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Ballast Quarterly Review, v06n1, Autumn 1990

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The best of Ballast

1985-1990

Editor's Choice

The first five years



Volume 6 No 1 Autumn 1990

Ballast Quarterly Review.
Volume 6, Number 1, Autumn
1990. Founder, editor, scholarship
guardian, usage consultant,
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BALLAST is an acronym for
Books Art Language Logic
Ambiguity Science and Teaching,
as well as a distant allusion to
BLAST, the short-lived publica-
tion founded during World War I
by the Vorticist artist and writer P.
Wyndham Lewis. **BALLAST** was
established in 1985 in Milwaukee,
moved to Savannah, then Cincin-
nati, now Iowa. Initially it was a
protest against small-mindedness,
habitual tardiness and gum
chewing among visual artists. Its
editor having reached middle age,
it is now chiefly a hodgepodge of
indelible passages from books,
diaries and magazines. Put
differently, it is a journal devoted
to wit, the contents of which are
intended to be insightful, amusing
or thought-provoking.

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**Cover
illustration:**
Nine charac-
ters from a
hypothetical
alphabet by
Jerry Bond,
1990. All
illustrations in
this issue, with
the exception
of the
drawings on
pages 6, 7 and
10, were
produced by
graphic design
students in the
Department of
Art, University
of Northern
Iowa, during
September
1990.

There were two neighbors; one of them contended that the other's cat had stolen and eaten five pounds of his butter; there was a bitter argument and finally they agreed to seek the advice of the rabbi. They went to the rabbi and the owner of the cat said: "It cannot be, my cat doesn't care for butter at all" but the other insisted that it was his cat and the rabbi said: "Bring me the scales." And they brought the scales and he asked: "How many pounds of butter?" "Five pounds." And believe it or not, the weight of the cat was exactly five pounds. So the rabbi said: "Now I have the butter, but where is the cat?"

Victor Frankl, "Reduction and Nihilism" in Arthur Koestler and J.R. Smythies, eds., *Beyond Reductionism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 403.



Left: Corporate symbol for fictional firm, Zebra Costume Shop, by Matthew Parkinson.

A boy named Eddie Shell came one afternoon to play with Frank and me, and at the hour for going home did not know how to do so. This is a malady that afflicts all children, but my mother was not sure how she should handle it in Eddie's case. She consulted us secretly as to whether he should be asked to stay for supper; we thought not, so she hinted to him that his mother might be expecting him. He was so slow in acting upon the hint that we were all in despair and began to feel guilty because we had not pressed him to stay. What I remember now is Eddie standing at last on the other side of the screen door and trying to say good-bye as if he meant it. My mother said warmly: "Well, Eddie, come and see us again." Whereupon he opened the door and walked in.

Mark Van Doren, *The Autobiography of Mark Van Doren* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 24.

Three questions:

- (1) Which craft was persecuted by the Puritans of New England?
- (2) What was the name of the inventor of the steam engine?
- (3) The name of the inventor of the sewing machine is pronounced how?

While teaching at Black Mountain College, [Josef] Albers encouraged students to bring in any material they found, and on at least one occasion (this was later, in the mid-forties) was himself tested by the "solution." Several students hostile to Albers, and impatient of what they took to be the endless mechanics of the course, decided to do a three-dimensional construction out of a material not singular to Black Mountain but found there in plentiful supply: cow dung. That day in class, as always, the constructions were placed in front of the room, without names attached to them. Albers – again, as always – picked up each piece in turn, examining and criticizing it. "Ah (as he passed down the row), a good swindle: marbles made to look like fish eggs...and what's this one? Wonderful – it looks exactly like muddy cow [excrement]! So real you want to pick it up and smell to be sure..." – at which point he did; and was sure. But he never batted an eye. He simply put the [excrement] back down, omitted his usual comment on the "material's" color and form, and blandly proceeded on to the next construction.

Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972), pp. 68-69.

