

Love Letter

By Dale Shank

Dearest Joni,

I was startled when I happened to see your photo on the cover of *UK Art News*, with the caption “New Artist-in-Residence at the Darcotes Centre for Contemporary Art.” You were looking straight into my eyes. But I was totally gobsmacked to get a response to my letter. I didn’t dare to expect that.

It’s great to hear from you. It’s been a long time. Ten years? Fifteen?

You say you’re now a serious artist, a teaching artist. Private students. Probably rich. Solo exhibitions all over Europe. Fantastic.

You say you sorted out your priorities. Purpose and direction. I’m happy for you.

And glad to see you didn’t change your name to Epona. I hoped you wouldn’t. Epona was a horse goddess. Not really an artist’s name, was it?

By the way, a trivial thing: the black ink on your letter wasn’t all the same tone. Did you notice? Probably not. The differences were subtle. But obvious to my eye. Obvious to those of us who are facile with Ansel Adams’ zone system for black-and-white photos. I had that Linhof 4x5. An awesome camera. But my craft didn’t count. Galleries rejected my work. You do remember, don’t you? My Charing Cross darkroom was an oasis. My gallery. But I left it when I moved to Tangier. Negatives, too. And I don’t take photos anymore. But I could.

Maybe I’ve changed a bit since you left, Joni. Or maybe not. But as you always said—and you were always right—I should keep my eyes open. Pay attention, you said. And I do pay attention. I watch a twitchy cokehead in my local bar who drinks cheap beer with Elmer, a man who worked 37 years in a linoleum factory. Elmer has carbon tetrachloride eyes. They play pinball and Elmer beats the suffering Jesus out of him. They don’t believe in art. It figures.

I’ve sorted out my priorities, too. I see the obvious. And beyond. I channel synchronicities with the universe. I’ve been a Death Valley curandero, curing altitude sickness with protein tea from lichen found in cosmic forests. An Alaskan malamute, with a Canadian postage stamp in its mouth, on a sled ride from the New Jersey shore to Cambodia. And Henry Kissinger, peddling black-market hand grenades for a first-class ticket to Uruguay on Arctic Air. These are good times. I pay attention.

Did you know this is the Year of the Snake in the Sky? And an excellent year for masks. Genuine tribal masks, with high price tags, are sold at Ye Olde Antique Shoppe across the street. These are masks Margaret Mead smuggled. She hawked them for favors in the academic community. They’re too small for adults. Pygmies, maybe. Rich kids like them, wear them on Halloween, their tiny poison apples in Gucci handbags. Rich kids have tutors who tell them what is and what is not genuine, what is artistic. Tutors don’t tell them that if you take poverty away from the poor, they’ll have nothing. Nothing at all.

Joni, even after all these years, I remember everything. The blister on the tip of your left thumb. The hole in your Capezio pointe shoe. When you danced. Before you painted. That injured sea gull, at home, in Salt Lake City. Its blind eye. That leak in the squirrel’s nest in the middle of January which let in the ice. In Toronto. Dead. The squirrel. Maybe Jesus walked on ice.

You say you attended a gala banquet at the Musee d’Orsay to celebrate some artist whose name, sorry, I can’t remember. And you ate roast squab with porcini. Which reminds me, I’m still hungry for Brazil. You, too? But about squab. Are you aware that squab is just a cover-up name for pigeon? You ate a pigeon. Messy creatures that whitewash statues of genuine artists. Remember Rodin’s, in Budapest? Eating a trashy pigeon is just a short step from eating a

cockroach. Kafka would be dumbstruck. If you take hunger away from the starving, what do they have left? Nothing. Nothing at all.

So, Joni, that’s the news from here. Oh, I should mention I’ve started writing again. I remember you used to like my stories. Some of them. I write what I know. What I see.

And I’m working on a new story. Its main character is Herr Hoden, a paleo-urologist. His research shows that after quadrupedal humanoids channeled into bipedal humans, the body, in perfect synchronicity with cosmic ethers, evolved to where adult males didn’t crush their testicles when they sat down. It’s already a long, complex piece about pain, anatomy, matriarchy and ambition. I’ll not bother you with details. It might not be fiction. *The New Yorker* will want it and I’ll let you know when it’s published.

I hope your career soars to the stars. I hope your ambitions materialize. All your priorities. Maybe we’ll get back together. Sometime. Maybe inspire each other. Again.

Pay attention, my dearest.

Ethan