

So!<sup>1</sup>

Do you believe she BURNT all those letters? From Bahrain, Belgium, China, England, France, Indonesia, Italy, Libya, Scotland... we lost count, she & I, there were so many. From the U.S., Hawaii & Massachusetts. The worst part? All those gorgeous, irreplaceable stamps. Irreplaceable, extinct currency (unless the E.U. collapses & nations rewind). Most of these letters were hand written, except from the foreign correspondents (news, I mean). He (who shall remain nameless) typed his on a manual, and what wouldn't you give to have one of those artifacts now that he's moderately famous?

You shouldn't be allowed to burn letters. From anyone.

Space, she said. Tired of lugging boxes from home to home around the world. Bad enough lugging those papers and books. It worried me, because what if she starts burning books as well now that she reads, almost exclusively, E-Books? Don't you miss the feel of paper, I asked, you who used to revel in textures and weight and shades for printing, to which she responded (as she exasperatingly does) with her 'See-no-evil' monkey face.

It's NOT about space. Her art collection takes up way more. She wanted to forget them all, the letter writers, I mean, forget the years when (as I once teased) there was a lover in every port. The time I said it she was mad (although she hid it well, pretending to laugh it off). She has no secrets from me. All work and no play makes Jill, she began . . . Stop, I said. You know your real 'work' is all about love.

Isn't a letter from a lover, even a distant one, a kind of love?

When I reminded her recently of this incendiary act, all she said – 'I was young' – and then asked for a recipe for fish maw<sup>2</sup>. Fish maw! As if she gives a stuff. You have to soak the dried maw (nature's plastic) for hours to turn the papery, membranous form to gel & then boil for hours.

These are the missives she now receives by email!

Xu Xi<sup>3,4</sup>

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When I reminded her recently of this incendiary act, all she said - "I was young" - and then asked for a recipe for fish maw. Fish maw! As if she gives a stuff. You have

<sup>1</sup>When pressed, Xu Xi described this letter as 'creative non-fiction, the genre that defies definition.' We're happy to live with such ambiguity; an ambiguity which will resurface later in the issue.

<sup>2</sup>A recipe for Fish Maw soup (with chicken, pork and ham), direct from Xu Xi's correspondent:

Buy the whole chicken, get the thigh, drumsticks and wings removed for steamed consumption and use only the body for soup. Then you get two chicken dishes. Or if you like chicken feet, that's good too. Soak fish maw overnight in sealed container in fridge (it will soften and enlarge slightly). Next day, rinse fish maw with cold water; if preferred cut into bite sized pieces. Blanch all meat ingredients in boiling water for 1 minute to remove blood. Rinse in cold water. Put all meat ingredients in clean pot. Add water and boil for one hour. After one hour, put in fish maw and boil another one hour. Add salt before consumption. Leftover soup gelatinizes in fridge. You can scoop out single servings and heat up in microwave.

<sup>3</sup>Xu Xi was born and raised in Hong Kong, and has also lived in New York City (variously, Brooklyn & Manhattan), Singapore, Morrisonville (New York), Greece (mostly on the island of Hydra but also for a time on Kea and briefly in and out of Athens), Paris (France), Surrey (UK), Bergen (Norway), Orlando (Florida), Aspen (Colorado), Cincinnati (Ohio), Iowa City (Iowa), Amherst (Massachusetts). She has published nine books of stories and essays, the most recent being *Habit of a Foreign Sky*, and currently works as a writer in residence at the City University of Hong Kong. She includes, among an extensive list of previous occupations, currency trading and casino gambling. We wonder if there is any real distinction. She may one day move to Oregon.

<sup>4</sup>Some further notes on Xu Xi's letter-writing history, by the author, in the form of a list of correspondents:

'Dad, when he disappeared to the mines of Indonesia or to Japan in my childhood; penpal in New Zealand from about age 12 or 13 to 21 or so (we finally met when I tracked her down many years later - her last name was unusual and she proved easy to find in a country of fewer inhabitants than the city of Hong Kong); several writers with whom I maintained a long correspondence (letters, not emails); parents & extended family when I was in college and three siblings over the years until international long distance got cheap and email happened; for a certain era of my misspent youth, letters to a number of lovers in various ports of call around the world; my present partner, with whom I hooked up when I was in Hong Kong and he in New York for the first year of our relationship after which we lived together (in NYC) and then I got restless and in my typical itinerant fashion, disappeared around the world but returned, like a homing pigeon, with regularity to our apartment in NYC and then in 2010 moved to Hong Kong because Mum's Alzheimer's needed my less itinerant presence and here we are, arrived in the present moment. (Mum is now 93, healthy but with a mind somewhere in that final frontier of space and memory.)'