

# Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

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Volume 10 | Issue 1

Article 4

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June 2010

## Select All

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### Recommended Citation

Silverman, E. G. (2010) "Select All," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 4.  
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol10/iss1/4>

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## Silverman: Select All

### SELECT ALL

E.G. Silverman

Kevin Van Slyke sat at his computer and opened two new files. He labeled one *Leaving You Note* and the other *Suicide Note*, keeping them both open so he could window back and forth.

He wasn't sure if this was the best plan. It might make more sense to type one note first, save it as the other, and then make the few small changes that would be required. It would be easier that way. The problem with two open files was that he'd have to be jumping back and forth, cutting and pasting.

But working on both notes simultaneously had one big advantage. It was more neutral. Completely neutral, really. Free of prejudice. No need to favor one over the other. No need to give either greater weight by writing it first. No threat of having it perhaps unconsciously, unavoidably influence the tone of the other.

It was bad enough that, after he was gone, in one scenario he would come off as the guilty party entirely, no matter what he said, whereas in the other, surely the finger of blame would be pointed at his wife. It seemed so unfair, the way an act had the power to retrospectively allot culpability. It made no sense. The truth was that the note itself, even the deed itself, whichever it turned out to be, would have no bearing whatsoever on responsibility. Only by maintaining his impartiality to the outcome could he remain untouched by such ramifications and thus loyal to the truth.

Having labeled the two files, Kevin set to work, but immediately he was stymied by the issue of to whom to address the notes. Naturally, he'd assumed that he'd address them to Dixie. After all, it was she he was leaving, one way or the other. But what about the children? Weren't they the intended recipients of his message too?

Then it dawned on him—didn't he owe his son and daughter something extra, some words to help them over the shock of it, especially for the suicide note? And what about the other outcome?

Wouldn't he owe them an explanation of his desertion as much alive as dead?

Yes, well now, that did complicate matters a bit, didn't it?

Okay, so he would have to draft separate notes—two to his wife and two to his children. Yes, that would work, wouldn't it? In the ones to Dixie, he would feel no inhibitions of paternal responsibility, while in the letters to his children he would need to exercise maturity and restraint. With his children, it would be important to maintain a positive tone, full of love, hope, and promise, and he would frame the whole episode in a light meant not merely to console them, but to point them forward, to let them know how much he loved them, how full of great things their lives would be. He would tell them that they should put this little setback behind them, move on, and never give him a second thought.

That was what he wanted, wasn't it—that his children never again gave him a second thought? Perhaps he should ponder that a while. Perhaps there was a middle ground to tread—some means by which he could still reside fondly in their memories without causing them any trauma, any sense of loss.

Well, at any rate, this all meant that he was up to four letters. He'd have to work on four files simultaneously: *Leaving You Note—Dixie*, *Leaving Note—Children*, *Suicide Note—Dixie*, and *Suicide Note—Children*. It was going to get awfully confusing, juggling four open files, keeping track of where he was in the cutting and pasting, every time he caught a typo in one, making sure he fixed it in all four.

At once, another complication became glaringly obvious. How could he be so insensitive as to treat his two children as a single unit? They were so unlike. Roy, his ten-year-old son, was already so rambunctious, independent, athletic, and self-assured. How could he lump him together with Annie, a butterball of a sweetheart and barely more than a plaything for his wife? So then, was he talking about drafting six letters? How in the world was he going to juggle six letters, all with different objectives and demands?

Of course, the easy way out would have been simply to make a decision, thereby reducing his requirements to three documents. But he had always believed that once you had a system in place, you should stick with it, especially when a subject with such great importance was at stake.

Okay, he told himself, let's go back to the original plan. He already had the two files open and labeled. Why not get those two letters drafted and then go from there? If he could cut and paste, fine. The only way to know for sure was to get the blasted things written.

He stared at the blank screen. Getting starting was always the hardest part. He ordered himself to stop procrastinating with all this nonsense about numbers of letters and cutting and pasting. What difference did it make how he labeled the files or how many versions there were?

