I seem to have scored a 95. This amazed everyone, including me, but I am not complaining. I just finished (a week ahead of time) a fine arts paper, but spend most of my time visiting Fogg Museum in the hopes that someone will be there.†

This, then, is the final letter of this year, which started with my return to Harvard to face my first series of final exams. I am confident the old look in my eyes is gone, replaced with one of amiable, bland stupidity. All out of paper. I remain, your son.

John H. Updike

## To **Mary Pennington**

Lowell House E-51, Harvard College
[Late January 1952]

Muffin,

I telephoned the Health Center‡ and was told, by a briskly officious voice, that there are no visiting hours and that visitors are admitted by a combination of nurse's whim and Divine guidance. Furthermore, it was indicated that I would have to provide a pretty interesting reason why I should be admitted. "Family connections" and "patient's condition" were mentioned

* In her letter of December 10, Linda wrote of a "new map that is being made at the Berks Country Trust Company" of the land surrounding and including their farm. There are concerns about Bethlehem Steel acquiring nearby properties, arousing Linda's fear that she will become "part-owner of an island in an uncharted sea of high finance."

† Updike will later say of Mary: "I courted her essentially by falling down the stairs of the Fogg Museum several times." Drawn to clowning, pranks, and pratfalls, Updike, for attention, would pretend he was falling down the steps of the Fogg Museum or Widener Library.

‡ Mary was suffering from a platelet deficiency and would spend a week in Massachusetts General Hospital, in Boston; Updike was eventually able to visit her daily.

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grimly. Muttering what I hoped would be taken to be a witticism, I let the receiver slip from my sweaty little hand.

While I am prepared to brave the antiseptic labyrinth of Mass General and expose my tenderness to a room full of suffering I would prefer to ignore, the spectacle of me attempting to explain to a bulky and petulant nurse exactly why I thought I deserved to see you is sufficiently unnerving to give my hitherto unabashed pursuit for goodness pause. (Explain the syntax of that sentence and win a gold doubloon.) Thus, this note, which should get into your presence more easily than I, and with considerably less friction among your caretakers.

My reason for wishing to visit you is not easily unravelled; it would involve a eulogization of your goodness and an explication of my psyche, two goodies that a merely officially interesting person might find tedious. I have long ago learned that in matters of persuasion my fundamentally dishonest face can secure me easy access to nothing more selective than a Protestant church.

I made a call earlier in the day which proved even less fruitful. Toying with the notion of aiding you on your journey from one place of rest to another, I asked a lady at Mass General when you would leave and if you had some companions already. She feigned gross stupidity and went so far as to deny your existence. I was not prepared to argue metaphysics with her, so I hung up, breathing heavily. Of such stuff are mock heroes made.

I do hope you are well, and can shortly shoulder your bed and walk, as the Lord commanded. God didn't mean ladies to be off their feet more than is essential for their peace of mind. (The Biblical tone of this missive stems in part from the fact that I am listening as I write to a vehemently Christian record by Patti Page.) I shall endeavor to bluff my way into Fine Arts 16 tomorrow, and this, plus the fact that you have a story that I want sometime, would indicate future contact.

I know damn well you don't like being called Muffin. In spite of all, I remain (a point of permanence in a flux-mad world),

a rube

P.S. Excuse typing. I am all in a dither, for now I must register for another term of fun in Harvard College for Indigent Boys.

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## To **Plowville**

Lowell House E-51, Harvard College
January 29, 1952

Dear Plowvillians:

Half the report is in, and it couldn't be much easier reading. Mr. Morrison presented me with a nice flat A in his course, and my five days preparation for Shakespeare payed off with a 96 for the test and another A of the same variety. However, this will be the cheerfullest side of the news. I prepared as adequately as I could for the Fine Arts exam, and took the test with dubious distinction. I certainly will not get an A of any size out of the course, as I had said ever since I got that B on the paper. But I spent many happy days in Fogg, dividing my attention between Romanesque cathedrals and a Miss Mary E. Pennington, of Chicago, easily the most exciting thing I have encountered since a freckled tot called Butz and I chanced to meet somewhere around Philadelphia Avenue.* This lady is in the hospital right now and in somewhat of a Quixotic fashion, I have visited her. This whole business may account for a unique cheerfulness and sprightly prose manner of this letter, as opposed to the dismally incoherent things I have been pawning off as specimens of polite correspondence.

