

HESTER

[NOTE: The following documents have a singular character to them. They are now deposited with the Essex Historical Society, along with the account of one Joseph Pue, Surveyor, of Hester Prynne's trial and subsequent penance and sojourn among the people of Boston. Nathaniel Hawthorne had contemplated giving the original Pue documents to the Society in 1850, after publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, but was persuaded by his sister Elizabeth to keep them out of view to enhance the sale of the book as a piece of "true fiction." The Society received the Pue documents after the death of Elizabeth, who had kept them in safekeeping. The following letters from Hester to her daughter Pearl, until recently, were held by family members. There are only a small number of the total number of letters they exchanged. Unfortunately, none of Pearl's letters to Hester have been found; they are presumably buried with Hester.

The lives of Hester and Pearl can be easily traced after the death of Arthur Dimmesdale. Pearl and Hester left Boston in the summer of 1650; Pearl was eight, Hester, thirty. They traveled extensively in England and on the Continent, Pearl having been made independently wealthy through Roger Chillingworth's will. Pearl married one Gabriel Jouet, a bastard son of Matthew de Jouet, once Master of the Horse for Louis XIII. The Jouets were a noble and ancient family in the Province of Anjou.

Gabriel was born in 1640 and married Pearl in 1660. It was about this time that Hester returned to Boston, though the exact date cannot be determined. Pearl and Gabriel lived in Paris until, fed up with the duplicities of Louis XIV, they traveled to Brazil, where Gabriel established himself as a trader. Eventually, they returned to Spain, in 1700, when the Duke of Anjou, Louis XIV's second grandson, was declared Phillip V, king of Spain. Gabriel apparently hoped Phillip V would fund him with a permanent residence, the Duke's blood being mixed with Gabriel's since feudal times in their common province. The Duke provided a small stipend for Gabriel and Pearl, and they lived in Spain during the War of the Spanish Succession.

The letters, until recently, were in the possession of the descendants of Pearl and Gabriel's son. The letters were found by the son upon Pearl's death in 1727 in Morocco, where, after the death of Gabriel, she had followed one Baron Jan Wilhelm Ripparda when he was dismissed from the Spanish court for certain ambassadorial improprieties. They both embraced Islam in Tetuán and died in the wars there. The small mahogany box her son found containing the letters was the only possession she had, aside from her clothing. Her remains, mixed with Ripparda's, are still in Tetuán and revered by the inhabitants.]

* * *

May, in the spring

Dearest daughter,

I have returned. The house is no different, only older, its face weathered by the trials of wind, the juries of the ocean. I cannot say I return with fondness or anticipation or even joy. Joy -- what a thin word to attach to our lives, daughter, so pale and hollow beside the thrill of despair we've lived. No, I do not return with joy but with something more adamant and annealed, like an ugly shapeless clay pot baked in fire that endures in the earth for all that is left of time. It does not matter that in the pot are ashes.

Listen to me, rhapsodizing like the very worst of the Puritan ministers! Not like your father, though he had his oratorical unmoorings. I am trying to answer the question you put to me on the pier. I do not know why I return. Perhaps there are no words for it, only that in the midst of the anger and hatred I feel for this place I still bear a flame that is still worth seeing the light of. We have had a good life, you and I, but if the flame does not burn here in me, it will never burn anywhere. I must take care that nothing has been destroyed.

About this place, nothing has changed. These people still believe with as much empty sanctity about their God as they ever did, still prostrate themselves before him, offering up their boredom as the perfect faith. Whenever they are uncomfortable they think they're doing right! And they have such a knack for making themselves squirm and suck on ashes. And their attitude toward women has not changed. Just the other day, the day after I had opened the door to this chamber, a woman was whipped for repulsing the attacks of one John Wedg, though it was soon revealed that he'd gotten her with child anyway. Wedg, as far as I heard, had nothing done to him and was deemed not in control of himself; he was fined and excused. She, on the other hand, was punished because she provoked Wedg's attack by her excessive beauty and "attention to lascivious detail." She had done nothing but wear the looks God gave her, yet, in the name of that God, they took her dignity from her. I protested, but it did no good. I am glad I am free of

that claptrap, no longer beswayed by their squirly niggings with God. My God is cleaner, purer -- I have no need anymore for the false pride of men.

