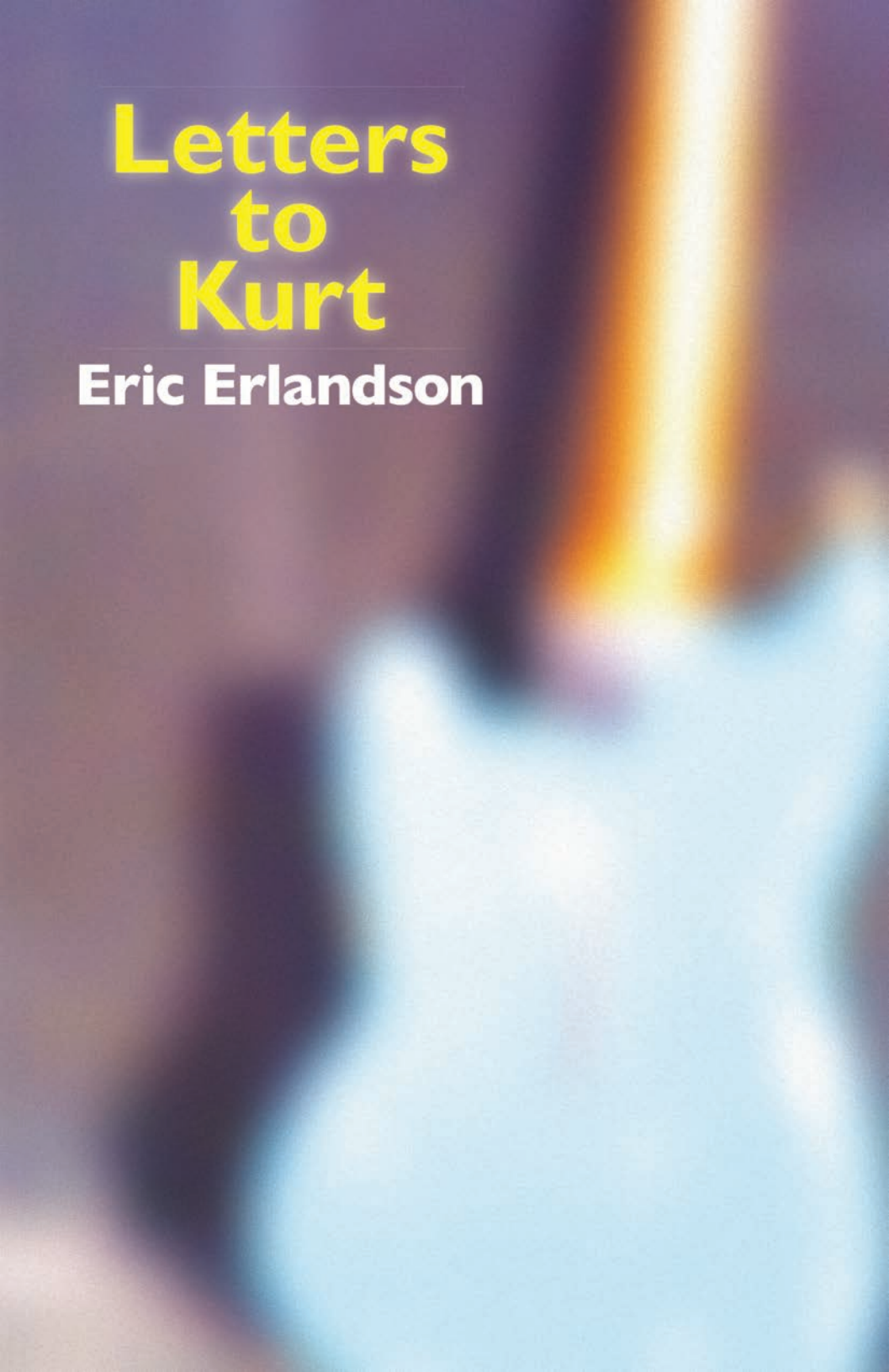


Letters to Kurt

Eric Erlandson



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info@akashicbooks.com

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*My mother groan'd, my father wept;
Into the dangerous world I leapt,
Helpless, naked, piping loud,
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.*

*Struggling in my father's hands,
Striving against my swaddling bands,
Bound & weary, I thought best
To sulk upon my mother's breast.*

*When I saw that rage was vain,
And to sulk would nothing gain,
Turning many a trick & wile
I began to soothe & smile.*

—from William Blake's *Infant Sorrow*

You probably think this song is about you . . . don't you?

