

# DEAR BOY,

An Epistolary Memoir

Heather Weber

Judith Kitchen Select



OVENBIRD

Ovenbird Books, 2013  
Port Townsend, WA

Copyright © 2013 by Heather Weber.

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States of America.

Ovenbird Books  
Port Townsend, WA  
Judith Kitchen Select

This book is published under the Judith Kitchen Select imprint of Ovenbird Books, a new publishing venture designed to bring literary nonfiction titles to the attention of the reading public. In the interest of quality and individuality, Judith Kitchen acts as editor and introduces each book; the writer has complete autonomy over content and design.

If you would like to use material from this book (other than for review purposes), prior permission must be obtained by contacting the author through [ovenbirdbooks.org](http://ovenbirdbooks.org). Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Cover art: John Beyer  
Author photograph: John Beyer

Ovenbird Books Nonfiction Series  
With a foreword by Judith Kitchen.  
[www: ovenbirdbooks.org](http://www.ovenbirdbooks.org)



Library of Congress Control Number: 2013920014

ISBN-13: 978-1940906041  
ISBN-10: 1940906040

For two brothers—Henry and Josh.



For three sisters—Una, Evvy, and Naomi.



## **Epistles: An Introduction**

*Dear Boy*, by Heather Weber, has found its perfect form. What else can she do but spell out the letters in her head—the ones she writes to the brother who died, the brother she loved and sometimes didn't speak to? In trying to penetrate the distances of now and then, before and after, she discovers that she needs the distance not of time and space, but of first and third person, names and no-names. Dear Boy, she says, and he becomes not the somewhat troubled, talented man who died but the mischievous boy who enlivened her childhood. And she becomes, for the duration of the letter at least, the girl she used to be.

The Boy. The Girl. They could be us. Yet the letters close the distance opened by the lack of names. They are intimate, full of detail, full of story. Story retold, rehashed, reimagined, restored. They carry us thoroughly into the mind of the writer: her memories, yes, but also her growing adult understanding of the family dynamics that invade this story at every turn. The distances of the heart.

Nowhere are those distances so delineated as when we encounter the Mother. Here, we soon realize is the source of confusion and conflict. Weber's impulse is threefold—to call forth, with precision, the odd behaviors of the Mother and how, from the child's perspective, life itself is given shape; to catch the boy up on what has happened since he's been gone; and to speak directly to a woman who doesn't want to listen. Long after the funeral, Weber addresses her withheld presence. In those spaces, she also addresses herself, talks to herself, "Girl," she says, "You believed the dreams were another gift." And they were. But not until she found voice for them, and the voice emerges through technique—as opposed to device.

Using the epistolary form, Weber has breached the gap between writer and reader. We are in the presence of something at once urgent and measured. Each letter takes the time it needs to focus or explore. The story unfolds piecemeal and yet there is an overlay of adult compassion that

## **Heather Weber**

colors each remembered scene. Weber gives us a template for re-examination, analysis, self-confrontation, meditation, even forgiveness. Even self-forgiveness.

Finally, please do not turn to the back of the book to look at the photographs until you have fully encountered the letters. The impulse behind these epistles—the need to find a perspective within which to revisit the life and go forward—will become your lens as you then discover that you know these people, these no-longer-strangers who stare back from the page. The photographs act as confirmation, but also as a further window into the mysteries of who we all are, and why—before it's too late—we must pay attention to those constantly revised letters floating in our minds.

—Judith Kitchen, November 2013

## **Dear Boy,**

Dear Reader,

By now, writers and readers alike have conversed enough on issues of fact, fiction, and truth-telling in memoir. Many of us share the understanding that a finite mind cannot be trusted to reliably remember every historical and concrete detail of a life. In the realm of memoir, this must be acceptable. And yet, Reader, you deserve what is true.

I offer you a story, true to memory, which science says is faulty and likes to scramble sequences and details of history. The sequencing of events, especially in the early part of this story, may be somewhat askew; yet, it follows memory, a narrative in its own right. To counteract memory's shortcomings as well as possible, I have shored her up with recorded facts and interviews as were available to me. Names have been changed to afford some people their privacy; other names have been changed for art's sake.