This epistle must needs be short -- I have much to do to get this house aright, not only for my own small comfort but to sweep all the memories of this place into their proper squadrons and give them no more power than they deserve. Much moves within as I sit here. I am filled with you. Much love always.

* * *

June, 1669

Pearl,

I have tried to give you, with my poor paint of words, some shape of what moves through me, the fire that tempers my eyes. You were right when you said that I did not have to return. I choose to. There is still some shred of debt to be paid, not to these tight-frocked myrmidons but to a knot of ground to which I am laced as hard as a sailor's reef. You have the same fire within you, yet luckily you have been much softened by the love of a good man and a fair child.

Women such as we need to feel the sanctity of our deep and strong desires; they must buckle to no man or book or minister. The gift that you have, daughter, is the knowledge of your own self, injected into you by my own dark distress and the words of a dying man. It is hard won; it can not be lost.

I visited his grave today, let the sharp mazed stares of the good drones of Boston slide off my back. Littered with debris, sunken like a hag's cheek, the sungnawed chunk of wood thrusting up out of the ground like a flag of surrender -- here was all the worldly baggage of the man I loved, still love. I drank the fineness of his death down like an elixir.

His grave is tucked away in a corner of the cemetery. That is fitting, as he would have said. They do not know what to do with him. They never did. Not that it matters to him, but I feel an anger, like thorns in the throat, at their cowardice. Here was one whom all praised. Old

men lifted their heavy hearts and found them divested. Old women, their bosoms dry for years, suddenly found an oasis in their nipples when they saw him. Young girls throbbed with such sweetened piety as they listened to him speak. And the other ministers in the town, void as they were of imagination, thought that the very river of Paradise coursed through his veins when in fact his blood boiled like the ferment inside the freshening grape. All professed to love him, all of them spiked their prayers on their voices and lifted their banners in his wind. It does not matter now, but the injustice of men, though foolish and null, always galls my heart.

Do you remember that day? I know we have talked of it, but is there some residue of memory you hold that belongs to you and no other? I hope so. He was a man worth remembering, especially now since he is pleached with the cullet that makes up most of the lives of men. Do you remember that day? Those pious people packed like cordwood in front of the scaffold, gaping at the man's distress as if they had no common humanity with him, their eyes shifting to and from his bosom? The Good Reverend had shown the dull brass of humanness, shown them he was no better than they were, and they kissed him on the cheek and left him alone. All I, we, could do for his torment and pain was keep silent vigil, purge his loneliness with love.

Even now, after all these years of careful armor-building around my heart, I reverberate. Out of the columbarium of my heart he appears, Lazarus-like. He haunts my thoughts, rales in my blood, and I can almost sense again the taut muscles of his back and thighs against my hands. You may have been made in a dark moment, Pearl, but there was no darkness in the ardor and passion of our time. You were never a child of the devil but of the light, blinded perhaps, but never blind. He is here, and that is why I am here, to keep faith with the faith worth keeping.

I put no flowers on his grave, did nothing to reduce the wild visage of the place. He had betrayed them and they buried him like a beggar, accorded the respect of the holy and the

contumely of the damned. He would not have been surprised. No good Puritan cares to have his categories mixed.

Someone might object to my words to you but you know me well enough to see that such embarrassment is not necessary, is no solvent of thought or chastity. The man meant much to me, moreso because you were never able to share in any sort of life with him, or with us. I barely tasted the man myself, but it was enough to slake my thirst for anything else in this life. You and I must continually recognize our nature, that we will not insert ourselves into any creed that disallows our strength and calls our agony retribution. Such are the sicknesses that men anchor to themselves, and that is fine for them, but not to drag the women along. We have much better business to do.

Such a long time between letters. I miss my grandchild. Is he walking yet? Put him on the right paths early or he might get religion and be forever crawling.

* * *

Dearest Pearl,

I have received your packet of letters today and have spent the best part of the day reading and re-reading them. Thank you for the information on my grandson. Teethed and rambunctious, is he? A hellion, you say? I wonder where he gets that from. Such a chuffy child will prove to be a boon in the coming years. Be glad that he is not bland and anile.

