

Chu Lai  
January 27

Dear Family-

Not much to report -- this is just to let you know that I'm still functioning and reasonably sane. For some reason or other there isn't that much to do in the office tonight, so I popped off a letter to Jack and still have time for another. I hope you'll forgive the impersonality of a typed letter, but it's good practice and it makes it look as though I'm busy. (The corresponding disadvantage is that typing fills up so much less space that it requires you to think of that much more to write -- no mean task when nothing ever happens.)

I did get a chance to check out the Special Services Library today. It's located behind one of the smaller helicopter pads, about a three minute walk from my billet. The building itself is rather tired-looking, but it's quiet and has comfortable chairs. For some reason, apparently in keeping with their "educational" mission, the library personnel had put up carefully labelled reproductions of Famous Works Of Art (Impressionists, mostly, ... "The Third-Class Carriage," and so forth) and various Informative Charts (a Chart Of The Solar System, with photographs - all looking like the ones in the World Book, probably taken in the thirties at Mt. Palomar). The result was an effect which made me immediately think of grade school --- grade school as it was for me in the early grades, before all the earnest people managed to reform it after Sputnik and the education gap, or whatever they called it. Of course, I don't want to overly romanticize it -- heaven knows children can be every bit as unhappy as anyone else, in fact, at that point life can be positively TRAGIC, a feeling I can't manage at this point -- but, even so, there was something rather special about it. What I'm thinking about right now is school, much as I hated to go. The specialness lay in objects and places - particularly the ~~KMM~~ textbooks, almost always veterans introduced into the school system during the thirties and forties, with marvelous, blotchy reproductions of photographs -- you couldn't always be sure of what they were representations and would have to take the captions word for it. Of course, there was always the satisfaction of having a really NEW book, one that nobody else had ever touched before. Still, most of them were of an older vintage - often the old printings, sometimes just new printings of the same old books. Apparently, knowledge didn't wear out quite so fast before 1957 --- In the short period between then and now, I'm sure that there have ~~been~~ been many more editions, revisions, etc, than in the twenty years before. There was also that improbable family in the readers, with - naturally - the cherry red Pierce Arrow. I can't remember if they were the same children who went around the world --- I particularly remember Britaany and the lobster-pots. Did they go to China? Children today certainly don't go to China in their school-books.

There were also the other books -- the orange things on cheap paper, with silhouettes, the Childhood of Famous Americans, I have it on the authority of my sister. The only one I can remember off-hand is Martin Van Buren, something about owning a telescope; I probably envied him. Also the standard series; Signature Books were always preferable to Landmark -- I could probably remember more of the former even now. Somewhere in there, there was even a biography of Paracelsus (which I pronounced paralysis), the great 16th century magus and healer, written for children! Also the (Grosset & Dunlop? Scribners?) series

I may have gotten a bit carried away, which I don't mean immediately.

which had Swiss Family Robinson (I know you thought the father was an awful prig, Lois, but I loved the book) and very satisfactory illustrations. It (the series) also had Kidnapped, which I can remember reading on a folding cot in Mountain Lakes. Then, a book from the school library about a boy who fought an immense battle with toy soldiers -- as I remember, I envied him, too --- Envy is probably the natural state of most children.

In an entirely different class were the few truly wonderful books, like Prince Priggio and Otto of the Silver Hand, and the Howard Pyle books. They had the advantage of an excellent story and truly satisfactory illustrations, preferably of men in armor and flags and horses and castles and unusual devices.

I could probably continue all night with the catalogue, but I'd probably only succeed in convincing myself that I spent all of my time with books....Something which is (a) not true and (b) generally regarded as reprehensible. Actually, I probably was an unnatural child, but what's wrong about that? I certainly hope that my children aren't "normal" ...I feel totally indifferent to the idea of a well-rounded childhood. Exploring the area around Syosset and the out-back near the railroad tracks at Mountain Lakes strikes me as infinitely preferable to an early introduction to the baseball diamond and all its attendant unpleasantnesses ---- But that's been said often enough in popular literature, hasn't it?

However, I think that's enough of my spontaneous outburst of egotism. It's not quite time to write my memoirs yet, looking back over the massive lifetime of twenty-three years. I have time to read, to write, to listen to the tapes, to relax. The library, as I was about to write before I let myself be side-tracked, has a few rather decent books....Bainton's biography of ~~Max~~Luther, some science-fiction, etc. At the moment I'm reading De Santillana's The Crime of Galileo. If I start working days, these will be the nightly movies. And writing letters. If I keep this up, I may have my autobiography written before too long. Not bad for someone who hasn't even begun a career ---- but then, of course, I have; being me.

My deepest love to all,

Rob