

Almeda Sperry to Emma Goldman

Jonathan Ned Katz

1912

A question from Emma Goldman about past love relations with men evokes from Sperry this deep-felt reply:

March 4th 1912

My own Dear-my cherry-blossom-my moon-beam shimmering on a dark pool at night-my mountain, so calm, so serene-my drop of dew hidden in the heart of a wild rose: I do not know whether I have loved deeply and passionately or not; if you mean have I ever loved a man I will frankly say that I never saw a man. I have seen bipeds who pose as men but never saw a man. No, I have never deeply loved any man. I seem to exact too much. The men are lying pups and all they are after is sex.

Writing of a woman friend, Sperry says:
you know she has auburn hair and I made a verse about it-it goes,

“Into thy glowing mass I thrust
The thin line
Of my crimson lips Thrilling
With lust.”

The rest I don’t remember... You know that isn’t poetry — it is just the way I felt.

The following month, on April 2, Sperry, in a depressed mood, writes Goldman that “something seems to have broken in me, I do not care for anything any more. One thing though, I love you.”

A few weeks later on April 20, feeling better, Sperry vividly describes another friend, Florence, bringing to life in words another woman as “unconventional” as herself.

Apr. 20th [1912] In the daytime I loaf a good deal in Florence —'s office — there all the radicals drop in from time to time ...

Florence ... is a girl of nineteen who is as mature looking as a woman of 45.

She is a mixture of French and Irish and is the most unconventional creature I have ever met; she is fat but it is a hard fat; she has dark looking eyes and dark hair and soft, caressing hands, well shaped but with spatulate nails. She thinks that when a woman marries each kid should be by a different man. She has the prettiest mouth I ever saw ... we made a bargain-I'm to stop drinking and she will stop using crude language — very vulgar language... Florence means to marry for money only — she is unscrupulous and selfish with those she don't like. She literally oozes sex and tells me that there are only two men she has ever met often who have not asked her for intercourse. She tells me that she shakes with desire for intercourse but is afraid of 'getting in' wrong — that is, having a baby. I am not telling you this for gossip I'm only describing Florence. I said to her, "Insidious poison, how did I ever become acquainted with you?" and she said, "I flirted with you."

Florence isn't a Christian either; she used to get a beating every Sunday when she lived at home-they beat her to make her go to church. She wants someone to place a bomb under every church in Kensington so she can light them.

She likes perfumed cigarettes only won't smoke for fear of ruining her voice she likes drink but says [of herself], "I don't like to hold Florence's head the next morning." She would like to masturbate only she said she read a doctor book once and it scared the devil out of her. I certainly have fun with Florence — we say whatever comes into our heads. I say things to her I don't say to you for I'm always afraid of losing you ...

Well, I'll smoke a few more cigarettes and dream of you before I turn in. I like to think of you from the first glimpse I ever had of you. Tonight I approach you with reverence.

Three months later on July 28, in a letter addressed "Dearest," Sperry writes to Goldman:

The reason that I have been reticent with you lately was because I have been ashamed of myself and did not want to tell you what I was doing; you see, I went on that trip with Newton. Newton is a Carnegie steel man whom I have known since panic times. Fred and I were living in Braddock at the time and the larder was pretty empty — in fact I helped clean out a flat for a peck of potatoes and some onions and some cabbage and I also did several ironings. Then I said to myself, "Anybody who works like this is a damned fool." So I got a friend of mine to introduce me to Newt, who had nothing to do during the panic but walk the streets and spend his money as his salary was going on all the time; he is pretty well heeled at that. So I've had Newt ever since the panic times and when he asked me to take a trip with him this summer I hated to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs for God knows that Fred don't make enuf to keep me in cigarettes and magazines. So I went on the trip and I never had a more miserable time in all my life as one can find out more about a person by living under the same roof with them a day than they can find out by seeing them every day for a year. I must say that I am more disgusted with men than I ever was and if I ever give Fred up it will have to be a 'cookoo' that gets me the next time. I never saw a man that works for the United States Steel trust that was in the least successful either as a major or as a minor boss that wasn't a god-damned hog; they can eat more and hold more booze than anyone that I ever saw. Newt is a stout man with a bay window belly. I have seen

him with three and four different meats in front of him at the table no wonder he gets gout; he is a Christian too, by the powers, and thinks that his relations with me are a sin. I have always let him believe that I was a Christian, too, until lately and one day I couldn't stand it any more and I said, "See here! I'm damned if I don't tell you just what I believe in;" he looked in amazement for he never heard me swear before-and then I gave him a tirade on my beliefs of all sorts. Do you think that he got disgusted? No, he grinned and got an erection of the penis; he is like all the rest of the Christians-he has as much real christianity in him as my big toe has. And he has an ox-like brain that is exasperating; all he knows how to do is to horse hell out of the men to increase the tonnage of the mills. I never was so god damned mad at myself in all my life-when we'd get in a coach he would make me sit facing him all the time-so he would be sure of having me, I s'pose and he always tries to make me smear my face with cream and powder. I'll bet that he won't want me to go on a vacation with him again in a hurry for I chased him all over the map. I darn near killed myself doing so but he was some tired, too. I wish. that I had been feeling well-he'd be up in his heaven tuning his harp by now-he'd have died of apoplexy [sic].