My mother did the first terrible thing for which I never forgave her, y'know...my mother...She says to me, "Henry, I have a wart." I'm only four years old and I'm sitting in this little chair and she says, "Henry, what shall I do with this?" And I say, "Cut it off. With a scissors." Two days later she got blood poisoning and she says, "And you told me to cut it off!" and bang bang bang she slaps me, for telling her to do this. How do you like a mother who'd do that?

Henry Miller, quoted in Robert Snyder, ed., *This is Henry Miller, Henry Miller From Brooklyn* (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1974), p. 25.

Interviewer: Do your own dogs do any Stupid Pet Tricks?

David Letterman: No. Well, actually, yeah. They each know one trick...We have two dogs, Bob and Stan. Bob and I sound the same when we eat potato chips. That's Bob's trick. And Stan's trick is that if you read him a list of TV commediennes he'll only get excited when you reach the name "Lucille Ball." The key word there is, of course, "ball." He loves to play ball.

David Letterman in an interview by Pat Hackett in the TV Cable Section of the *Milwaukee Journal*, Sunday, 9 June 1985, p. 3.

Below: Nine characters from a hypothetical alphabet by Debbie Gage.



Von Neumann lived in this elegant house in Princeton. As I parked my car and walked in, there was this very large Great Dane dog bouncing around on the front lawn. I knocked on the door and von Neumann, who was a small, quiet, modest kind of a man, came to the door and bowed to me and said, "Bigelow, won't you come in," and so forth, and this dog brushed between our legs and went into the living room. He proceeded to lie down on the rug in front of everybody, and we had the entire interview -- whether I would come, what I knew, what the job was going to be like -- and this lasted maybe forty minutes, with the dog wandering all around the house. Towards the end of it, von Neumann asked me if I always traveled with the dog. But of course it wasn't my dog, and it wasn't his either, but von Neumann -- being a diplomatic, middle-European type person -- he kindly avoided mentioning it until the end.

Julian Bigelow [Princeton mathematician, recalling his job interview with John von Neumann], quoted in Ed Regis, *Who Got Einstein's Office?* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1987), p. 110. Suggested by Joseph Podlesnik, a reader from Ithaca, New York.

When they [the American Siamese twins Violet and Daisy Hilton, joined at the waist] died of the Hong Kong flu in 1969, they were working in a supermarket near Charlotte, North Carolina, as a double checkout girl -- one bagging, no doubt, as the other rang up the till on the cash register.

Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 209.

Whitehead himself had moments when he was not quite sure where he had put things. One day in the early 1930s he had Professor James Melrose of Illinois to tea at the Whitehead cottage...It occurred to Whitehead that his guests might like to see the work in progress in a library addition to the house. So he led them outside, first carefully putting on Professor Melrose's hat which he found in the coatroom closet and assumed was his own. After the excursion he returned the hat to the closet, but at tea's end, when he and Mrs. Whitehead prepared to accompany the guests to their car, he went there once more for his hat. This time Melrose had beat him to it and retrieved his lawful property. Whitehead reached up to the place where his visitor's hat had been, made a little exclamation of surprise, then trotted some distance to a spot where his own hat hung on a hook. It was clear to his guests that the author of *Process and Reality* did not realize there were two hats, but believed that his own had in some unaccountable way changed its place.

Joseph Gerard Brennan, "Alfred North Whitehead" in *American Scholar*, vol 47 no 4, Autumn 1978.

R.W. Wood is said to have spent some time in a flat in Paris where he discovered that the lady in the flat below kept a tortoise in a window pen. Wood fashioned a collecting device from a broom-handle, and bought a supply of tortoises of dispersed sizes. While the lady was out shopping, Wood replaced her tortoise by one slightly larger. He repeated this operation each day until the growth of the tortoise became so obvious to its owner that she consulted Wood who, having first played a subsidiary joke by sending her to consult a Professor at the Sorbonne whom he considered to be devoid of humor, advised her to write the press. When the tortoise had grown to such a size that several pressmen were taking a daily interest, Wood then reversed the process, and in a week or so the tortoise mysteriously contracted to its original dimensions.