—Carly Simon

*Just 'cause you got the monkey off your back
doesn't mean the circus has left town.*

—George Carlin

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Introduction

Twenty years ago today, I met Kurt Cobain. My girlfriend and bandmate at the time, Courtney Love, and I were introduced to him in the parking lot after a Butthole Surfers show at the Hollywood Palladium. Around three or four a.m. that same night, the phone rang as Courtney and I were just about to fall asleep in our small basement room under a house in the hills near Universal Studios. Kurt was drunk and had been goaded by an English journalist friend to call Courtney. After she hung up the phone we had ourselves a chuckle. We had kept our relationship secret. Courtney did not want our band to lose its sex appeal. She believed that *couple* bands were too *unavailable*. The fact was, for more than a year, we had shared a deep and powerful, if codependent, bond. But after that night, cracks began to appear: great change was on the horizon.

During our first U.S. tour that summer, Courtney began having an affair with Billy Corgan from the Smashing Pumpkins. We broke up—not an easy feat while touring in a van and playing night after night together. Among many conflicted feelings, I was also relieved to finally be set free from our ever more volatile relationship. Our band was on the verge of success, so we slugged on as friends and partners. Then, on September 17, 1991, we released our debut album, *Pretty on the Inside*, and toured in support of it. A week later, Kurt's band Nirvana released *Nevermind*. The world would never be the same.

Within a month, Courtney and Kurt were dating, soon to be elected “first couple of grunge.” Their relationship was dragged under the magnifying glass of the media as the pressures of fame gathered around them. I fell into a sort of friend/caretaker role early on, which lasted throughout the tumultuous years of their marriage. I was present when their daughter was born. I chaperoned Kurt, at Courtney’s behest, to help shield and comfort him during a Nirvana performance in the UK at the height of his fame and most fragile. I listened to him work on music and lent an ear to his frustrations. But there was always something stopping us from becoming really close: my loyalty to Courtney, along with my self-protective tendency and, perhaps, subconscious jealousy. Damn, how I wished I could write and sing like him! The way he married fearless punk rage with a melodic emotional vulnerability and made it look so simple. He truly was the voice of his generation. Yet, I saw firsthand the toll it took on his soul.

The rollercoaster came to a screeching halt one April morning in 1994 when Kurt was found dead after committing suicide. Our breakthrough album, entitled *Live Through This*, was released, ironically, just four days after Kurt’s death. Two months later, Kristen Pfaff, my ex-girlfriend and Hole’s bass player at the time, was found dead of a heroin overdose. The following March, I lost my dad as well. Over the next six years, I was carried by the winds of success and all the attendant drama. There were albums to make, shows to play; I never properly grieved or processed all that loss. By the year 2000, my relationship with Courtney had disintegrated, and the band eventually dis-

solved. After settling a lawsuit initiated by Courtney with our record label, I set off on my journey into the unknown.

A couple of years ago, a kid who called himself Kyle Cobain showed up early for one of my weekly Buddhist meetings. He was about to turn 27. The Anonymouses weren't working for him and he was stuck inside an existentialist tunnel looking for a way out. He spoke of his friendship with Elliott Smith, a red flag if there ever was one. Suicide idols. I tried to help him the best I could, but I hadn't come to terms with suicide, what causes it, how it happens, and why so many people around me have chosen it as a way out. A few months later, Kyle killed himself. He was the last in a too-long string of friends who had taken that route, following in the footsteps of a growing list of self-destructed heroes. We've numbed ourselves to pain and no longer seek a proper understanding of the cycle of life and death. No wonder more and more people seem to be choosing to end their lives.