Things are the same in Boston, as they always are, which is to say that nothing much happens. The upstanding magistrates, still thrilling to the spirit of Anne Hutchinson, though she be dead twenty-six years this year, have lately persecuted some wayward Quakers and Catholics, but it is not good sport since there can be no betting and everything is done with such a sour and solemn façade. Even righteousness may not feel ebullient when it is stroking itself. But that is the trait of the Puritan. Even if prayer gives a scarlet cheat of satisfaction, then they think it be done in the wrong manner. What a tiresome people!

I recall often our travels in England and Europe, our meetings with poets and musicians and artists. When my husband first sent me here to this wilderness I felt bereft of all civilization. Everything here was so raw and undigested, corrading a person's sensitivities into the fine powder of senescence. It has not changed at all. They still believe they are on the edge of the devil's garden and must fortify their souls against such canards as dance and music and theater and art. Benighted people. Any glimpse or sensation of beauty they get must either be immediately handed to God on a platter of prayer or corralled into the hypnosis of a hymn. How much they have missed in life. No wonder they moan for heaven so diligently.

In my last letter (I do not know if it has reached you yet) I spoke to you about my visit to your father's grave. There was one other grave to visit here -- Roger Chillingworth's. I cannot call him by his former name because the man who once had that name ceased to exist long ago, done away on some heathen altar. No one in this town, even the Reverend Mr. Wilson or Governor Bellingham, both of whom executed his will, knew who he really was. Some people, dyed in the rightness of their feelings, would advise everlasting hatred to this man if they were me. I cannot do that, victim as much as devil he was. I have no softness for him, no anger, nothing left at all, like a wide expanse of marsh grass unvisited by anything but storm and the faint calls of geese. His grave is no different from the others around it in the churchyard. There is no sere spot of ground, no bilious flowers blossoming from the turgid heart, as might be expected in some of those writings you read. Only a headstone carved with the inevitable death's head and a sprinkle of verses about healing the soul. His name has been effaced by the action of the weather. The stone angles dangerously to one side. I left no flowers.

I have not told you about him. There was never time and there was no need. I do not know why I ever married him. When I first knew him he was the scholar, mephitic with the dust of books and cheap oil. But what a light shone in his brain! He could parse the universe as neatly as a butcher's cleaver, then sew it up again into a lozenge to be dandled from the hand and

sucked on for the ache of the mind. He had a gift for words, though not the voice for speech, often gravel-ridden, raddled with odd pauses and breathings. I remember well his courtship of me, the sprucing he did of his self, his attempt to become like all men. Divigating and maundering, he finally poured his words out on me, lathering me in a frenzy as if he were aware that if he did not say it all at once he would never say it again. Pleased, flattered, intrigued I was, but not moved.

Have no doubt, he did have his attractions. His intelligence was one. All the other men I saw around me fiddled with life like children with their toes, intent on nothing more than being intent on nothing. He, following his own trail through books and learned discourse, sought to dig into the nature of things, unfurl the heliced mysteries into the straight lines of knowledge, and, like most miners, did not care for the fashion of the day. True, that is not the sort of thing that would impress a woman's heart with desire, but, being young and unknowing of these things, I admired his fortitude, it being so much stronger than what I saw as my own untutored soul. Do not laugh -- it is what I felt.

He was not handsome and was not young and had known only books in his life, but one thing struck me strongly: he needed me. That is a powerful argument a man can give to a woman, she usually raised to believe that if she is not needed, she is worth nothing. I espied in his skeleton of facts and philosophies a fragile architect who hungered for the warmth of a simple human relationship, one far from the cold and austere study of the universe. And he wanted me to be with him. I was powerfully drawn. I did not love him but I did need to be needed, and here was a man willing to assume me into his life. I was assumed, mistake that it was. It was no sin on either of our parts, twining 'round each other. I feel no shame over it now, but I did then.

What little you know of him as Chillingworth will suffice. There is no excuse for hatred, especially hatred drawn out of love, but it is tragic nonetheless, though forgetfulness, not pity, is

the only proper reply. I will never forget him, though I will not remember him either, he being like a piece of chalk leached by the rain until nothing remains except a faint stain in the brightest sun.

