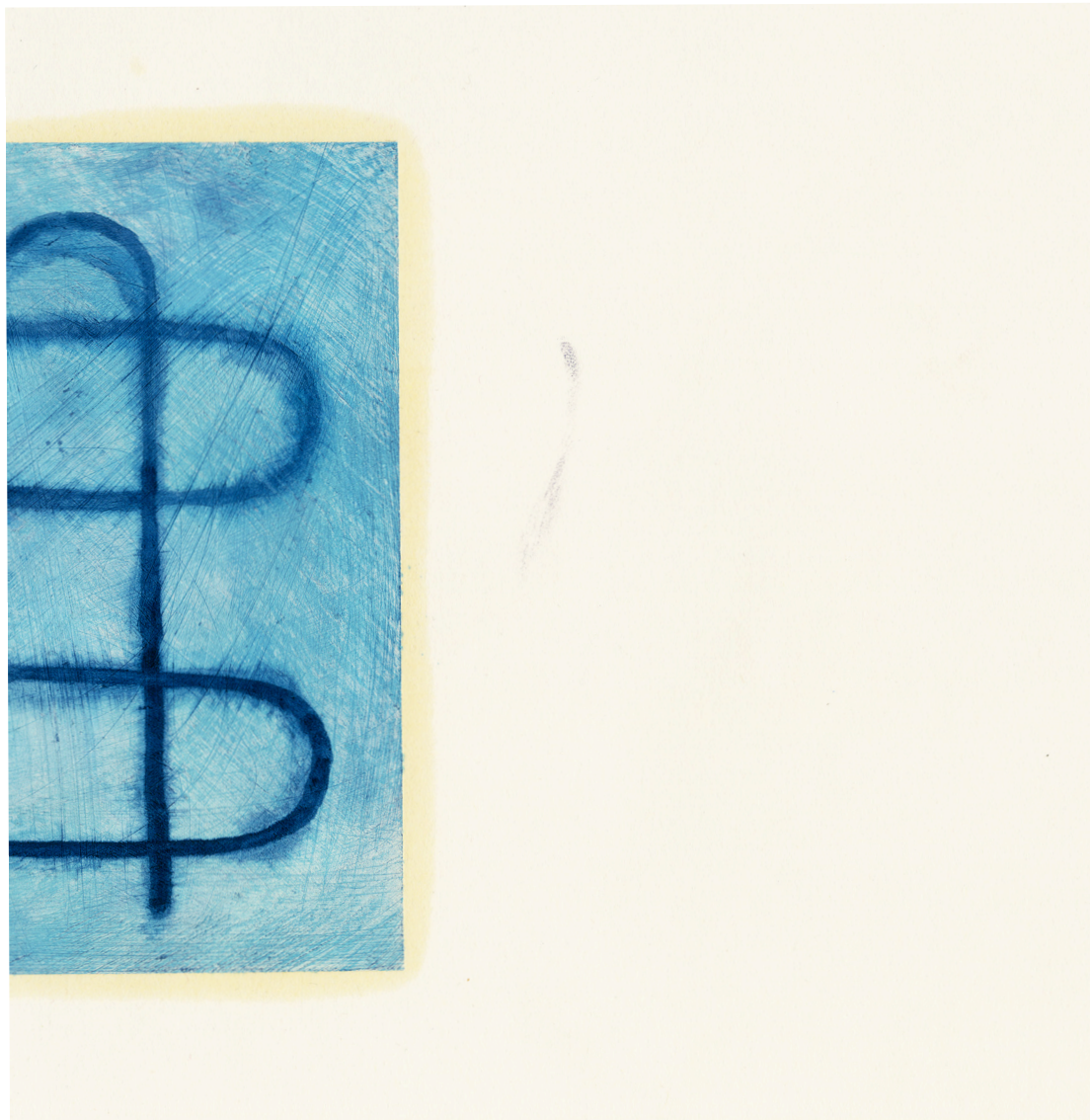


Dear Mom,

May 11, 1988

I'm still hoping that you'll send me some memories of dad's work during the cold war. The history everywhere has me thinking about it again. But I'm in Berlin now and wanted to let you know I was okay and just get down a few notes on what I am trying to write about this painting I saw here that I just can't get out of my mind.