The day after tomorrow I take a Humanities 4 test. If my attitude does not become a little more grim, I am bound to do poorly in it, but even this sloth is minimized by the twin facts (a) I have a straight A average so far (b) it is a full course, so I will have ample opportunity to redeem any blunders I might pull. The unexpected prowess I seem to have developed in regards to Shakespeare, scoring 94, 95, and 96 in that order, tends to make me more than a bit heady, and the myth of my academic invincibility is due to be exploded, but the sun is shining brightly upon this tousled head at the moment.

While this exam period has been less than frenetic, I have taken the slight opportunity for confusion presented, and scrambled the correspondence you have been providing me with. I have managed to find the latest, however, and treat it thusly:

My remarks to the Greenwich Upsnouts anent Argyle socks were effu-

* Although Mary's father was at the time a Unitarian minister in Chicago, she was born in Massachusetts and had spent much of her childhood in Cambridge, where her father had been the minister at First Parish in Cambridge. Updike spent the first thirteen years of his life in a house at 117 Philadelphia Avenue in Shillington. Butz is likely a typo and should be Lutz, for Peggy Lutz, who lived across the street. Updike would later refer to his high school classmate and friend as "a peppy knockout" who "was too much girl for me."

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sive indeed,* I feared no one would take them seriously; but the motivation behind such treatment was a sincere awe at their lustre and the patience embedded in their making. I did not mention the fact that like most beautiful things, Jean's socks were fragile and transient; several wearings have induced a large hole in the heel of one, and I have not attempted to wash them yet. But I do love them. I got my old loafers heeled and in general perked up, so I think we can forgo the purchase of another pair for a bit. I think that drinking hot water is a strange thing to be doing, but it has about it the ring of home remedy that fills this native of the hexeri county with great confidence.† Hot water, in short, is the thing, and as soon as I feel worse, I shall begin guzzling it. The new dog business confirms my feeling that Beaver is an evil influence and a reincarnation of Atilla, King of the Huns. I will be delighted to try to see the man from Houghton Mifflin with your book; I wish I had not forgotten his name.‡ I may even try to finish mine and see what can be done with it. I may even reread it pretty soon. And as to Mahlon obligations: the whole thing is unfortunate, with the blame divided between my unwarranted and unjustifiable carelessness with the car, what I suspect is Mahlon's incompetence, and a strong element of act of God.§ Who is to pay the piper (played by stocky, folksy "Pops" Rothermel, local tinker) is a problem of division. I am all for letting Mel do all he can, since he cannot really pay what he had promised he would. I seem to be contributing my share by dawdling over books and fraternizing with the idle rich, an activity that I do not feel quite apropos to the situation yet one endorsed by my parents and by the little man, dressed in horns and tail, who vies for my soul with the small shining angel labelled "Honor, Virtue, and Right Choice of Free Will." And judging from the pleasant caste of things now and in general for the last twenty (nearly) years of my sojourn here, God has paid more than His share already. The *Lampoon* should be at Strawberry Hill now: David Lay, popular Circulation Manager, has said he has mailed it.

The term bill on hand, due on the eighth, is to the tune of $144.00. I will hold off payment until you tell me that much is in the bank.

* "Greenwich Upsnouts" refers to the Connecticut Updikes—his aunt Mary, his uncle Donald, and their daughter, Jean. In a letter of January 25, 1952, Linda wrote: "Mary said that you had thanked them for the socks in such glowing terms that Jean did not know whether or not to believe you."

† In her letter of January 25, Linda wrote: "Your grandparents have taken to drinking hot water at odd times. And they are now so engaged. It seems to be a difficult procedure, causing much coughing, wheezing, and swooshing."