I have much to keep me busy here. Babies are born, aristocrats die, brides wed grooms, fancy winning out even against the hangdog looks of the ministers, and my needle eats through thread like a hog through scraps. Almost everybody is different than before. The few who do remember treat me as if I were a fellow warrior of some sort; the young ones only gawk at my letter, thinking it the fine coat-of-arms of a noble woman. It is, but I don't spread that opinion abroad. The weight of it is familiar, but I do not take it up again out of shame or deficit. It is to annoy and itch those who recall and to herald out that I have no shame to be ashamed of. It is good sometimes to prick these Puritans between their categories, mix their colors up so that their dull rainbows of gray and black and white are blistered with delight and illicit sensations. If the devil wished a perfect disguise to do his work, the Puritan is it. Calm, brutal, righteous, flexed, he can accomplish the devil's work in the name of God, and with much greater efficiency.

Allow me my barbs; I shall soon lose my teeth anyway, though not the willingness to bite. And I will not return to you, not yet at least. There is still much to do here.

* * *

March

Pearl,

I find early mornings the best time to write to you and this morning is especially fine. The ocean wrenches the welkin out like a sponge and daubs everything with a thick liniment of rain. All night and all this morning this limber sky has dumped buckets and the lithe soil sucks it down. All water is like thread, from thick yarns of it in wells and underground streams to the tiniest filament in the embroidery of roots. Even a morning as soaked as this is like St. Thomas's thread and will pull the heaviest heart to the surface. (Do you like my imagery? Not quite as

clanking as the verse of that man we met, Milton, but I like my imagery more supple. I've been trying to compose my thoughts into some form of a journal, some reminiscences. I don't know why, I'll only have the book buried with me, but it softens the hours to whittle them to words.)

I have not had much chance to write to you at all, but not for lack of wanting to. A curious thing has taken place. One night, while I was sitting before the fire, losing my eyes and thoughts in the flames, I heard a timorous knock on the door. At first I took it for something else, a branch or a stray fist of wind, and paid no attention to it. Again, the sound. My reveries broken, I called out for whoever it was to enter. The door slid open, ever so timidly, and who do you think stepped into the light? Goody Johnson, the wife of the deacon (the deacon long gone to his own dissolution and she has had two more since), one of the women who so churlishly stood in the lane outside the prison and baited me as I walked to the scaffold. You may remember her, not from that instance but from others where she, with the other fine wives and hopefuls, gave us a processional hymn of caustic comments wherever we walked. You would think the woman would scarce want to taint herself in my presence. Yet there she stood, her shawl wrapped like a pentacle around her, her eyes glistening in the low light.

I of course asked her what she was doing out on such a night, puzzled as I was by this apparition. I suspected that she might be the vanguard for some deputation sworn to rid the good town of me and readied myself for a not-so-subtle onslaught of demands. Perhaps it was because of that that I did not offer her a chair right off, content for her to do her duty and be away. Something in my looks must have puzzled her as well because she asked, in the mousiest of voices (you remember her voice, sharp as a fish knife?), if she should return, I perhaps being busy and not willing to speak. I told her that she could stay if she wished and moved the other chair in the room to the front of the fire. Goody Johnson sat down and without any prelude, even a greeting between old enemies, told me that she had a problem that she needed help with and that I was the best aid available. I bade her speak.

For what must have been an hour she and I mulled her problem over the fire of our words. It was a small problem, not irreducible by any means, and by the end of our time together Goody Johnson left with no small measure of happiness bottled up in her bosom. For myself, I took some pleasure from it, not without my pinch of petty revenge and irony, most unbelieving that the entire episode took place and wondering what it all meant. For the first time in a great while I had connected with a woman, actually shared time that was not embittered and terse, and had been of some help. My stodgy old convictions about men and women were pleasantly upset, I must tell you, though not overthrown. Goody Johnson aside, there is still much to distrust.

If Goody Johnson's visit had been all that had happened, it still would have provided me with a year's supply of thought and analysis. I say "if" because Goody Johnson's visit rapidly became the tocsin for all the other ladies in the village to descend to my doorstep and unburden their donkey hearts on my wharf. I became like one of those sin-eaters we heard about in our travels, those people hired at funerals who took upon themselves the sins of the deceased so that he might slip out of purgatory like a gill of ale down a drunkard's throat. Women from all rungs of life's ladder came at all hours to talk about all things, dipping their souls like pens into the ink of their sins and writing them large for me on the vellum of their anguish. I, who was once no better than the floor of any stable, am suddenly the Alexandrian library for all the ills of women.

