The Letters Page: a literary journal in letters

Issue 5: Protest

Spring 2015

Jon McGregor
Nottingham

Dear Reader,

How is it where you are? Here, the days are grey and slow and the skies are lowering. But we have turned winter's corner and our hearts are beginning to stir. Soon there will be green shoots knuckling from the soil and the young people will shyly pursue one another with fistfuls of flowers held behind their backs. (At least, this is how we understand it to be done. Times may have changed.)

Our correspondents have surprised us again. When we asked for letters of or about or in protest, we expected a tide of rage to break over us. We expected red ink and bricks through the windows. We expected blood. Instead, the letters we have for you here are thoughtful and enquiring and often puzzled by the state of the world. Our correspondents have written to us about the many ways in which it is possible to say no; about the experience of being around other people who are saying no; about the sense of being on the other end of that rejection. We're very pleased with the way their letters have transcended what could have been a narrow theme, and we hope you enjoy reading them.

For our next issue, we're not announcing a theme in advance. We would like your submissions to be driven by whatever your writing is doing right now. We are primarily a literary magazine, and the letter is only intended as a framing device. We are interested in thinking about correspondence in the widest sense. Some of these thoughts are still in development; some of our developments will be guided by your submissions. Full details can be found on the back page. We'd love to hear from you.

By the way, if you have printed this issue, or indeed received it in the post from a kind friend, you will perhaps now be marvelling at how elegantly it sits in the hand, or how easy it is to read on a crowded bus without intruding upon your fellow commuters. If so, we are glad. We do not pretend to be fully qualified graphic designers here at the offices of *The Letters Page*, but we do like to provide you with a comfortable reading experience. Of course, if you are reading this on a screen device, then we would like to think your reading experience is equally comfortable. Do let us know.

Yours,
The Editor.

Rosa Campbell
London

To the boy who thinks I know everything:

Before I moved to London I didn't know what a union banner looked like, or Trafalgar Square. Not in real life. But here I am waiting in the cold for the banner to arrive. You're here too, smoking a roll up.

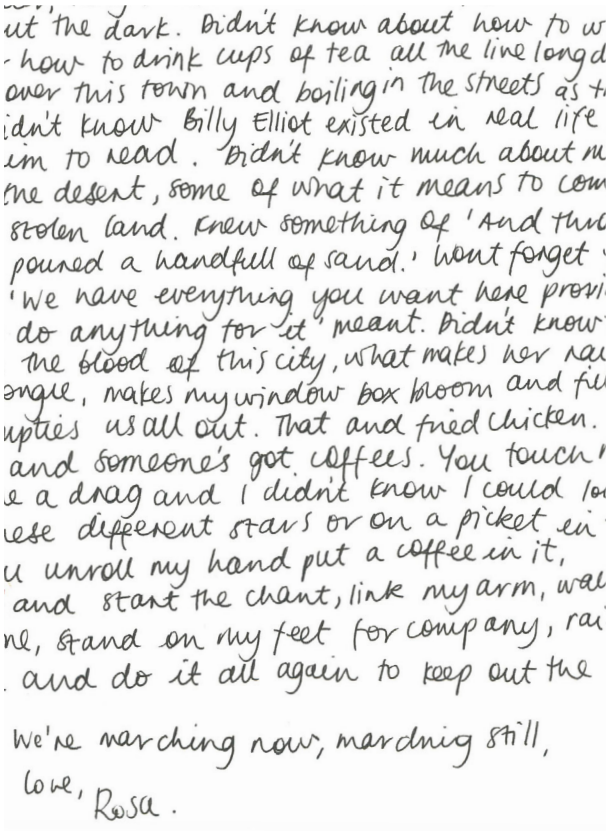
'Thought you quit?'

'Did.'