‡ Regarding her novel, Linda wrote: "Was the man from Houghton Mifflin an old *Lampoon* president? You told him of course that the first really important book on the life of Ponce de León is on your mother's desk? You didn't? But you will. You are going to drag it back to Boston in the spring and sell it for me" (January 25).

§ The family Plymouth suffered damage through some kind of mishap for which Updike and his high school classmate Mahlon Frankhauser shared responsibility. The automobile was repaired by Mr. Rothermel for $389.50, of which Mahlon agreed to pay $150.

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In looking through the catalogue, I see that a course in painting is being offered, and I might try to get in. I am not happy about the way I have allowed my one really native talent to lag behind in this mad chase after the Liberal Education, and think it would do me much more good than a course in Human Behavior. I have been exposed to humans behaving for a long time, perhaps I had best turn my attention to a few pigments. Definitely, though, no writing course: the decision need not be made for a couple weeks, and I thought you always wanted me to take all the practical courses in art I could. I would probably do rather poorly in it (my eye for color is almost nonexistent), but I am not really gunning for marks, else I would take all English courses.

In rereading this, I discover a certain ambiguity. I do not think I have been at Harvard U. for a generation, I am not quite that ancient-feeling yet. "Here" refers to this green globe, or more, abstractly, this span of existence.

Enough of footnotes. I feel that I have neglected to say nothing but the things I intended to tell you when I sat down a half hour ago, but then, what price information? Is life a mere search for facts? Eh?

Johnny

## To **Plowville**

Lowell House E-51, Harvard College
February 25, 1952

Dear Plowvillians:

As I write this, the radio is blaring *Oliver Twist* into my ear, and Robert A. Wallace* is sitting by my side, sewing his socks and talking. This might explain some of the confusion that I fear will be found in this missive.

I am, indeed, very happy to have both my withholding statements, and just now have made out my income tax report. I feel more than slightly silly to discover that the limit is $600 and not $500, and that I could have easily worked a few more weeks and be somewhat richer at this moment.†

And speaking of being richer; several pairs of stockings, a text book, numerous medicinal supplies (S.T. 37, Aspergum, Thantis Lozenges) with which I combatted a cold that came with the sudden and unprovoked spell of wet snow, and several luncheons, a basketball game, and the Lowell House Dance held last night, all shared with Miss Pennington, have cut

* A Harvard student one year Updike's senior, with poetic aspirations.
† Updike worked as a copy boy for the *Reading Eagle* over three summers, 1950–52.

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into my hitherto unruffled financial life a bit. While Mary E. Pennington is undoubtedly the best thing that has happened to me for a long time, I can't help but notice a renewed gusto in daily expenditure which I regret. Pardon, and any time you wish to alter your orders to not work please say so. It is, in a way, reassuring to know that after a year and a half of dormancy I can bestir myself to pursue this most excellent creature, even into the depths of Massachusetts General and Fogg Library. *Amor vincit omnia, et omnia est amor.*[*]

I realize you might like to get a clearer picture of her, but I find it difficult to summarize. She is 5'6½" in her tennis-sneakered feet, a senior (I did not know this when I first glimpsed her, and my inertia after the initial propulsion overcame the chronological inequality as well as the basic absurdity of the situation). The blood of the Saracen flows quickly. All this might sound like a ghastly mistake, but it isn't. She is good-looking and intelligent. Have faith and remember that Mark Antony, too, was ambitious.

I have been reading "Lycidas" tonight, and must confess that I also find Milton's dignity impressive but dull. The complexity of mythological reference embedded in the work is as discouraging to relaxed reading as the comparable amount of scholarship in, say, Eliot's "Waste Land" or even *Finnegans Wake*, the least readable work of genius ever produced.

