

Excerpt from:

**Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa** by Marilyn Chase, published by Chronicle Books 2020  
<https://www.chroniclebooks.com/collections/art-design/products/everything-she-touched>

## Chapter 5 Love Letters

Albert Lanier's Model A jalopy was holding up and getting good gas mileage.

"It's the strangest looking car ever," he wrote to his parents in Georgia. "Children run out and wave and flock around us wherever we stop."

To avoid the heat, Albert and his friends slept during the day and drove at night on their way from Black Mountain College in North Carolina to San Francisco. When they ran low on funds near the end of the trip, Albert resorted to selling his blood in Las Vegas. Tired from the procedure, he slept and awoke to find his traveling companions fresh from a gambling spree and sporting new shirts bought with his "blood money." They had barely enough for the bridge toll across San Francisco Bay. He'd laugh about it later.

By September, Albert moved in with his Black Mountain friends "Rags" Watkins and Peggy Tolkwatkins. Peggy had drawn Albert to the City by the Bay with tales of a bohemian good life, where young artists could dine on a four-course Italian dinner with red wine for seventy-five cents. Reality didn't quite live up to the romance. Albert took work as a carpenter's apprentice for union wages.

Torn between staying at Black Mountain and helping her family resettle, Ruth Asawa took a short leave from art school in September and October of 1948 to lend a hand on their new farm near Los Angeles. The Asawas found temporary living space at the *gakuen*, the Japanese schoolhouse where Ruth had studied calligraphy in a long-ago childhood before the war. They occupied one room, partitioned with makeshift cardboard walls from a dozen other families who also resettled in the school after camp. Now twenty-two, Ruth pitched in to help her parents grow their new cash crop of asters and chrysanthemums, along with the staple produce of tomatoes, melons, beans, and cucumbers. How she longed to return to Black Mountain and her art. But as a daughter, she wrote Albert, her sense of filial duty left her "bound to the future plans of our home & farm. I cannot leave now."

Absence sharpened her feelings for him, but as she wrote to him on September 17, their pathway forward was still unclear:

*I love you Albert, and wish I could say more definitely what I will do. . . . Will you come and visit us? . . . 6 of us sleep in a room . . . Father, Mother, brother, 3 daughters. . . .*

*You have given me a great deal of courage and never will I forget it. . . .*

*If I could promise you something it's that I'm all yours & part of all my thoughts is you, but when & where? I can't say yet.*

*Mother is quite shy about the house. She says we can't let you sleep in a sleeping bag, but if you care when you come, to hear 6 people snoring, you're welcome to our kitchen floor.*

During their separation, Ruth and Albert would live through letters. Planning and dreaming, they pondered what it would mean to make a life devoted to art and each other. Agonizing over how to ease parental anguish over their interracial union, they wrote out their own long-distance love story. Each

thought the other would destroy such an intimate dialogue. In the end, neither had the heart to do so. Their children would later make a convincing case to save their letters for history.

Laboring eighteen-hour days at farming, pickling, and canning, Ruth also tutored her sister Kimiko in English, to help her regain the fluency she had lost during the war, when she was in Japan. In a letter dated September 28, 1948, Ruth began introducing Albert to the family values he would encounter:

*It is again so good to be with people who work thrice as hard as I do. . . .  
Mama and I speak of marriage. She is gentle but firm in her beliefs . . . She wants me near but she will not hold me; She said today to "please study so that you won't have to be just a farm hand as I've been all my life;" and not to think of marriage too soon. I shall go as I've always gone, my own way, though it seems like the dutiful way, it is the way I prefer. . . .  
We are crowded, but you have seen greater crowds than this; the family may not respond, but understand it is in their nature. They are not friendly, but kind-souled people. Do not worry. Hope you can eat our food. It's very different. We all eat with chopsticks and much rice.  
Forgive me, I'm tired tonight, and hope for a sound sleep.  
You've made me very happy and I celebrate by proxy this happiness with you.*

The first weekend in October 1948, Albert appeared at the road to the Asawas' schoolhouse home, dressed formally in a dark suit. The reunion scene unfolded as if in a movie: Ruth running down the path to meet him, grasping his hands, and leading him up the wooden porch past the rickety player piano, which had somehow survived the war, and into the house for introductions.