Get on with it, he lectured himself. Write the letter.

Tell the truth.

But that was the problem, wasn't it? What was the truth?

*Dear Dixie*, he typed. *I love you.*

Started with a lie already, didn't you? he told himself.

But was it a lie?

He tried to remember when he had been certain of his love for her, hoping that in the memory would lie the truth.

He typed: *I remember when we fell in love.*

He gazed at the words for a while and then wandered into the kitchen and poured himself some more coffee. He could hear his wife upstairs with Annie, dressing her or cleaning her room or arguing about something. It all sounded the same. He forced himself back into his office and sat again before the computer and ordered himself to concentrate.

Abigail, their little brown scruffy furball of a mutt appeared, seeming to materialize out of nowhere, as she frequently did. Kevin watched as she hunted the perimeter of the room and then curled up on the old recliner in the corner, not caring that she was nestled on a stack of unopened mail.

"Fleeing from the war zone?" he mused. The dog wagged her stump of a tail. "I'm going to miss you," he said. Abigail yawned and put her head down between her front paws.

*I loved you the first time I saw you*, he typed, hating how insidious it sounded. He could see the way she'd roll her eyes and shake her head at his sentimentality. How could you love me if you didn't even know me, she would say. It would be truly a chastisement, a rebuke of his feelings, a betrayal, a slap at his emotional cravings, but she would disguise it as a playful swipe, a mild tease that meant nothing, thereby depriving him even of the privilege of showing his pain. That's what he should be telling her, but it was nothing she would understand, and this was no time for bickering over misunderstandings. The idea now was to stick to common ground. Stick to the points that she would absorb. The idea now was to make her understand his decision, whichever one that turned out to be, and there was nothing to be gained by confusing the issue with digressions that were beyond her comprehension.

He highlighted the sentence and deleted it.

But wait a second. It was a true statement, wasn't it? Whether she understood it or not. Whether she rolled her eyes or not. He loved her the first time he saw her, and it was important to say that. Without that point, nothing that followed made sense, did it?

So he reversed the deletion and there the sentence was again, black on white. Reading it made him feel better. He would leave it for now. It was a good sentence, sentimental or not. Maybe if she read it and thought about it until it sunk in she would begin to understand.

That was the problem. Always had been. She didn't understand. Because it was a sentence that she would never have written, had it been she writing the note. At least she never would have written it about him.

He wasn't sure if she would have written it about others. He had asked her about others, but she had laughed at him dismissively. He knew that had to be a lie, that there had to have been others whom

she had loved, and her dissembling had filled him with the fear that they were not all in the past. Perhaps that was why she had never truly loved him.

But whatever her feelings for him, he smiled as he read the sentence. It was as fine a sentence as one could ever hope to write, assuming of course that it was sincere. All true love is love at first sight, he thought, although that wasn't something he would put in his note to her. Perhaps it was something he should say in his note or notes to his children, but he would put off deciding that for now.

He typed: *You were planting geraniums at my sister's. Around the pool. You were wearing short overalls and a T-shirt and you had the tops of the overalls folded down. You were wearing a yellow and pink hat and tan work boots and white socks with some sort of blue logo, and your hair stuck out from under the hat. Your hair was bothering you, and you kept pushing it back with your wrist. You were so intent on getting the geraniums planted that you didn't see me staring at you. I don't know why I fell so in love with you, watching you planting the geraniums, but perhaps it was because I was so lonely. Certainly when you're lonely, you're more vulnerable to love. But I don't think that was it. I think I would have fallen in love with you whether I was lonely or not. Oh, and there were petunias, too. I remember now: there were white ones and some pink and some purple petunias. You were making a great effort to plant the geraniums in the middle of the pots and then surround them with equal arrangements of the various colors of petunias. I remember thinking that if it had been me, I would have thrown them all in haphazardly and what difference would it have made?*

He sat back and read what he had written. His coffee was cold. His wife had bought a new coffeemaker. It automatically shut off after two hours, and then the coffee was cold. He hated that. When he'd complained to her about it, she had rolled her eyes and shaken her head. "Then why don't you make some fresh?" she'd said. "Then it would be hot."

