

ALSO BY CAROLYN LOCKE

Always This Falling

*Not One Thing: Following Matsuo Basho's Narrow Road
to the Interior*

The Place We Become

The Riddle of Yes

BETWEEN: RAY AND EVA 1938-39

A MEMOIR IN POETRY

CAROLYN LOCKE



For my parents, whose love abides

BETWEEN: Ray and Eva 1938–39
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PROLOGUE

My father was a TB survivor, but my parents talked very little about that time in their lives.

Yes, he had tuberculosis, a highly contagious disease. Yes, he was treated in a sanatorium during the first year of their marriage. Yes, it was a difficult time. Yes, he was lucky. He recovered.

The one story my mother told me more than once was that the doctors said they might never have children, and she was devastated. *But look at us now,* she would say. *Four beautiful children! And aren't we blessed to have you.*

Late in his life, my father shared two things with his granddaughter Alison when she was working on a biography project in middle school. First, that he kept himself busy in the sanatorium by making a model house. Second, that he and his buddies used to sit on the porch and watch the black wagon come and go. That last phrase most likely said with the French Canadian accent of his buddy Doucette, followed by a chuckle or two, although I can't be sure of that.

So that was what I knew.

Years after my parents died, my sister discovered the daily letters they wrote to each other during my father's time in the sanatorium from April 1938 through February 1939. What follows is a memoir in poetry based on those letters.

KNOWING WHAT YOU COULDN'T

for my parents

I never expected to meet you this way
in words sprawled across hundreds of pages

folded and tucked into envelopes
finally arriving here, where I have lived

for so long without you. Never expected
to know your voices—young, vibrant,

full of longing—or to hold my breath for you
each time I read *It won't be long now, honey*.

Never expected my urgent desire
to spare you the anguish of the coming months.

TIME WARP

1

first letter:

Friday nite
Monday noon

My Dearest Sweetheart,

I hope you came up yesterday. It was a nice day yesterday, maybe, I don't know yet. I know you didn't expect a letter today. In fact I told you yesterday I hadn't written you yet, but thought I would just so you would hear from me. I haven't anything to say because I saw you day after tomorrow. I hope you can understand this but I don't know exactly when I wrote it. Tomorrow you will receive a more sensible letter.

envelope postmarked april 23, 1938 a saturday

2

“MR. RAYMOND RUSSELL OF HUDSON, N.H. WAS ADMITTED TO THIS SANATORIUM [PEMBROKE SANATORIUM, CONCORD, N.H.] ON APRIL 21, 1938.”

ROBERT B. KERR, M.D.

“PNEUMOTHORAX TREATMENTS FOR COLLAPSE OF THE RIGHT LUNG WERE INITIATED ON APRIL 23, 1938 . . . ”

ROBERT B. KERR, M.D.

3

thursdayfridaysaturday

he waits for the first treatment
for the doctor to insert the needle

between his ribs
and into the pleural cavity

waits for the needle
to deliver the gas

that will press against his lung
begin the collapse they say

will stop the disease from growing
the collapse he hopes will save his life

4

he is

just 24 years old

married

6 months and 16 days

5

P.S. This is sensible. I love you.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

your little boy blue

Lots of love

All my love

your Husband
Ray

(DIS)ORIENTATION

from *The Patient Book of Rules*

Food should be taken as a duty
even when

there is no desire to eat

Patients must spend
as much time as possible
out of doors

They are expected

to be in their reclining chairs
before 8:15 AM
and before 3:15 PM

Noisy and boisterous talking
and visiting between patients

is not allowed

Radios must not be played

during rest hours
after evening lunch is served

or when annoying

to other people in the institution

All patients are expected

to retire immediately
after evening lunch is served

at which time lights
will be turned off

and absolute quiet must prevail

Visiting among patients
in rooms or camps

is not allowed

Conversations between patients
regarding their illness or symptoms
should be avoided

at all times

Expectorating into handkerchiefs

on the floors into washbowls
hoppers or toilets or
anywhere about the grounds

is strictly prohibited

Coughing in the dining room
or reception room

is not allowed

The physicians in charge
expect of you

a *cheerful* compliance
with all the regulations

THOUGHTS ON A FROST-COVERED OCTOBER MORNING

Today I want to leave this moment
and enter the one
when he, my-father-who-isn't-yet-my-father,
feels the first needle invade his body.

Want to know if he remains himself
during those long months of isolation and after.
Before he and my mother-who-isn't-yet my mother
conceived my two sisters, my brother, and me.

Because somehow the flesh and blood
of his body-now-gone became theirs
and mine. Where is he in my body now? Maybe
somewhere in my fingers and toes, square and sturdy
as his. Maybe somewhere in the untouchable tissues
of my heart. I want to know how the disease changed
him. Changed us. Changed me.

Caught in the swirl of the then-before-I-was,
the now-in-which-I-am, and everything in between,
I feel our last hug, the strength of our bodies
joined in the innocence of that day. Not knowing
that his body would fail just days later. This time
not the lungs but the heart.

I slide my fingers over the ink,
words written by his hand-that-no-longer-is
and by my mother's, too. Search for the two of them
who somehow became me.

EARLY DAYS (APRIL 23 TO MAY 6, 1938)

Ray to Eva

I might've been misinformed about staying here only 2 or 3 months. I had better ask Doctor Kerr.

I'm going to forget time for now and just see if I can eat and sleep myself out of here, sometime.

Had my second treatment, 400 cc's . . . Last week I weighed 153, tonight 157 . . . I'll soon be up to 200.

Eva to Ray

I didn't have you for my alarm clock this a.m. so overslept like a mutt.

I kind of miss being able to tease you, blue eyes.

Honey, do you know what they inject in your lung? I know it's some sterile gas but am rather vague about it.

My patient spent a fairly good night . . . She isn't sure about having me tonight . . . won't know until 4 p.m. I need to get in a few hours sleep . . . got my

Ray to Eva

I got 200 cc's this a.m. but it did not affect me this time. Good night my little pigeon (mad?)

Enjoyed your visit very much yesterday.

I had a treatment . . . this morning (300 cc's) and don't even notice except when the needle goes in.

Eva to Ray

money for the two nights I've worked . . . haven't heard from that Carr woman though . . . hope I work tonight because then I'll feel as if I should rest Saturday and Sunday before registering.

I shall see you tomorrow if I don't go to work.

I had a nightmare, per usual.
Your wife,
Plumpy

I went to the Blue Moon with nursing school friends for a cocktail and eats . . .

Ray to Eva

*when I might have felt
lonesome, especially a day
like today . . . I hope you
can come Sunday but I
won't count on it because I
know you will probably have
to work. Hope you don't get a
3-month case.*

*I felt swell all day today.
Best since I've been here. My
appetite is getting real good.*

*Hope you will be off
sometime this week . . . It
seems a year since I've seen
you . . .*

Eva to Ray

*I have to go to bed with a hot
water bag because it has turned
so cold . . . I'd rather have you
a million times over . . . I'm
just longing for the time when
you hold me close again.*

*I was so lonely and blue today
because I couldn't get up to see
you.*

*I've gotten so all I want to do
is come home, read your letter,
and go to bed.*

I lift my eyes from your words, disoriented, dizzied by our shared longing, as
the snow continues to fall.