I shall write to Bunce and get the name of the man I spoke to. Send the manuscript whenever you like. I will be proud to take it around.[†]

After Beaver has learned to say "Mama," try him on "Excelsior." And tell my grandparents that I have the utmost confidence in their abilities to cope with the indignities and inconveniences of age, and I wish them well. I have three hour exams between me and spring vacation, and academic pressure is about to reassert itself, along with the extra-curricular push of *Poon*, and, of course, Pennington.

Johnny

* Love conquers all, and all is love.

† His mother's manuscript "Dear Juan." In a letter of February 28, 1952, she will respond: "I am glad, too, that you will show my manuscript around Boston. I feel very humble about it, recognizing it now as some of the worst writing in the world. But as you say, it is time to get it off the living room floor and give it a chance. You probably will get the first part of it sometime next week with the suggestion that you start with the Atlantic Monthly Press because they were kind enough to give me a letter of criticism on one version of it, years ago."

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## To **Plowville**

Lowell House E-51, Harvard College
March 2, 1952

What ho Plowvillians:

God's in His Heaven (courtesy of John Milton)

All's right with the world* (designed by William Shakespeare)

These two gentlemen, too much out of my thoughts of late, are squatting on my shoulders at this moment, and with two hour exams coming in the next week (Shakespeare on Wednesday, Milton on Friday), I shall be paying more attention to their presence. But the impending flurry of academic endeavor does not dim the optimism Mr. Browning felt, no doubt in a not unsimilar moment. The sun is beaming in my window, and the New England weather shows some signs of snapping out of the doldrums. The aroma in the air is that of Spring in the arms of Winter. New England weather is essentially slow-witted and unimaginative, contrasted to Pennsylvania weather, which is witty, capricious, and entertaining. For all of December and January the weather here seemed to think it was March, and snapped out of a general warmth spasmodically to treat us with a dismal, grey day or so of bitter cold. Then in the beginning of February, it discovered that it could, if it so desired, snow; and for all of the month just kept snowing and snowing. I have never pushed so many cars out of snowdrifts in my life. But now, March is here, a happy month in both its lion and lamb states (Blake liked them both, even as do I), a month which will see me enter my third decade as well as three hour exams for which I am singularly unprepared. And at the end of the month I should enter a train headed for the green hills of Mr. Penn's woodland. The vacation is from the 30th to the 6th.

I have been unable to remember to get stamps or envelopes, the lack of which make it difficult to start a letter. I am sorry to hear that Satan is so much in the house on Strawberry Hill.† I assume the dogs brought him home, just as they brought Beaver home, and there was an awkward period when Lucifer stood outside the door and pounded his hoofed feet against the door, whimpering. I realize there was nothing to do but let him in out of the cold, but where does he eat? At the head of the table or on the floor

* The passage—"God's in His Heaven— / All's right with the world!"—comes from Robert Browning's verse drama "Pippa Passes."

† Linda opened her letter of February 25, 1952, by stating: "Satan has been present for the whole week-end. Whether he is making a study of your grandfather's improved health or the fact we haven't been hearing from Harvard as often as we think we should, I wouldn't know. But the four of us went to hear Rev. Snyder yesterday without feeling any appreciable relief from his Satanic Majesty's jibes."

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with Beaver and friends. Satan is forever with us, but we must teach him his proper place. While my head acheth not, nor does my stomache distend, my teeth are kicking up a little and should give Ernie a laugh the next time we meet.* I think a man who makes his living off of decay deserves a chuckle now and then. My chuckle for the week is derived from the picture of young Emerson unleashed among the hills. Is it anything like this picture from Tintern Abbey?†

> . . . when like a roe
> I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides
> Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
> Wherever nature led: more like a man
> Flying from something that he dreads, than one
> Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then
> (The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,
> And their glad animal movements all gone by)
> To me was all in all.—I cannot paint
> What then I was.

There is no excuse for quoting so much, but I find myself fond of Wordsworth. I never read poetry when little, so all the poets—Wordsworth, Byron, Browning—one should get out of your system in the teens have a terrible hold over me when I should be advancing to the Donne stage of appreciation, and ultimately, to Cowper and Matthew Arnold.