She didn't understand. He'd liked the old coffeemaker that stayed on forever. One pot would last all morning. At lunchtime he'd dump out what was left, rinse the pot, and that was that.

Maybe it was her way of expressing some repressed hostility because he didn't go to an office every day like everyone else. But no, that was silly. She'd known what she was getting. She'd known all along that he worked from his little office in the back corner of the house, amongst his books and his things and private secluded world, and that was where he wrote his little reports about topics with funny names whose essence she never seemed to grasp or to care about. It was his sanctum and only Abigail came to visit, although sometimes the phone on the separate business line rang and once in a while the fax machine beeped. He had a radio, which in the afternoons was tuned to the classical music station he liked unless there was opera. He didn't care for opera when he worked.

The new coffeemaker made cappuccino. That was why she'd insisted on it. Then, if they ever had a dinner party, she could make cappuccino after dinner for their guests.

But they never had any guests, other than relatives, and they didn't make cappuccino for their relatives.

Oh, they had friends, all right. Or at least she did. But they were more friends whom she had play dates for her daughter with, or whom she had lunch with or played tennis with or served on the Shade Tree Committee with or volunteered at the school with, and none of those activities called for cappuccino.

He typed: *You were drinking lemonade. I remember you had three glasses of it. Each time you came over to my sister, you complained about the heat and took off your pink and yellow hat and readjusted your hair, and that gave me a chance to see your smile and your eyes and to hear your voice. How was I to know that when you went into the kitchen to refill your lemonade, you were dumping vodka in with it and that your fierce flower-arranging persistence was alcohol-fueled? How was I to know that I was falling in love with a drunk?*

*You were such a happy drunk. Did you know that? Did you know that is what has changed? That is why I am doing this. Not that you're no longer a happy drunk. That you are no longer happy. Ever. Not around me anyway. You never smile. You never laugh. I fell in love with your laugh, your smile, the twinkle in your eyes, the merriment that lit up your face, the way I was awestruck that you could make my stomach do somersaults that pushed my cheeks up, and I was happy just watching you plant flowers. Now I think you hate me because I have stripped all that happiness away from you, and what choice does that leave me?*

*This choice. That I am making now. That will be made by the time you read this.*

*After planting six pots of flowers and drinking three glasses of vodka-laced lemonade, you strode over to the couch where my sister and I sat watching her four-year-old, and you stood there with your hands on your hips demanding to know what we thought about your planting job.*

*Little Melissa threw a ball and it hit you in the shin. My sister and I laughed, but you feigned great insult and announced that you needed to go for a swim.*

*You stripped off your shoes, socks, T-shirt, and overalls, and underneath you had a white bikini. You stood there with your clothes in a pile at your feet and your hands on your hips, wanting to know which of us was going to join you, and all I could think was how incredibly sexy you were. Then you shrugged your shoulders, trotted to the edge of the pool, and dove in. You swam lengths, first crawl and then breaststroke and then backstroke, and then you floated on your back, spouting fountains of water like a whale.*

*Would you try not to gawk so much? my sister said to me.*

*I wasn't gawking, I said.*

*You were gawking, she said.*

*What's gawking? little Melissa said.*

*Never mind, my sister said.*

*Follow me, my sister said to me.*



*We went into the house, and she gave me a pair of her husband's swim trunks and two towels, and she made two vodka and lemonades. She told me she'd take Melissa to the park and would I please try not to do anything obscene or make a mess.*

*I went back out to the pool with the towels and the two drinks. You floated on your back and ignored me, and when I dove in, you complained that I splashed you. But when I told you I was onto your secret about the drinks and I'd brought you one, you told me I could kiss you if I wanted and I did.*