DEAR BOY,

An Epistolary Memoir

*Dear Boy,*

*I wrote you an email last year, addressed to your tattoo shop. Did you ever get it? It was about our cousin's wedding—you were invited, but she didn't know where to send the invitation. You know, your house really was out in the middle of nowhere. How many houses are there in that tiny town, anyway—five? And a church? And some railroad tracks? And just a little bit up from the churchyard, that narrow country road where you landed after flying out of a car.*

*You never saw this house I live in, and you'd been living in your home for years before I ever visited. We weren't too busy, but were we scared to act like brother and sister? Today I was thinking that it's still July, a few weeks before your blood marked the gravel with a great brown stain, but the leaves on the silver maple in my front yard have turned sunny gold speckled with mildew. Meaning the accident already happened. Too late for me to ask you how the distance between us unfurled, why your once-tight grip on my hand loosened into a flat, retracted palm.*

*Too late now—but death demands an account. The closer the death, the more detailed its demands. And all this accounting I must do with you, Boy, is like sending a hundred years' worth of birthday cards and getting none in return. But so it will be. I have no other way to speak to you.*

# I

*If I could build my whole world around you,  
I'd make your eyes the morning sun.  
I'd put so much love where there is sorrow.  
I'd put joy where there's never been none.*

—Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell



## **Dear Boy,**

\*

Here's a simple story. There was a woman who sliced and froze peaches in the summers of my childhood. When she was young, she married a younger man. They made the Boy, Henry.

When she was older, she married an older man. Together they made me (Heather) and a younger boy. His name is Josh.

## Heather Weber

Dear Boy,

I am swallowed up in your jeans-shorts and canvas shoes. (You like everything blue—from the navy shoes to the dusky jersey and your Wild Bill's Railroad engineer cap.) We have the same freckles and bubble cheeks, the same dark hair. Our chins tilt back and aim right at the eye of the camera. I am laughing like I own you, the shoes, the all-encompassing cut-offs, the jersey, the room, the outside, and the universe.

In other pictures, I lean my elbow into your stomach while I'm resting, like you're my personal human beanbag, and you don't seem to mind much of anything that I do—whether I snatch a wide-brimmed straw hat off your head or drape my calves over the tops of your shoulders while I perch on the kitchen counter. Nor does it seem to trouble you if I topple your Lego castle or—during a game—run into the baseball field calling your name.

## Dear Boy,

\*

On one of their first dates, Husband Number Two took ice cream sandwiches to Peaches and the Boy. The Boy asked, *Will you be my daddy?* And soon, Number Two invited the Boy and Peaches to move into his house. He passed footballs with the Boy in the long family room.

After multiple marriage proposals from Number Two, Peaches lifted up a prayer: *If you want me to marry him, Lord, have him walk in the door in the next five minutes.* Number Two, who she thought was on a business trip, arrived hurriedly a few moments later. He'd forgotten his keys.

The bridesmaids wore daffodil-yellow dresses, their hair swept back in waves from shiny, perspiring faces. Peaches' dress sleeves billowed from shoulders to silk cuffs as she walked down the aisle of the Unitarian church in Palo Alto. The Boy, in his brown suit and shaggy black-brown hair, carried the ring on a tiny pillow.

Afterward, in the multipurpose room of the Americana Apartments, he sat at a black grand piano in front of a single window that spanned the height of the wall. Sunlight streamed through the glass, turning his hair and the piano a glinting mahogany.

As the Girl grew up listening to Peaches' stories and studying the pictures in the wedding album, this photo-

## **Heather Weber**

graph of the Boy reminded her of Schroeder in a Peanuts comic. She wondered if his playing had been heard by party guests or drowned out by the din of the loudspeaker.

## Dear Boy,

\*

The Girl tried to get born when Peaches was only six months pregnant. At the hospital, they shot Peaches up with steroids to make the Girl's lungs grow faster. Vodka and orange juice kept the contractions at bay. Peaches sipped next to the Scrabble board that floated on the bedspread between her and Number Two, who took time off work to pour vodka and monitor contractions. The Boy sat and read *The Hardy Boys* when he got home from school and—the Girl later imagined—was very forgiving of his sister-to-be for all the inconvenience. She liked to think her very existence was enough, finally, to make up for all the afternoons spent sitting with bed-resting Peaches when he could have been at the zoo or the park or the beach.