I am happy indeed to see that you have your second title picked. And learning shorthand should solve the problem of dialogue recording. And, to assume momentarily the mock pose of Dutch Uncle, don't become too fond of dialogue as it is. Mr. Morrison said good dialogue (in fact, you may have said this) must give the impression of verisimilitude without being similar, really.‡

*Question and Answer period:*§

Have you been working on your book?

A. No. I have decided to let my writing slide a bit, and not to write again

* In discussing Satan's presence in her house, Linda, in her letter of February 25, added: "Heads ached. Stomachs were distended. And teeth threatened even greater discomforts," which provided an opening for Updike's reference to his chronic teeth issues and their dentist, Dr. Ernie Rothermel.

† Updike contrasts this passage from Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" with his mother's reference to their cousin Emerson Gundy, who, "it is reported, was let out of school and now roams the country in authentic hillbilly style" (February 25).

‡ In her letter of February 25, Linda wrote: "the title for my second book came to me this morning . . . *The Phoenix*. The only catch in writing it that I can foresee will be my inability to record the dialogue as fast as it is being produced."

§ Updike repeats, then answers, three questions his mother asked in her letter of February 25.

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until I feel a terrible compulsion to do so. I do have other talents, and would like to develop them. I am ambitious, but your harsh words on the younger writers who were prematurely printed gives me pause, and a justification for my laziness. Yes, I am lazy, and rather happy about it. I was afraid for a while of becoming a mechanical man. I am even prepared to allow myself the luxury of a few mistakes.

Or does the *Lampoon* take all your time?

A. No. It takes very little of my time, and I had better start working for it with more earnestness. The last issue was a poor one, and it contained little of my stuff, but the *Crimson* felt obliged to print this embarrassing review, which I enclose for the amusement of one and all, even Satan.* The tone of the thing was probably set by my continual appearance in the four previous issues which were not reviewed.

And what of Miss Pennington?

She does take a good deal of time. But she is very good. If I were in your shoes, this whole thing would make me somewhat queasy: it is only natural. But be assured that you would approve of her if you saw her, and I am almost certain that I will never meet another person who could make me happier than she does now. I waited a long time to spring into action, and my life *sine femina* was sufficiently painless to prevent me from springing foolishly. She is quite lovely.

I got through the weekend with a minimum of expenditure, but I can't help a feeling of guilt, with nearly every penny I toss into the maw of Cambridge business men.

I am enclosing the little slip with my grades on it, with the reminder that this may be the last of this type you'll see.

Milton calls.

Johnny

* In a *Harvard Crimson* review of the *Lampoon*, appearing on February 29, 1952, Michael Maccoby is highly critical of the most recent issue, which "varies from dull to distasteful," but singles out Updike, whose sketch, poem, and "five snappy drawings are really high quality material—worthy, I believe of the Benchley, Williams Golden Age of Lampoonery." He goes on to state: "And since the editors find it so hard to fill the magazine with new material, they might well change the name of the *Lampoon* to the *Updike Gazette* and persuade their talented colleague to do the whole thing."

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## To **Mary Pennington**

Plowville, PA
March 31, 1952

Baby,

It is late, my tooth hurts like hell, and I am one very disgruntled chicken indeed. I have just returned from an ill-advised expedition to Shillington, Pa., which just reasserted its right to the title of Dullest Town in the Whole Wide World. I encountered a few more or less pleasant people with whom, unfortunately, I have nothing in common except a fragment of my past. Seeking escape from my troubles in the Shillington Diner, I played a pinball machine, with an old basketball star as my companion, until my legs ached from standing up and I ceased to be amused when he or I won a few more games. Thinking bitter thoughts about Sunday night fit for neither man nor beast, I drove my weary way home, brooding over my lack of sleep, my lack of you, my lack of good painless teeth, in that order. Northern lights are having a field day in the Pennsylvania sky, so the radio emitted little more cheering than irritated static. Both my parents were shrewdly gone to bed, although I imagine this typing is keeping them awake. As far as misery is concerned, share and share alike, I allus say. Or nearly allus, especially when there is an ugly gap in the conversation.

