

Perfect Architect

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For Mum and Kiyoko Tamura and Setsuko Taguchi
&
in loving memory of
Nathalie Labbé

*One of the basic human requirements is the need to dwell,
and one of the central human acts is the act of inhabiting,
of connecting ourselves, however temporarily,
with a place on this planet which belongs to us
and to which we belong.*

Charles Moore, School of Architecture, UCLA
Foreword, *In Praise of Shadows*, Junichiro Tanizaki

*In this world you have to be your hero.
By that I mean that you have to win
whatever it is that matters to you
by your own strength and in your own way.*

Jeanette Winterson, *The Powerbook*

Chapter One

Perfect Architect

The Architect is dead.

He has choked on a piece of eel. Approximately 6cm by 8cm. She didn't even know he cared for eel. His wife, Gaia, is lost, and sorting through his things, for comfort, for legal matters and his clients, finds a bundle.

A bundle of letters.

Letter 1

Selené to Charles

My sweet Arles,

How wonderful are your ideas for the new house. All these long years of planning, of dreams, of secrecy, but soon we will all luxuriate in shared truth. At last! To be honest I think you star architects wait far too long before designing the ‘dream home’. Why wait? You have had wealth and talent in abundance for donkey’s years.

I can see the point in the workaday architects taking their time finding their feet, but that’s hardly the case for those on the world stage, and not for ‘name’ architects such as you, Charles. Then again, a personality such as yours needs to prove itself, and only now when approaching the autumn of your life can you allow yourself your garden, your home, your true delight. As for me, well you know me more than any other, and I long skipped the hierarchies for mine own contentment. In fact, I think it not unfair to say that I have ignored them from the very start. You have always shown far more diligence than I.

Ah, fool. Men, you are all fools. I can sense that my teasing might make you mad, still, you must allow a girl her fun. I’d certainly never keep your attention if I did but only adore you, and adore you I do, Charles.

Again I congratulate you and await your next move.

My love to you as always

Selené

Letter 2

Selené to Charles

My dear Arles,

Oh sweet silly you. I see my last letter did inflame something in you. I mention the most lusty of seasons and you are made to feel old. Age so becomes a man. And Charles, you have far more to offer a woman now than ever before. You should rejoice! How proud you have become, but forgive me, it is a woman's want to inspire the flame of man from time to time. After all, someone has to check that one has not begun taking oneself *too* seriously.

As for women being the 'greater fools', I say not, for some of us have the good sense to keep you men at a wise and comfortable distance appropriate to our same requirements of say, the changes in season. And whilst you are in a brooding and disconsolate mood, pray take heed lest I decide to batten down the hatches in silence a while, I'm not good when a storm breaks.

My love to you as always

Selené

Letter 3

Selené to Charles

My sweet Arles,

Well in truth yes, perhaps a month's silence was too harsh, and for that I am sorry, but you have to admit that in overreacting I am not alone, and if I cannot remain free to speak as I wish, although my love for you would doubtless remain, I could no longer condone our relations further. I so love to tease, but that's always the way, and passions always peak in the wake of, and fear of losing them. Oh I am too cruel again. Forgive me, but the grass has been freshly cut, and I am of a mind to take a new lover. That luscious minted air arouses me more than the scent of any man, but then my affinity has always been with nature, and as you so often remind me, there are very few of humankind who I can abide or would abide me. I thought you might have left off the last part of that but I forgive you and assume it is but your possessiveness acting up.

Now then, that's enough for today my dear, I must just quickly sign off, do forgive me darling, but the little ones are acting up, and I myself am quite desperate for a change of scenery and some good fresh air. Heavens, I make such a poor mother. Anyway, I do hope you might visit us all soon, we miss you so.

My love to you as always

Selené

Gaia Ore, Swedish born, adopted by English parents; aged thirty-two, and alive. Charles Ore, half Norwegian, half English; and at the time of his death, forty-three, seven months, eleven days, four hours, and twelve seconds precisely. Detail was what Charles had lived, and indeed, died by. Had he no idea how difficult it was to choke on a piece of eel, how unlikely? And who counted the twelve seconds? Is choking so exactly measured? When dining with a fellow architect, it would appear to be the case. And Charles would have expected no less, though most others might have expected, and felt more appreciation of, a sharp pat on the back. Is architectural competition really so stiff? Apparently so.