Three months after the Girl's birth, the Boy got another sister. This time Husband Number One's family expanded. And by the time little Josh was born, the Boy was firmly sandwiched between two clans, two sets of siblings. He grinned in photos with towheaded children—a boy and a girl on a different sofa in another living room—children who had some sort of claim on the Boy, the nature of which the Girl never liked to consider.



## Heather Weber

Dear Boy,

I perch on the Big Wheel in the driveway. Stanford Place, Cupertino. The stick of an orange creamsicle stems from my fist as I watch you frolic down the sidewalk's mild incline, a walkie-talkie in hand. You are too exuberant to be a real spy, but your friend Paul hides in the neighbor's tree with the other walkie and you'll play-act surprise when he jumps out at you. I, too, am spying, waiting for you to skip my way. You'll smile and laugh when you see the orange-sugar cream melting into rivers down my closed-up hand.

I know. You couldn't wait for me to be born.

## Dear Boy,

\*

When Peaches married, the Boy borrowed Number Two's last name. Then, he sent letters to Number Two's parents in blocky handwriting:

*Dear Grama and Grampa,*

*Thank you for the speedometer. I liked the card. It was very nice. we had a hard rain. Have a nice Thanksgiving. happy birthday.*

When she received the letter, Grama penciled '79 in the top left corner. The Boy was eight years old.

As time passed, he minced words, turning his correspondence into sketches. Nineteen eighty-two was the year of distant mountain ranges. *Happy Birthday Gramps*, he cursive'd on one just next to a lake where a fisherman stood in his boat and reeled in a catch half his size. "I got another fish!" the man exclaimed via speech bubble.

## Heather Weber

\*

Here was one of the living room photos placed in the family album: In the early eighties, Number Two sported a beard the size of a backyard critter as he held terry-clothed baby Josh on the living room couch. The Boy snuggled against Number Two and the Girl reclined on the Boy's lap, held in tight by his arm. With baby fat in their cheeks, they wore pastel pajamas and had the same brown, bowl-shaped hairdos, stray side-curls flipping out at the ears. In a photo taken two years later, on the front porch next to visiting Grama and Grampa, the Boy clutched a basketball in one arm and the Girl in the other, his arm lightly cupping the round of her shoulder.

Many years later, the grown-up Girl would wish that a certain photo had been taken on the Boy's wedding day. She would long for an image, captured forever, of herself and the thirty-four-year-old Boy, widow-peaked and black-tuxedoed, a rosebud tucked into his lapel. With the sunny May breeze flirting with her red-dyed hair, she'd have stood next to the Boy, an arm wrapped behind his back, while little Josh flanked the Boy's other side. The Girl's two daughters would have nestled into the legs of their mother and uncles—the whole party grinning at the Boy's good fortune, his good wife.

## Dear Boy,

You see, Boy,

You are less *Henry* than you are *Boy*: your sweaty torso, your freckled cheeks propping up a smile, the way you lean into your dirt bike, scuff the ground with the heel of your shoe, build slot-car tracks with intent eyes, wave me from the hot pancake griddle on the stove, and with flourish stack a last block on the wooden tower. All this has made you the prototype—the standard—for every other. It couldn't be helped. You're the bar, Boy.

## Heather Weber

Dear Boy,

Peach, tangerine, lemon, fig, plum—the trees on Stanford Place made for a neighborhood orchard. Number Two built his plywood-and-chicken-wire coop in the corner of the backyard where he'd chopped down the diseased walnut tree. He painted the coop aquamarine and fitted small, hinged doors on the side to access the birds' roosting spot. When the shipment of Rhode Island Reds arrived, I popped pieces of dried pineapple in my mouth, the sweet and tang making my tongue recoil and burn. Peaches seemed bright, burning, happy as the whole family crouched in the garage and watched as you took a small swatch of red fabric and poked it into the cage. The chicks screamed and scurried, scrambling with excitement—because it was *blood-red*, Peaches explained over the din of the chicks. She crouched at the cage and rose and crouched again.