The whole crew, with the possible exception of the dogs, seemed to have expected that I wanted to marry you. They all like your picture, but, though they aren't saying anything, I think they're a bit frightened of you. People tend to distrust paragons, and you haven't given me much to show that you aren't one. They can't very well do anything but approve of you, since my approval is so absolute, but cavils have been raised. My mother, in a windy conversation held in an open field on a dog walk, with three dogs making intricate patterns on my mother's legs with their leashes, expressed something less than hysterical endorsement of my marrying before I got out of Harvard U. I began to adopt a get-tuff attitude and pointed out the exemption possibilities of a dependent or two when the Army started licking its scrawny chops. She thought this was a pretty cheap thought, and I guess it is at that. I don't know, chicken, about us practically; but spiritually we're magnificent, and I have always been a spiritualist. My mother also timidly suggested that she should meet both you and your parents before we get hitched. It seems that her mother-in-law fainted when my father told her she was a mother-in-law; my mother would like to fortify herself against any such display. Rightly so, said I. Don't you worry, because I say you're a schnook (Germanic spelling) and you tell me I'm one and if I ever get my

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teeth straightened out I'll bite the world by the tail if I have to. But an ectomorph with a toothache isn't any good to anyone. He stinks.

I wrote you a rather messy letter on some Western Union blanks in one of the six railway trains I found myself during the long tedium home, but decided against sending it. Didn't say anything, just made a few wry comments about train travel that Benchley probably did much better in 1933. I did apologize for having to be told to kiss you good-bye, but then I'm never sure if you really are as much of an exhibitionist as this old body.

Beaver is making a great deal of noise in the middle of the room, and my parents are writhing upstairs, so I do believe the time has come. There is much else to say. For example, I am trying to complete my Milton paper despite the endless conversations that echo through the house, and my mother is rather unnerved by the fact that she has always been so unsympathetic to old John, whom I told her you admired. She promises to brush up on Milton sometime soon, but I don't think that's really necessary. I hope we can make a go of it—I do look forward to getting two such good people as my mother and thee together, even if you do meet over my dead or dying body.

O, how fond am I of Mary Entwistle Pennington!

xx J

## To **Mary Pennington**

Plowville, PA
April 1, 1952

Ah my chicken,

But Jolson the Dog is a good dog. For he lieth upon the threadbare rug smilingly, and glitters his eyes, and makes pink the underside of his tongue. His hair, cultivated with a diet of raw eggs recommended by the sturdy veterinarian, is luxuriant, curving, gleaming, switching back upon itself in the triumph of brownness and blackness and whiteness. He is good, for he is I, and you are a bee, and he looks at me and sees the ramshackle, yellow-fingered, hay-haired boy nervously stutter with his hands upon the typewriter, writing on yellow paper in the hopes that the postal service can bring him one foot closer to the distant Mary Pennington. And he knows, with the typical canine shrewdness that has perpetrated a thousand doggy hoaxes, that I have spent the afternoon in town with my mother, harrying sales people into selling us a topcoat, two shoes, four socks, and four of what the more squeamish sex terms unmentionables. Knowing this, he pants. Why? Surely for sardonic reasons.

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O the sardonic rascal! Since that exclamation point, I have eaten a meal full of confused talk, most of it my father's, centering around death and clothes taken from dead men's bodies, delivered in his usual stream-of-consciousness I'm-in-love-with-hate manner. Life is just too naked around here at times, and your letter fell like a rose petal dropped into a lion's cage. My grandparents are dying, noisily and painfully, although they obviously wish it could be managed more inobtrusively. I have the feeling now that both are hanging onto life with their fingertips, and it occurs to me and my mother that Death as well as Satan sits at our table. Last night a man came and took Beaver away. Beaver came to me as the laughing stock of the neighborhood, the clumsy and semi-insane beagle owned by a dead man, and after living with sympathy and two better adjusted dogs and my mother's magnificent way of making everyone except herself feel important, became such a fine beagle that the fish man fell in love with him and asked if he could take him to live with. Of course we said yes. And today we find a great hole vacant for the clumsy and aggressive mongrel who scattered dog hair and a canine smell over our house as if he were scattering violet petals to the temple of the Graces.

