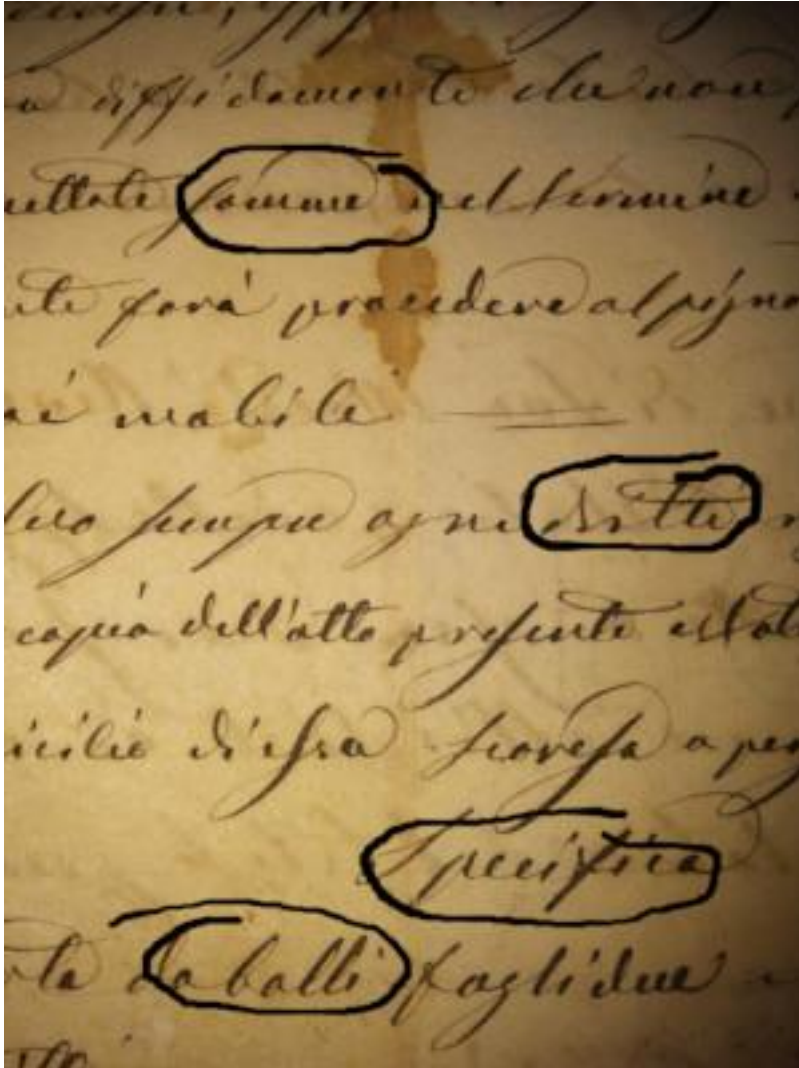


# The Paradoxical Art of Epistolary Erasure

---



Date: September 16, 2023 Author: Artisanal Writer

## By Kelly DuMar

... I am tired, Beloved, of chafing my heart against  
The want of you;  
Of squeezing it into little inkdrops,  
And posting it.  
And I scald alone, here under the fire  
Of the great moon.

~Excerpt from "The Letter," by Amy Lowell

We rarely communicate with actual mailed letters today. And yet many of us have access to family archives containing personal histories of intimate and compelling relationships. My recent book, *jinx and heavenly calling--I poached a portion of my mother's love letters to my father, 1953-1954*, is a collection of epistolary erasure poetry. Through erasing my mother's letters, I was fascinated to have a direct encounter with the origin story of my parents' relationship. Because it's my origin story too. Without the exchange of their letters, I would never have been born.

As I talk to audiences about my book, questions arise--*What is an erasure poem? Why did I write this book? Why is it continuing to excite me, preoccupy me and feed me? Because the erasure of found text sparks fresh, relevant and imaginative feelings, insights and ideas. According to the Academy of American Poets, erasure is a means of collaboration, creating a new text from an old one and thereby starting a dialogue between the two, or as a means of confrontation, a challenge to a pre-existing text. Erasure is a literary practice of paradox--revitalizing what might otherwise be devalued or thrown away, hidden, forgotten, or buried. This is why many writers aptly describe erasure as a practice of excavation.*

Tiana Nobile, in her essay on the poetics of erasure, describes it as an act of repurposing: *Through an intensive process of excavation, fracturing, and fusion, writers can repurpose found text in order to construct new narratives. Such acts of repurposing may be intended to subvert the original narrative, construct a new narrative, or give voice to marginalized narratives.*

Erasure can be expressed in a variety of textual and visual forms, so as you prepare to erase your source material, you have creative decisions to make about the best way to proceed. Erin Dorney outlines six common forms of erasure with visual examples in her article *Six Styles of Erasure Poetry*. She gives examples of using cross-out, computer-generated, covered-up, cut-out, retyped and visual erasure.

