

Love Letter, with Static Interference from Einstein's Brain · Joyce Carol Oates

Some say the world is Numbers, some say the world is a Mouth, but when you are in love such observations possess very little weight. And while it is perhaps true that most women are in (undiagnosed) terror of bleeding to death, it is historically true that they have put their terror to good use in cultivating the art of the *warm and engaging smile*.

For instance, let me share with my love the sudden realization that: this rural landscape possesses the fey asymmetrical charm of a vision seen through the bottom of a Coca-Cola bottle!—for so it *does* suddenly seem.

For instance, though some say the world is Numbers, and some say the world is a Mouth, how can science explain the fact that, if, at this moment, I approach the mirror on my wall, and raise my right hand, *it is really my left hand I am raising in the mirror?* (In fact I am acting out this experiment right now. I have acted out this experiment while composing my letter.)

Many wild stories circulate in this neighborhood about Einstein's brain and its influence, years after his death. However, my love, I hope not to worry you because *I am well and have never felt better in my life*. As for the theory that women are in (undiagnosed) terror of bleeding to death, and draining away like cracked vases, it is wisest to contemplate the food heaped on your plate and give thanks to the Almighty that it is on *your* plate and not someone else's on the far side of the globe.

You have a warm and engaging smile. Thank you, I have a dimpled smile. Thank *you*, I have a sweet smile. I have a charming smile, thank you. *Thank you*, I have a luminous smile. Thank you, I am blessed with a fetching smile. I, a shy smile. I, a guileless. You are very observant, thank you, I have a dazzling smile. Thank *you*, I have a madcap smile arranged to show eleven teeth. —Though some say the world is Numbers, and some say the world is a Mouth.

My love, do not be jealous of the brain's interference because I am untouched by it, though sometimes the air reeks of formaldehyde when

the wind blows from a certain direction. And do not be jealous when I confess that, Tuesday afternoon, I encountered a former lover at a banquet. The poor creature had aged greatly and did not recognize me at first. All his hair had fallen out, the secret wink in his left eye had become a twitch, his sullen overweight nineteen-year-old daughter sat beside him cutting his meat into small pieces, shaking dollops of sour cream on his baked potato, lighting his cigarettes, etc. "If I suffer from a degenerative disease," the poor creature said, with an attempt at his old jocose humor, "—does that make me a degenerate?"

Though some say the world is Numbers no one wishes to speculate as to their sum if they are added up. It is more tempting to gossip about the bootlegged brain in our midst, and to match our footsteps with the famous "ghost footsteps" on the gravelled path leading to Einstein's former residence. O *it is* tempting!—but I have not succumbed.

It is dangerous to take yourself too seriously because Einstein has proven that you cannot conceive of an idea that vast, for if the candle flame is snuffed out, *had it ever existed?—and how could its existence be demonstrated?* Yet, it is dangerous to take yourself too lightly because then strangers will brush rudely past you not minding if they knock you aside, and even your loved ones will one day cease to recognize you. My love, why have I not heard from you in fourteen years?

Some say the world is a Mouth but our local genius was not one of them. Numerous people in the village tell warm and humorous anecdotes concerning him to this day, such as: the gnarled old cobbler on Bedlam Lane for whom Einstein did his income tax several years in succession; the Negro groundskeeper (now greatly aged) who tended the grass along Philosopher's Walk for whom Einstein always had a kind word; the pack of apple-cheeked schoolboys (now grown into mature adults) whom Einstein helped with their arithmetic homework . . . *sometimes making little errors!* Everyone recalls his snowy-white hair, his boyish smile, his brain still snugly encased in its skull, the creak of his bicycle, which often needed oiling. My love, I absorb myself in harmless local legends while awaiting your arrival.

You laughed in delight and kissed me. You laughed gaily and recklessly and kissed me hard. I kissed your pursed lips. You kissed mine and took

my breath away. You, you laughed defiantly and seized me in an embrace and kissed me *as a man kisses a woman*. I kissed you in return *as a woman kisses a man* because my thoughts were wholly on you and not elsewhere. You boldly kissed my lips. You laughed puckishly and kissed my lips *hard*. As a man kisses a woman, so you kissed me, while focussing your thoughts upon me. As a woman kisses a man, so I kissed you, while focussing my thoughts upon you, despite the faint odor of formaldehyde.

I will love you forever, you said. Thank you, I will love *you* forever. I will die for you! Thank you, I will die for *you*. You are beautiful. Thank you, you are handsome. You are ravishingly beautiful. *You*, you are ravishingly handsome. I have never met anyone like you before. I have never met anyone like *you* before. Why is this landscape blurred, as if glimpsed through the bottom of a Coca-Cola bottle? It is gray and overcast, resembling a landscape glimpsed through the bottom of a Seven-Up bottle. I will love you forever. Thank you, I will love *you* forever until one of us dies.

Some say the world is Numbers, some say the world is a Mouth, but it is a world of *morality, law, and simple human interaction* as well, in which case it was wicked for an unauthorized surgeon to secretly remove Einstein's brain from his skull and hide it away beneath a cellar stairs, when the great physicist-genius had stated his wish beforehand that he did not want an autopsy. His wish was for cremation, which all the world knows.

He flexed his manly fingers and we both stared at them, against our conscious intention. These were the fingers (strong, stubby, manly, with clean square forthright nails) that had held Einstein's brain: but they very much resembled any fingers. Why is so much in life taken for granted, I cried suddenly, so that other strollers in the garden turned to stare,—when it so transparently partakes of the miraculous!

It is futile and silly to fritter away your life in terror that you will soon bleed to death, and far more practical to heap everyone's plate high with steaming food, and insist upon second helpings. I have always counted myself proudly amongst the latter. For if the world is Numbers someone else will add them up and if the world is a Mouth it must be fed.

My love, it has been so long. It seems like yesterday. Surely I have seen your face before?—it is a haunting and unforgettable face. I await a message or a signal from you, in plain English or (if you prefer) in code. I have forgotten nothing. Yes, but you have dropped your fragrant nosegay on the path. I stroll about at dusk, at the “violet” hour, alert to emanations in the breeze. My love, you *will* live forever. *And so will I.*

(He weighed it in his two hands, he said smiling. Was it uncommonly heavy?—it was not. Was it uncommonly large?—it was not. Did it possess any uncommon features?—it did not. “It was a brain like any other,” he said. “Though it reeked now of formaldehyde. And had turned slightly pale from being so long in its jar beneath the cellar stairs. It had,” he said thoughtfully, “been dead a long time.”)