Milton is done. To the tune of seven pages. Tonight I am getting down to Philly with Fred to listen to Jean Shepherd, one of the great figures in modern radio, deliver his record program from the roof of the Hotel Sheraton from 11:20 until 2 in the morning. Then we shall trundle back, possibly with Mr. Lasch, from whom I am awaiting a phone call, which may account for my nervous manner with the keyboard. But then I do not really write a good letter. I am too impatient, too full of the sense of time wasted, too anxious to either retreat into solitude or grapple with souls face to face but in any case baffled by this peculiar mixture of loneliness and companionship. Your eyes will trace the lines that now I type, your hands will hold the paper much as I held it, but this is consolation for a poet, and a very small part of me is poet. I miss you, I want you. I shall leave Sunday morning so I can call you Sunday night and maybe come up with the fatigue of train travel still wet in my eyes. You may expect me, for I am Jolson, the everready dog, who laughs at the pretensions of John H. Updike. Wit? Mere conversational escapism and articulated cowardice. Wisdom? Nothing more than loudly expressed sophistry, cloaked in conceit and booted with malapropisms. Heroism? A pose, and a poorly played one at that. But thank you, and worry not. The toothache is gone, and I *am* a prancing centaur, Miss Pegasus.*

And just to challenge that statement, a big black rain cloud has suddenly loomed into the horizon, and we have bustled out into the yard to remove

* One of Updike's several nicknames for Mary. Pegasus was the white winged horse, associated with, among other things, poetic inspiration and purity.

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the clothes from the line. O, Moparopy,* how exciting life is! And without you, how empty.

I am indeed glad that I am capable of loving you, and do.

John

## To **Plowville**

Lowell House E-51, Harvard College
April 18, 1952

Dear Denizens of Strawberry Hill (and it won't be too long before the implications of that title realize themselves in very explicit, red, Premier† terms):

It has been a disturbingly long time since you have written, and the last letter I have to answer is dated April 9.‡ In rereading it, the puzzlement with which I first met the final paragraph is intensified. I hope the tone of it was set by an unsuccessful grappling with the Rototiller, for I find much in it unnerving.

> There must be some way for a young man to save himself from this will to prostrate himself before the woman (i.e., the supermamma).§

This sort of terminology shows an unexpectedly crass attitude. One has to read no further than Plato, whose myth of the orbicular man was one of the first lessons my family ever gave me, than to know that love leads not to prostration but elevation. We hold our heads erect, the better to study the sky, and stand upright as the trees. That the trees are rooted in the earth does not subtract from the grandeur of their cloud searching. And they prostrate themselves only when they are ripped from the ground, or severed by a cruelly keen ax. And there is indeed an edge in the sentence:

> Consider carefully that young man who retired with the cry that he was not good enough.

How much is gained through contemplation of cowards? Has anything of worth ever been accomplished in self-doubt? And why "Postpone action

* In their letters, Updike and Mary sometimes wrote in "opo language," which she described as "a childhood code we found amusing": Mary was "Moparopy" and Updike was "Jopon."
† Linda grew and sold strawberries, Premier being one of several varieties.
‡ Linda's letter of April 9, 1952, from which Updike quotes in his reply, is not among those held at Ursinus College, indicating that it may have been destroyed. Following Updike's visit to Plowville over spring break, his mother expressed concerns about the intensity of his feelings for his new girlfriend.
§ The first of five quoted passages from his mother's letter.