*That kiss must be why I imagined that you were in love with me like I was in love with you.*

*And need I remind you that it was your place we went back to that night, and it was your bed we spent the night in, and it was you who said the whole thing felt like a dream. No, you added, it felt like a honeymoon.*

*I remember being so struck by how different you were from everyone else I knew. Everyone else was struggling. Everyone else was trying so hard to find their way. Everyone else was so full of ambition—to be a doctor or lawyer or scientist or executive or movie star or professor or politician or—or anything. Something. Everyone else wanted to be something. Everyone else wanted to be successful. Everyone else wanted to be rich. Everyone else wanted to somehow change the world. Everyone else was out to establish themselves as a force to be reckoned with. But not you. You, who were smarter and prettier and more graceful and sexier than any of them, you who could have done anything, you were the only one who had figured it all out. You had only one ambition. I remember so clearly how we lay in your bed that first night, after making love—(I remember it was awkward and over so quick and you laughed so sweetly and told me not to worry that you would show me how to make the most fantastic love—and that was one promise you did keep—at least for a while you did) how you paced around the room naked and wonderful, explaining it all to me, so full of life and excitement. Your one ambition was to be happy. Your plan was so simple. You would spend your whole life living*

*plainly, free of goals, and you would have a lover who would support you, and you would read and paint and listen to music and plant flowers and a vegetable garden, and you would have children when you were ready and, now it was really important that I digested this part, you said to me so seriously, sitting on the bed now, taking my hand in yours, fixing my eyes sternly with yours, that I absolutely had to understand that this was no pipe dream, that you were no flake or romantic or starry-eyed fool, that you were no retro-hippie, that you weren't talking about free love or living in a commune or sitting around meditating, no, it was nothing like that at all. No, it was just plainly, quite simply that you were going to live a perfectly normal, everyday life. But your ambition was to be happy, to lead a perfectly normal everyday life, happily. I know it doesn't sound like much, you said, and you were starting to scoot over, to straddle me, but you show me one person who has managed to pull it off.*

*And then came the best part, probably the best moment of my entire life. Because then as you reached down and put me inside you (and I'll bet you don't know this—that when you did that, you bit down on your lower lip so I could see your front teeth like a beaver gnawing a log), you told me that you needed a partner for this life of yours, someone who thought it was a worthwhile vision, someone who would be willing and able to support you. You didn't need to be rich, but you did need to be comfortable—that's what you said, and I asked if having me inside you felt comfortable and that was the end of that conversation. As we made love again, I knew full well what we were agreeing to.*

He sat back, sipped at his cold coffee, and read over what he had written. It wasn't at all what he had meant to say. So far, all he'd told her was what she already knew, and what was the point in that? The problem between them wasn't what she knew. It was all the things he didn't know how to tell her. That, and probably a lot of things about her that he didn't know, but there wasn't much he could do about that now, was there?

He typed: *I never thought then to ask you about love. I never thought to demand to know what role love played in your grand scheme.*

*But how could I have thought to ask it? You told me you loved me. I believed you. It seemed so obvious. So inherent. So intrinsic. Of course I believed it.*

No, that wasn't what he wanted to say either.

*Did you ever love me?*

No, that wasn't it either. She must have loved him. Sometime. Some amount. Or else none of it would have made sense.

*What has happened? Where did we go wrong? When did you stop loving me?*

But what difference did that make? She had and that was all that was important.

*Was there a flaw in your plan? Was it that your plan could only work with a partner whom you truly loved? Has it failed because of me? Am I the flaw in your plan?*

Okay, perhaps he was getting close.

He sipped his cold coffee. The fax machine beeped and started printing.

Yes, he thought, now I am getting to the heart of the matter. He sat staring at his words on the screen and then he typed: *I am leaving you before you leave me.*

Yes, he thought, that's what this is really about now, isn't it?

