

7 Aug 71

Dear HW:

We're still on the early (graveyard) shift and have no idea when it will end - on each week's schedule another week is added. This time around on this shift instead of gradually coming to terms with it, not that we were ever very successful at that, we're more disoriented now than a month ago when it started. (Senility?) Many problems and pressures we can do nothing about, which there's no point in going in to, but as an example: trying to sleep in a bedroom where the temperature today, with two fans going, was 90°, and where we have to contend with light, too, since we have to have the blinds up to get the cool air when it does come. Can't sleep, can't eat. The ulcer is not pleased.

During our second week on the early there was the "attempted escape" of George Jackson. Something very ugly happened at San Quentin. It kept us running, taping, clipping; missed a lot of sleep. Stories from both sides have to be considered with great caution since both have gone overboard, those from Q more than the other. For about a week Q had a different version every day, some only slightly less unbelievable than the others, almost all an affront to simple logic. Do you want or need any of this?

So this isn't going to be much of a letter, but I do want to write about the baby blanket. In your note of 8/28 you say suggesting "this" (the original thought of the afghan?) was your idea. An already-made afghan and a to-be-made blanket are two such different propositions that if Lil feels in the slightest she'd rather not (nothing in your letter to suggest this, quite the contrary; I'm just going by how I might feel) - anyway, it wouldn't hurt our feelings in the least, and the Mattoses of course know nothing about it. Don't even feel any reason has to be given. In case she does want to do it, though, and might enjoy the challenge of a simple Chinese character, we're working out the design (Chinese version of Jennifer's surname in stylized form, as it appears on her personal seal) and I'll hold this until I can include it. But her parents, and we too, would be very happy with the peace symbol, and after all Lil has worked that out herself. Not knowing the steps involved, we may come up with something impossible to do. We like Lil's choice of colors for Larry's blanket and would trust her judgment, but if we come up with any other ideas, will include them for her consideration.

(I feel I'm not making too much sense, but then I'm nodding over the typewriter.)

You haven't said anything more about the glaucoma, and we're wondering about the prospects for treatment or arresting the process. Please tell us. I'm more concerned about this than the knee, painful as I know that must be. I also wonder how much of a pleasure it can be to knót and crochet.

Have a note here to remind myself to tell you that one of those who went to San Quentin (30 Aug) was Dr. Herbert Reid (phonetic - Reed? Read?), described as "of the Commission of Inquiry into the Black Panthers," and of Harvard Law School. Had never heard of him or the commission, and if you haven't either (which I doubt), this might be of interest.


We're both sorry it took us so long to answer, or even acknowledge all your letters received since the time we went on the early shift. Re-reading them all in one gulp, preparing to answer them, was really overwhelming, knowing this is only a small part of what you do. The lack of response was due only to numbness, mental, emotional and physical.


Our library is no longer picketed, and when we can match their time open with our time awake, will see if we can run down anything on the constable from Barnstable. Haven't forgotten.


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A note on the evolution of the character for the baby blanket. The family involved is named Mattos, so their Chinese family name is Ma, meaning horse and pronounced mah. It's a common Chinese name, actually, commonest among the Moslems, millions of whom live in the northwest provinces and derives from the fact that many of them used the name of the prophet, Mahomet or Mohammed, depending upon which tribe of Arabs or Turks you learned it from.


But Ma, of course, is a character which has been around since long before the Moslems. The earliest version was scratched on the scapulae of sheep or on tortoise shells which then were heated in fire by fortunetellers who read the heat-caused cracks in the bone as supernatural manifestations on which they based their predictions.

This was during the Shang Dynasty (1766-1122 B.C.) and was the earliest known form of Chinese writing. It was a simple picture: 

During the Chou Dynasty (1122-221 B.C.) they began chiseling these ideographs into bronze tablets and seals, so the character became greatly simplified, getting farther away from a picture but still recognizable: 

In the Ch'in Dynasty (221-206 B.C.) they were still chiseling into bronze and stone but also beginning to write with a soft brush with ink on paper, and the character remained 

for chiseling or carving but turned into something quite different for the brush: 

During the Han Dynasty writing became almost entirely a matter of brush work, so the character became:  which it still is today, suggesting the mane, the four legs and tail if you know how to look at it.

Nowadays when Chinese cut a personal seal in stone they formalize the characters within the constraints of a rectangle. Thus the character Ma on a seal becomes:

