

Dear Reader –

Knut Hamsun said that in old age we are like a batch of letters. ‘We are no longer in the passing, we have arrived.’ And yet it is in the arrival that we remain. What a joy to write a letter that is everywhere and nowhere at the same time – a piece of virtual intimacy. You have no need to respond. Your response arrives in the act of reading. It’s such a pity that it will not fall gently through the letterbox. How many guitars get tuned before the postman arrives? How many suicides come after the mailman? I love and have loved the art of letters, and yet I have forgotten it too. When I was younger, in Dublin, the postman was the closest thing to a metronome. The letterbox flapped and you could tell the weight of the news by the sound of it against the carpet. Years later, when I lived in Texas, I used to drive a mile and a half to the rural postbox which I opened every day to get a series of rejection slips from New York and London publishers. Those days of hope and [...]¹

Later still, when I went on a long cycling journey, I would pick up letters from ‘General Delivery’ in Amarillo, Portland, San Francisco. What a wonderful feeling it was to walk into the post office in pure anonymity, to find a letter waiting there.

Letters. When carried they are a permanent news. I miss them.

My father was a great letter writer. I have letters from him that came to me in all parts of the world, so that I truly know where home is. I carried those letters with me. And then of course there’s all those love letters too, the fantastic embarrassments of youth. Great letters, like great novels, remind us where we were. I could patch my life together with old airmail papers. The greatest letter I ever received was from my literary hero, John Berger², a letter that arrived, blue, out of the blue. He is a beautiful letter writer³. Sometimes I can hear his pen glide across the page. Jim Harrison, too. Another great letter writer. And Jennifer Johnston. I don’t stack them away in neat little piles, but sometimes I do leave them lying around my office, so that I can open them and let them surprise me. Reading an old letter in the middle of the afternoon, one can forgive himself the weight of whiskey in his hand. (No whiskey yet this evening!)

And what about the terror, the voyeurism, of looking into somebody else’s letters? My father⁴ himself has a full crate of letters that he keeps in his old writing shed in Dublin. Many old secrets. He has told me that I can read the letters at any time. I have told him that I will wait until he is gone. And he tells me that, in that box, that crate, those letters, he will never be gone.

For that reason I’m not so sure that I want to keep any of my old letters. Too many secrets and embarrassments. All those ancient longings. My own stupid vanity.

But this is a letter to you, and I don’t know who you are, or where you are. But I do know that our intimacy is real, that the art of reading is the only thing that gives credence and viability to the act of writing. Come closer, we can whisper. And we shall write again. Goodnight –

Le gach dea-ghui⁵,
Colum McCann⁶

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¹'Of course in letters we have also forgotten
the art of editing! Or at least careful editing.'
[Side-note by author].

²John often writes notes in his letters, along
the side. I always think: 'Never again will
a single story be told as if it were the only
one.' [Side-note by the author. The quotation
is from *G*, the 1972 Booker Prize-winning
novel by John Berger.]

³I still have it here in my office. [Side-note
by the author.]

⁴Colum McCann's father worked for many
years as a journalist and literary editor with
the *Irish Press*.

⁵'*With all best wishes.*'

⁶Colum McCann is an Irish writer of
novels and short stories. Originally from
Dublin, he now lives in New York, where
he teaches writing at Hunter College.
His first collection of stories, *Fishing The
Sloe-Black River*, was published in 1994; in
2011 he won the IMPAC Dublin award
for his novel, *Let The Great World Spin*.
McCann's latest novel, *TransAtlantic*, opens
with the first trans-Atlantic flight in 1919,
which carried the first bag of trans-Atlantic
airmail. One of those letters goes on to play
a key role in the novel, and indeed when we
first asked Colum McCann to contribute
to *The Letters Page* he said he would write
about this fictional letter. Perhaps he forgot,
or perhaps he changed his mind. We made
the bold editorial decision to accept what he
offered us instead, and we thank him for it.