So together we wait for a demo on a Saturday that probably won't come to much. I know you know the feeling as placards pass us: 'Britain Needs a Pay Rise' and '£10 an hour', and I think are these the best dreams we could muster? Before I moved to London I didn't know about Windrush, Groundnut Stew or the way the sky at twilight turns Oyster card blue.[1] I didn't know how to stick a key in a meter to turn the lights on, that if you don't have ten shiny pounds weighing your pocket down and a nearby Tesco then you get out the candles. When the candles run out you chat louder, laugh wilder and wider to stop your teeth chattering, to keep out the dark. Didn't know about how to write a novel, or Occupy or how to drink cups of tea all the live long day. Kettles whistling all over this town and boiling in the streets as they keep us at bay. Didn't know Billy Elliot existed in real life but he does; I taught him to read. Didn't know much about much except the red of the desert, some of what it means to come from a broad flat stolen land. Knew something of 'And through Vincent's fingers he poured a handful of sand'.[2] Won't forget that. Didn't know what 'we have everything you want here provided you're prepared to do anything for it' meant. Didn't know that's what sings through the blood of this city, what makes her rain water sting on my tongue, makes my window box bloom and fills us all up and empties us all out. That and fried chicken. Banner's here now and someone's got coffees. You touch my hand and give me a drag and I didn't know I could love anyone against these different stars or on a picket in the cold but then you unroll my hand put a coffee in it, uncurl the banner and start the chant, link my arm, walk with me, be with me, stand on my feet for company, raise your fist with me and do it all again to keep out the austerity chill.

We're marching now, marching still,

Love,
Rosa.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We're marching now, marching still,
love, Rosa.

1. The two blues used on the Transport for London Oyster card are Pantone 072U and Cyan U.

2. This quotation is from the song *From Little Things Big Things Grow*, by Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly (1991). The song tells the story of the pivotal eight-year-long strike of the Gurindji people against the British Vestey mining company for the right to their land. Vincent is Vincent Lingiari, a Gurindji man and strike leader. The Gurindji won but the struggle for Aboriginal land rights, recognition, justice and sovereignty continues across Australia today.

Originally from Sydney, Australia, Rosa Campbell is a London based writer, artist, activist and teacher. She's just finished her first novel. She writes for theatre and page and builds art work collaboratively.

Naomi Alderman
London

On a plane from Israel to London, 19 Nov 2014

You know what Orthodox Jews are good at? We're good at saying 'no'. At refusing. I say 'we'. I say it like you might say 'we' about people from your home town, even though you haven't lived there for 20 years. I'm not an Orthodox Jew anymore, but I'm good at refusing even my refusal of the ways of my ancestors. (See? Refusal is getting complicated already.)

What Orthodox Jews do is: we say 'no' to the world. The world says 'hey, here's a bunch of interesting foods, and marvellous people and fascinating journeys, and you might like to eat, or fuck, or take them'. And we say: no. No, ta. None today, thank you.[1]

We find a value in this refusal. It's curious. It's still in me, still one of my default styles of being. It's not so much that we say 'ugh no', or 'your ways are hateful to us and we repudiate them', although it's easy enough to interpret no like that. It's more that we know that non-experience is a form of experience. That maybe it's interesting never to have had some rather common experiences.

(We recognise this, somehow, when we talk about art. (Here I'm using 'we' to mean 'you and I, secular people'. I know it's confusing.) We're interested in the art made by shut-ins as much as that made by experience-hounds. We want to listen to the music made by someone who's never heard Katy Perry or The Beatles.[2] We know that ignorance is a kind of knowledge.)

In fact, although I have now ceased to refuse television on Saturdays, or the flesh of the pig, I think they're right, there's something to it. ('They'? 'We'? Can I refuse to care?)

Guy Debord wrote about *The Society of the Spectacle* – a late capitalist homogenisation of humanity in which we're all just a lumpen mass of undifferentiated 'audience'. Capitalism strips us of our individuality, so that it can more easily sell it back to us in the form of products with which we construct identities. We might all be dutifully working our way through those *1,000 Things To Do Before You Die*, but at least we can express our uniqueness by the precise combination of brands and services we enjoy.

Looked at like this, there's something almost heroic about refusal. Something really affirming of human potential. I'll give you an example: sex. We're all having sex now. ('We' the secular, of course.) In loads of positions, with all the different genders. Or at least before marriage, without marriage. Just because it's natural and nice and normal. (It. Is. And it is. And yes, it is).