Margaret Simon started her poetic erasure, not from a letter, but from an article *about* letters. She erased an essay by Jennifer Sinor published in *The*

*American Scholar*, Every Letter is a Love Letter, to make a visual poem about letter writing. Using a printed copy of Sinor's article, Simon created *Every Letter* by covering up or obscuring the original text, revealing only her *chosen* words. By drawing circles around her selections and lines, not only does Simon show us how to "read" the poem, but she also illustrates her declaration about how letters bind us to *time* and to each other:

*A letter is time–  
rest in the gap  
across space  
binding us  
to moment  
to everyone–*

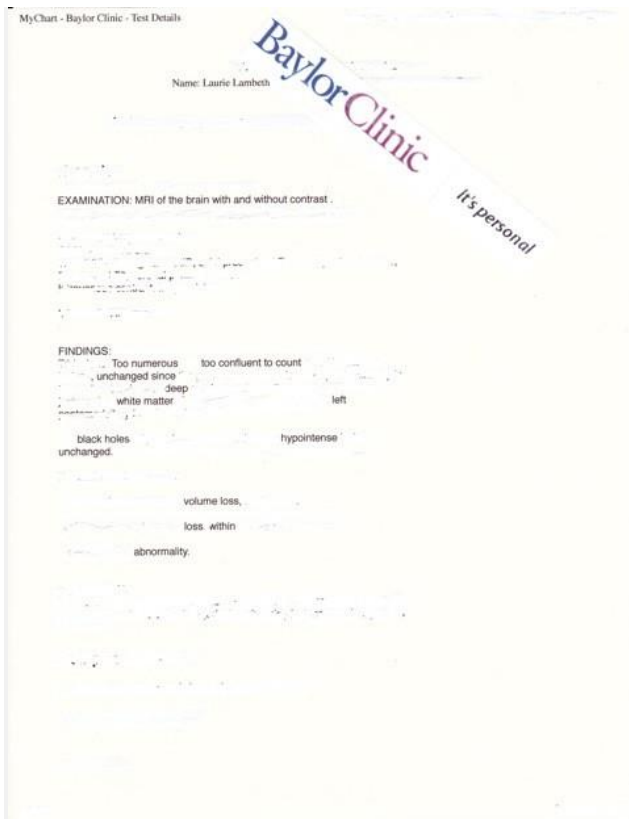


In addition to excavation or repurposing, erasure is an act of reclamation. The poet Laurie Clements Lambeth creates her erasure poem “Baylor Clinic: It’s personal,” published in *Wordgathering*, by covering up words and lines with a white-out on a printed copy sent to her, of a recent MRI of her brain. Lambeth describes the imaginative leap of erasure, in the face of an incurable illness, as an empowering act:

*What I inhabit, of course, is my body, and reading the report with its normal/abnormal findings, its detection of my lesions closing in on one another or joining and lengthening their reach, my black holes of permanent damage unchanged, and its evaluation of my current brain volume, speaks volumes to me about what I can do to imaginatively reclaim that brain and the language (metaphors!) used to describe it.*

Rather than emphasizing the black holes of her brain, by using white-out, Lambeth concretizes the white space of possibilities.

Through my own erasure project, I have excavated, repurposed *and* reclaimed aspects of my relationship with my mother--and myself. My mother was not alive when the love letters she wrote to my father came into my hands. In the latest stage of her life, her seventies, she wasn’t well or happy. She struggled with a number of physical ailments that made it challenging to care for her.



Dementia and lung disease made her depressed and inactive. She lost her innate cheerfulness. She wasn't able to keep herself safe or well cared for and we worried and felt helpless much of the time. When my mother aged, we lost her. When she died, we lost her twice.

But in her letters she was twenty-six-years old falling in love with the love of her life. To meet her at such a fun and promising time is one of the reasons this writing project has been so satisfying. Here was a young woman I wanted to spend time with. Erasing her letters involved me in a whole new phase of my relationship with my mother.

