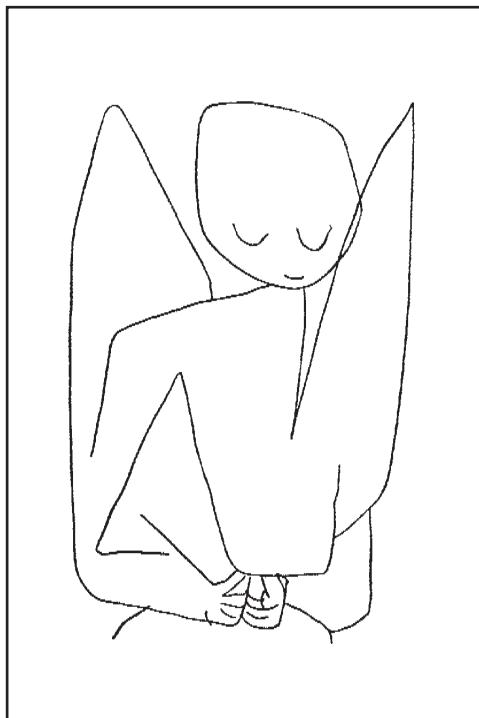


A Small Book on Green



*Servants
Reveille
A Beginning
Hallmark*

Letter of Recommendation from My Father to My Future Wife

G R E E N

Servants

I wouldn't mind a house
managed by servants—
an English butler
to advise me
whether to take tea in the study
or outside in the garden,
a cook whose kitchen is a temple
and whose table bears testimony
to imagination and love,
a gardener to tend the hedges
of the children's boxwood labyrinth,
a housekeeper who brings order
to the library's scattered books,
and most important of all,
a secretary and amanuensis,
an angel who, unseen, leaves
each morning on my desk
a ream of fresh paper
and an onyx fountain pen
beside a little silver bell
I might lift and ring
to summon all twelve muses
if that's whom I wanted,
if I thought they ever had
something poetic to say.

Reveille

When I went home to visit my sister
in the stone house by the river,
I couldn't sleep, and so I rose early,
before dawn, and entered the quiet
temple of the living room to sit
in simple meditation. Palms up,
legs crossed, shoulders squared,
I took a minute to relax my body,
then began to count slow breaths,
attentive to the task of emptying
the merest thought from the mind,
as if sweeping cobwebs from corners.
Moment by moment my heart grew
calm. The windows filled with light
and birdsong announced the morning.
Out of nothingness, light and birdsong.
With eyelids almost closed, I imagined
a peaceful sky free of drifting clouds—
heaven's immaculate, eternal blue.
As I sat, time passed, like the river
quickened by wind. Sun-diamonds
sparkled on wind-shirred water,
and all around the house red azaleas
blossomed, burning like a fiery moat
as towering pines swayed high above.
Perfectly still, quietly alert, I sat
and I breathed—the mind balanced.
Then I heard the soft yet distinct
notes of a distant trumpet.
I did not move, nor open my eyes,
but only listened—yes, a trumpet.
The soaring notes entered my being.
My first thought was of angels on high—
the Lord coming on clouds of glory.
But the next instant brought the truth:

not a trumpet, but a bugle—a soldier
at the fort upriver, sounding reveille.
How could I have forgotten the fort,
having grown up among soldiers and war?
How could I have forgotten the battlements,
the armaments I've known since childhood?
And so like any soldier, I rose to defend the day,
to praise the light in song, like any bird or poet,
knowing this could be the very day
when angels blow their trumpets
and wake everyone.

A Beginning

Today I am walking in woods
where men with chain saws
are felling trees and other men
with guns are killing deer.

Today I have nothing to praise
and nothing to feel sorry for.

Today I refuse to make the sky
tender or the earth heroic.

Today I will not condemn the trail
leading to the garbage dump
or lose myself in the leaves' fiery colors.

Today I won't pretend to understand
the ways we care for one another.

Today I will simply stand
in these thick woods and love
how the branches of one tree
reach into the branches of another.

Hallmark

Every year of high school
during the holiday season
from Thanksgiving to Christmas,
when the chill light was failing
and the days were growing dark,
my deaf mother and I worked
for minimum wage in the P.X.
of the Naval Base in Norfolk,
opening boxes and arranging
in the aisle's long display rack
thousands of greeting cards.
My mother would turn to me
and read each card out loud
as if she were delivering
the greatest poem ever written.
I love my mother, and so I said
nothing, though I'd grit my teeth
and shut my eyes not to hear
the sticky sentiment and clichés.
Those afternoons in early winter
were a budding poet's Freudian
nightmare, though looking back,
I've grown fond of the memory,
so much so that tonight I will sign
the card I've chosen, thanking her
for being who she is—my mother—
and send it off in a pink envelope.

Letter of Recommendation from My Father to My Future Wife

During the war, I was in China.
Every night we blew the world to hell.
The sky was purple and yellow
like his favorite shirt.

I was in India once
on the Ganges in a tourist boat.
There were soldiers,
some women with parasols.
A dead body floated by
going in the opposite direction.
My son likes this story
and requests it each year at Thanksgiving.

When he was twelve,
there was an accident.
He almost went blind.
For three weeks he lay in the hospital,
his eyes bandaged.
He did not like visitors,
but if they came
he'd silently hold their hand as they talked.

Small attentions
are all he requires.
Tell him you never saw anyone
so adept
at parallel parking.

Still, your life will not be easy.
Just look in the drawer where he keeps his socks.
Nothing matches. And what's the turtle's shell
doing there, or the map of the moon,
or the surgeon's plastic model of a take-apart heart?

You must understand—
he doesn't see the world clearly.
Once he screamed, "The woods are on fire!"
when it was only a blue cloud of insects
lifting from the trees.

But he's a good boy.
He likes to kiss
and be kissed.
I remember mornings
he would wake, stroking my whiskers
and kissing my hand.

He'll tell you—and it's true—
he prefers the green of your eyes
to all the green life
of heaven or earth.