Listen, though. I know people who didn't have sex till they were married. I really do. My friend who runs an organisation for Orthodox Jewish women who are unmarried, late 30s or early 40s and decide to have a baby alone – she knows women who've had to have their hymens broken before they give birth. Really. We really mean it about the not-having-sex-before-marriage thing. We're honestly serious about the possibility of refusal. The human ability to just not. The calm and consistent power of saying: 'yeah, there's nothing wrong with what you're doing, but I politely but firmly decline. Thanks'.

I think it's one of the things I value most about myself, you know. Not celibacy – I'm not. But the knowledge, right through me, written in the sinew and the fat, the muscle and the bone, that I know now to say 'no'. To not do what everyone seems to think is inevitable and unavoidable.

You have to practice this, I think, in small ways, to keep your hand in. No, I won't celebrate Christmas. No, I'm not drinking the wine. No, I don't wear high heels. It's helpful. It means you're in practice when it comes to: no, I don't agree. No, I think this is wrong. No, I won't stand by while you take them.

I mean, I don't have to spell it out, right? Why this is important for Jews. We all know.

It can get a bit addictive of course, refusing. From *Bartleby the Scrivener*[3] to anorexia nervosa, one can take refusal too far. But you can also not take it far enough. Because I think you have to be sure you'll be OK if you do it. So it's worth picking something just to practice.

It's all right. Probably the situation will never arise in which your capacity to refuse will be tested. But just in case. Might as well give a go to saying no.

