

Letter to Scofield Thayer [undated, but probably late October, 1917]

E. E. Cummings

Dépôt de Triage de la Ferté-Macé (Orne)

Dear Scofield -

I have so long denied yourself the pleasure of writing you a letter that only a small lead pencil can do myself justice now. I wrote, it's true, "under fire" (I think they call it) at Jussy, ce qui se trouve pas loin du Chemin des Dames; mais chez nous c'était toujours tranquille, [Jussy, which is not far from the Chemin des Dames, but around us it was always calm] by which I mean in the S[ector] of St. Quentin. In fact I had no reason at all to write till a month ago just, when my good and only friend in France (whom God gave me to meet on the paquebot [ship] going over) took glad life's arrears for writing letters to American friends and parents as letters mustn't be written; I being his friend we were both arrested, tried, and, after spending some nights in real prisons (rats tried to eat his blankets; I fed mine chocolate) are here, happy as never before, far from the nagging crowd of Ambulance Américains existence, given fresh warm luscious milk and buying butter eggs & vile tabac [tobacco] (Maryland) at the Canteen associated with this detaining station, with our last sous [pennies]. I have been sick it seems, la soupe (twice daily, & coffee at 6:45 = what one is expected to live on) or le pain de guerre [war bread], or arsenic, or something having converted me into a fountain of painful excrement for some few days—hence the milk we are now enjoying. Ce pays [This county], by the way, s'appelle la Normandie [is called Normandy]. Sunsets one misses d'ordinaire [ordinarily] en France here gladden my heart.

How intellectual is war : a millimeter turn of a round-screw, x jumps high in the midst of his merriment over y's uncouth hop.

Why am I happy at length? Scofield, mon ami et moi [my friend and I] are cuddling from *Xaos* [Chaos] the amazement which Art hath so long starved for. For us, here, now, war has sucked itself off and gone home. Our brains are burning, our souls in mesh. You may expect.

Of course, the gendarmes were what you'd expect. I myself was carrying 150 lbs or so baggage between prisons and chemins de fer [railroads] (it took some days to reach here). You must know a gendarme couldn't bear the weight of a bed-roll, tho' one always bore before one of my sacs (carrying only a few pounds) with un-incriminating letters, etc. The trip ended with a moonlight douze kilometres [twelve kilometers] walk from the station called Briouze jussequ'ici [up to here]. Once my 2 captors & I sat down, & I drank from a black unseen brook by the road-edge —

You can write (I mean I can) a letter & a post-card a week here, all censored by the bureau of the depot, etc. Having recently passed a commission, we are waiting to be sent to a permanent camp de concentration pour la durée de la guerre [for the duration of the war]; or freed. I have already warned my family to keep out, and now warn you (not that you'd or could do anything) as I had rather see just what the mighty French Gov't will do to us alone. They have nothing on me, of course.

There are about une trentaine de [thirty or so of] the finest people imaginable here. All us [drawing of penis] sleep in 1 big room, & the farting is glorious. There are also, amusing to state, 100 [drawing of pudenda] here, tho to get together is impossible and punished by a period of solitary confinement in the “cabinot”, a small, black, wet room which reminds [me] of mediaeval cuts [i.e. woodcuts] to torture-books. With some exceptions, toutes les femmes-la sont des putains [all the women here are prostitutes], sent here via Paris from the war-zone. The hommes [men] are not, however, pimps, but aliens, especially Poles, Russes, Austricher-Polonais, etc., with a husky sprinkling of Belges.

[At the top of the page, but surely the end of the letter:] We are, thank Heaven, the only Americans. Give my love to La Fleur Seule [the Only Flower or the Lone Flower—Thayer's wife, Elaine] and write en souci de [in care of] Morgan Harjes Cie, 31 Boulevard Haussmann, Paris

[MS at the Scofield Thayer-Dial Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University (YCAL MSS 34 Series IV, Box 30, folder 792—correspondence not dated)]