## Dear Boy,

\*

Like the Boy, the Girl corresponded with her grandparents, writing with such big letters she could fit only three or four words to a line.

*Dear Grama and Grampa,  
this is a Note from Heather  
ar chicken died  
a week or so  
ago. me and my  
dad and Josh were  
home alone.  
Henry had gone  
to his dad's house.  
Mom was going  
shopping.*

## Heather Weber

\*

After the Girl's chicken died, the Boy got so sick he couldn't remember Pete Rose's batting average or strategies for long division. He was practically in a coma for two weeks as he lay in the king-sized bed Peaches shared with Number Two.

So this was, according to Peaches.

Number Two did not notice the Boy in a coma, but listened as Peaches insisted she herself was dying. She saw fourteen specialists that year, none of whom could determine the cause of her fatigue, aching joints, and migraines. Despite the mystery, she said two doctors predicted her death in the next twelve months.

Coincidentally, the rest of the family was ill, too. The five-year-old Girl, Peaches told the pediatrician, was paranoid, irritable, and had headaches. Little Josh, by Peaches' count, slept eighteen hours a day. Good thing there was a thyroid specialist in San Francisco. In his office, the children's blood work came back negative for auto-immune diseases, but Peaches convinced the doctor to at least treat the *symptoms of disease*, and couldn't the family be helped with synthetic hormones? They could, he agreed, and contrary to medical wisdom of the times, the children and Peaches got on their daily dose. On account of the fact that Peaches didn't like Number Two's moods, she talked him into taking two different hormones (it was *that*, Peaches said, or divorce). The Girl never thought to argue about taking her medicine when, at breakfast, Peaches set out a tiny pill next to a bowl of yogurt or a plate of

## **Dear Boy,**

scrambled eggs and toast. Over the years, the pills Peaches doled out doubled in number, then tripled, then doubled again. The Girl sporadically slipped tablets, capsules and chewable supplements—Vitamins C, D, E, B-6, B-12, Pantothenic Acid, Evening Primrose oil—into her pockets when Peaches wasn't looking and flushed them down the toilet, their vibrant oranges, pinks, and yellows swirling together on the way. But the Girl never forgot to chew up her "thyroid" (as the family came to call the medicine prescribed by the specialist). Every morning for seventeen years, the Girl heeded Peaches' warnings against auto-immune disease and placed the chalky synthetic hormone (sometimes pink, sometimes yellow—depending on the manufacturer) on her tongue and let it dissolve there, the solute swirling inside eddies of saliva.



## Heather Weber

Dear Peaches,

You are so talented at networking with the desperately ill. On each neighboring street, you know of mentally retarded children, children with leukemia, and a teenaged girl who developed six tumors practically overnight and had rheumatoid arthritis by the time she was sixteen. You can prattle off each neighborhood case of lupus, brain cancer, migraines, chickenpox, Bell's palsy, and Down syndrome. You blame these diseases (and our family's cat-alog of symptoms) on a toxin sprayed from helicopters in the middle of the night.

To rid California of its Mediterranean fruit fly infestation, Malathion filtered through the atmosphere, blank-eting our city, our neighborhood, the tangerine tree in our backyard. Although the director of the California Conservation Corps publicly swallowed a diluted mouthful—to demonstrate the pesticide's safety—and survived, you insist on the poison's eradication of the neighbors: You know all the mothers who've died of mysterious, seemingly untraceable causes. Those mothers' names, which you list in solemn forewarning, make me afraid to leave you and I scream as Mrs. Pass, the kindergarten teacher, pries my hands off your calves and thighs. She straightjackets me with her arms, pressing me against her lap while the class sings *Frere Jacques. Dormez vous?* the children intone with lilting and feigned curiosity as I choke on air, breathless for one last glimpse of your retreating back.