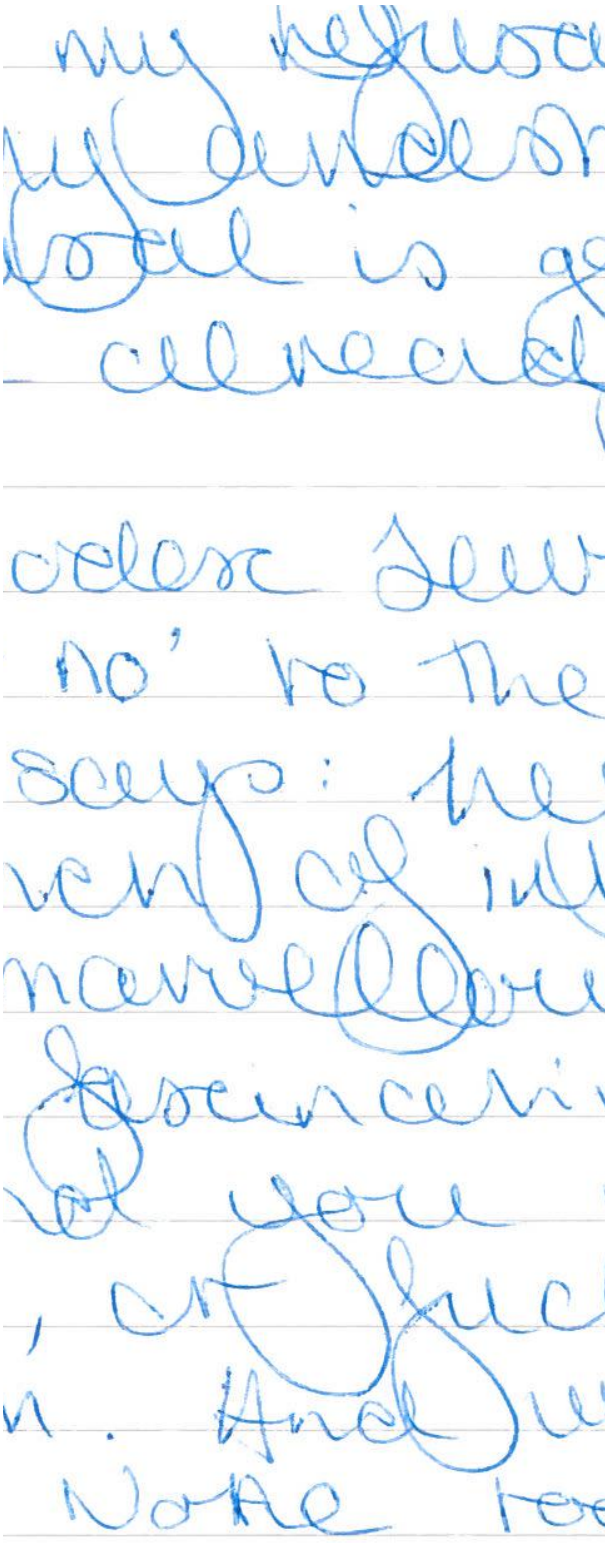
xx
Naomi

[1.] A short sample of things proscribed by Orthodox Judaism, provided by the writer: using anything electrical on the Sabbath (sunset Friday to sunset Saturday); eating milk and meat together, or milk three hours after meat; wearing clothing that's a mixture of linen and wool; spreading gossip of any sort, even nice things about people; putting books which contain God's name on the floor; saying God's name in Hebrew out loud, ever; travel between sunset Friday and sunset Saturday, except on foot; singing in front of men, if you're a woman; masturbating, if you're a man (and maybe if you're a woman – the sources are contradictory on this point); sex before marriage (but sex after marriage is enthusiastically encouraged); eating food which has been cooked in utensils ever used for non-kosher food, or is served on plates that have ever been used for non-kosher food; eating shellfish, pig, eel, monkfish, rabbit, animal gelatine, cochineal.

[2.] Katy Perry is a popular singer of the early 21st century, familiar to the older members of the editorial staff for her debut single, 'I Kissed A Girl' (2008). The Beatles were a popular skiffle band of the mid-20th century, known for the long-playing records *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, *Revolver*, and *The White Album*.

[3.] *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall Street* is a short story by Herman Melville, in which the eponymous scrivener declines requests to perform his duties with the apparently reasonable but unrelenting phrase: 'I would prefer not to'.

Naomi Alderman is a novelist, broadcaster and games designer. She's won numerous awards for her literary fiction, which includes *Disobedience* and *The Liars' Gospel*. She broadcasts regularly on BBC Radio 3 and Radio 4, and has a regular monthly column in *The Observer*. She is the co-creator of the hit smartphone audio fitness game *Zombies, Run!* In 2012 she was selected by Granta as one of their once-a-decade list of Best of Young British Novelists, and in 2013 she was picked for the Rolex Arts Initiative as the mentee of Margaret Atwood.



Kim Sherwood
Budapest

To everyone at home –

Just arrived back to the CEU,[1] the sun a red blaze over Buda tearing up the sky. I've had what is known around the 4077[2] as a full rich day, although in what I could not tell you. Spent the morning at the Holocaust Documentation Centre. Thick black rooms, the sound of marching boots at my back rounding me up in numbers, from 19C Jews proud to be 'Hungarians of the Mosaic Persuasion' to the first anti-Semitic laws of 1920, and on, 1938 Act XV, 1939 Act IV, forced labour service, 1944 German invasion, May 15 deportations, Oct 15 Arrow Cross coup.[3] Over half a million people dead by 1945. I could not read about the rescue attempts made by Gentiles for Jewish friends and strangers. I was full. I sat in the courtyard next to the memorial wall with M's uncle's name on it and cried.[4]

Then to Belváros to meet J.[5] Told him about my novel, my research here. After tea (solution to everything, apart from colonialism, obviously) J took me to see the protest in Freedom Square. The Orbán administration has been trying to erect a statue depicting Hungary as the Archangel Gabriel under Jewish and German civil groups, all protesting this representation of Hungary as straightforward victim, rather than long-standing perpetrator and ally. Survivors have been handcuffed and carried away, police film any who walk by – J says he has been documented going to and from work. How to walk like an innocent abroad?

The monument – now chipped pillars draped in tarpaulin – is faced with another kind of monument, protest offerings: candles, flowers, shoes representing people shot into the Danube, photographs of victims, of Hitler and Horthy[6] shaking hands. There were no protesters tonight, only an empty police car and a few stragglers. J and I joined the crowd seated on burnt grass in the middle of the square, all shouting about something else. Columbia is beating Greece in the World Cup. Behind the giant screen, protective barriers around the Soviet memorial have been removed for the first time in decades – presumably to detract attention, though the football is managing just fine.