Charles would have been supremely impressed by the statistics that upheld the most unusual, nay bizarre, of deaths. Though less impressed by the manner of it.

Gaia pored over the letters, some fifteen in the bundle, but coming back again and again to the most recent, the most personal, those she came to call: the final three.

The letters were in the same hand, from the same woman, all drenched in love and favour, and yes, intimacy. And what level of intimacy! To discover that this correspondence revealed that Charles, *Charles* had been given a pet name. Arles! A special, secret name, known to his secret correspondent, indeed perhaps to his *co-respondent*, and no doubt designed by the same. *Charles, Arles!* Gaia mocked. How trite, and unimaginative, simply cutting the first two letters. But how dare this... *this Selené*... have her own name for him? And who, pray... *is*... Selené? Oh yes, she is, *was* Charles' confidante, but what else? *What else?*

Secrets. Gaia and Charles had never had secrets.

She shivered, thinking, hoping, that perhaps the letters weren't his, that they belonged to another Charles, Arles! That they weren't there on the desk, that in fact, she had imagined them. Bereavement can do that to people, play tricks on them. It takes memories, real, and imagined, weaving them anew. Soiling them with pains, cleansing them with charity, with love, with fantasy. But it does not protect, bereavement is a feeble state.

A tear fell. A weighty tear, and it splashed dismissively onto the signature, smudging but not erasing...

...*Selené*

Sleep now for thought takes energies, and for now you are bereft.

Wasn't that his voice?

In his more gentle mood.

But sleep, sleep my sweet.

She let the letter fall next to its crumpled companions, and stole away to her study, to her sofa, a blanket, and deep exhausted sleep.

Chapter Two

The Construct

In the morning Gaia moved past the doorway of the bedroom, glancing in briefly to check that Charles wasn't there. And why would he, he had never been one for sleeping in. They had often slept apart. She trembled, remembering the call she had received just days before. A kind of guilt overcame her and she turned back and into the room. Gently she lay herself over Charles' side of the bed, running her hand over the pillow, wanting to weep. Unable.

She had to tell someone, had to find someone to tell. But most people knew already, and as he'd died whilst away on business, it was in fact *she* who was almost last to be told. And now of course it was in the press.

They had no family, few friends, and with his colleagues and peers she had always felt the need to retain a formal distance. But she must tell *someone*, must utter the news of his death in her own words, in her own voice, to prove that it was true. If she could just do that... somehow manage to say the words, see them acknowledged in someone else's face, his death in their expression, then it might just allow her to accept it as a reality. The desire felt brutal, but necessary.

She left the building in a state of disarray, clothes pasted on over pyjamas.

They lived in what Charles had insisted on calling the *Construct*, a concrete structure that comprised various *units*. One of the units was Gaia's study, and there she kept her own books to differentiate, he said, between her reading and his 'formal library'. In the study she also kept a television, which he couldn't bear, her plants, 'clutter', and her sofa-bed for the nights when Charles was sleep-working. The nights when his patience for the sleeper at his side would eventually cease, and he would ask that unless the marital partner was going to contribute in some way – by holding up vast sheets of paper in

readiness for frantic sketching, or in supplying refreshment or necessary encouragement – she remove herself, that his room be limited to its useful elements.

Charles had proposed that they use the term ‘home’ only when it became entirely appropriate. That time being when he was satisfied with a design for such a place and when, in his estimation, their marriage had earned it.

Gaia moved from street to street, blind to her environment, to direction, to time. The streets were uniform, mapped out on a repetitive grid. In the far distance, and as yet unseen, was the man who delivered their mail, Tom Bradshaw. He was wearing his uniform, one that had seen few changes in its design over the years despite the numerous take-overs; Charles had commented as much. Tom and Charles had been on first name terms.