At a writing workshop, I was introduced to Jim Harrison's book *Letters to Yesenin*, a gripping and desperate correspondence in the form of daily prose poems to a Russian poet who had committed suicide back in the 1920s. I began writing prose poem letters to Kurt as a way of exploring all I'd been through, my experience of life as it is now. My inner demons, personal means of self-sabotage, musings on death, suicide, masculine/feminine roles, food, sex, addiction, the financial crisis, global disturbances in the world, society's ever-increasing greed, anger, delusion, the movement in art toward style over substance, the mass disconnect between

body and mind, and various current events all come into play. I'm talking to myself really. But I found Kurt to be the perfect muse. He was someone whom I knew briefly, yet loved and admired immensely, a friend whom I wanted so badly to help, yet in the end failed to understand.

I see these letters as songs, fifty or so grooves from my brain's tape deck to you. A fifty-two-card pickup, presented in the order in which they came. In no way do I intend to glorify or romanticize Kurt's chosen way out, nor make light of it. Nor do I mean to demonize Courtney. Though my frustration comes through, these letters did not arise from vengeance. On the contrary, I thought if I could sort out my struggles and disappointments, face my demons, become more aware of the ways in which I attempt to escape this troubled world, maybe I would be in a position to help others. There is no way out, of course. But there is a way in, back to our true selves, our connection to the earth, the universe, to each other.

Twenty years later and I feel ready to embark on a new journey. The previous one has been beautiful, heartbreaking, and hilarious. Like a friend of mine once said, "Real life is way more fucked up than you could ever imagine." Who knows, if we open the mouth of the dead inside each one of us, we may just find a new reason to live.

Eric Erlandson

Los Angeles, California

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Destiny. My friend Ken said she changed his life. I found her on YouTube channeling you, her piercing black eyes not of my world. Not of yours, I hope. “Wake up, humanity, there are vampires!” she howls. Noshitsherlock. They’re everywhere. Zeitgeist Gesundheit Kindergarten Angst Kaputt. Fever-pitched salesmen barking out bargains on coffins, discounts on faith, selling us everlasting life in the form of teen neck fests and teeth-whitening paste. And when our meager lives are most at stake, the moneylenders waddle away with the bounty’s share of blood, the government corps burden the decomposing body with bureaucratic formaldehyde, and clever spiders circle our debt-ridden nests for any lone survivors or secrets. I bet you dressed as Dracula on Halloween. You seem like the type. And when your surrogate mother came to take your kid away, long after the ringing chords faded from the closet where the Fender Twin with one tube and one speaker gave solace, just weeks after the fall of Rome, a bottle of Rohypnol chased by a bottle of champagne, your failed intervention, there was no way out but to turn your fangs in. Rattlesnakes bite themselves. Young birds fly into cliffs. Parasites cause madness. Your burning stomach eaten by life itself. Too much heat, heroin, and Klonopin. Who’s to blame, the scorpion that stings itself or the ring of fire surrounding it? Great panic is a great excuse. My new book—*How to Lose Friends and*

Make People Weep! Rule number one: overdose on frozen French toast, shove a shotgun into your mouth, and replace those mercury fillings with buckshot lead, splattering your zits over the smeared reflection of your hate. Doubts do not cast shadows, guns do not have sons, figures do not speak. Five percent of Americans believe the President is a U.S. citizen. The other 95 percent don't care. We choose death in everything we do or not, whether we care or not. How poetic that you chose the greenhouse where new life is to be nurtured. Bono says we've moved out of the realm of karma and into one of grace. Greenhouse gas chambers and global warming. No creator could dream up such elegance even on one of his or her more elegiac days. An e-mail from my sister says Layla was called home last night. She passed away peacefully after her mother told her it was okay if she wanted to go be with Jesus. We need permission to die. From savior or flower. You hopped the Exodus wall after your farewell bib to sweet Bean. Did you miss the green in your daughter's eyes? Kids have a way of telling us what we can't admit to ourselves. Show us where we need to change. Now! Before it's too late! Before you blow your spirit into a zillion shards insuring your posterity. I could've saved you the bullet. The claim was paid in full with violets and stargazers, gardenias and morning glories. You stomped through the mud, numb to the wonders offered by gardens of mansions by lakes. If only you had stopped to inhale. Flowers like children are portals back to inspiration. They help us reclaim a proper greed for life. No need to identify the body.

