

Letter to Stevens from a Train Heading North in Winter

Alexander Long

Dear Mr. Stevens, the first time I saw the afterlife
Was in a mirror and behind me a window,
And through the window a dull winter
Landscape, smudges of tan and black and white
On the verge of absolute stasis if not
For a trickle of smoke rising from the center
Of a circle of stones where, the night before, a fire
Burned under midnight's formulations. The second time
Was in the same mirror, the same winter,
But what I saw was not beyond in the stark yard
But there in my own face: my father,
And my father's father, our eyes' three
Shades now one, our beards, clenched jawbones
Forcing a smile our eyes belied.
I tousled our hair and absorbed the aftershocks
Of imagination marveling time as best I could.
I have shared this with no one but you,
Eternal Master of Dawn, Attorney
Of Mere Being, Monster of Elegy, Collector of Bronze Rain,
The Soul Composed. But, can you laugh? I'll try
As I see the afterlife a third time on a train
Heading north in winter in the all-but-empty bar car,
And I will see myself in the window and in
The static landscape rushing quietly by
And I will hold cold-still in the center of it all.
But I won't see you, I fear. You're infinities beyond
Examining a forest of palm trees
In the palm of your hand. Respectfully, Alex

Letter to Wright from Kalamazoo, from Philadelphia

Alexander Long

Dear Mr. Wright, some days I speak to you
Plainly in a plain voice. Other days,
I have a distinct voice more yours than mine—
A stronger sort of plainness—like this poem
I choked out for my ex-father-in-law.
It's more yours than mine, that one you cobbled
Together in heroic couplets
For Charlie, who was, I guess, a real friend
To you. My ex's Dad was a real friend,
Too. Sure. I wish he'd found you before he
Went off and shot himself. Lucky me, I
Found you fifteen years after you died, but
You're not dead. Those days I chopped onions ten
Hours a day, then wrote obits another six,
And on break I grabbed whatever lines I could
Of your gathering Ohio, your broken body
In blossom, your Jenny. That was my life,
A lousy one I miss sometimes. I was
In my city, Philly, where hard labor
Is hard, love harder. Now I'm in a town
Even rougher to get by in. Two feet
Of snow today, another foot by week's end,
And I'm out of bourbon. If I had your number,
I'd flip the bill and yammer on for hours
About my ache for a skyline not nearly
As majestic as Manhattan's, for the pushers
Of Kensington and the hipster-dandies
Of Northern Liberties; for the salty smell
Of sweating pretzels by the El; the lazy
Accents of the Vet's vendors who've been out
Of work; the pretentious brick of Rittenhouse
Square; the pathetic neglect of West Philly
And beyond. I'd bitch nostalgic about
The lost city Lady Day and Coltrane
Ditched decades ago, but once lived in, maybe
Loved. And moments after we'd hang up,
I'd realize how deeply I'd forgotten
The snow, my self-imposed exile from my city
I can only see from a distance too
Great to cover. As ever, Alex

Letter to Cobain at 4:04 during Nirvana's Cover of Leadbelly's "Where Did You Sleep Last Night?"

Alexander Long

Dear Kurt, your eyes beyond color, beyond open
Beyond anything the human eye is
Meant to frame, praise, or curse; beyond music,
Even your guttural, stomach-shredding
Choruses, junk-spiked punk ballads; beyond
Blue as they flare wildly clear toward a point
As close as God, as far as love; beyond
The moment of clarity that pierces
Your bowels and splits your throat in two, and you
Know you have to finish the song, one last
Howl before you think twice about shedding
Your voice that blasts glass into sand. God damn
It, it's too late, again, to elegize you. So, listen,
You go ahead and finish this letter,
Or poem, that wants to praise what you went and did.
Then look here toward yourself through me, and I'll pass
This letter on. Then, we can be finished. —Alex