I wanted a demonstration.[7] I wanted a circuitry of fury into which I could solder my confusion, my

ambivalence towards this place that almost cut off my family line, and saved it, this place now re-writing its past whilst writing itself out of democracy. This is the first place I've felt unable to speak my ancestry or political beliefs. I want to show I'm not scared. But all I have is my novel. The old Jews I meet say they are frightened, more frightened than they have been in years. They say Central Europe was a myth, a gem polished by the West, and now the shine is off. No one cares what happens in the East. What can I do? Write write write, as if it will make a difference. (And if you don't think that last comma was deliberately ambiguous, you're out of your mind.)

Please send encouragement and gluten-free biscuits.

- K

1. CEU refers to the Central European University's student accommodation in Budapest's tenth district, available to rent during the summer.
2. 4077 refers to the TV show *M.A.S.H.* (4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital). 'A Full Rich Day' is an episode narrated through the character Hawkeye's letter home.
3. The Arrow Cross was the Hungarian fascist party.
4. 'M' refers to the writer's grandmother.
5. 'J' refers to the boyfriend of a friend of a friend of the writer, who happened to be working in Budapest while the writer was there.
6. Horthy is Admiral Horthy, leader of Hungary for much of the war.
7. In more recent months, significant anti-government protests have spread across Hungary.

Kim Sherwood is writing her first novel, exploring third-generation descendants of the Holocaust. She spent the summer carrying out research in Hungary. Kim is in the final year of her critical and creative writing PhD at the University of East Anglia, for which she was awarded a studentship. She teaches literature and creative writing. In 2014, Kim was shortlisted for the Words and Women Prize, longlisted for the *Mslexia* short story prize, and nominated for the 2015 Pushcart Prize. Her work can be found in *Going Down Swinging, Mslexia* and *Elbow Room*. Born in London, Kim now lives in Norwich, a Fine City.

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Andrey Kurkov
Kiev

Dear Christopher,[1]

So the first anniversary of our last 'Maidan'[2] has passed and slipped into history. We marked the occasion, remembered the heroes and carried on. Nearly two months after the parliamentary elections, parliament has finally started to function and we have a new Government. Winter has arrived and Ukraine's future depends to some extent on this season's weather and to some extent on Putin's mood.

Superficially, life in Kiev seems little different from how it was 'before the Maidan'. However, there have been changes and they are not of the most positive kind. I see that 'For Sale' signs have appeared on the balconies of several neighbouring apartments and, while Kiev has seen an influx of rich business people from the Donbass region,[3] there is a steady flow of young, middle-class families leaving and heading abroad. My youngest son Anton faces a sadder time at school now having just said goodbye to his best friend, Daniel, whose parents are taking him to live in Canada.

In the centre of town, a number of restaurants and cafes have closed down. There's less money in Kiev now and many more poor folk, including thousands of families who, having fled the fighting in the East of country, are living in barrack conditions. A less welcome type of refugee from the Donbass are the criminals. They have fled for two reasons: there is nothing left to steal. That is to say, only the new 'authorities' have the right to expropriate and 'nationalize' whatever they like. The second reason is connected with the first; the separatists shoot anyone they catch carrying out a crime of a more traditional nature. The separatists' battle with the local criminal classes began back in April when they shot a whole gang of known drug dealers.

In Kiev, the number of burglaries and muggings has risen alarmingly. My neighbour's apartment was burgled the other day and now we are talking about building a metal cage to prevent unwanted guests from accessing our floor. It reminds me of the early 1990s when everyone who had a bit of money invested in a metal front door. The main thing is to get the cage built before Christmas. It will be a kind of present to ourselves! Also we will feel less anxious

about going away during the holiday.

