

Dear God,¹

(A hopeless way to start a letter if ever I heard one, but I am told that out in the Promised Land this is how they do it. That they go to the Western Wall and chant and wail and then leave their prayer notes in the cracks between the bricks. Little letters to their penpal on high.)

'Dear God, let my mother live another year...'

'Dear God, let the baby be a boy...'

'Dear God, let me remember how to love. Or if not, even just how to pretend...'

So they write their pleas upon a piece of paper, fold it tight (watertight, tear-tight), and then find a gap to shove it in, dislodging a crumble of dust which makes a puff upon the air like a magic. A mystery of dirt and desperation. And then they walk away, still facing forwards, never turning their backs on the Wall because it is the Wall who will bring their words to God. Mumbling and shucking is all well and good but this here is a postal service built by Herod himself – lucky them – First Class airmail to the Temple Mount and beyond! (I wonder if it works the same from over here?)

And I always wonder too about the pigeons. Because, God, I picture them perched, watching, their heads bobbing like the men and women below (though of course the sexes are separated by another wall – you know better than anyone, God, there is always room in the Holy Land for more barriers), their black-grey plumage charred in the midday sun. Their beaks sweet with the tang of honey and milk.

But when the day is over and the faithful have all gone then, surely, the pigeons swoop. And they peck. Excavating the cracks like they would for worms only here there are dreams instead. Even juicier. Even more satisfying.

'Dear God, let me find someone who prefers me to my brother...'

'Dear God, I am sorry I said I would not fight another war...'

'Dear God, He asked me to write a letter to our unborn child but all I could manage was *What if I don't know you?*'

And each one the pigeons peck they steal away to their nest. Slot it in with the straw and shell and shit and make a home but of other people's words. Lay their eggs among the needy.

'Dear God...'

'Your faithful servant...'

'Your humble penpal...')

(Dear God, and did you ever hear the one about the man and the woman who are separated, so they decide to court via pigeon-mail until eventually the woman falls in love with the pigeon instead?)

(Dear God, I am rambling now. And I haven't even asked what I wanted to ask, or said what I wanted to say. But there is always tomorrow. Tomorrow in my letter and then next year in Jerusalem – isn't that what this religion is all about? Isn't that what I'm supposed to believe? Only, the darkness here is even colder than usual tonight. Like ice. So I only pray you don't forget about your penpal, hiding in the cracks.)²

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¹ This letter arrived at our editorial office as a tightly folded square, an effect we have sought in vain to reproduce for you here. You can achieve the same effect by printing out this page, if you haven't already done so, and folding it in half six times. (We don't recommend folding the screen of your electronic reading device any times.)

² Ruth Gilligan's first novel, *Forget*, was published in 2006 and reached the top of the Irish Bestsellers List while she was still at school. Since then she has published two more novels, while studying at Cambridge, Yale, and the University of East Anglia. She is working on a novel about the history of Irish Jews, the research for which has informed this letter.