My discontent here is related, in perhaps an unconscious way, to not knowing the bigger picture of dad's relationship to the American secret war against socialist movements around world just after I was born. My childhood memories of our family are so full of a sense of social justice and urgency around human rights - it seems so paradoxical that he would have been part of that war machine at those same moments. There's an image somewhere in my head of us all on the train to DC and the car is full of peace marchers and you are making watercolors and he is reading. I always saw beauty and justice connected in how we acted, in who we were, in all our reflections...

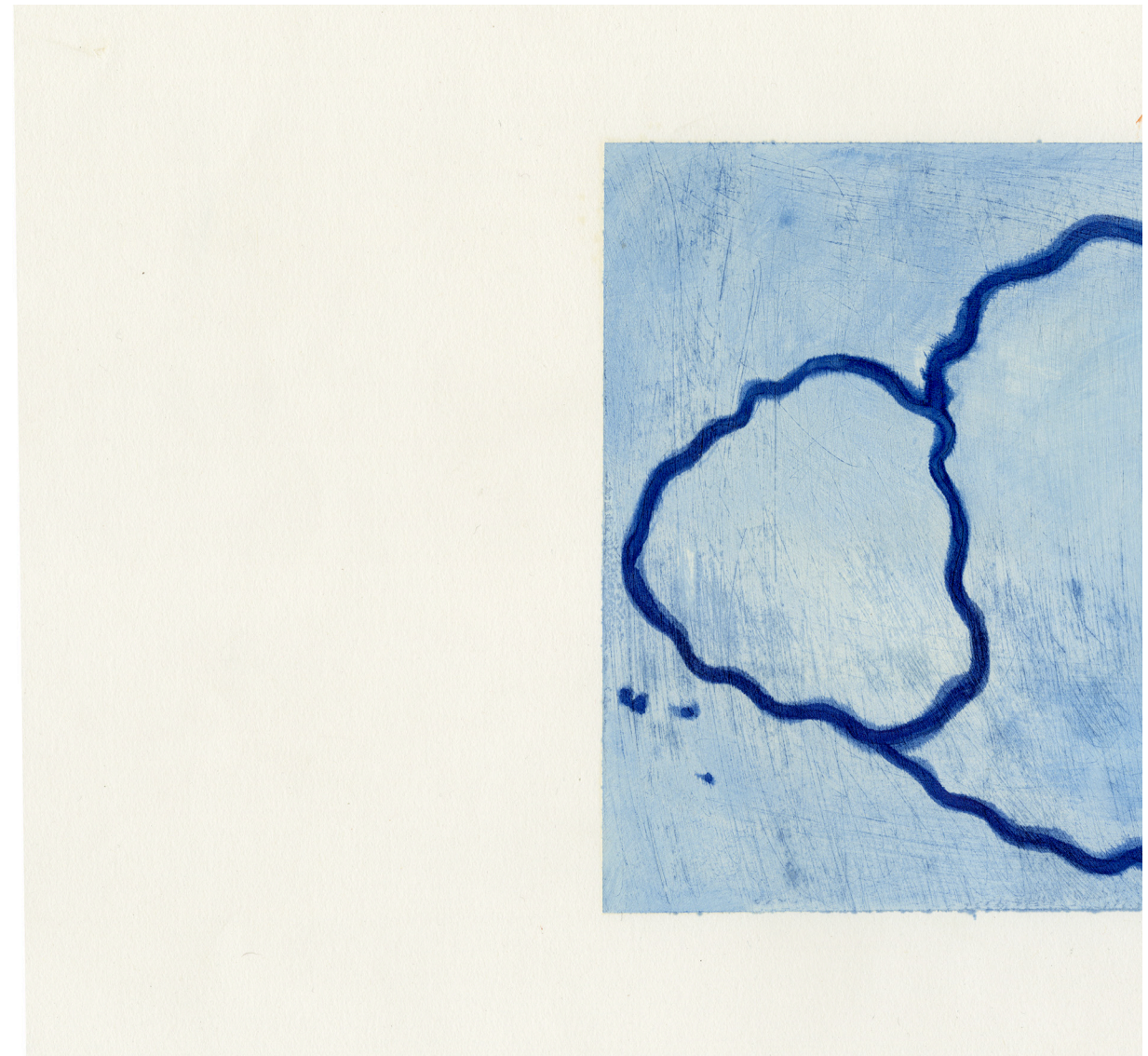


Dearest,

May 30, 1988

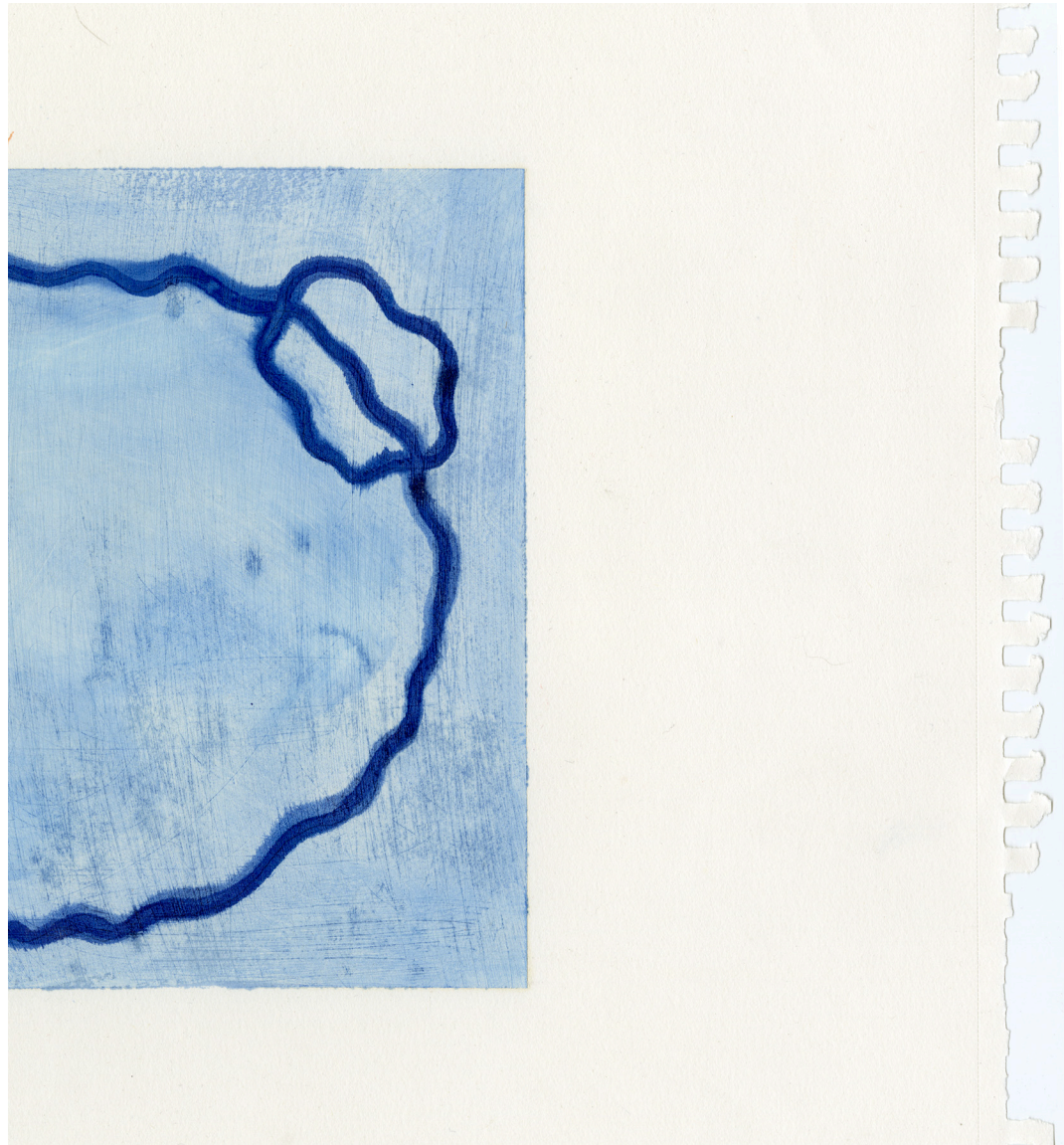
I'm so happy you decided to send me these thoughts on the picture you are looking at. I remember painting so many still-lives in the 60's when you were little and how you would watch me for hours. I know that I promised to write more about your dad's work with the government (CIA?), but strangely after our talk on the phone, my memory now of his work is a bit strained, but I'll try.