R.V. Jones, "The Theory of Practical Joking -- Its Relevance to Physics" in *The Bulletin of the Institute of Physics*, June 1957, p. 193.

In Paris once I had two strawberry finches. Having to leave the city for a few days, I asked Mary if she would save them for me. On my return, noticing that she had not removed their cover (indeed had her head up and turned, as in thought), I pulled it off myself and cried out at once, "Fore God, imposters!" Moving like a risen Recaumier, Mary said, in her light pining voice, "That cat and your abominable eye! Who on earth before has known one finch from another?"

Djuna Barnes in Hugh Edwards, *Surrealism and Its Affinities: The Mary Reynolds Collection* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1956), p. 73. Suggested by Amy Arntson, a reader from Lake Mills, Wisconsin.



Above: Hypothetical postage stamp employing verbal and visual puns by Bao Li-ying from Beijing, Peoples Republic of China, now studying in Iowa.

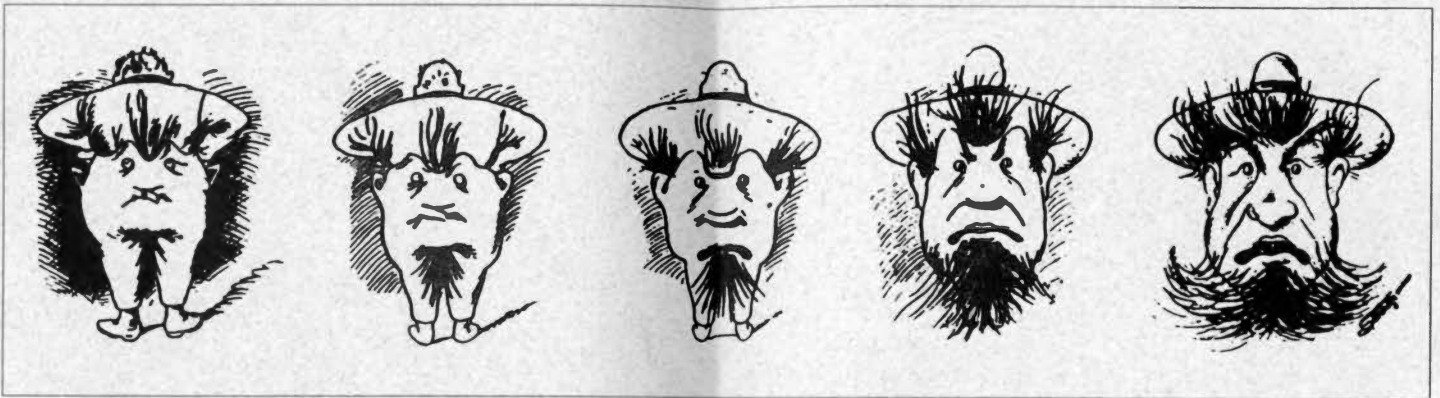
A Norwegian told me his mother sent him to a store to get something and he came home saying he forgot what she sent him for. She sent him again with the words, "What you don't keep in your head your feet must make up for, my little man." When he ate with his fingers and his grandmother told him to eat with his fork, he said, "Fingers were made before forks," and she cornered him, "But not *your* fingers."

Carl Sandburg, *Always the Young Strangers* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953), p. 167.

I learned from her and others like her that a first-rate soup is more creative than a second-rate painting, and that, generally, cooking or parenthood or making a home could be creative while poetry need not be; it could be uncreative.

Abraham Maslow, *Toward A Psychology of Being* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1968).

Below: *Metamorphosis* by Hans Schiessmann (1877), in which a respectable citizen turns into a Social Democrat.



In 1847 I gave an address at Newton, Massachusetts, before a Teachers' Institute conducted by Horace Mann. My subject was grasshoppers. I passed around a large jar of these insects, and made every teacher take one and hold it while I was speaking. If any one dropped the insect, I stopped till he picked it up. This was at that time a great innovation, and excited much laughter and derision. There can be no true progress in the teaching of natural science until such methods become general.

