



LOVE,
H

THE LETTERS OF
HELENE DORN
AND HETTIE JONES



HETTIE JONES

LOVE, H

*The Letters of Helene Dorn
and Hettie Jones*

HETTIE JONES

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INTRODUCTION

Letters stop time—even old they're always news. "Letters Lift Spirits," declares one vintage postage stamp, another "Letters Preserve Memories," and a third, with reverence, "Letters Mingle Souls."

Love, H is all this as well as a story with a backstory.

Thematically, collections from women emphasize friendship, and a lengthy correspondence unfolds not just a friendship but a sympathetic intimacy, an *I* and a *You*.

So who will you meet here? A couple of plainspoken women, avant-garde by nature, not analysis. Expansive, introspective, reportorial, confessional, two participants in a gradual redefinition.

In 1960, when we began to write, like most women then Helene Dorn and I were married with children. What set us apart were our men and our context: the Beat / Black Mountain / San Francisco / New York bohemia of that time, the Kerouac Ginsberg O'Hara deKooning nexus that has had such a lasting impact on American culture. The place I call Boyland. Each of us had arrived there with something in mind—she to paint, I to write—and then foundered on love, on the hardships and distractions of marriage and motherhood. Still, we were taking it all in, putting things by.

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I'd come home from work to a party. In the group with my husband, LeRoi Jones, was a man I didn't recognize, and—surprise!—a *woman*. In 1960, at six on a cold December evening, the women I knew were either home with their kids or warming up at the Cedar Bar.

But here in my house was a tall, beautiful blonde who swooped down, relieved me of my bag of groceries, and with her free hand fingered the fabric of my coat. My outer garment, that is—a poncho I'd pieced together from multi-colored woolen samples.

“Did you *make* that?” she asked.

Her husband, introduced as the poet Edward Dorn, pointed out that Helene—this woman, his wife—had made the finely tailored—lined!—silk jacket he was wearing.

In 1960, few women managed to keep their own skills in sight and so immediately presented the evidence. We left the men and went to the kitchen, ready to talk.

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In those days, women raised to believe the nuclear family an ideal safe haven were seldom in places where they could subvert it, or project an alternate reality. Our early sixties bohemia conformed: men in the lead, their wives who accepted this, and the chicks who stood outside, inhabitants of their own lives, looking in at “old lady” and either dubious or desirous. I recognized immediately Helene’s refusal, like my own, to acquiesce entirely to this setup. We discovered right away that we had things to say, to exchange, to question. She’d traded an early, settled marriage for a vagabond life with Ed in the rural West, I’d discarded family for LeRoi and the centrifuge of downtown Manhattan.

At dinner that night we kept trying to keep our conversation going across a large, round, noisily occupied restaurant table. That’s how it was to be with us—words across distance, sometimes through difficult, even perilous times.

I was planning to write but had yet to figure out what or how. Meanwhile I was two months pregnant, had a toddler and a day job, and a husband on his way to fame. I needed to hear from this straight-talking woman—nothing fancy, just what she was thinking and doing. Like me Helene had fled an intended life. She had three kids. She laughed out loud. Her favorite ending to any art/life dilemma was “*Ta dum Ta dum Ta dum Ta dum!*”

The seven-year difference between us presaged a change in the kind of life a woman might choose, and the result of that choice on her later life. Helene, born 1927, entered our mutual bohemia already a mother, a woman who had felt stifled in a traditional marriage and had been freed by her relationship with her second husband. I, born 1934, entered that same circle determinedly independent, a college graduate already earning her own living.

Although correspondence by the men of that time is available, we have few examples from women. Joyce Johnson and Jack Kerouac wrote for a while (see *Door Wide Open*). *Love, H*, however, isn’t a moment in time but a selection from many exchanges—mailed, faxed, and finally emailed over forty years.

And since even the briefest text is a message, I believe the letter form lends itself to contemporary thinking, and that meeting two old pros might inspire its wider range.