Gaia paused at a corner, realising that it must have been Tom who delivered Selené’s letters – of course it was, and she sensed a bitterness erupting as though it made him complicit. But he was only doing his job and she liked him, though she hadn’t known him as well as Charles had. You see, Charles was the early riser, the one up early enough to catch first delivery and pass the time of day over various packages, boxes and letters.

Tom had a wife, Cara, and two kids, Paul and Phoebe. Tom wanted “a whole stack of kids... that I can start a band with. I play guitar, guitar an’... we’d be called Poochi’s Poops! How about that? Uh... Poo... Poo,” but his nerves would get the better of his dreaming and his speech would dwindle to nervous silence. Charles would encourage him, he had a strange patience for the mailman that he didn’t extend to many others. Charles kidded around with Gaia in the retelling, said it made him feel like he was back in the States, where real people’s lives are like Updike’s fiction. The Updike Documentaries, he called his episodes with Tom. Tom had spent his formative years in the States. Him and his wife Cara were childhood sweethearts.

Gaia had never really understood, she didn’t read John Updike, she’d never lived in the US despite having wanted to. But like many dreams that she thought she and Charles had shared, their moving out

to the States as a couple was something that never happened. Without realising and without intention, the number of ‘shared dreams that never happened’ had somehow multiplied, and after a time it seemed all the dreams were his. One personality subsumed by another; and just as Charles’ passion, drive and talent exploded onto the world, Gaia’s had gently fallen to one side. It was curious how easily this had happened, for Charles had certainly not intended it, not consciously at least. It had been a subtle erosion, an unseen tide lapping an open shoreline, with the sands of one dreamer slipping away and under. ‘You’ve lost your verve!’ Charles would say. And complicit somehow, she would laugh.

He suggested her verve might be spherical, a ball that had rolled away but might soon be found. They had even, when love still seemed to dust them lightly, looked for the ball under sofas and tables, scrambling about the floor on all fours like children. Then lain on their backs, like dying flies, but filled with warmth and still some laughter. Perhaps though, over time, the verve had rolled too far away. Perhaps it had been pushed. Either way, it was now very much harder to find. And Charles’ capacity for fun had long been replaced by a sternness, a seriousness, a grown-oldness. Things had fallen apart, and somehow unseen, had not been mended.

Gaia thought back again to Charles’ and Tom’s Updike Documentaries. She held new suspicions about them. That these encounters were charged with the anticipation of further contact with a certain correspondent, a certain woman with whom a certain intimacy was shared. After all, to the over-educated upper-middle-class, heterosexual male, are mailmen really that compelling?

As well as children, Tom and Cara had a dog, a pit bull. Tom would joke with Charles about how it chased away any delivery people, especially their mailman, even biting him once. The dog bit other people too. Their neighbours wanted the dog dead, but Tom said it wouldn’t be fair on the children, they loved Poochi, “Heck, they wanna name the band after him! Though I’ve always wanted to call us Pickles and Chillies.”

Less than a year later, the dog mauled their newborn, Perry. Gaia had read about it in the local paper. Now the dog was dead too.

Unawares, Tom and Gaia traced the same pathway from opposite edges of town, he pausing to tease the mail through stiffened openings, she to look over her shoulder. Nothing and no one there. Just a dead field of streets. An easy concrete maze that would not permit the surrender to being lost. She wanted to walk somewhere less familiar.

Tom never read the papers himself, he preferred to hear the news straight from the streets, or through the windows of complaining women, over the breakfasts of frustrated men. He saw it as taking advantage of an essential editing service, “So... *in... in... instead* of me scouring the tabloids for what’s up, and dredging through all the i-rrelevant, I just bide my time and let these good folk serve it up to me, piece by pretty piece.”

And who could fault that for a method? That was the sort of tale that would tickle Charles, “I’d ask him how he coped when people’s windows were not open!” Tom would smile, “Easy,” he’d say, “I just knock the bastards up!”

So that was Tom, larger than life, heart enough for two.

His whistling could now just be made out. Losing her bearings, the buildings appeared to collapse one into another, the streets all repeats of the first one. The only difference between the ten connecting streets and the first was the Construct erected at one corner, the place that wasn’t home.