Louis Agassiz, in Lane Cooper, ed., *Louis Agassiz as a Teacher: Illustrative Extracts on His Method of Instruction* (Ithaca, NY: Comstock Publishing, 1945), p. 82.

The secret of teaching is to appear to have known all your life what you learned this afternoon.

The secret of teaching is to appear to have learned this afternoon what you have known all your life.

At around age six, perhaps, I was standing by myself in our front yard waiting for supper, just at that hour in a late summer day when the sun is already below the horizon and the risen full moon in the visible sky stops being chalky and begins to take on light. There comes the moment, and I saw it then, when the moon goes from flat to round. For the first time it met my eyes as a globe. The word "moon" came into my mouth as though fed to me out of a silver spoon. Held in my mouth the moon became a Concord grape Grandpa took off his vine and gave me to suck out of its skin and swallow whole, in Ohio.

Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 10.

After falling into a sound sleep, [Elias] Howe dreamed that he was kidnapped by a band of savages who threatened to kill him if he did not invent a sewing machine in twenty-four hours. Unable to meet the deadline, the machinist was led to his execution. As the spears of the savages descended on him, Howe noticed that they had eye-shaped holes close to the tips. At that moment he shook off the nightmare, woke up, and knew exactly where to place the eye in his sewing machine needle.

Carol Orsag and Ann Elwood, *Brainstorms and Thunderbolts: How Creative Genius Works* (New York: MacMillan, 1983), pp. 81-82.

His absent-mindedness made him a very dangerous, very slow driver, and since I was often seated next to him, he was known to change gears with my kneecap, then failing to understand why the engine raced or stalled. We would stop by the roadside while he examined the carburetor, attributing to it the fault which was his own, and mine, I suppose, for having kneecaps which resembled the gear lever of an Austin Healy Twelve.

Peter Ustinov (remembering his childhood), *Dear Me* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 71.

After dinner, [Marcel] Duchamp would take the bus to Nice to play at a chess circle and return late with Lydie [his first wife] lying awake waiting for him. Even so, he did not go up to bed immediately, but set up the chess pieces to study the position of a game he had been playing. First thing in the morning when he arose, he went to the chessboard to make a move he had thought out during the night. But the piece could not be moved – during the night Lydie had arisen and glued down all the pieces...A few days later Duchamp and Lydie divorced, and he returned to the States.

Man Ray, *Self-Portrait* (Boston: Little Brown, 1963), p. 237.

He loved to call things by the wrong names – or, it may be, the right ones, fantastically the right ones. Either extreme is poetry, of which he had the secret without knowing that he did. It was natural for him to name two lively rams on the place Belshassar and Nebuchadnezzar...Frank became Fritz Augustus – just why, I never inquired – and I was either Marcus Aurelius or Marco Bozzaris. Guy was Guy Bob, and Carl was Carlo. And Paul, when it came time for him to share in the illicit luxuriānce, was no other than Wallace P. Poggin – again, I have no faint idea why. My father never discussed his inspirations, any more than he analyzed his spoonerisms, or even admitted that they had fallen from his mouth. He would cough, and appear to apologize by saying: “I have a little throakling in my tit.”

Mark Van Doren, *The Autobiography of Mark Van Doren* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968).

One day during dinner – I was six years old at the time – they were discussing my looks and Mamma, trying to discover something nice about my face, said that I had intelligent eyes, and a pleasant smile, and then, yielding to Papa's arguments and to the obvious, had been forced to admit that I was plain; and afterwards, when I was thanking her for the dinner, she patted my cheek and said: “Remember, my little Nikolai, that no one will love you for your face so you must try to be a sensible good boy.”

Leo Tolstoy, *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929).

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war...And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*

Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" in Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, trans., *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 12.



Above: Pen and ink illustration by Michael Sturtz.