How will the 26th of August suit you for me to come to see you-that is, if you would like to meet me after telling you all this? I don't care-I'll be darned if I go hungry for anybody ...

Write to me, dear, I need it. Let me know when it is your pleasure to have me come to see you. I want to touch you-I want to see whether you really have substance or whether you are merely one of my dreams.

Lovingly A

On August 8, replying to a letter from Goldman, Sperry again discusses her own love and sex relations with men.

I have absolutely no reciprocation as far as passion is concerned for a man who pays me for sex. So bent is such a man for self-gratification that he seldom bothers to find out whether the woman responds or not and if he does want response he can easily be "bluffed." Nearly all men try to buy love — if they don't do it by marrying they do it otherwise and that is why I have such a contempt for men. Love should be worship but love seems to be with most people — ejaculation. I fear I never will love any man. I've seen too much and I am no fool.

Referring to the possibility of leaving her husband, Sperry thinks she shall have him somewhere in the background always. Habit is even stronger than love and it is nice to sleep with someone so that when a person wakes up in the middle of the night why one can touch the other person and not feel so alone. And then, too, in the winter time — when the wind howls. My word! If I were alone then, I'd ask the nearest male who had any kind of health to sleep with me, just for the sake of his animal warmth. My word! I have no civilization whatever, have I? But as far as violence is concerned, violence don't hold me to anyone. It is the sweet part of Fred that holds me — and the fact that we have been thru strikes, panics and hunger and sickness together. The time he went to cut my throat I kicked him in the abdomen and he forgot about wanting to slit my neck. You can ask my mother if she ever got a whimper out of me when she beat me. A loving glance, a pressure of the hand, a smile and I was her willing slave but a beating or a hit alongside the head and she was the one to fear then — not I. The inner part of me is untamed-it's never been licked ...

I am a savage, Emma, a wild, wild savage. And they can't tame me with their puling conventions, their stinking houses nor their damned religion. And it is the untamed part of me that loves you because you don't want to put leading strings on it. If you did I would tell you that you are a liar and your book is a lie.

And it is the wild part of me that would be unabashed in showing its love for you in front of a multitude or in a crowded room. My eyes would sparkle with love-they would follow you about and love to gaze upon you always and every part of my body would be replete with satisfaction of its expression of love.

God! God! God! God!

On August 24, Sperry responds to a letter from Goldman:

Dearest:

It is so very, very sweet of you to address me with endearing terms. I assure you that no one in the world appreciates such expressions of endearment more than myself, especially when they emanate from such a tower of strength as yourself. I suppose that the reason that you are such a tower of strength is that you are thoroly purged from all superstition. I note where you say that love should not mean worship as that smacks too much of slavishness for you. I discuss that matter because I naturally wanted to find just what your definition of the term meant.

In a letter of uncertain date, Sperry refers to Goldman's hope that they may spend some time together in the country.

Dear ... I, too, wish that I could spend a week with you in the country. I am with you in spirit, at any rate. Just before you sink into slumber, dear heart, I rest in your arms. I browse amongst the roots of your hair-I kiss your body with biting kisses-I inhale the sweet, pungent odor of you and you plead with me for relief.

After spending a week in the country with Goldman, Sperry again speaks of her deep feelings for her friend.

Sept. 23rd [1912]

Dearest: I have been flitting about from one thing to another today, in vain endeavor to quell my terrible longing for you. But my work is done and now that I have sat down to think, I am instantly seized with a fire that races over my body in recurrent waves. My last thots at night are of you. I dream of you during my slumbers and that hellish alarm clock is losing some of its terrors for me for my first waking thots are of you.

Dear, that day you were so kind to me and afterwards took me in your arms, your beautiful throat, that I kissed with a reverent tenderness, reminded me somehow of the throat of that bird I shot-you remember my telling you of that.

Do you know, sweet cherry-blossom, that my week with you has filled me with such an energy, such an eagerness to become worthy of your friendship, that I feel that I must either use my intensity towards living up to my best self or ending it all quickly in one last, grand debauch ...

... How I wish I [was] with you on the farm! You are so sweet in the mornings-your eyes are like violets and you seem to forget, for a time, the sorrows of the world. And your bosom-ah, your sweet bosom, unconfined.

Lovingly, Almeda

The sexual relationship between the two is referred to clearly in another letter from Sperry to Goldman:

Dearest... If I had only had the courage enuf to kill myself when you reached the climax then – then I would have known happiness, for at that moment I had complete possession of you. Now you see the yearning I am possessed with – the yearning to possess you at all time and it is impossible. What greater suffering can there be – what greater heaven – what greater hell? And how the will to live sticks in me when I wish to live after possessing you. Satisfied? Ah God, no! At this moment I am listening to the rhythm of the pulse coming thru your throat. I am surg(ing) along with your life blood, coursing through the secret places of your body.