"This is Albert."

Ruth's father Umakichi summoned enough English to make small talk, while her mother Haru smiled.

Ruth made a lunch of soup, rice, and abalone, a shellfish prized in Japanese cuisine for its texture and tang of the sea. Ruth's sisters Kimiko and Janet watched him work on a mouthful of the muscular mollusk. He gulped it down in two minutes. Ruth swiftly cleared the table. Then, diverting attention from his struggle with the shellfish, Albert beamed his charm at Ruth's mother.

"Mrs. Asawa," he said, "you are so beautiful!"

Understanding little, Haru replied, smiling, "Yes."

Albert's introduction to the challenging dish was over, to everyone's relief. Ruth would later learn to make Southern fare like fried chicken and gravy, catering to Albert's palate—and thickening his narrow waistline.

Albert's brief overnight visit brought no easy storybook blessing of their union. But the Asawas, despite their reservations, had now met the young man vying for Ruth's hand. Albert, for his part, had a chance to witness the struggles of his beloved's family. This gave him an understanding of Ruth's deep sense of filial duty, which was crucial to loving and being loved by her. Bill, Kimiko, and Janet had a chance to meet the young Southerner who had won their sister's heart. Albert's deference and easygoing charm began to thaw her parents' reserve and kindle a nascent friendship with her siblings.

Once she had helped the Asawas resume planting, Ruth could heed the call of her mentors and her art, and make plans to complete her third year at Black Mountain. Money was as tight as ever. Ruth's teacher Josef Albers didn't spare the superlatives in a September 18 letter recommending her for a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation scholarship:

*Ruth Asawa is of an unusual artistic talent in painting as well as in design and in drawing. . . . You might have heard about the exhibition of art students' work at the Addison Gallery of Andover, Mass. I have seen three reports on that Exhibition in Time magazine, the New York Times and Art News. In all these comments Ruth Asawa's painting there is considered among the most outstanding . . .*

Tiffany turned her down. Albers assured her other funding could be arranged on her return. But Black Mountain still offered no degrees. So it would be a continued gamble.

Before returning to school, Ruth met with the editor of the Los Angeles–based magazine *Arts & Architecture*. Rather than promoting her own art, she talked up Albert's Minimum House at Black Mountain, sparking editor John Entenza's interest in a pictorial feature on the project. She arranged new photos of the house by her friend, photographer Hazel-Frieda Larsen. One of the Milwaukee group that preceded Ruth to Black Mountain, Larsen took soulful portraits, despite suffering from polio, their generation's most-feared epidemic, which had paralyzed the late president Roosevelt and left Larsen similarly encased in metal leg braces.

In mid-October, Ruth headed back across the country to Black Mountain, stopping on her way at two places that were dear to her mentors Josef Albers and Buckminster Fuller. In Taos, New Mexico, she took in the colors that had inspired Albers's palette—an ochre adobe, indigo sky, and pink Indian blanket.

"I passed as an Indian boy," Ruth wrote Albert in a card postmarked on October 18. The Indians asked her which tribe she belonged to: Apache, Navajo, or Cherokee? "They greeted me and it was thrilling."

Next, she stopped in Wichita to view Fuller's futuristic Dymaxion house, a 1,000-square-foot aluminum structure with moving walls and a profile like a spaceship that had touched down in a Kansas wheat field.

"It was like spreading the wings of a dragonfly to see what made it move," Ruth wrote to Albert upon her arrival back at the college on October 23. "I didn't understand it but such beauty unfolded."

