

Dear Jon,¹

Once I took myself to the Isle of Wight with two dogs to try to write. I stayed in a caravan in the woods, my nearest neighbours about a twenty minute drive away – so there was that feeling of isolation that I felt would probably be important on retreat. This was mid August, but a wet August, and after the first evening, a windy August, and then a gale-y August with hailstones. Which all sounds fine, if you're in a caravan with a heater and a bottle of whisky and two noble dogs at your feet. But the caravan had no heater, or any electricity or running water, so after around 6pm when the sun was blotted out by black clouds I could either sit in the car or go to bed.

The caravan also lacked a table; in fact, inside it was only a bed. The idea was you spent your days outdoors and only used it to sleep in. I was able to attach a torch to a cupboard by its wrist loop, but when the wind got up and the caravan rocked in the weather, the torch would swing about like we were on a boat, unnerving for the dogs and not fantastic for me either.

The dogs required two walks a day – not just potters through the woods, but a total change of scenery – a hike on the downs or a sizeable length of coast. If they didn't, or thought they might not, get these two walks, one of them would stand on me and breathe mackerel breath in my face, while the other would get the worries, like the world was ending and we all needed a place to hide. At night they insisted on sleeping in bed with me – too terrified by whatever it was that was outside and moving through the undergrowth to sleep on their own. Turned out a tree had fallen in the woods and taken down the fence that kept the sheep in the neighbouring field out, and they'd become tangled in blackberries, dragging themselves around and making terrible sounds. I spent most nights awake feeling the caravan move and hearing those sounds.

There was a day I decided I had to have a wash, and I warmed a kettle over a fire, while I held an umbrella over it, then stripped off in the woods in the middle of a rainstorm. I cooked on the same fire some nights, usually kidney beans and tomatoes. I tried to stop dinner from being crisps in bed, and won that fight maybe three times. All in all I'm not sure I wrote more than a paragraph on my retreat, too concerned with trying to do the things that needed to be done in order to get through the day. On one walk along the beach, a shoal of poisonous Portuguese Man-of-War jellyfish² had washed up and the dogs kept trying to eat them. On another trip to the downs I collected sloes in a hailstorm so that at least I could say that on my retreat I'd made sloe gin. Four days afterwards, at 6am, when the gale became too strong to be so close to so many large trees, I dropped this bag of sloes in a bin at the ferry terminal.³

Hope that helps. I had no idea my handwriting had become this chronic.

With love,
Evie⁴

x

once I took myself to the Isle of Wight with two dogs to try to write. I stayed in a caravan in the woods, my nearest neighbours about a 20 min drive away - so there was that feeling of isolation that I felt would probably be important on retreat. This was mid August, but a wet August, and after the first evening, a windy August, and then a gale-y August with hailstones. Which all sounds fine, if you're in a nice little caravan with a heater and a bottle of whisky and two noble dogs at your feet. But the caravan had no heater or any electricity (or running water, so after around 6pm when the sun was blotted out by black clouds I could either sit in the car or go to bed - the caravan also lacked a table, in fact, inside it was only a bed. The idea was you spent your days outdoors and only used it to sleep in. I was able to attach a torch to a cupboard by its wrist loop, but when the wind got up and the caravan rocked in the weather, the torch would swing about like we were on a boat, unnering for the dogs and not fantastic for me either.

The dogs required 2 walks a day - not just potter through the woods, but a total change of scenery - a hike on the downs or a sizable length of coast. If they didn't or thought they might not, get these two walks, one of them would stand on me and breathe rattle (breath) in my face, while the other would get the worries, like the world was ending and we all needed a place to hide. At night they insisted on sleeping in bed with me - too terrified by whatever it was that was outside and moving through the undergrowth - to sleep on their own. Turned out a tree had fallen in the woods and taken down the fence that kept the sheep in the neighbouring field out, and they'd become tangled in blackberries, dragging themselves around and making terrible sounds. I spent most nights awake feeling the caravan move and hearing those sounds.

There was a day I decided I had to have a wash, and I warmed a kettle over.

¹ As this is the second letter in this issue to be addressed to 'Jon', we feel we should remind contributors and potential contributors that we prefer letters, when not addressed to a fictional recipient, to be addressed to the general reader, or a particular reader, or even to *The Letters Page* as a corporate entity. But not Jon. That guy gets enough post as it is.

² Also known as a Portuguese man o' war, or Portuguese Man-of-war, and renowned for the severity of its sting, the *physalia physalis* is not a true jellyfish at all, but rather a siphonophore: a colony of specialised individual organisms which are so connected and interdependent as to be unable to conceive of life as truly independent beings. Much like the rest of us, then.

³ We really don't mean to judge, but this doesn't sound like the most productive or enjoyable of writing retreats. We happen to know that a member of our editorial board, Éireann Lørsung, has established a writing retreat near Ghent which is very likely to be comfortable, hospitable, and geared towards offering the space and calm in which to write well and clearly for a period of time. Details at <http://dickinsonhouse.be/possibility/>. Other writing retreat venues are available.

⁴ Evie Wyld was born in London and grew up in Australia and South London. Her first novel, *After the Fire, a Still Small Voice*, won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and a Betty Trask Award and was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for New Writers, the Commonwealth Prize and the International IMPAC Dublin literary award. Her second novel, *All the Birds, Singing*, won the Miles Franklin Award, the Encore Award and the Jerwood Fiction Uncovered Prize. In 2013 she was included on Granta Magazine's once a decade Best of Young British Novelists list. All the best minds of our generation were, it seems. But no-one's bitter about it. Evie Wyld divides her time between Peckham and the Isle of Wight.