

Dear Clare,¹

I know it's an unusual thing, because we haven't at all met and are unlikely to, but I am compelled to tell you how moving your picture of the boy on the tram was.

How familiar.

I too have experienced something extraordinary and unforgettable in the face of a child.

The girl in my past was small, no older than 3 or 4 years old. She had run ahead of her mother and she was holding a helium balloon and singing that old Disney song. You know the one: *It's a small world after all ... it's a small world after all ... It's a small, small world.* This tiny stranger, bouncing and singing and holding her balloon like there was nothing at all that I or anyone else should ever be unhappy about. She was beautiful. Free. But she was also pale and a little underweight for her height. Her hair, quite oddly, was cropped short. Like you all I could do was stare.

This was a long time ago. Before I had children of my own. And although I never forgot her, I first thought of her – really thought of her – when my own daughter was also four and we were at school watching another group of children perform *In the Jungle* with their cardboard lion hats and felt paws. She was on my hip, my daughter, a little too clingy, and I had this feeling – I don't know what it was – this feeling I guess that her zest was different. We left not long after, her singing in the car on the way to the shops – *a wumbawumba wumbawumba* – and me reassuring myself that everything was okay. At the supermarket a man blew up a balloon and popped it on a stick for her. It was promotional, one of those yellow and black 'Buy West Australian' advertisements, but she held it high nonetheless, skipping through the aisles and to the checkout where she rubbed it back and forth on the ground and cried when the friction caused it to burst. That was when I thought of the girl. The one from my past. How pale she was. How pale my daughter now seemed. And also how innocent, how nice to have that part of childhood – a part we all once knew – when the best thing in life was a balloon, and the worst was as simple and easy to replace as a broken trinket.

If only.

That same evening I learned my daughter had leukaemia.

Soon after her pigtails and her plump lips disappeared. She was elfin. Hairless but for a few odd strands. Her frame was not unlike the one you described. Little stick arms. Fragile legs. Large over-sized eyes. No eyebrows. No eyelashes. A paleness so ethereal she seemed from outer-space. Chemotherapy ravaged her. It made her small for her age. Thin. She too used to grab at me like the baby monkey you wrote of, and I would pick her up and hold her and carry her places. And it was easy. Because she was so light.

Back then I found strange comfort in Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*.³ It was, in amongst all the shock and fear, the only book I could concentrate on. I read it again and again. Especially the part when Lauren, racked with grief, suddenly finds a 'smallish' and 'fine-bodied' man-child in her home. I recognised my daughter in this being. Things like his 'unfinished look' and

the 'thinness of physical address'. That's what it was like. I would look at my child and ... I don't know how to explain it ... I would look at her and it was as if she ... I don't know. She was different. I was trying to find her, trying to remember her. And yet at the same time, there she was.

People stared. Like you on the tram I suppose. Like me all those years ago.

I spent all last night dreaming about what it was I wanted to say. All night churning over those last few sentences, and when I woke this morning, the words had come. I would look at my child and it was as if she had been stripped to her essence.

That boy on the tram?⁴ I both know him and do not know him. He is my daughter in the days and weeks following the most gruelling part of her treatment. He is her at the beginning of the healing process. But he is also a product of my own desire, a representation which you have written and I have interpreted. I hold your letter and add the image that moves my own experience. But the real him – a him I can never know – hides behind a wall of language, inaccessible but for that brief, strange moment you wrote about. A moment. Out of context. Changed. It strikes me, the ease with which I can now make him up. Don't I see him ill and on the verge of recovery because that's exactly what I need to see?

If I could go back in time to that helium-filled song of my past, I would look for a scar, a 2-3cm stripe across the base of the girl's neck. That's how I would know. A lifelong incision. But I'm tired, and it's too complicated to explain right now.

The weather is still cool here. October and yet more winter than spring. I lit the fire today, and I'm sitting beside it now to finish this letter. My daughter and son are splashing in the bath. Her fleshy padding has surely returned. As has her colour. They're squealing, the two of them, overcompensating I think, for all the days spent in a hospital bed.

I too just wanted you to know.

Love,
Maria⁵

¹This letter is written in response to Clare Wigfall's letter in our first issue, a full recap of which you can find in the footnotes to Tod Wodicka's letter earlier in this issue.

²The Disney song *It's a Small World* was written for a World's Fair exhibit in New York, 1964. The Fair's official guidebook describes the exhibit as 'A salute to the children of the world'. The exhibit was so successful that it was recreated in the original Disneyland theme park in 1966. Walt Disney died the same year, from cancer.

³A slim novel of 128 pages and two and a half characters, *The Body Artist* is considered by at least one of our editors to be DeLillo's finest work, and a remarkable way to follow up the crushing success of *Underworld*.

⁴That boy on the tram, one late 20th century day in the centre of Europe, has now been responsible for three of the letters we've published. We wouldn't be all that surprised to receive a letter from the boy himself for our next issue.

The juxtaposition of Maria's letter with Tod Wodicka's generated some discussion in the editorial office: Did the emotional weight of the one conflict with the exuberant tone of the other? Should that even matter? Reader, we had a long discussion about the text and the context. Roland Barthes would have been proud of us. We spoke to both Maria and Tod, and to Clare, although sadly not to the boy on the tram. In the end, we decided that we loved both letters, and the wild divergence between them, and so we happily offer them both to you here.

⁵Maria Papas is an Australian writer who is currently studying a PhD in English at the University of Western Australia. Her research topic (which involves writing a novel and an exegesis) loosely explores the interaction between strangers in fiction. You can contact her on Twitter @MariaPapas5.

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