## Dear Boy,

Dear Peaches,

On my report card, Mrs. Pass writes, “Heather has done well this year in spite of a lot of illnesses and missing school. I hope she is on the mend.” You must think I am broken still because, in first grade, Mrs. Burnetti droops over her desk adding up all the days I’d missed—forty-two absences and sixteen tardies in the last three quarters of the school year. I like Mrs. Burnetti with her white-blond bob and thick sturdy shape, her creamy skin and dark eyes set off by deep reds and forest green cashmere. To her I am a “real joy, a beautiful child” with “lovely qualities”—words so pretty they sting, and I imagine wrapping my arms around her as I watch her walk, swathed in linen and cashmere, from the left to right ends of the blackboard, reminding us how “the first vowel does the talking and the second one does the walking.”

I’ve decided I will not disappoint. I remember my vowels, pronouncing them just so, in turn allowing one to say its name, the other to remain silent. Aloud, I read my way through books full of letters, decoding their meanings: a young girl longs for her mother to approve a set of mismatched socks, yellow and red; another young girl cleans her room, waters household plants, grocery shops, washes dishes. Her mother calls her a “big help.” I look for some version of you in these mothers, these stories. Once, I put together my own words after studying your photograph. I imagined that the woman in the picture was someone other than who you have become:

## Heather Weber

*Inside the frame, laughter lies.*

*Outside the picture, heartache cries.*

*I love the woman inside the frame—  
joyful, happy, without pain.*

When you find my poem in the trash, you don't understand that it is the woman in the frame, only, that I long for, some shadow of your current self. You tuck the poem away in a file and will someday present it back to me. That day, you'll be tearful at this magnanimous preservation of my past.

## Dear Boy,

Dear Boy,

In a little while Peaches and Number Two will put an end to our before-bed fraternizing and send me across the hall to my room, powder-pink and white. At night in the dark I can see the outlines of the white armoire with round pink knobs, the pink stool, the lacy white pillow sham with a ribbon of pink running through, pink-and-white Precious Moments figurines, pink My Little Pony.

Navy-and-red bunk beds make-shifted from plywood sheeting and plywood cubes tower in the room you share with little Josh. Wish I could stay up on your top bunk, playing *Go Fish* and meandering through a whole collection of Golden Books while you dabble with the slot car track below, the *whzzzz* of the control gun growing louder when the cars get stuck. Tonight I'm worried about wetting my bed. It happens often enough that I know what to do: strip off my nightgown and change the sheets. But Peaches always hears when I get up—in spite of her room being on the other side of the house.

Usually the bedwetting doesn't bother her, but Peaches came in last night while I was tugging at the wet sheets in the dark. She flipped on the light.

"I wet the bed." I blinked and saw her eyes were funny and bright, her face pinched like a bent staple.

"Here," she said, and took the sheets, pulling them off. After she remade the bed with dry ones, she sat on it. "Have a seat," she told me, pointing at my pink desk stool. Still damp from the film of urine stuck to my legs, I hunched over the stool in fresh pajamas, waiting till I could collapse into bed again. But

## Heather Weber

Peaches seemed wide awake and suddenly was talking the way important people talk on TV when they give big speeches and wear dark suits. Peaches' speech was about bedwetting, how she was tired of changing the sheets so often; it needed to stop. And, she said, she was displeased with me in general (not just about bedwetting). There were other things, bedwetting being only a covert subversion of authority. I couldn't follow it, Boy, I was so tired, but I reached into the fog in my head and picked a moment—two—from the day before that might have upset her: I didn't share the tea set with little Josh. I disturbed her folded laundry.

I listened, drunk with tired, drunker with her steady drone. I hadn't noticed it before, but there, leaning against the wall under the light switch was one of those three-foot rods, one half-inch in diameter, that Peaches and Number Two bought at the lumberyard for our spankings, so thin that it bent in the air and whistled sharp before the slap on our bottoms.

I was and wasn't certain where this was going—the speech, the sitting down on my stool instead of climbing back into a warm, dry bed, the vibrations I heard in Peaches' voice hitting me all dark and funny.

Did you and little Josh wake up, Boy, and hear when she said, "Bend over the stool"? Did it really happen, or was I dreaming that my head was upside down six inches from the floor, hands grasping the stool legs for balance. Then, the *zip zip* of the rod bending in the air and flirting with my skin through the layer of pink polyester-and-cotton nightgown. Sting and retreat. Sting and retreat. I unrolled into a standing position,

## **Dear Boy,**

backing into the side of my bed to press the burning away. When I looked up, Peaches was tucking the rod into my closet, sliding the stool under my desk so it looked as if I'd slept the whole night through, my room undisturbed. Then she was pulling the blankets up to my chin, kissing me goodnight. I quivered and closed my eyes, my backside tingling, arrows shooting down to my toes.