The festive season is nearly upon us and neither economic nor military problems will prevent Ukrainians celebrating wherever they are. One of the next convoys of 'humanitarian aid' sent into Donbass from Russia will include a Christmas tree – a gift from the Russian Government – together with a huge number of presents from the children of Moscow to the children of the Donbass. At the moment most, if not all, Moscow school children are making cards and writing letters of support for their contemporaries in Donetsk and Lughansk[4] and in Donetsk and Lughansk the children are making cards for the 'freedom fighters', that is the people fighting against the Ukrainian army. At the same time, children living in Kiev and other areas of Ukraine are hard at work on patriotic drawings to send as gifts to the Ukrainian army and volunteer forces.

One day examples of this artwork by children on both sides of the front line will hang side by side on display in one museum. But that is not likely to happen any time soon, certainly not this year.

All good wishes for the New Year and Christmas!

Kind regards,
Andrey Kurkov

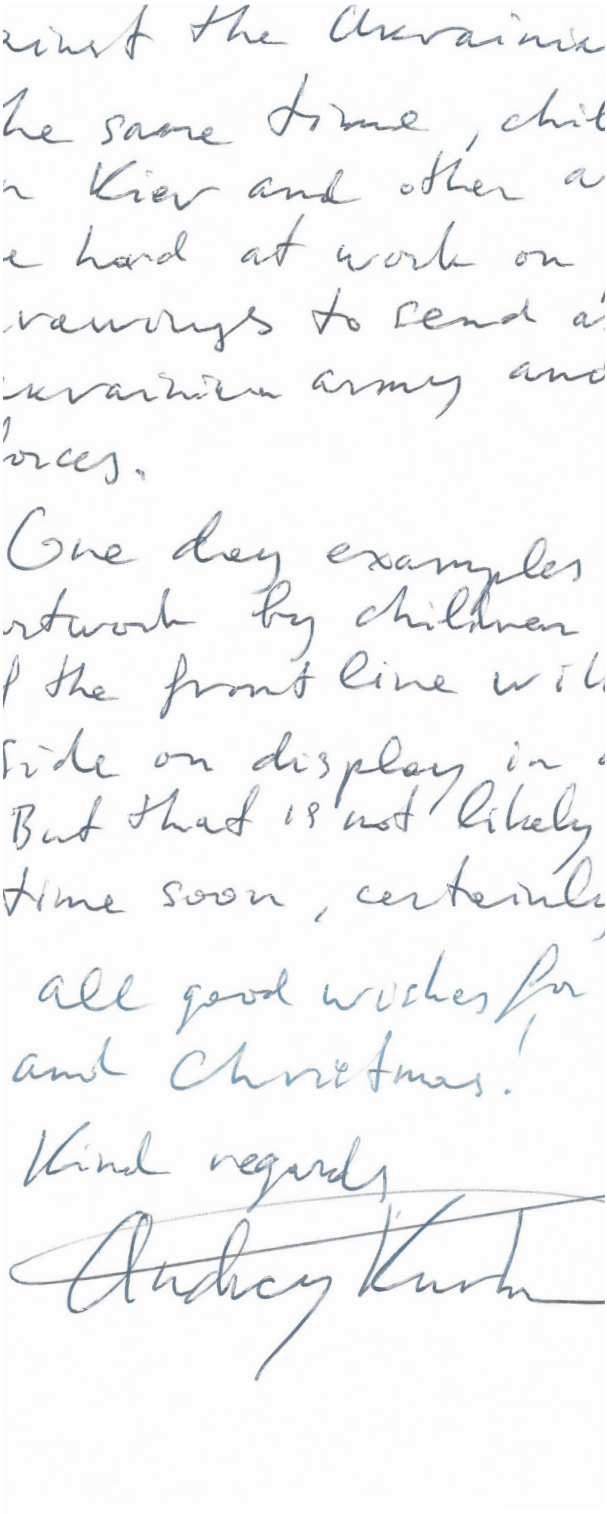
[1.] The 'Christopher' to whom this letter is addressed is Christopher Maclehose, who at one time ran Harvill Press, Andrey Kurkov's first publisher in the UK. Maclehose is the founder of Maclehose Press, and during his career has been responsible for introducing UK readers to writers such as WG Sebald, Raymond Carver, Javier Marias, Jose Saramago, Richard Ford, and Stieg Larsson. We will, of course, pass Andrey's letter on to him.