I saw Patti Smith read from her new book today at the Hammer Museum. Her starving-artist days at the Chelsea with Robert Mapplethorpe and Harry Smith. Sometimes there was no food. "That's when men were real men," she said. "Before credit cards." You carve your genius down to 110 pounds of turkey just to throw up the stuffing with the gravy. Allergies make a convenient excuse. Leonard Nimoy was there backstage, meet and greet and beaming. Carbon life into silicone life into plastic. There are no banjos on *Star Trek*, no soul in a robot's eyes. How does it feel to have eulogies written to you by your idols? Must feed your ergotism. Man, we really knew how to pick 'em. Swapped more than our share of witches. *Ahhh* yes, those spectral torments in Medusa's nest, sucking sugar and blood off Kali's left hands, our tongues glued to Elizabeth's bidet. All those fallen female archetypes. Little girls wearing mother's heels and apron. One look is worth a thousand lashes. Pick your dragon of choice and trace your ambitious demise through history. Pollack hit the bottle and then the windshield. Lennon got lost in L.A. only to bleed on New York sidewalk. Geniuses marry their mothers but fuck their muses. You're a far better man than me. You took matters into your own hands before Euterpe could do you in. You upped and left. I pull the covers over my head and wait for the flutes to stop. To fight crazy is to lose. I

say take the kid already. She came out of *your* hole. I was only the donor. The holy donut roller. Inarticulate in my assumptions. I fasten a pink sunrise to my neck, dig my fingers into the soil bed, search for rocks to skip on the river. Peacocks in full plume scream on the banks of the Puget Sound. Our food swings in a rucksack hanging on a rope tied between two trees. The cathedral moon invites all bears to the picnic. The biggest givers are the biggest takers. I switch on Blake, switch on Bloch, switch on Beckett, Burroughs n' Bukowski, but can never switch off that damn pecker hammering away in my head. Horsemeat never tasted so good. A delicacy in Europe. Dog food in America. Let's talk about our immaculate humiliation. Two and a half years of good ol' fortun'd bad luck earning her the privilege to drag what was left of the earth of you around the world in a teddy bear urn like a headless trophy. Raggedy Ann with her pulverized Curious George. You floated on a leaf down the stream behind your mother's house in Olympia while a Tibetan lama mumbled lame incantations to your demons. I'm sorry, I don't mean to disturb your sleep with cheap talk of ex's or religion. We shouldn't blame the mass-neutering of the male species on our mothers, wives, women's lib, the disintegration of the nuclear family, plastic water bottles, too much soy in the diet, or birth control hormones pissed into the water supply. After all, we begged that bitch to bark for us, do our bidding, stave off the jackals. We laid ourselves naked upon her altar, open to her spells, transfixed by her pearls, eager for her hatchet. Two and a half years of do-unto-me's, till death . . . did us apart.

Driving and listening to another fascinating self-help audio book. Nothin' like Six Stinkin' Hats to make your drive-by commute a quantum weep for all existence. I put on the WHITE one. The morgue sheet. A blank slate. Just the facts. Where you lay heir apparent with self-infected wounded head. No witnesses, 'cept for me and the whole damn world. Your left hand on the barrel of a Remington 20-gauge resting between your legs, pointed at your chin. A spent shell-casing. A wallet for identification. You stabbed your spiel into a pile of dirt with your pen. Like all good martyrs you wrote in RED. Burning records like a fireman on fire. Melting down your punk rock past. Tchotchkes for the toilet, turds for the mantle. *Hey, put that hose away, man.* Pout it out, gloom it or gloat it before you just plain *blow* it. Life's butt a joke. A hypodermical hoot. You're supposed to laugh at the punch lines, not kick and cry in your birthday soot, eating away at your cancer in the blood of your BLACK. The judge's robe. You paid to play and now you pay one sordid dividend for canceling the show. Sorry, I don't think Lloyds of London accepts claims from the seven cold hells below. Maybe you're a mute bug fending off the fungus you used to pick from your spaghetti with such surgical precision, or a meat-eating orchid overrun by baby's breath, stifled by secondhand smoke. What we need here is an