Changing direction, Gaia moved from one street and sought comfort in back stepping down the connecting one. Startled, as she and Tom collided. He barely recognised her. No make-up, no perfected, frightened fashion on too thin bones. Today, she looked...? Well? Ordinary.

Gaia sensed his revised reading of her: she’s no one really, when it comes down to it, under all that smartness, she’s just like anybody else. To Tom that was nothing of an insult, for him, ordinary was as acceptable as anything else. But to Gaia it was wounding. She shot a look that pierced him through. Straight through his badge, uniform, T-shirt, flesh, bone. She remembered the letters, she looked at the bag on his shoulder, she wanted it, wanted the next letter, wanted to see what honest-Tom delivered to dishonest-dead-Charles.

“He’s dead.”

“Wha-z-s up...?” Had he heard that right?

“He’s dead, Charles.”

“*Beg yo-ur pardon?*”

“He’s dead!”

Tom caught the widow awkwardly as her knees failed, but soon they were both to meet the pavement, and its cold cold slabs. The feel of the concrete sending shivers through them both. She pictured Charles laid out. She’d grazed the back of her hand to the knuckles, blood.

“I don’t know wh... da...say...” Tom’s words, falling away.

She looked into his face, he felt it and it panicked him, she might peel the very skin from his cheeks with such a cloying gaze. The blood drew back from his sharpening features, and a cold blue terror surfaced. And that was it. *That* was reflected death. Now it was real.

The concrete was disappearing, waxy, melting away. The mailman’s haunted expression had unlocked the grief. The news burnt deep behind his skin and hurt. It hurt like hell.

A pale grey drizzle fell steadily.

He carried the widow to her place, took the keys from her pocket, removed the sodden outer garments, and delivered her to bed, the architect’s bed. He had her drink some water, smoothed the curls out of her face, and promised to call back in a few hours. He wrote down a phone number and a message explaining that he had taken the keys so as to let himself back in, should she forget what had been said, and then he left.

She woke to the smell of fresh coffee moving through the various units and then the sound of Tom’s voice from the floor below, “I don’t know if you can hear me, I was ju-st saying, I’m not so used to the fresh stuff, but I think I’m getting to grips with the mech-anics of it.” His voice was nearing, “Shall I, should I... well I was gonna suggest some music?” He reached the doorway, “But on second thoughts, that’s... probably *in-...* appropriate... just got such a gigantic music system in this place. I’ve never been around inside before. Of course, I...”

Gaia smiled, Tom seemed so childlike and yet, she assumed, he must

be about her age. Somehow the news of Charles' death, the letters, and telling Tom, all took the shape of strange fictional details and having wept so deeply she now felt deplete of emotion, any at all. No pain, love, nor worry, just a peculiar state of equanimity. She didn't want to analyse it. No emotion, and somehow that just seemed to fit.

Tom stood, his cheeks pink, feeling something akin to the awkwardness of a boy on the first day of something a bit too unfamiliar. Noticing; and then without meaning to, Gaia laughed.

"What's funny? Are you alright Mrs Ore?" She sat up, sensing the distance made by his formality. She wanted him to call her Gaia, but she didn't say.

"That tray must be heavy," she pointed to a table, "I'm sorry I laughed, I don't know why..."

"It doesn't matter, I don't think it's easy for you right now." He sucked up a breath, "I can't stay... I..."

Gaia sensed his feeling ill at ease, "No, no, of course... of course, but thank you..."

"Oh it's nothing. I just felt, sort of... well, duty bound, to check you was alright that's... all, and you're alright?"

"Yes, yes, and thank you... for being so kind."

He blushed again and withdrew from the room. Then as he left the house he called out again, he'd leave the keys near the mail on the table by the main door. The door slammed cleanly.

Mail, new mail.

Gaia bolted down the stairs, took up the envelopes almost without seeing them, and returned to the room. She let them fall onto the bed, then turned her back on them. Sudden resistance. Fear perhaps.

