

give much to many — because I some way seem to feel what they feel — never wanting to give all . . .

As a woman it means willingness to give life — not only her life but other life — Nobody I know means that much to me — for more than a moment at a time — I cannot help knowing that — the moment does not fool me — I seem to see way ahead into the years — always to see folks too clearly. It's always aloneness.

When Strand told her that this last letter was unkind, she turned meek and apologetic. "I wanted to take the unkindness away by putting my arms around your neck and asking you not to mind." O'Keeffe had started to hate Canyon, the place that she had loved just a few months before, and she told Strand that her favorite picture was no more than a black piece of fabric in a black frame echoing the black view from her window.

"I want to be out under the stars — out where there is lots of room," she sighed. During one of her nocturnal rambles, she thought that the cities of Amarillo and Canyon "sparkle like black opals on the plains."

The nets of stars that so sharply illuminated the darkness of the desert prompted her to return to the technique of making a grid of navy-blue watercolor — the gaps revealing white paper that created the effect of stars in blue sky. *Starlight Night* so pleased her that she later had it reproduced as her Christmas card.

Staying up all night, she watched dawn radiate in auras above the horizon. "The light would begin to appear and then it would disappear and there would be a kind of halo effect, and then it would appear again," she said. She captured that halation in three watercolors, *Light Coming on the Plains, Nos. I-III*. The circles within circles, this time rendered in livid monotones similar to the silvery neutrals of photography, once again recall Strand's influence on O'Keeffe's work.

And so it went for many weeks as O'Keeffe encouraged Strand, discouraged Macmahon, dated Reid, and corresponded with Stieglitz. She dedicated sheaves of correspondence to the inadequacy of language. To Strand, she complained, "Queer that two folks have such a hard time to get acquainted." Blaming Stieglitz, she added, "It wouldn't have been so hard if nobody else had been in the world — that is — if other folks hadn't scared us so."

Then, abruptly, O'Keeffe's letters stopped coming. Strand was staying in Twin Lakes when he wrote to Stieglitz at Lake George (New York) to see if he had heard from "Canyon" lately. "I haven't," Strand wrote. "I suppose there is something that makes it impossible — something perhaps that I said or left unsaid — I don't know." Stieglitz reassured Strand, "Letter writing of all kinds to anyone — would have been forced — and as you know Canyon does not force."

Stieglitz's own position was constrained, as it had been with other women. "Of course, my own trouble is purely the family question — the same trouble I've had for so many years." He wrote that his photography was stagnant.

After the lengthy wait for a letter, Strand hardly was comforted by O'Keeffe's next confessional, in which she announced that Reid had proposed: "He is like this country. . . . I believe I'd like to live with him — for a while anyway but I hate the idea of being tied — It seems I have never seen anyone with such damnable nerve — I don't see how we could possibly make it anything. . . . We have laughed over it — and talked over it — both saying it looks impossible but that doesn't phase him at all."

After delivering her surprising news, O'Keeffe left for a month's vacation in the Rocky Mountains with [her sister] Claudia — leaving Strand in an uncomfortable state of limbo.

A flood had washed out bridges along the most direct route through Denver, Colorado, so the two sisters bought passage on a train that traveled through Albuquerque, New Mexico. Georgia, who had never visited any of the Southwest except the flat terrain of the Panhandle, gazed out the window at a passing mosaic of rosy soil and blue-tinged mountains covered in piñon and fir.

Upon arrival in Colorado, the sisters took a truck along a road so rutted that it took them five hours to travel twenty miles. Georgia sat in the front passenger seat, insisting, "I don't like second hand scenery." During the trip she resumed her epistolary flirtation with Strand, (avoiding any mention of Reid) and invited him to New Mexico, where "the nothingness is several times larger than in Texas."

The sisters returned by way of Santa Fe, an artists' colony of eccentrics and sophisticates from around the country. The light of the town was lucid and the colors scintillating. "I loved it immediately," O'Keeffe recalled. "From then on I was always on my way back."

Still, the Texas plains remained, "like a marvelous song too lovely to sing — to wonderful to try to sing."

Upon her return to Canyon, O'Keeffe found that Strand's letters had piled up. Impetuously, she decided to end her relationships with Reid and Macmahon and wrote to Strand, "I feel as though I've just wiped my hand across the table they were all on and tumbled them all off. . . . They are all gone from the present anyway. And it's a great feeling that I have of being gloriously free. Some would call it fickle — a ridiculous word. With me, it's more a feeling of mastery of myself. I always feel like a sort of slave when I'm liking anyone very much."

In the same letter, she wrote a lengthy fable of a chestnut tree that stops sharing its nutrients with its fellow trees in order to grow above them into cleaner air with better light to produce larger fruit. The taller tree is resented by other trees, but its fruit endures as theirs does not and its seed produces another lovely tree of equal quality. O'Keeffe explained that the tree was being "unsentimental." It was a warning that her own survival depended upon her ability to be unsentimental.

President Woodrow Wilson had called for a declaration of war against Germany on April 6, 1917, and Canyon was abuzz with patriotic enthusiasm. Although Americans had been divided on the merits of intervention, after Wilson assured them that "the world must be made safe for democracy," a juggernaut of patriotism rolled across the land.

Despite Wilson's assurance that "We have no selfish

possible for you to use your strength — or should I say express it. Is that why I wanted to put my hand in yours as I looked at them — I don't know. Do you understand a little?

The look in your eyes that startled me so . . . I had just run from eyes — I had run like mad only to find a glimmer of the same thing in new eyes — So I looked away — wondering. Wasn't there any place to get away from that look — from folks that feel that way about me. My fault — yes. Maybe.

Strand's letters to O'Keeffe have been lost or destroyed, but it appears that, like Macmahon, he was taken aback by the frankness of her emotions. He must have made some such protest, because her next letter was defensive. "If you knew more of me you would probably be disappointed. . . . You need not write me anymore if you don't want to. I feel that in a way I am spilling — maybe — a person you had made up that gave you pleasure. Honesty is a merciless thing."

With that same disconcerting honesty, she carried on, "So many people had kissed me in such a short time — and I had liked them all and had let them all — had wanted them all too — It simply staggered me that I stood there wanting to kiss someone else — another one I thought — for goodness sake — What am I getting to — It wouldn't be fair to you."

O'Keeffe's vacillating between dependence and independence had the desired effect of keeping her suitors confused. She seems to have suffered from feelings of insecurity whenever she was confronted with relationships or the prospect of commitment. "I seem to like many people enough to make them miserable — No one enough to make them happy. I am not fine — nothing fine about me. And I'm not sorry about it either. I'm only what I am — and I'm free to live the minutes as they come to me — If you know me at all you must know me as I am."

In a punitive tone, she added that men

never understand me — unless maybe Stieglitz does — don't know that I understand myself — It's really thinking a great deal of many — wanting to