[2.] Variations of the word 'maidan' are used in a number of languages to mean 'square' or 'park': notable examples include Midan Tahrir in Cairo, Tavisuplebis Moedani in Tbilisi, Maydan al Shajara in Benghazi, and Taksim Meydani in Istanbul. Astute readers will recognise these as the locations for recent protests and uprisings, for even in an age of digital activism the occupation of central public spaces is still a key element of any popular movement. The writer is referring, in this instance, to Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kiev, where a series of escalating street protests between November 2013 and February 2014 culminated in the occupation of parliamentary buildings and removal of the president, Viktor Yanukovych. The aftermath of these events was complex, to say the least, and street protests have continued.

[3.] The Donbass region, in eastern Ukraine, has seen armed conflict throughout 2014 between pro-Russian separatist groups and Ukrainian government forces. There is currently a ceasefire in place, although violations are common on both sides.

[4.] Donetsk and Lughansk together make up the Donbass region.

Andrey Kurkov is a Ukrainian novelist and essayist, perhaps best known in the UK for his 2001 debut novel, *Death and the Penguin*. He has published twelve other novels, and his work has been translated into twenty-five languages, and he probably wishes people would stop saying he is best known for his debut novel. His collection of essays about recent events in his country, *Ukraine Diaries: Dispatches from Kiev*, is published by Harvill Secker and highly recommended to anyone who found the above footnotes a sketchy and inadequate guide. Kurkov is Vice-President of Ukrainian PEN.



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Kind regards

Andrey Kurk

Huang Haisu
North-eastern China

Dear Hong Kong Students,

Watching you live on CNN was how I spent my evenings during the week before the Chinese National Day holiday.[1] Footage of your stand was better than any TV program, for as I watched, I travelled through the magic of airwaves to be with you. Above me was a red umbrella, on my wrist a yellow ribbon, on my eyes a pair of goggles coated with a layer of plastic film, and on my face a mask. My skin burned when you were assaulted with pepper spray. My lungs protested as you ran away from the tear gas. Feeling your exhaustion, my eyes could not remain open as the midnight deadline passed.

The last time I saw anything like this was twenty-five years ago, long before most of you were born.[2] I was 'too young, too naïve' to recall much, but I do remember youthful faces like yours with optimistic hopes and firm wills. Who could possibly forget the selflessness of fearless souls on the square! But you see, one can only remember if he ever knows. Even if he knows, he can only recall if he wants to.

So your street solidarity is beyond the comprehension of many university students on the other side of the train to Lo Wu[3] – 'why are they on that fragrant island always the unreasonable ones?' And more often, 'Are their protests real?'

How do I know this? Because I am their teacher. And I make a simple request of you. Please write to my students and tell them your stories. Describe that night in Central,[4] how warm it felt when friends and strangers held hands and dared to dream one united dream. Compare Hong Kong old and new: What changes have you experienced? What was it that propelled you onto the street to make a stand?

You may wonder whether your letters could arrive. To be honest, I wonder, too. Yet once your letters run the gauntlet to reach only one student, be assured that he or she will spread the word about you. And then… A class. A cohort. A college. A university. A community. A city. A province. A country.

Staring at the black hole where you had been on the TV screen, I realise while you are risking your lives, I am only venturing to write this letter. The absence of you and the helplessness in

me made this holiday the most tedious of all. Your webpage news went blank. Baidu abandoned you, and you became Who? in my inquiries. As if you were a dream. As if I was insane.

On the street, when you have finished reading and geared up for upcoming danger, be proud of your influence and write to your press across the border. Send your letters to 1597451582@qq.com to start with.[5] I will make certain they first go to my one hundred and seven readers.