Then he typed: *But no, that's not it precisely. It's not that you would leave me. You would never physically leave me. To leave me would be to admit failure, and that is something you have never done. No, it's rather that you have already left me. You have deserted me emotionally, have stripped your love from me. You have isolated me and left me alone. You hate me and are repelled by the sight of me. As a result, I am miserable.*

He could not believe what he had written. There it was. He'd said it. He had thought it for a time now—he'd lost track of how long, but he'd hated himself for thinking it and each time it came to mind he'd castigated himself and pushed the thought away. He'd never dreamed he would say it to her, and yet, here it was, staring him in

the face, and once it was down on paper (or on the monitor, anyway) by God, it did ring true.

The fax machine was done printing. He went over to see what was there. It was an advertisement from Staples, offering two cases of paper for the price of one. He read the small print to make sure delivery was free. It was a good offer, although he wouldn't need paper for another month or two.

He sat back down in front of the computer.

Suicide would be easier, he thought, because if he left her, he would need to deal with so many practical concerns—where he would live, how he could afford it after the alimony and child support he would be obliged to pay, how he would replace his little office, what would become of Abigail, how he would have to send his new address to his clients—the few thousand souls who paid ten dollars every two months to receive his twelve-page newsletter on astronomy for non-scientists getting started in the field.

So many problems would go away if he chose suicide. But then there was the hurdle of technique. He had stockpiled pills, but he had little faith in them, and he couldn't bear the embarrassment of trying and failing. All the other methods were too gruesome to contemplate. He couldn't imagine shooting himself or jumping off a building or a bridge or driving a car off a cliff or any of the other means that seemed to be popular of late. When you came right down to specifics, there wasn't any easy, reliable way to kill himself.

So was that it, then? Was he going to leave his wife and children because he didn't have the courage to kill himself?

Or would he remain faithful and miserable because he was a coward?

But he had been over all of this too many times, and he'd made up his mind. Well, he'd made up his mind to do one or the other, and the thing now was to concentrate on getting these letters written. That was the task at hand, and he'd always thought that that was the key to getting through life—keep concentrating on the task at hand.

He typed: *I remember you making all the plans. You made a list, sitting on the park bench in your apartment, in your short jean overalls and nothing else, my favorite outfit, your hair bleached from the sun, freckles on your shoulders, wearing a straw-hat that I said made you look like Huckleberry Finn or Tom Sawyer and you insisted that it was Huckleberry Hound and you made that hound dog face, panting with your tongue hanging out. You wrote the list on an envelope because you said the list would be the song of our lives together, and the best songs are always written on the backs of envelopes. You'd seen a song written by John Lennon on the back of an envelope at the British Library in London when you'd lived there for two years after college. I suggested that an envelope was fine if you insisted, but why not write it on the front so you wouldn't have to deal with the creases, and you said that was what you loved about me, my fierce sense of practicality. You said that we would make such an excellent and balanced team, my fierce sense of practicality and your cockeyed romantic impetuosity. You said that you would fill our lives with fire and spice, and I would be our rock of stability. I said I couldn't quite see how that would work, in a practical sense, and you said hush and let's work on our list.*

*I should have wondered then how you would mesh your cockeyed romantic impetuosity, your fire and spice, with the list. Or rather, I should have asked, should have demanded that the list be prioritized, rationalized, decoded. I should have forced us to see the stark reality of it. I should have asked you which of the things on the list were the most important. I should have seen that half the items on that list were incompatible with the others, that they were virtually guaranteed to suffocate them.*

*But I was too in love with you, and I did as you said. I married you and made love to you and made babies with you. Now you hate me because your plan didn't work out. It turns out that your life—that our life—is not enough for you.*

He could hear her in the kitchen now. It was close to noon, and she was probably giving their daughter lunch. He wasn't sure if his

wife ate lunch nowadays. So often she was somewhere else, at school or a meeting or tennis.

He'd fallen into the habit of eating at his desk. Usually the house was empty, and he'd go make himself a sandwich and take it back to his office. But he needed a break from the letter. He could use some company. So he saved the file, closed it, and ventured into the kitchen.