On her first day back at Black Mountain, Ruth sought solitude in the places where she and Albert had fallen in love. Once back in her study, she put a pair of cacti on her windowsill, one lean and one rounded. It was, she wrote:

*. . . like a portrait of us, looking towards the lake . . .*

*Thinking of you really keeps me going. There's nothing like you ethereal and real. Being apart will maybe help us understand more. A lot we don't know together.*

*I love the quiet so far. I must start painting to counteract all the brownness of the paintings around here.*

*Memories are beautiful & controlled things. I haven't yet gone to your study. Moon is beautiful over the lake tonight. Part of it is already hidden modestly.*

Albert didn't hide from his parents his visit to the Asawa family. He frankly declared his admiration for their courage and industry in rebuilding their postwar lives, and his desire to design them a new home. He wasn't ready to tell his parents about his intentions toward Ruth—though they must have had a clue that this was a singular friendship. He shared his news first with his sister Laurie, who lived in Georgia with her husband, a prominent peach grower, and their two small girls.

Laurie wrote to her brother on November 1 that she was moved to tears by his confidence in her, but shaken by his plans. She praised Ruth as talented and sincere. But she warned him their parents would oppose a mixed marriage:

*I was surprised beyond words when I realized that you are in love with Ruth. I had truthfully never thought of such a thing . . .*

*When they disapprove of a marriage to Ruth it won't be hate as you put it. Neither will it be a lack of love. It will only be disapproval of your marrying into another race. Her people will probably feel the same—your folks won't be able to imagine grandchildren of Japanese descent, neither will hers look forward to blonde, blue-eyed ones.*

Facing a wall of parental skepticism, it seemed Albert and Ruth had work to do.

That same day, Albert heard from Ruth, who had resumed modern dance classes with Elizabeth Schmitt. Her joy in movement was tempered by witnessing struggles of her friend Larsen, now in physical therapy to reanimate her limbs after suffering from polio:

*Dearest Albert, Hazel will walk again. It is more to see Hazel exercise than dancing students.*

Later in November, Albert sent Ruth a mysterious present in a nest of boxes. In the smallest, Ruth wrote, she'd been afraid she would find an engagement ring, which she didn't want due to her ambivalence about marriage, her distaste for showy baubles, her innate frugality—or all three. Instead, she was delighted by the surprise of an old watch on a chain that she could fit in her palm or open to watch its movement ticking away. She sketched it in her letter, marking the hours with words of love.

Gingerly, Ruth had started to share news of their relationship with a few select friends, like the émigré musician Charlotte Schlesinger, known by her nickname, Bimbus. In her thank-you letter for the watch, she reported:

*I have begun to think more and more in terms of US.*

*Bimbus is glad for us; but says that we must become independent of our friends and must work out our lives with work as our problem, not ourselves.*

*I believe it strongly and if we cannot love our work as well as each other, it will be impossible to live together. . . .*

*Time away from you is precious because it makes me love you more deeply in your physical absence. There will be so much love when we are together again.*

*I admire your attempt for independence, your tiny room, your letters and drawings.*

*I cannot love without work and I cannot stand ugliness, and laziness is one of the lowest forms of ugliness to me, but I'm afraid I would love you even if you were lazy, I now love you so blindly. . .*

As Ruth wrestled with problems of balancing work and life, Albert worked feverishly to allay her fears, using every tool at his disposal: reason, poetry, humor. One corny joke misfired and triggered a lover's tiff. Albert had written about having "dishonorable intentions"—perhaps code for his longing to be with her. Ruth didn't understand, wasn't amused, and even wondered if there were another woman in the picture.

In a letter written during a “stupid carpentry class” on November 22, Albert shot back that his joke was facetious and all his intentions were honorable and “all reserved for you.” In this letter, he not only clarified the misunderstanding, but went on to state his case for marriage from a variety of angles.