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It took twenty years, and some persuasion, before I agreed to write *How I Became Hettie Jones*, my memoir of that sixties bohemia. I'd been working on children's books and poetry and stories, as well as editing and teaching, and I couldn't see the purpose—I thought people just wanted gossip—until, finally, I began to see that particular story as a *way* to teach. Since then, given the book's success, but that it concerns only the 1950s and '60s, people (women especially) have been asking, "When are you going to write '*Remaining Hettie Jones*'?"

Another twenty years passed while I considered addressing this challenge. Why continue the story? Of what use would it be? What attraction? Scholars have tended to heroicize "beat chicks" who lived through that scene and got out alive. But afterward, lacking the anchor of male celebrity, they . . . ah, what did they do? Where did they go? What *kept* them alive? How *did* I remain Hettie Jones?

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In *How I Became* I wrote that these letters "kept me from sinking." Now they've kept time—the right time, because it's easy to be wrong. It was Helene who sent me, as I was writing that book, Kay Boyle's warning against memory's "dreamy evasive eyes." But here, in our letters, eyes peeled, we look straight out from wherever we were.

To correspond isn't to duplicate but to harmonize. Yet what was accomplished in all those years of words that crisscrossed the continent and sometimes the ocean? For us, a record of our separate evolutions, two takes on a possible woman's life. For the reader a glimpse into that process. And what would *this* teach?

Sometimes you have to let an idea reveal itself; I learned this from the men I knew. From Robert Creeley, that one thought should simply lead to another. From Jack Kerouac, that spontaneity can be achieved through writing in the moment *what the mind has been putting by*. From LeRoi Jones and others, that content determines form, and from Charles Olson, specificity, what one word, one tone, can mean. I can't emphasize enough how I value these lessons.

What I didn't learn from the men, though, was to value *my* moments enough to speak of them; for that I needed Helene, who, similarly, valued hers. When we met she'd been married to Ed since the mid-50s, time enough to have figured out how to maintain her integrity—if not her art (the latter, like mine, a story waiting to be told). I learned a lot from her scholarly bent, her excellent eye. And I learned, as I groped toward myself, what it was to have a friend who would herself benefit from our exchange.

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Once we began writing we never stopped, though sometimes there were silences or only postcards when work consumed us, as eventually we both became single mothers / working artists. “Discarded wives”—a definition Helene found—we got over the discards and into the score cards. Naturally, making up for lost time took new time: I was thirty-seven when my first book was published, Helene forty-four at her first show. But we got there, somehow. Or other. “Offline?” she wrote, after we'd progressed to email. “I've been offline since the day I was born!”

But what, after all, is the *subject* of an offline life?

As a poet, I take my thesis for this book from one way to drive the poem, which is to approach its subject from multiple directions. Letters, too, come from every which way, including time. Does their aggregate make a subject? Not guaranteed. But, like poems, they offer voices. As in: the authors have agreed to speak and we, the future, have caught them unawares.

Letters also offer arrivals, as in: at last they brought themselves to the table. Thus this correspondence offers two voices, each of two women bringing herself to the table, approaching from different directions to the other's witness, for forty-odd years. Oddities themselves. Offline.

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The focus of *Love, H* is wide-ranging, and like any story, it has its moods. Ecstatic: “Norway commission verified!” “Book contract signed!” Contemplative: “I wonder what it is that I want, more than this.” Reports from the battleground of women's rights: “Nuns for Choice marching alongside well-dressed New Hampshire Republican Women for Choice!” And accounts from the life to which we remained irrevocably connected: “The funeral service was lovely—chanting, and the Kaddish, and little statements . . . the place crowded with people sitting on the floor and squeezed around the perimeter on chairs;

me—a seat away from Bob Creeley—on a little table, since no chairs left by the time I arrived promptly at 9. Everyone up early for Allen.”

In making this selection I’ve been concerned most of all with literature and art and our attempts to locate our own efforts within these disciplines. But art was just one part of the ongoing struggle to sustain ourselves in a culture only beginning to recognize the working woman’s place in it, and how she might achieve the necessary balance for such a venture. Given that the quest for this balance is ongoing, my purpose here is to submit some guidance, in the hope that how we remained will help others envision lives of their own choosing, and to offer young women what we lacked, frontline stories of success and failure at trying to be an artist in a woman’s life.

Which is opposite the way that’s usually phrased. Offline indeed.