I have listened now to many problems, many melodies played on heart's strings, and I counsel as best I can, not always sure that I can be the sort of help they want me to be. It is always the same for the women in any age: they must bear the brunt of a certain injustice and then are denied a voice to speak out the injustice. One woman comes to me and tells me that her husband's ardor has cooled against her, that his eye wanders among the fresh virgins in the pews across the aisle. What can I do, she asks. I want to tell her to leave him, let him linger over his lascivious meal as long as he desires but without her kitchen help to clean up, but I cannot because I see in her eye that the brutality of his presence is more known, and therefore less

dangerous, to her than the rigors of finding her own freedom, and that what she seeks is not release but nourishment to endure the hostilities. What can I tell her? I tell her what she wants to hear, tell her that he will come 'round, that that is the nature of men and must be borne, and she leaves feeling justified and, for a short time, oddly whole. Meanwhile, I steep my thoughts in gall and wonder what I can do to put out his eyes.

And then they ask me, whether directly or not, in their eyes or in their words, about what had happened. So I tell them the truth, as clarion-clear as I can, and let them absorb what shocks their flesh is heir to. I tell them that I did what I did out of love. I tell them that no book or code of laws would prove an adequate dam against the waters of what I felt to be right. I do not tell them to be licentious (though, for some of them, the activity would not hurt), but the real shame lies not in the feelings themselves but in the denial of them, in the falsification of their true character. It would be a mean and stingy God who would give us senses to imbibe and understand the wonder of His creation, our bodies and minds being His greatest creation, and then command, through a book written by a tribe of men wandering in the desert, that everything our bodies and minds do be in fault, be a sin, be anti-creation. I tell them not to be ashamed of what they feel but instead to understand from where those feelings spring. I end by telling them, lest I scandalize them further, that who they are as women does not come from the bowels of some book or the barbed phrases uttered by men but from their own souls that body forth sensations and intuitions full of wonder and delight and mystery. I cannot force them to understand this but until they do they will run in fear from the edicts and invitations of their own natures.

I can never accurately gauge how what I say affects them. Mostly they are silent; some protest. But none ever stays away for long and in our own silent ways we sap the foundation. It will take a long time and many words, most of them wasted, before they find a voice they can speak comfortably and truthfully with.

I am not sure what I think of all this. I am pleased they seek me out. I feel no shame in front of them and most of them are coming to feel no shame in front of me. We speak with a friendliness we could not have had a decade ago. But why do I speak with them at all? I do not know if I am doing them any service by telling them what they will not tell themselves, even though they are well-versed in it. I do not counsel them out of hatred for men, for those good magistrates who imprisoned me behind the letter have done more for me than they will ever know or want to know. Neither do I do it out of love, I think, even though I feel a great fondness for the women who enter my door. Perhaps, taking all of this together, I do it for no reason at all, it is just simply there to be done, I happen to be in the time and space to do it, and so the event happens, under no divine plan, with no licit end.

I am tired of all this revolutionary talk, daughter, it is hard work! You have liberated yourself well because you have a man who loves you and a child who knows nothing else but the care that has flowed from your heart. I, too, once possessed that freedom. Perhaps that is what we need, the sort of love that is never corrupted by anger for injustice nor duped by false democracy. I do not know. Each must find his or her own path. All I can do is point; I cannot make the journey for them. That is where Christ was wrong. He should have stayed a fisherman who spoke uncommon good sense rather than a Messiah who tried to do all the sinning for people. They have too much fun doing it to give it up for very long to one man. All they did was turn into Puritans. Enough. My best to all.

* * *

June, 1707

Pearl,

There is for me very little time left. By the time this missive meets you I will be fresh in the ground, buried near your father. I expect no great reunions beyond the grave but I find great comfort in knowing that he will be near me. Reunions! What good would that do us, bodiless as

we will probably be! There is nothing good in being a spirit, no blood to course through veins, no fever to feel in the heat of the night. I only hope heaven is not boring or run by men. Better to be an old grey washer by the ford than an eternally hymning angel.