Work in his tiny, sunless room had left Albert longing for space and light to clear his head. He reassured Ruth he was equally devoted to his vocation as she was to hers, adding that Fuller and Ruth were the lodestars guiding his great life decisions:

*The life of the artist-scientist-explorer (Fuller) is truly the only life worth living.  
You give me courage—just the word Ruth gives me an “all is possible” feeling.*

Albert’s letter went on to address his own fears of family rejection; he hoped the Laniers would take “a sensible attitude.” At the same time, he tried to quell Ruth’s jitters on many fronts: matrimonial, artistic, family, and lifestyle. He wooed her with a description of their future life in art together as “nomads going from one job to the next in a Model ‘A’ or Jeep with the kids strapped in.” Integrity to art and each other would guide them.

Boldly pressing his case for marriage, Albert suggested that they ask Fuller to design them a wedding ring. He didn’t like ostentatious engagement rings any more than she did. He wanted to honor Ruth with a unique piece of art by their beloved mentor, a wedding ring whose worth would flow from Fuller’s designing of it, and from Ruth’s wearing of it. This time, she didn’t object.

Albert braced for the lonely holiday season ahead:

*Next Christmas we must be together—our first—and this our last apart.*

By now, he told her, the flavors of everyday life were all infused with Ruth.

*I just can’t drink hot chocolate. That’s our drink—We had hot chocolate after listening to  
“Pastorale” . . .*

He closed the November 22 missive by begging Ruth not to exhaust herself or to overreact to his flippant jokes by imagining a rival:

*My love, love, and no more letters too late at night or when you’re too tired.*

Around Thanksgiving, Ruth’s qualms began to ease, and she wrote to Albert on November 30 that her older sister Lois now supported them:

*Lois . . . hopes for a glorious beautiful journey for you and me. She is very good. She said,  
“Love him, not for his race, but as an individual.” You certainly are an individual. She will come to  
L.A. in June so they will be at our wedding. Bimbus wants to play Mozart for us. I haven’t planned  
anything. It almost frightens me to be thinking in terms of matrimony.*

The week before Christmas, Ruth was madly rehearsing dances and hymns for Black Mountain’s holiday recitals before school closed for the winter break. She helped deck the tree with metal spirals they had made the year before, lighting them with candles. She filled her December 16 letter to Albert with holiday news and sensual allusions to Black Mountain landscapes where they had spent intimate moments:

*We dance tomorrow, scared; rehearse tonight. Tonight is Christmas for us, we sing Bach's "Praise our God" and O Jesu so sweet, a beautiful chorale. Then a haunted peace here, and a greater alertness to light & darkness. Too much moonlight tonight to suppress memories of beautiful nights with you. Mae West, moon, water; the night is filled with sensations.*

Ruth would spend Christmas Eve with Josef and Anni Albers, and then, craving solitude, leave to build a fire by herself. She'd confessed to Albert in a letter postmarked December 23 that her head and heart were sometimes at odds:

*When I say that I want children, one says "your work is more important". "One cannot do both." Then I begin to wonder about what is possible or impossible. Do I see the future clearly in believing that we can have a family, but still maintain our own work . . .*

*Do we know how to give & take. Yes of our service, but of the real gift? Do we know how to fight, not to destroy but to survive. Martyrdom now seems to be the survival for, not the dying for. . . .*

*I paint more often now, throw many away and start over each time.*

*Rubbing the now & here into the clay, I have a clean slate to think of tomorrow with you which seems too wonderful to imagine.*

A hyacinth Albert had planted outside Ruth's window the previous spring put out a glorious purple bloom. She opened a holiday card from Fuller, postmarked on December 24, and found his promise of a ring, which he described in his arcane wizard's formula:

*Much love to you! A wedding ring for you and Albert is in process of design—It is Dymaxion—i.e. Unity is at minimum twofold. UNITY = Minima<sup>2</sup> Maxima Universe.  
(Signed) Buckminster Fuller*

Ruth was puzzled by his cosmic equation, but delighted at the prospect of the ring. By now, Albert had a new job as an architectural draftsman for Bay Area architect Mario Corbett. But Ruth still held out hope he could somehow continue studies with Fuller, writing on December 28:

*I am sure Fuller is the one, because he is so vast yet so intimate.*

Seeking clues about her future, she had the poet Charles Olson read her fortune in the cards, which foretold that she would cross a body of water. "I hope it is only the S.F. Bay," she added.