When I sit down to write, I always get sidetracked with feelings of sadness. To me, your dad was physically such a handsome man, and in the early years of our relationship, he was so kind. Our engagement period was from Dec 54 to Apr 55, and it was around this time that he was working for the government. I remember because at the time the job started for him, he was making furniture for when we would be married: nice, pretty stuff: a couch made from an old door, a coffee table and a bed headboard with shelves. And you know I was so impressed, so smitten. His hands were so beautiful, and he worked so hard...





...So anyway, this is small picture and has a dense flatness. Without any shine it implies the imbalance of looking carefully at something that is denying any sort of reflection – receding from any kind of mirroring (where am I in there?) but still insists on more looking. It’s frustrating. I think that the person who painted it wanted to absorb another person’s sight. This feeling of going-into, of involuntary assimilation, is I guess already in the medium of painting itself – something calls to us for attention, opens us up to exposing emotion but denies any serving of purpose for that feeling in the present. It’s a picture that is against empathy in a way – we know we are supposed to feel into to another person – but all we seem to do is replace them with our selves. To paint over, or to paint through the supposedly “real” conditions of experience show the impossibility of remaking those realities of the present: covering and recovering the chronologies of a stranger...



...What your dad and I had together, besides our original passion, was the politics we shared. We were both part of the idealism of those times: a belief that if clear study and research were applied to our international policy, the horrors of the just passed war could be avoided. I was always horrified by the racism of my father, wanted to help anything that might change our country for the better and your dad thought that from within the gov’t things could be made better. Everyone thought that way then. Now it looks like just a false hope: that we could somehow change things by working inside the system. But what else besides hope could we have? With McCarthy raging in the Senate and children escorted to school by armed soldiers. And this was in America! It was like a growing stain. I don’t know, we somehow thought that intelligent people could change things. And the CIA that recruited him found him when he was so young, and placed him and all his student friends into good programs. By the end of graduate school right before the wedding, he was paid to help a general who designed the spy planes they secretly flew over Russia. Maybe they wanted a political scientist there in on that stuff to be able to remind them of history? ...





...But of course, any painting is a picture of something that happened, even if that event was the just the making of the painting. Encountering it shows the conflict between immediate time (memory?) and historical archive (facts?) make me see myself through another body, in this stranger's position of address and identification. I'm thinking that this kind of re-embodiment is an old idea: that one can occupy the being of another through a spatial position established by a work of art. But I'm realizing that this kind of habitation is not at all empathetic. The thing I'm feeling-into is staying entirely strange and different from me. Through this transubstantiation, I am in a body of someone previously unknown. I adopt their perspective even though I can't fully incorporate it. I become unlike myself in the way I might want to; seeing what the object sees which is me but not able to recognize the vision. With this sensibility, I suppose I can become anyone and empathy falls away...

...After the Bay of Pigs, he quit that work along with most of his academic friends. Although there were sometimes strange absences when we traveled in the years that followed, I'm pretty sure that by the time of Viet Nam, he was no longer doing that work. By then we were both protesting, or at least I was, and he was supporting me by taking care of you kids. After we grew apart, he never spoke of it again, or brushed it aside as the work that all academics had to do at the time – the “good Americans.” ...





...Pushing us outside of linear time, a picture could undo the assignment of ordered subjectivity by suggesting an abstracted context for overflow between anyone. The idea of psychic life ever be anchored recognizable representations is proved a fallacy. I know that the emotional life I experience internally, my supposed “personality and character,” is often hidden beneath the stories, images, and references dictated by the world as my “experiences.” And I know this in part because you formed me. I’m thinking of how those who have power over us, develop this dictation without us, way before our actual presence. To reject these distinctions is in many places today, is an act that risks one’s life. And the real implication of the violence brought to any of our refusals implies that we all share the position of never truly being “ourselves” in this particular world.

I guess any good picture is also a sad one.

Write me back, xxD



...But honey, it’s so hard to think back now to why these things happened. Ambitious men surrounded me with their idealism and explanations. I find myself thinking so much of my hurtful father too, and wishing I could talk to him again, even though he had such terrible politics, and was so awful to me. And sitting here now I just realized I still have that little coffee table your dad made for us after he got his first check at that job. I always wondered why he didn’t take it with him after the divorce. It’s so strange how some things last and other things don’t. I may be done with the past, but the past seems never to be done with me.

More Soon, love, love, Mom.