She breathed deeply, her eyes settling on a blanket, she pulled it around her shoulders and decided to try Tom's coffee first, now almost stubbornly ignoring the letters as they lay. – It made no sense. – But the contents of a letter, though very rarely, can sometimes cut too deep. She exhaled. Yes, a necessary delay.

Pouring the coffee, she began to look about the room. This, Charles' bedroom, was also called *creative-unit-four*, he numbered the rooms he worked in, there were seven in all. He had three actual workrooms, units, but somehow the entire building had given over its

other functions to make still more space for their creative inhabitant. Kitchen, bathroom and so on, became almost redundant terms. The trouble was that cooking and bathing still had to happen despite the models, sketches, mappings, screens, and yet more models.

Behind a huge stretched-out roll of drafting paper, Gaia found a stack of heavy boxes. Dusty boxes. Dust wasn't especially unusual, Charles refused to have some areas of the units disturbed at all, and cleaning, by himself or anyone else, he found intensely disturbing.

She pulled one box out and blew at the dust. Lifted the lid. Letters. A full box-set of Selené. Pain shot up in her chest. She dropped the lid, went back to her own room and picked up her cigarettes.

Nicotine imbibed, she returned and began to tug at two other boxes, and damn her! There she was, entombed, enshrined, cut up and shared between three boxes, but not dead. And who knows, there might be more. She lashed the paper out of the way, kicked at model boxes, but no, there didn't appear to be any more. Selené – you fit into three boxes. You fit inside three boxes, and you fit into Charles' life, but how much of it? All of it? Have you always known him, known him longer than I have, better than I have?

She pulled at the letters, but was too distressed to open them, and in no mind to deal with the contents. Overwhelmed by the sheer amount, by what that meant, or *had* meant, or might mean, she pushed the letters back beside their dusty companions.

The cigarettes kept her hands busy, the coffee now made her shake. What to do? – Defeated, what greater harm could new mail do? – She went back to the bed and finally opened up the letters. Just bills. She clutched them to her chest. Strange to feel comforted by letters from the bank, the gas and electric supplier. She held on to them as she moved to look up and around this his favourite room, wondering now, just who had been the man that she had married?

Charles Ore had passed away without having achieved his 'home', and long before his potential could be realised, as architect, as intellectual, as man. He had fulfilled the dreams of many men's lifetimes by the age of forty, but Charles' potency had been that of his list of 'the great men of history' – of *Cusanus*, *Gropius*, *Rabindranath Tagore*, *Shostakovich*,

Lenin, Tom Waits... and Philip Roth, as he would say, *to name but a few*, and now it was cut short.

There was no corresponding list of great women, and Selené had suggested with great pride that these might simply have been too many to list. The real truth lay in Charles' belief that greatness, in all its philosophical dimensions at least, was limited to and encapsulated in the one consistent and overriding influence in his life, and that of course, was her, his dear beloved Selené.

Gaia now rose early to check the mail, but still nothing came from Selené. She quickly realised that Selené might actually be waiting for Charles' reply... to the last of the three. For would she know that Charles had passed away?

The sympathy cards piled up, arriving now from all over the world, from colleagues, rivals, friends from way back, from people Gaia did and did not know. A few even from admirers of Charles' work, fans you could say. Gaia thought it strange, but so it was with some of the more avant-garde architects, they were regarded for their brilliance in a way that seldom happened anymore, and certainly not outside the world of the architectural elite. Charles, ever cynical, would comment gruffly, "It seems we live in the shallows, and the present is too much given over only to celebrating the superficial... how people look... what they wear, dumb-ass branding and marketing... all the trash of modern life in place of talent, intellect and real hard work!"

Gaia felt a moment of pride in the cards and letters from his fans, perhaps Charles had re-elevated the status of the architect. *Re-elevation*, she smiled, the architect would have liked that. She moved through memories of times when she had caught his attention, when he had been interested or amused by things she had said. He hadn't always been only irritated by her. She wiped away an affectionate tear and smiled at one of his photographs, a more natural shot taken by a photographer from a broadsheet, she tried to recall which one. There had been many, and most were posed, half-shadow shots that somehow only ever revealed one persona, and it was not her favourite. Not Charles.