The epistolary erasure poems I made are *not* my mother's letters to my father. Those personal texts can only exist in their original format, as sent, as received, in 1953-1954, from Shirley to Dusty. And the letters can only be read by me in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with all my experience of their relationship over decades.

The poet Mary Ruefle is well known for her work in erasure, and I applied her ideas to my project. Ruefle compares how word choice in erasure is different than other forms of writing: *In the erasures I can only choose words out of all the words on a given page, while writing regularly I can choose from all the words in existence. In that sense, the erasures are like a 'form'—I am restricted by certain rules.* And Ruefle captures well what I experienced as instinctive impulses in erasing a text: *I glance at the words, I do not read pages. My eyes look at words as if they were flowers in a field.*

My method was to retype only the words I selected from the letters. I electronically erased the digital images I made with my iPhone so as not to alter or damage the originals, (an archive that belongs to my siblings as well, not just to me). I added the visual element of layering with a palimpsest: a graphic I made from something I extracted from the particular letter or envelope I was erasing. I could choose from all the words in the entire letter, but I could only select words in the order and form in which they were originally written. The title of each poem is a word or phrase used from the letter in its original format.

Erasing originals connected to a personal relationship is a unique process involving memory and emotional ties that are not a factor in erasing other kinds of chosen texts. My eyes scanned the letters plucking words and making white space selections guided by unconscious memories and an awareness of another layer: how my mother wrote from her present into a future I witnessed. A future with joys, to be sure. A future with conflicts, yes. And when the word “storm” appeared in the original letter from which I made this poem, it seemed to shout: *pick me.*



storm

around

the corner

hectic the ladies

and party a party

*Tomorrow.*

you'll have to

revive me

be nice

when you can

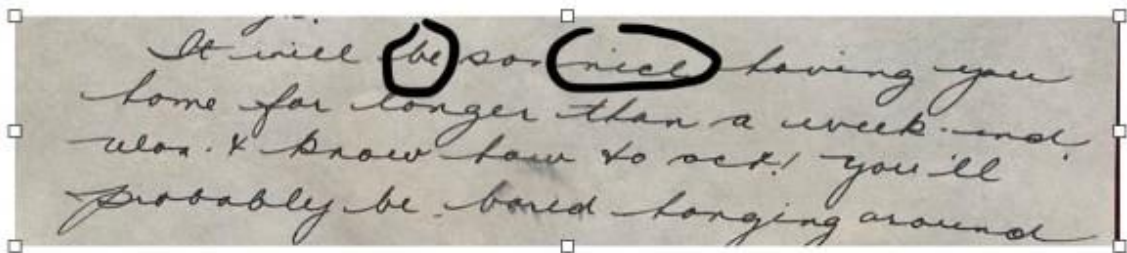
And my father was kind in all the ways he could be. I suppose we're all kind in all the ways we can be. I think most of the time most of us intend to be kind. But he had, over the years, a pattern of losing this, forgetting that--so, he often created significant hurt or inconvenience for her.

Storm is a universal theme, foreshadowing every after-marriage/after-children relationship, isn't it? That's why I erased everything except the big fat word "tomorrow" for the graphic underlay, or palimpsest, of the original letter. Yes, I existed in their tomorrow; I experienced their storms.

The last line I constructed, "be nice/when you can," punches me in the gut. It's the kind of entreaty we all make to our loved ones who live with our shortcomings, weaknesses and blunders every day. *I'm gonna screw up. Be nice when you can.* Let me be clear about something since I am trying to crack the mystery of epistolary erasure. My mother didn't write in her letter "be nice/when you can." My subconscious put the lines together from fragments I plucked on two separate pages:

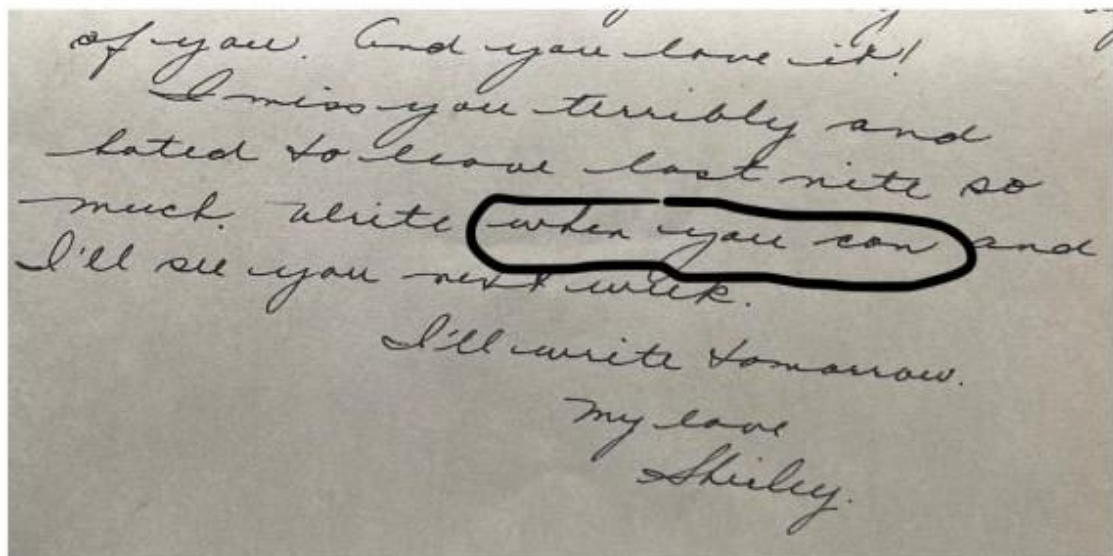


Here's the section from page 2



It will be so nice having you home for longer than a week. and you know how to act! you'll probably be bored hanging around

Here's the section from page 3



of you. And you love it!  
I miss you terribly and hated to leave last nite so much. write when you can and I'll see you next week.  
I'll write tomorrow.  
my love  
Shirley.

be nice / when you can

And my father was kind in all the ways he could be. I suppose we're all kind in all the ways we can be. I think most of the time most of us intend to be kind. But he had, over the years, a pattern of losing this, forgetting that--so, he often created significant hurt or inconvenience for her.

Early in their marriage--she hurt from this story for years--she was hosting a dinner party for his work. And he went to introduce her to someone who just arrived, and he forgot her name.

And my mother, well, she had a pattern of needing reviving after a party. And none of their unkindnesses were intentional. But, here's the thing: intended or not, they were never resolved. I think unkindness can't be undone. They can be amended. There is the art of apology, and the art of accepting an amends when it is respectfully, even artfully, given.

In the letters, I also witnessed how kind they were to each other, how artfully kind and forgiving, enough to fall in love, marry, and want to make a family-- despite all the inevitable storms.

*Deep in a life is another life*, the poet Marianne Boruch says. The use of palimpsest was one way of creating a dialogue between the original letters, the past, and my encounter with them, the present. The Oxford Reference Dictionary defines palimpsest as *"From the Greek work palimpsestos, meaning a papyrus or other kind of writing material on which two or more sets of writing had been superimposed in such a way that, because of imperfect erasure, some of the earlier text could be read through the later over-writing.* Which brings me to the selection of this single word from my mother's letter as the palimpsest of "storm":

*tomorrow.*

It's a kind of one-word poem that evokes so much mystery. Who knows what will happen *tomorrow*? Flora saved my mother's letters to her son but died not knowing they would end up in my hands or a book. And, what will happen to her letters after I'm gone, and what will happen to my poems? What new lives within lives will be experienced and exposed? The poet Toi Derricotte points us to the spiritual mystery at the heart of the one-word-poem, *tomorrow*:

*"In the end, our connection to the past is more than a personal connection; it places us within a lifeline that extends before and beyond us, it places and holds us between the wings of something vast and eternal."*

I can only wonder what my children or great-grandchildren will discover from the writing I leave behind in poems, diaries, plays, and notebooks, and how my writing may be used as a palimpsest for them. I trust one of them will someday

excavate and repurpose my leftover words after I'm gone, and perhaps, even reclaim something vital that is lost or left behind.



**Kelly DuMar** is a poet, playwright and workshop facilitator from Boston. She's author of four poetry collections, including *jinx* and *heavenly calling*, published by Lily Poetry Review Books in March 2023. Her poems and images are published in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Thrush*, *Glassworks*, *Flock* and more.

Kelly teaches a variety of creative writing workshops, in person and online, and she teaches Play Labs for the International Women's Writing Guild and the Transformative Language Arts Network. Kelly produces the Featured Open Mic for the *Journal of Expressive Writing*. She lives on the rural Charles River where she photographs the wetlands and woods. Reach her at [kellydumar.com](http://kellydumar.com)

