

Dear Reader,

This morning I've had the windows cracked a bit, as it's the first day the temperature has reached 9 degrees C, and that felt quite balmy to me. Two floors up a pianist is practising – I usually only hear it in summer, but there it was again, in February, with the windows open. There is something magic to me in hearing music – good music! live music! – unexpected! And by this I don't mean the house party music our neighbours sometimes play till 3 or 4am and that we can feel vibrating through the thick brick walls between us, but the precision and dedication of a lone instrument perhaps – in the middle of the day. I do think this middle of the day is the key – generally we expect to hear music & such at night, at parties and so on – but being a person who grew up in the country and who did not have the opportunity to learn an instrument (read: interest or inclination), I find it terribly inspiring when I hear Debussy floating out some flat's window, especially if it's someone playing for practice.

I will say however, that I did on many occasions have the chance to hear my grandfather and his wife sitting around playing banjo and guitar respectively (in their living room near the stove) – playing a few Hank Williams songs and harmonizing with their voices as they sang. My favourite though was a song they played called Mandolin Man – originally sung by the Kendalls, no doubt a family who sang together as well. The lyrics loosely are – “Mandolin Man, the dance floor is empty. Won't your honkytonk band play the last song for me? Take me away – my soul's feelin' empty. My heart's in your hand, Mandolin Man.” These mini-concerts were impromptu & usually occurred at holidays when the family gathered – if at all.

I have mixed feelings about this memory though; as a kid, I was so embarrassed by this playing & the effusiveness of their voices and harmony – Somehow it was so moving to me inside, but I didn't know what to do with that feeling of immensity, being pressed down by the music, so I felt ashamed and wanted to go run around outside alone. Now, in my memory, I think how amazing it was to see the skill of people who know how to play and sing and offer it out so freely to others. I miss those times. When my grandfather passed away, his wife made copies of an old tape of the two of them singing and playing – badly mixed, with the songs coming in over each other & cutting out jarringly, but it's clear and does the trick of memory a service.

I also here must offer apologies for going on so much without having engaged you at all. I had a friend who wrote letters to me in my 20s and would go on & on and never ask a single question, so I never knew if he was even interested in what I might say. So, please, dear reader – how is it with you? Are you well? Do write when you can<sup>1</sup>.

Sincerely, Laressa.<sup>2,3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> You can, if you so wish, write to Laressa Dickey c/o *The Letters Page*, School of English, University of Nottingham, NG7 2RD. You can probably also write to this issue's other contributors, although we haven't asked them and so offer no promises as to how or whether they might respond. Still, a letter is not a system of debt, so you wouldn't write with any expectation of a response in any case, right?

<sup>2</sup> Laressa Dickey has lived in Tennessee, California, and Minneapolis, spent some time in Portugal, and is now resident in Berlin. When she left home to attend university in Memphis and, later, after moving to California, she wrote letters back and forth with one of the most reliable pen pals she's ever had, Katherine Rosson, the neighbor of her grandmother who was a good 70 years older than Laressa but young and spry and still squatting in her garden in her 90s. She taught Laressa a lot about letter writing: a bit of news, a bit of memory, some current thoughts and scenes mixed in, followed by a warm goodbye. Laressa has lived over 10 years now without her letters. Laressa Dickey's poems have been published by, among many others, MIEL press; her debut collection, *Bottomland*, will be published by Shearsman Books in the UK in Spring 2014.

<sup>3</sup> This letter was sent to us on a sheet of paper with a printed poem on the reverse. Although unattributed, and not necessarily intended to correspond to the letter, we couldn't help noticing that the last few lines seemed significant:

*Crumbs on / yesterday's plate. A lover floating in the window. Outside, the / postman on the way to deliver a letter.*

We asked Laressa whether we could include the poem here in full, as an early phase in what we hope will become a detailed exploration of the possibilities of paratext; sadly, for us, the poem is due for publication shortly in *Blood Orange Review* and so is effectively embargoed until then. We would encourage you to seek it out.