Ruth told Albert that her siblings—"less sens[ible] and less rational" than family skeptics—supported their match. Her older brother, George, had liked Albert on first meeting him in L.A., and in any event would support his sister's choice. "Your trademark," George told his sister, "is made by either people living your life or living your own."

She told Albert her family's acceptance of him as a future son-in-law had been forged in suffering. For herself, from then on, she declared on December 29 that she would suffer only for art:

*They dare to be tolerant, for we have all suffered intolerance innocently. I no longer want to nurse such wounds; I want to wrap fingers cut by aluminum shavings, and hands scratched by wire; only these things produce tolerable pains.*

*You will have to look at me on streetcars or bus when you hear someone shout "dirty Jap." I hope we never have to experience it, but expect it, but do not fear it. I've overcome most of the*

*fear. I've reached a point where I can no longer nurse such stupidity. This attitude has forced me to become a citizen of the universe by which I become infinitely smaller, than if I belonged to a family, or province, or race. Then I can allow myself to pass and not to be hurt as mortally by ugly remarks, because I no longer identify myself as Japanese or American . . .*

Racial differences weren't made by God but by man, Ruth reasoned. She embraced Albers's theory about the relativity and interaction of colors that vibrate and change in relation to the colors next to them, as people change and interact with each other. She wanted to resist social pressures to conform; she wanted to innovate like Fuller.

*You painted me brown, and I painted you white. From our limited experience with color, we know red and green work together, there is activity, violence, but not red poisoning green. Together they can produce yellow without losing any of their strength. It is hard to look at, but exciting. If we suffocate under society's pressure, we will, I'm sure, realize our capacity and limitations; and we will be unable to follow Fuller. I know we will always be following him as children followed the Pied Piper . . .*

Giving herself up wholly to love required Ruth to be sure she and her lover could also remain true to their respective arts. So she repeatedly sought that reassurance from Albert. She closed her December 29 letter urging him to love his vocation as much as he loved her:

*I will take no more love from you until you have given your own work the love it deserves. And put all of my love into it. There is such an abundance of it. Please use some of it at night. The nights are so starved.*

All that agonizing about their future began to fray Albert's nerves. On January 11, he tried to ease his fiancée's mind and made his case for trust:

*The increasing frequency with which you write about love versus work . . . disturbs me. . . . I know I have far to go—perhaps far before you will have me—but please do not think that it will never be—only two must believe but one losing belief is fatal. . . .*

*Ruth, love me as you are tender to plants, as you love coils of beautiful wire, as you love loneliness—knowing that time will wear rough edges smooth—that distance is surmountable—that wire is stronger than stone—that God is good and God is love.*

But the new year, 1949, brought a new concern beyond matters of the heart.

Black Mountain's academic politics exploded into open conflict and mass resignations. Financial pressure, factions, and intellectual clashes between big egos had weakened the school's fabric. The list of issues was long: money, faculty hiring, course offerings, a need for leadership, and questions about whether faculty could also administer the college and resolve disputes while they were teaching. The very democracy and free expression that many had loved now ran amok. Albers, who doubted the practicality of giving young students the same voting power as senior faculty, now temporarily presided over the fracas as rector. Much of the animus focused on Black Mountain's charismatic cofounder and physics professor Ted Dreier, who'd put sixteen years and his fortune into the college. Now some questioned his ability to lead.