I wish to escape from you but I am harried from place to place in my thots. I cannot escape from the rhythmic spurt of your love juice.¹

On October 11, 1912, Sperry writes to Goldman:

Of course I have an ache for you but it is a sad ache, not a passionate ache. I do not believe in allowing passion to rule one's head for then it is not love but lust[.]

On top of a typed letter, hand-dated October 21, Sperry scrawls in pencil:

Don't you ever show this to anybody.

The typed letter begins:

Do you know, dear, that sometimes I feel quite cruel towards you? When I do not hear from you I wish I were a giant with thirty league boots, I would stride to where you are, grab you up with my big paws and dump you down into the middle of this community and whenever you would try to escape I would push you back into it again just to let despair [sic] creep into your heart. I would like to strike you in the mouth. I think, "She is at the tail end of a blind alley anyhow. To hell with other people-damn the swine! they do not understand any part of her and she is giving, giving, giving herself to them. She will die in extreme poverty, if she does not die in harness..." And then I think, "Can it be possible that I feel vulgar jealousy? Well, this is the first time." And then-I kiss your feet and ask for forgiveness.

¹ This particularly important letter was somehow missed when Jonathan Ned Katz was researching Sperry's letters for inclusion in *Gay American History*. It is quoted here from Lillian Faderman's book *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*. NY: Columbia University Press, June 1991, page 34.

In the same letter, in a hand-written section dated the next day, October 22, Sperry continues a feverish dialogue with herself about her mixed feelings for Goldman.

And then sometimes I think, "Perhaps she is just studying me-all my personalities for the good of her cause-studying this peculiar product of our civilization. Her cause is first. But if I were really assured of this fact I would carve her heart out. Mark how the blood spurts! But by carving her heart out, Almeda, you would only acknowledge your weakness and you do..love to kiss her hands, Almeda, and lay your head on her wonderful bosom. So get strong, Almeda, get strong-as she is and such unbidden thoughts will not come into your head. And haven't you had proof that the human side responds to you? But her cause-her cause comes first! But doesn't it in you, Almeda? Think! What else is worth while living for? Lower your head in shame.

Sperry's jealousy and anger at Goldman apparently continued to grow and find expression. At some point, in a reconciliation attempt, Goldman sent Sperry a rose, which Sperry immediately sent back, then waited in agony during the next weeks, fearing that her rejection of Goldman had finally been successful.

On December 12, Sperry wrote Goldman asking her not to forsake her. Still not hearing from Goldman, on December 20 Sperry wrote again, apologizing for her "crime" against Goldman, expressing gratitude to her friend, and declaring, "I have rooted jealousy out of me, Emma, rooted it!" On December 23, Sperry received a Christmas card from Goldman, who, it seems, continued to accept her friend-jealousy, anger, love, and all. Sperry immediately replied:

Dec. 23rd 1912

Dearest: I have just received your card and am filled with a great peace. I am a little remorseful for wanting to hear from you so badly ... I will never again have anger for you nor ever feel impatient again for I have lived a thousand years in the last two weeks.

Tell me, Emma, why is it that when a person knows he has been as bad as he can be-why is it that he picks out the one he loves the most to hurt? And why did I have to show you the savage part of me and want to even beat you? I hope you got your fill of the 'primitive.'

I am so glad you looked into my eyes that day. It is a good thing that one-half of me is decent. I wish I had had a mother like you. You are my mother. Fred said that day I sent the rose back-you know I woke up screaming-[Fred said:] "0, will you never be anything else but a child? If I know Em, she won't pay any attention to it." Then I went to sleep again for Fred always knows ...

Ah your dear eyes! There are many things I cannot do now since you looked at me that way. I reckon I must love you more than I ever loved anybody because I used to do everything I felt like doing without stopping to consider others. You are the first person who ever "got my goat." I reckon its because I believe in you. If I didn't I'd kill you.

Almeda

In a letter addressed to "Honey bug," written on the following day, Christmas Eve (and continued on Christmas), a calmer Sperry tells Goldman:

I am so sorry you have a cold. You must wear spats on rainy or slushy days. I was thinking about that the day I touched your ankle at the Colonial. Low cut shoes are foolish on a rainy day-ones skirts get wet at the boattom and make ones ankles wet...

... I shall have all those things you wish for me in the coming year if you keep on loving me-you sweet dear. If you were here I would kiss your hands-not from servility-I am servile to no one-but because they are such sweet little ducks of hands. I would do more Ulan that-I am famished to rest my head on your bosom.

Lovingly, A

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Jonathan Ned Katz
Almeda Sperry to Emma Goldman
1912

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Sperry's letters are in Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University. Jonathan Ned Katz is grateful to Rosalyn Baxdandall and Alix Kates Shulman for informing him of these letters. OutHistory.org is interested in any additional data about Sperry, and especially interested in a photo.

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