His wife and daughter were sitting at the kitchen table. His daughter was eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, holding it with both hands. Her paper plate was a pink pig's head with a snout indicated by two black circles. His wife was wearing a yellow tank top and jeans, and her hair was back in a clip. Her elbows were on the table and she was studying her daughter as if it was the first time she had witnessed such a feat of agility and wonder.

"Hi, Daddy," his daughter said, glancing up at him, smiling, holding her sandwich a few inches from her mouth, still somehow chewing as she spoke.

"Want me to make you something?" his wife asked.

"Okay," he said and he sat down at the table across from his daughter.

"What would you like?" his wife asked.

"I don't care," he said. "Anything would be fine."

She reached over to hand a napkin to their daughter. "You've got jelly on your cheek, sweetie," she said and then to him, "I'm not a mind reader. If you'd like me to make you something, you'll have to tell me what it is you want."

He got up and wiped the jelly off his daughter's cheek.

"Never mind," he said. "I'll make myself something later."

He checked the coffeemaker and found that sure enough she had dumped it out and rinsed the pot.

She said, "Do you want more coffee?"

"That's okay."

"I'll make more if you want it."

"No, that's okay."

He got himself a Diet Coke from the refrigerator, returned to his office, sat in his chair, and reopened the file.

He typed: *You are still beautiful. There is an eternal youth about you, and yet you are so different from when I fell in love with you. When you look at me, your face is so downtrodden now, as if the mere thought of smiling is almost too much to bear. You don't seem angry or upset or even irritated. It is more something like tired, but somehow worse. It is as though the life has been erased from you. It is as if you have forgotten how to be happy.*

*Is it my fault? Am I to blame for what has happened to you?*

*Perhaps that is what hatred is.*

*And perhaps it is how I feel too.*

"Do you have a minute?" his wife said, standing in the doorway of his office.

He was startled, spun around to her, and then quickly saved the file and closed it.

"Writing letters to your girlfriend?" she said.

"No, I—I was—"

"You do have a girlfriend, don't you?"

She marched in towards him as if she was going to push him aside, open the file, and see for herself, but instead she went to the long shelf they had had built along the windows, where he kept mounds of papers in a mess that she used to make fun of. She neatened a couple of the stacks, picking them up and banging them a few times to put them in order and setting them back down.

"Well, I hope you do because I have a boyfriend," she said.

She gazed out the window, turned around, took a deep breath, and stood staring at him, waiting to see what he had to say.

"I have to take our daughter to a play date. I'll be home in a few hours. We can talk about it more then." And with that she was gone.

He watched her walk away. He tried to recall the last time that they had made love. It hadn't been that long ago, probably sometime

in the last week or two, but he couldn't remember for sure. He wished he'd known then that it would be the last time so he could have tried to make it something special, could have relished it more, could have stored it in his memory clearly.

He turned to his computer, reopened the file, and read what he had written.

Then he typed: *Well dear, that was quite a surprise. No, it wasn't a surprise that you are having an affair. If that's what you meant. An affair. Whatever that is, exactly. That you are sleeping with someone. Having sex with him. Fucking him. That's what you mean, isn't it?*

*Or does it mean that you love someone? Not me. Someone else. You always have. Or wanted to. Or did. Not me. Someone else.*

*I guess I always knew. Suspected anyway. No, I knew.*

*I hoped not, but I knew.*

*But still, you surprised me. Shocked me. Not so much what you said, but the way you said it.*

*I mean really, you just waltzing in here like that and saying it that way. What am I supposed to think?*

*That you don't love me. That's what I'm supposed to think.*

*You made that clear all right.*

*Well, I guess I ought to be relieved. Now I don't have to do either of the things I was dreading. Not now that you've taken care of it for me.*

*Heck, come to think of it, I don't have to write all these damned letters either.*

*Heck, come to think of it—.*

He clicked on Edit, then Select All, then Delete.

There, before him on the screen was a blank, open file. All he had to do now was create.