With pressure mounting for Dreier's ouster, loyal artists and instructors quit in protest, including both Josef and Anni Albers, Charlotte "Bimbus" Schlesinger, Johanna Jalowetz, and almost the entire

arts faculty. The resignations would be effective after the spring semester, in August 1949. Harvard architect Walter Gropius resigned from the Advisory Council, citing “the fatal blunder” of ousting Dreier, a man who had been the college’s “heart and soul.”

Ruth dashed off the news to Albert in an undated letter:

*Resignation of all definite. We must have new faculty, to continue the College. No one is indispensable, we will survive, and continue to exist as a college, working for things & ideas bigger than personal feelings & fears. [Max] Dehn returns. We have the possibility of improvement or degeneration. Spirit is set forward to build & reconstruct but not renew old ulcers. . . . Albers leaves a gap.*

Although sad about her mentor’s coming departure, Ruth took a quiet, measured approach to the transition, her maturity winning respect among her peers. Never politically ambitious, she soon got a surprise, as Albert’s friend Si Sillman wrote him at the end of January: “There was a battle & an election . . . & in the heat of the student meeting . . . Ruth was made/elected Student Moderator. A complete dark horse.”

The post of student moderator was like that of a student body president, and it brought her faculty status plus a seat on the Board of Fellows, which met in New York. Along with her credibility as an artist, Ruth’s resolve to stay neutral and float above the fray added to her stature. Despite her heavy new role, and longing for Albert, Ruth ventured out, gamely trying a new dance. But ultimately she found the party scene dreary, as she wrote him:

*. . . Our Valentine party ended gay-drunk. I was sober & bored by it. But I learned to jitterbug – the lindy; and all night I jitterbugged. Hazel was high. None of the charm of the Satie night . . .*

But it was impossible to heal the rifts and restore Black Mountain’s original magic, just when so many faculty were heading out the door.

New leadership was recruited from Swarthmore to head a reorganization, with the understanding that faculty would no longer take part in administrative policy decisions. Amid continued struggle, Ruth poured out her frustration to Albert in letters. They loved the artistic autonomy of Black Mountain, but not its factions or infighting. There was little to hold them after June—only the hope of Fuller’s return. Meanwhile, Albert was adjusting to the demands of his profession. They had a whole life to plan, their skeptical families to manage, and legal obstacles to surmount.

At the time, marriages between whites and members of other ethnic groups were rare and even illegal under many states’ anti-miscegenation laws. But Albert was determined to wed, even if it meant he and his bride-to-be would have to hitch a ride to Reno, as he believed Nevada to be the nearest state that would allow their marriage.

They weren’t alone among young couples seeking to break barriers. The previous year, in Los Angeles, a Mexican American woman, Andrea Perez, and her African American fiancé, Sylvester Davis, had paved the way for racial equality in marriage. When they originally applied for a license, L.A. County Clerk W. G. Sharp refused, citing California Civil Codes Sections 60 and 69, which declared illegal the intermarriage or issuance of licenses for a Caucasian to marry a “Negro,” or for that matter, a “mulatto,” “Mongolian,” or “Malay” (archaic statutory language used to designate people with African or Asian heritage).

Perez and Davis sued. The California State Supreme Court agreed to review their complaint. In October 1948, in the case of *Perez v. Sharp*, the court decided in their favor. Chief Justice Roger Traynor

ruled that the ban violated the equal protection of the laws clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. California's high court declared that marriage is a fundamental right that can't be denied on the basis of race, freeing couples to wed across color lines in the Golden State. The victory came nearly two decades before the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case of *Loving v. Virginia* extended that right across the nation.

So Albert and Ruth could get hitched without hitchhiking to Reno.

Still, there were two sets of parents on opposite sides of the country to convince. There would be tears in Georgia and stoic silence in California. Ruth later confided in a private memoir: "Albert's mother cried. She had hoped Albert would marry a sweet blue-eyed girl from Metter and live nearby and attend the Methodist Church on Sundays." Mr. Asawa would quietly keep his own counsel, but as Ruth wrote in the memoir, "That is how many Japanese express 'no.'"