## Heather Weber

Dear Boy,

My first Pioneer Girls task is to sew a yellow-and-black badge onto a blue nylon bag. I get points for *Sewing*. The other girls, who've been there the longest, have already *Camped*, maybe *Built a Fire from Sticks*, *Made Dinner for the Family*, *Ironed Shirts for Father*. Their blue nylon bags are quilted with badges.

Next, I bring Peaches for Mother-Daughter night. The evening's craft involves decorating a Mason jar lid with glitter, glue, and seashells, and then filling the jar itself with marbles or more shells. After our cooperative craft, we get our picture taken together. Peaches' dress looks like a fuchsia sheet wrapped around her body. A blue cloth belt knots in her middle as if to keep the fabric from falling open at any moment. She's dressed me in a frilly long-sleeved white blouse and navy skirt. My hair loosely puffs out from the barrettes at both sides of my temples. The photographer-mother urges me and Peaches to back up against a shadowy white wall. Peaches' lips press into a straight line, and one arm reaches behind as if to steady me for the photograph. At the wrong moment I close my eyes, tilt my head down toward the floor, turn my lips slightly up but not enough for a smile.

All evening I look from Peaches to the long-haired Pioneer-Girl beauties in the room and wonder if they've been able to decode the mysteries of their own mothers—and have *you*? Have you, Boy, been able to understand, to *locate*, Peaches—what with her tangle of thick grown-up hair, those

**Dear Boy,**

lines fracturing the skin around her eyes and mouth, her  
papery neckline, her silvery blue veins?



## Heather Weber

\*

*Leaving*, Peaches said. At first the Girl pictured packing the car with swimsuits, sand shovels, towels and buckets, heading west to the ocean for the day, mountains in the horizon as she, the Boy, little Josh and Peaches zoomed down CA-17S to Santa Cruz. She never thought leaving Number Two meant anything other than that trip to the beach, or possibly berry-picking the summer hours away at a nearby orchard. But Peaches had other ideas: *leaving*, she said, was heading to the local Wells Fargo, emptying the saving and checking accounts, renting a new house, and never never coming back. Leaving should have happened a long time ago.

The Girl braced for it—and then the plan changed. The family was leaving, Number Two *included*, on a seventy-degree day in January. The hired men carried out the Sears television and the sectional pieces of sofa, leaving large geometric shapes in the carpet from furniture that hadn't been moved in months. The Girl and little Josh were sent across the street to a house where a mother and her newborn baby made quiet noises.

“Come in,” Joanne said kindly when the children arrived at the door. Her lips were purple-red as if they'd been smashed in a pillow all morning, and the Girl, noticing Joanne's watery blue eyes and mussed blond hair, wondered if she'd been crying. Maybe, observed the Girl, it was because Joanne knew the family had had to give away their Golden Retriever the week before. Joanne must have heard how the Girl sucked in air—an absolute holocaust of the heart—when she laid the puppy to

## Dear Boy,

rest on his new owner's crate and offered it one of her own baby blankets by which to remember her smell.

*Transformers* was on at Joanne's house, but the Girl and little Josh were busy observing from the window the burial of the family beds, desks, and Sesame Street swing set into the metal mouth of the blue-and-yellow moving truck. There was the Boy, toting small boxes out of the house and placing them on the curb. There was Peaches, speaking to a neighbor lady, gesticulating wildly in the air as the two of them watched the busy commute from house to truck.

Sometime after the moving van departed and before the family left the house for good, the Girl slipped back inside. At the built-in kitchen table, she hunched over a slip of paper, a pencil gripped in hand. She pressed the letters out, pushing top to bottom, left to right, in deliberate, measured strokes, quickening her pace only at the sound of a car motor running in the driveway. "Dear House," she wrote. "I will miss you. You have been a good house." Face-up she left the note, centered on the table, for the empty yellow walls to read.