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whenever possible"? True, positive action is so rare, and postponement so common—life, I once said, was the involved postponement of death—that such advice smacks strangely of negation. And because action is so rare, it should be considered. Certainly, I do not deny this. And I do not think it unfair to ask you all to believe that I have considered deeply. Few men have ever considered so thoroughly, nor moved as deliberately, as Henry David Thoreau, who did not "wish to live that which was not life." And he also wrote, "I think that we may safely trust a good deal more than we do." So you must trust my earnest desire to live a life that is one, rather than an imitation, and you must trust my mind, my sensibility, and the morality impressed upon my mind by the example set by the four denizens* who now seem to doubt the excellence of their lesson, to secure that life with wisdom. Cannot my twenty years of slight accomplishment give me some recommendation? Or must I be lumped with the proverbially "rash" youth, one of the falsest of all social myths? The young are seldom rash, because they are seldom desperate. And because their lives have so much more future than past in them, they act with incredible awareness of consequences. They are busy creating their selves, and the destruction they do is a product of misapplied constructive effort. That they need help in the application is beyond question, but it is their task, often unhappy, to reject that advice which they feel is false.

You need time to weigh yourself . . .

No one really needs time. Time is always with us. It is the one constant factor, the one inescapable fact. I tried to assure you that I have weighed upon the best scales I could fashion, and we can be weighed only upon that one, for every other person's scale was originally made for himself.

The sentence continues: . . . knowing that you do not come of a self-sacrificing people.

I know no such thing, any more than I understand the meaning of "self-sacrificing." If I used the term, it was an unsuccessful attempt at phrasing a difficult concept. There is only one actual example of self-sacrifice, and I have been raised to benefit by that sacrifice, which I observed last week by taking Miss Pennington to the Lutheran Church. It is impossible to sacrifice the self, even if we could find a suitable altar, and a knife probing enough to make the incision. And, since we are bound to that self, we must learn to live with it, dignifying it with respect that is not adoration, a kind of introverted

* His parents and maternal grandparents, the denizens of Strawberry Hill.

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idolatry. It is unreal to claim "We are intensely fond of ourselves, preferring to fail rather than to give ourselves up to another." No one gives the self up, really. And our sole example of such a giving cannot be termed a failure. Failure results when we hoard that self, carrying it with us into dark corners, and murmuring it to sleep, snarl like a dog over his Gro-Pup when someone approaches to share. I have met no such people, much less coming of them. Three of you are fond of terming yourselves failures, two in cursing your lives, one in wishing for death. All three of you are doing a gross injustice to your good lives. The fourth would seem to be guiltless of such an injustice. And I have her nose, and, I hope, her strength.

Of such a quartet I come, and I have loved and admired all. Now I love and admire one more. How fine a tribute to my family that I can write that sentence with such unquestioning certitude of its validity! No, you are neither clannish or cruel, and, if I have the blood of any of you in my veins, neither am I. And how much must I believe this:

> And somewhere along the line you have mistaken self-denial for self-sacrifice, I fear.

I fear not. I have never been conscious of self-denial. I always think that my childhood was unblemished and completely fulfilled. I, and perhaps you, made mistakes, but I have been denied nothing. Now I do not wish to be denied the trust I demand: trust in my good sense and in my sincerity. I know I will not be denied this, for I can ask no one to have faith in me if I am. Fear nothing.

I got a flat A on the Milton paper. Houghton Mifflin dropped me a note containing positively inane criticism, consisting in its entirety the remark that the style seemed didactic, and that you seemed to "be talking down to the reader."* I would send you the note, except you might take it more seriously than it deserves. Think about the garden, Mother, and *The Phoenix*; let me worry with the Boston publishers and Juan. The two issues of *Poon* are winging their way, as is the Van Doren book, somewhat overdue at the library. Michael Maccoby gave the last issue a favorable review and mentioned me but once in it. This letter is somewhat confused, and not entirely because I was listening to the Boston Red Sox come from behind to defeat the A's in the tenth inning, 5 to 4. But even here, you will notice, virtue was triumphant.

Also: no more thank you notes. I deserve none, least of all for the fine visit

* Updike hand-delivered his mother's novel manuscript, "Dear Juan," to the Houghton Mifflin office in Boston on March 20, 1952.

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