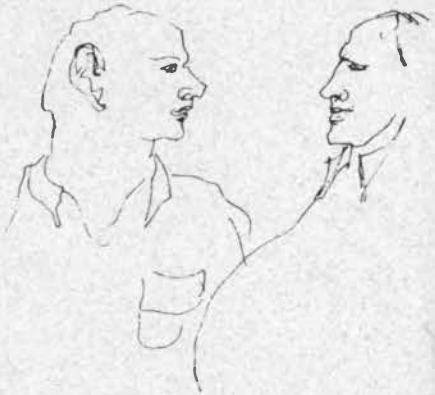
Education and learning, while on the one hand furthering this process of discovery, on the other hand gradually brake and finally stop it completely. There are relatively few adults who are fortunate enough to have retained something of the child's curiosity, his capacity for questioning and wondering. The average adult "knows all the answers," which is exactly why he will never know even a single answer. He has ceased to wonder, to discover. He knows his way around, and it is indeed a way around and around the same conventional pattern, in which everything is familiar and nothing cause for wonder. It is this adult who answers the child's questions and, in answering, fails to answer them but instead acquaints the child with the conventional patterns of his civilization, which effectively close up the asking mouth and shut the wondering eye.

Ernst G. Schachtel, *Metamorphosis* (New York: Basic Books, 1959).

One morning in the late 1940s, Swiss inventor George de Mestral went hunting in the Jura Mountains near Lyon. With him was his dog, an Irish pointer. Both brushed up against burdocks, which left burrs in the dog's fur and on the man's wool pants. De Mestral attempted to pull off the burrs, but they resisted. Anyone else might have cursed or shrugged, but de Mestral wondered why they clung with such tenacity. When he returned home, he examined them under a microscope and saw hundreds of tiny hooks that snagged into the flat matt of wool and fur. It occurred to him that as a fastener the burr was without equal – and, unlike a zipper, did not jam or catch.

Carol Orsag Madigan and Ann Elwood (recounting the story of the invention of velcro), *Brainstorms and Thunderbolts* (New York: MacMillan, 1983), p. 239.

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Above: Pen and ink drawing by Gary Oyloe. Right: Corporate symbol for fictional firm, Zigzag Billiards Hall, by Paul Ellmers.

The Chicago press had gotten hold of [Laszlo] Moholy[-Nagy] and his New Bauhaus with single-minded curiosity, as did every club and civic association in town. Being highly appreciative of beautiful women, he accepted early in his Chicago days an invitation by a Fashion Group to attend a luncheon in his honor at the Drake Hotel. Hardly had the ice cream been served when Moholy got up, unfolded a thick manuscript that had gone over well at Harvard, and started to read with intensity and concentration, ignoring staggering language difficulties in his zeal to win new converts. As time went by one after another of the fashion ladies took an unobtrusive leave until only three club-leaders and a drowsy waiter were left. When I later tried to point out the incompatibility of lecture and audience, Moholy was annoyed:

"I don't know what you are talking about," he said. "Five people stayed because they got something out of it."

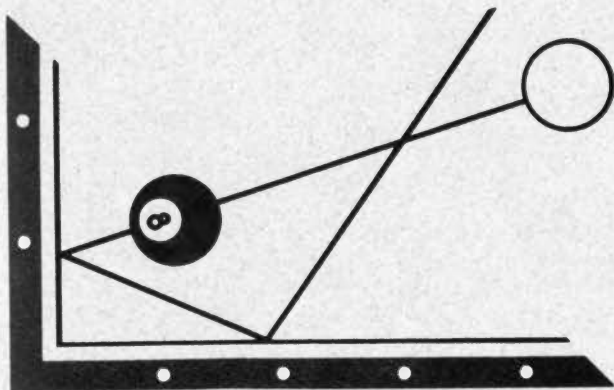
"Three," I said.

"Five," said Moholy. "Why do you assume that neither you nor the waiter have anything to learn?"

Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, "Moholy-Nagy: The Chicago Years" in Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *Moholy-Nagy* (New York: Praeger, 1970), pp. 22-23.

I've painted for a very long time, but I don't get tired or bored by it; I love to do it. If I don't paint one day, I don't feel well physically or mentally. My eyes bother me when I don't paint. But when I paint a full day, I feel satisfied and everything seems to be OK. I would never stop, never retire. I can't see how people can retire; I don't understand that. My brother Moses died while he was painting. He was actually working on a painting, and the last words he said were to the model: "Phoebe, don't frown." Then he died. He worked to the very last minute.

Raphael Soyer, quoted in Elaine King, *Artists Observed* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1986).



[Emil] Nolde did not use paintbrushes. When inspiration seized him, he threw away his brushes and simply dipped his old paint-rag into the colors and brushed it all over the canvas in blissful delirium. His pictures were formless, primitive, motley-colored daubings with complete neglect of craftsmanship. Nolde was an Expressionist and belonged to a group of such artists. The expression of one's inner self was all that mattered. If viewed from the high level of technical tradition, or if compared with Rebrandt or Raphael, this type of painting was nothing but brutal daubs of color. Nolde's name was one of the novel methods of frightening children at that time. When they were bad, they were threatened: "Look, I'm going to tell Nolde. He will pick you up and smear you all over his canvas."

George Grosz, *A Little Yes and a Big No: The Autobiography of George Grosz* (New York: Dial Press, 1946), pp. 83-84.

A soldier up for medical exam proved to have been wearing a truss for the last 6 years, and was classified as P.E. or Permanently Exempt. On his way out he gave this news to his pal, who immediately asked for the loan of the truss, which was granted. The examiner asked how long he had been wearing it, and he said "Six years," whereupon he was classified as M.E. "What's that?" he asked. "Middle East." "How can I go to the Middle East when I've been wearing a truss for 6 years?" "If you can wear a truss for 6 years upside-down, you can jolly well ride a camel for 6 months."

Edward Marsh, *Ambrosia and Small Beer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), p. 220.

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Above: Corporate symbol (alternate proposal) for Zebra Costume Shop by Matthew Parkinson.



Nor could I sing "The Birmingham Jail" at Granny Fant's, as Uncle Jamie had once spent a night in that place. Nor could we (later on, in adolescence) mention new births in Uncle Jamie's presence, for at forty he still did not know the facts of life, and Granny Fant was determined to keep up the illusion that humanity is restocked by the stork. She was, as my father and I discovered to our amazement, wrong. It turned out that Jamie thought pregnancy came about by the passage of a testicle into some unthinkable orifice of the female. He remarked reflectively that if he'd married he could only have had two children. "And I don't think I could have stood the pain."

Guy Davenport, "Finding" in *The Geography of the Imagination* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), pp. 362-363.

Mark Van Doren: Nothing in nature is more beautiful than the eye of a horse.

BALLAST has moved to Iowa, to a region increasingly listed among the most desirable places in which to live. All subscriptions, including gift subscriptions, must be mailed to:

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BALLAST doesn't have a budget really. For five years, it has operated at a loss. Even if we obtained stamps from everyone to whom we send the magazine, we would still lose about 13 cents per copy just on printing costs, without beginning to account for research, typesetting, paste-up, correspondence, and so on. The losses are currently offset by donations from enlightened subscribers and generous contributions from the Subscription Kid's paycheck. If anyone is foolishly philanthropic (foolish because such contributions are probably not tax deductible), we will sometimes accept a check (made payable to Roy R. Behrens), a page of freshly minted stamps, or winter clothing (remember when Henry Miller attempted suicide one winter by taking sleeping pills, fell asleep by an open window, and woke up -- alive -- in a snow drift?)

You are brilliant and subtle if you come from Iowa and really strange and you live as you live and you are always well taken care of if you come from Iowa.

Gertrude Stein,
*Everybody's
Autobiography*
(New York:
Random
House, 1937),
p. 224.

We are grateful for all of the mail we receive.

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