Imminent death gives me leave to make light if I wish. Make light -- now there is an interesting phrase. For all of my effort in my life to keep my mind free and clear I find myself sliding into the most trite of superstitions. I wait for his voice to call me. At night, when the moon slices through the sky and the sky's throat bleeds stars, when the darkness slips over me, I wait for him. The women have been bringing me solace by the caravan -- but I like it, it soothes me and gives them some feeling of purpose. Even the minister has been by to see me, giving me some pious tripe about my letter being a beacon for all. I've become quite the magnet for the souls around here, like some ancient monk sleeping in his coffin. I don't know whether they come for comfort or amusement. I suppose it does not matter -- they're both the same.

Pearl, I am filled with a desire to pass on something to you, though I have not the faintest notion what. Why is it, on occasions where people are being translated into higher brackets, some of us itch with this indelible desire to appear sage and provocative? You know all my thoughts, you have them recorded. The ones you do not know I have etched into my journal, which will molder alongside me as it should, my thoughts no better than the brain that fictioned them. What can I say that you have not already seen?

I want to pass on a philosophy to you, some organic integration of thought, like a compost heap, that will continue to bleed nutriment into your brain for years to come. But nothing comes. Do I have a philosophy? Only that life is meaningless, even with a God, and that it is important to do something, not just mean to do it. My one great sin in the world was having meant to help your father. It cost us dearly and for that there will always be an abyss in any conscious mind I attain. After that, nothing. It has been good being alive, but it is not recommended for one's health and recreation. Re-creation! Interesting.

I wait for him, there is no doubt I wait for him, though I feel there is no gold in doing that. The older I have gotten, the more I have cut my senses off from this world, drawing into myself like some sapient turtle to chew the cud of my existence. Times my soul has been to other places, other times, while I have been only some convenient port for it to return to, yet I no more believe in spirits or the ancient astrology now than I did years before. I know that no matter what I think I know, it all comes down to this clay infused with breath that will wither in a fragile bluster of pain and then be no more. I cannot dupe myself. I know he will not be there on the other side. Nothing will be there.

Yet my love for him has sustained me all these years, as my love once, very briefly, gave him succor at the hands of the devil. His spirit, even if it does not exist in substance, has so permeated my being that every breath I have taken has been shared by him, every pulse of blood borrowed from him, until through no fault of my own, he has taken up residence, attic to cellar, and no amount of hard-boiled scholasticism will evict him into the streets. He has riddled me in more ways than one.

And yet I may be all wrong. He may well be waiting for me to slip on over, young as a buck and fresh as ferns. For my sustenance at times I let myself believe that fantasy, dredging out his picture, the incandescent attraction of his face and figure still strong and bracing, and my old woman's body shivers like the surface of a lake after a thousand geese have left it at once. I may have to answer to a God I've not had much respect for, face the division of goats and sheep (I prefer the sheep), and tremble as He counts the list of my sins in His giant book. I may even count along with Him so that He misses none. I'm sorry, daughter, I cannot take seriously the image of a God spending His infinity as a clerk, morosely dealing out justice like drams of monkshood. In the same spirit I cannot abide by the notion of a heaven and hell, no green fields or lakes of brimstone, no Arthur stag-proud against the sun or slathered with flames. Yes, I believe in total dissolution, but a small part of me thrills to the possibility I am wrong. Perhaps

he is speaking to me through that, breaching my defenses with the softness of his voice, as he did once before.

I end the letter here, not empty of words but simply knowing that the words I have left are not very important or urgent. I have been reading the poetry of a woman, Anne Bradstreet. She is good, accurate, not bedizened with stuffy piety or empty rhetoric, but she will never be recognized as such, not while men control the means of print. Do what you can for her.

It is hard to die alone, but not as hard as you might think. All my life long you have been my constant companion. At times I rued the fact that you were brought into the world, feeling helpless to help, as ignorant of you as the moon. Then there were times the simple grace and sincerity of your love was like yeast to me, raising my spirits and my confidence to do well by you. I owe you much, daughter, and even though you are not here, I do not die alone.

I give up claim to this life. Cling to yours and those of your husband and son. Much of life is like smoke from a fire, a straight column of ascending emptiness, and then nothing at all. Give it meaning and intelligence.