The young couple waged some shuttle diplomacy. Albert courted the Asawas by drawing up a floor plan for their dream house. Ruth visited Albert's sister Laurie Pearson in Georgia. She chatted easily with her prospective sister-in-law, poring over Albert's baby pictures. She showed Laurie's girls how to eat with chopsticks. Posing for snapshots with Laurie in her garden, Ruth was all smiles in a demure shirtwaist dress. She began to win over Albert's sister as Laurie surmounted her fears for the young couple and become their ally for family acceptance.

With Laurie coming over to his side, Albert announced his plans to his parents in an Easter letter, voicing hope his news would give their holiday an extra reason to celebrate. He sketched a beguiling portrait of the young woman they'd never met:

*She is very beautiful, quiet, energetic, and unaffected and believes almost religiously in work. She is five-feet, two-inches tall and has very black hair. Besides her painting and design work she likes to grow things and cultivates mad little gardens at school and had rather dance than eat. Last year we worked on several projects together and we work beautifully together. She finished all the oak in the minimum house and still insists that all the stonework should be done over because one stone is wrong. Besides cooking food that would fatten anyone but me, she gives haircuts that are second to no one's. During the year, she has contributed over \$800 to the college's milk house fund since she doesn't charge for haircuts, the boys and faculty can contribute to the fund instead.*

Mrs. Lanier took Albert's letter into her bedroom and shut the door. Laurie heard weeping from within, but she wrote Albert that no "hard-ugly things" were said.

With the Laniers reeling in shock, Ruth summoned the strength and poise on May 6 to send them this introduction:

*I am Ruth Asawa, the girl whom Albert will marry. Not knowing my background nor the acquaintance of similar people, I realize that it is almost impossible to imagine your son to consider marriage with me . . . It is as much an offence against my family as you perhaps feel it is to marry out of one's race. I have talked to them about it, and though it is a sadness to them, they do not say "no," nor do they exclude me from the family for what we are about to do.*

Ruth wrote that she hoped they would reply to her, but added she would understand if they didn't want to meet her.

Soon enough, though, Albert's mother found her voice to let Ruth know just how she felt in a frank May 10 reply:

*You and Albert! How I've worried about the situation. I still believe that such a marriage is not right for you or for him. However, there is not anything I can do about it—He told us about the marriage—he didn't ask. . . .*

*You must be a very attractive, versatile and, in fact just a fine person. I don't want to say things to hurt you but it is just the differences in race, background and in general just the ways and ideas of the world that it is going to be hard to get adjusted . . .*

*I've written to Albert that if and when you're married to bring you home when he comes and we'll do our best to treat you as we would [his sisters] Laurie, Jewel Bird or Helen. . . .*

Albert broached the issue of social stigma with diplomacy:

*Daddy, "such marriages" are not common here but legal. Thanks to the advantages we have both had, and to the talents we both hope we have, our friends and associates will be rather uncommon and people who know us quite free from our nationalities.*

Denied a blessing by both sets of parents, Albert and Ruth had made their best case for simple consent. Next they began debating where to live. Reuniting at Black Mountain had one great virtue: It would let him continue to study with Fuller. On the other hand, opening a new chapter in San Francisco would let both of them launch their professional lives as an architect and artist.

Albert wrote to Ruth that he was warming to San Francisco, suggesting a tilt toward the West Coast:

*I love our city so much it will be wonderful to be here together days and nights and to have time for love—*

*Last night and today I have been in love with everything—torn billboards, brick walls, my little room and most of all you. . . .*

*Another thing you must promise—do not make your working an absolute necessity—I want you to work if you want to but if a fair job is not available immediately—wait—you are an artist and my lover—this is a full occupation.*

Although she still had no degree, Ruth was now completing her sixth year of college. She was fed up with school politics, and eager to make art and live with Albert. Their debate over where to live turned more favorably toward the West Coast:

*San Francisco will make all of us happy, including Mama, Papa . . . The idea of San Francisco excites me and with all little notes for paintings and wire, I will be content in working by myself and having love with you, and looking at your face and hands and body. I can hardly wait. . . .*

*Please don't let anything come between us. I fear that—not the marriage. I want one clean room with windows for people to see whom I love. I do not know my energy to love, it is very strong. . . .*

*. . . Oh I remember the pains of it and the frightfully beautiful love marks on the sensitive nerves. . . .*

*I dance all of the time, and love all of the movements which are possible. Albers calls me "biological" in color class. The peepers are crying, singing; I am awaking at 5:45 a.m. to catch the morning sun at the farm. Everything I do, I love; (except moderate). The way I feel about becoming that is as Truman must have felt when he won over Dewey. It will be the death of me yet, but we are having a relatively peaceful productive semester. Albert, it is soon that I shall hold you again.*

They finally agreed that they would make their home in San Francisco, but the next challenge was finding affordable housing with space for Ruth's art in the Bay Area. After joking they could live in a chicken coop in Marin County, Albert finally found their first home.

Number 135 Jackson Street was a cavernous loft above a seed company and onion warehouse overlooking San Francisco's clamorous produce district. It was big and bare, measuring 25 by 60 feet, with scant amenities but plenty of space to work and watch the city go by. Some Black Mountain friends conveniently stored a piano, a double bed, an icebox, and a record player there, giving them a few amenities. Albert wrote Ruth on May 10 that the loft was perfect for them, although no conventional honeymoon cottage or starter home with two bedrooms and a bath, known in the trade as a "junior five":

*I begin to feel the loft is home. I must warn you that it is in a very disreputable neighborhood and not at all a "junior five." All that I can promise is that it will be clean and relatively isolated and big. I love it and cannot wait to be there with you . . .*

*I only pray that I can keep you as sweet and beautiful as I find you.*

That month, Ruth's faculty friends at Black Mountain began preparing their student to be a bride, in their unconventional fashion. Anni designed and made Ruth a wedding hat, and acquired a length of black fabric, which offered a sophisticated art-school twist on the traditional wedding gown. Johanna Jalowetz and the school's Dutch dietician Pietronella Swierstra began sewing the bespoke creation. It was two-piece and floor length, sober like the bride who would wear it. Ruth confided to Albert it was "a beautiful dress, and it frightens me to see it, but in an exciting way."

Albert agreed he would make one last trip east to visit his parents in Georgia and reunite with Ruth at Black Mountain. He would also help her hang the art for her final student exhibition. Albert assured his parents it was the right move:

*What I really want to do now is work and Ruth has been there too long, had become too much the servant, too indispensable to the place and the people.*

The month of June gave the couple a chance to seek the blessing of their college mentors before embarking on their new life. Albert approached Fuller about their plan to blend art and architecture with family life. Fuller was exuberant:

*The world is your oyster. You become the pearl. You rub and you rub and make a big pearl.*

Ruth shyly sought out Josef Albers for her final conference. In the past, when she stood up to him, saying she preferred painting flowers over abstract designs, he had responded: "Fine, just make sure they are Asawa flowers."

Now, unable to meet his steely blue gaze, she lowered her eyes.

"Come in Asawa, what do you want to ask me?"

"I want to have a family but also I want to become an artist. Do you think it is possible?"

"How many children do you want?"

"Six."

Albers grabbed her chin and gave it a little shake. He inhaled, tightening his lips.

"Ya, ya, you make babies, that is your art. Be sure to make them Asawas."

When Albert went to talk to Albers, the painter told him, “Don’t ever let her stop doing her work.”

Excerpt from:

**Everything She Touched: The Life of Ruth Asawa** by Marilyn Chase, published by Chronicle Books 2020  
<https://www.chroniclebooks.com/collections/art-design/products/everything-she-touched>