Stay safe,
An English Language teacher from mainland China

1. The Chinese National Day holiday is held on October 1 of each year, marking the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

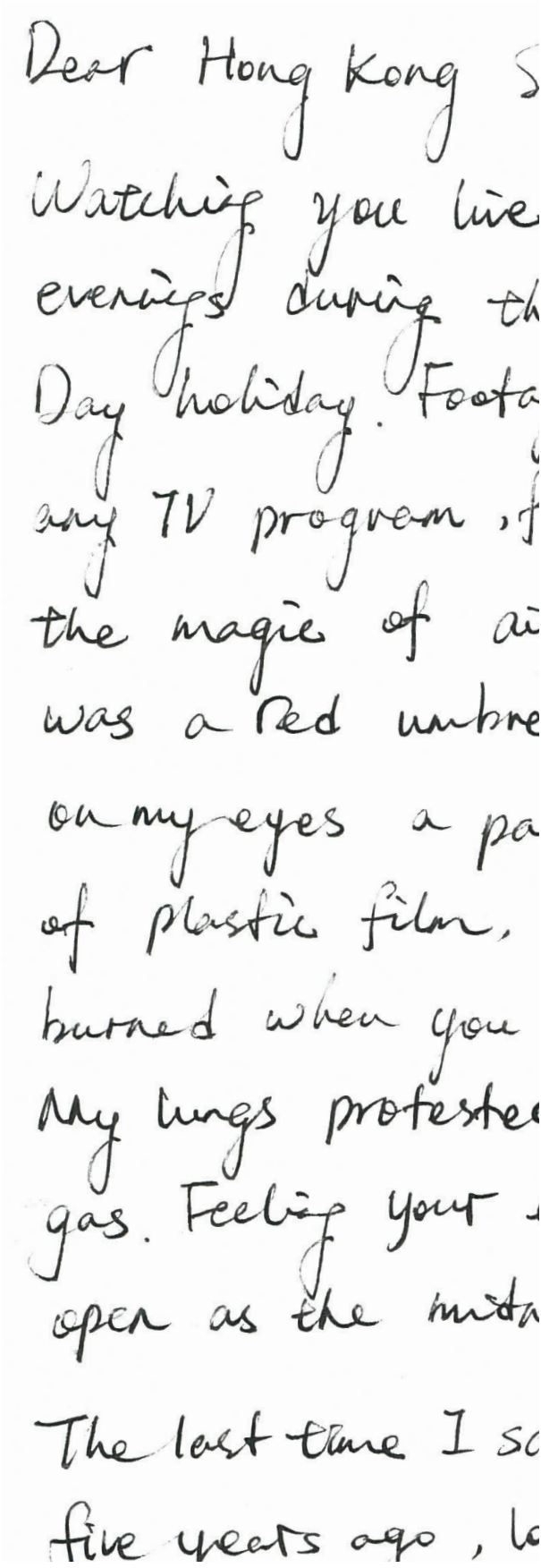
2. The writer is referring here to the Tiananmen Square democracy protest of 1989, which was brought to an end by the intervention of the military and the deaths of a large number of students. Discussion of the events of June 1989 in China is, to say the least, discouraged, with web searches relating to that date or location returning the message 'No results found'.

3. Lo Wu is the location of the main immigration control point for transfer between Hong Kong and mainland China.

4. 'Central' refers to the Central Business District of Hong Kong, location of the recent democracy protests.

5. Letters sent to this email address will reach Haisu Huang directly.

Haisu Huang (H.H.) was born and raised in north-eastern China near the Russian border. From being unable to recite all twenty-six letters twenty years ago to now writing stories in English, she has been fortunate to study with outstanding teachers and mentors. While passing her love of the language to her own students, H.H. earned an MFA in Creative Writing from City University of Hong Kong.



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Emma Chapman
Wilmslow

To my dear friends in Vietnam,

I will not say your names. You tell me people watch you: indeed, I have seen them myself. The quiet ones, who sat at the back of our English classes and gave their names haltingly. You told me later that they were spies, sent to check that we weren't planning a government coup. I believe you. Your phones have been tapped and you've been followed. You hear stories of people disappearing: into nothing and for nothing.

I understand why you don't rise up against it. Why you keep your heads down, focussing on the moment. It's better now than it was. After the war, there were more things to subdue. The real jobs were not for you, but for the victors. The bell for you would ring at 4am – you told me – rousing you from your bed to the fields. Mindless planting and drudgery, making your brains dull, wearing the resistance out of you like a river over rock. Then there were the camps, where they'd remake you in their image.

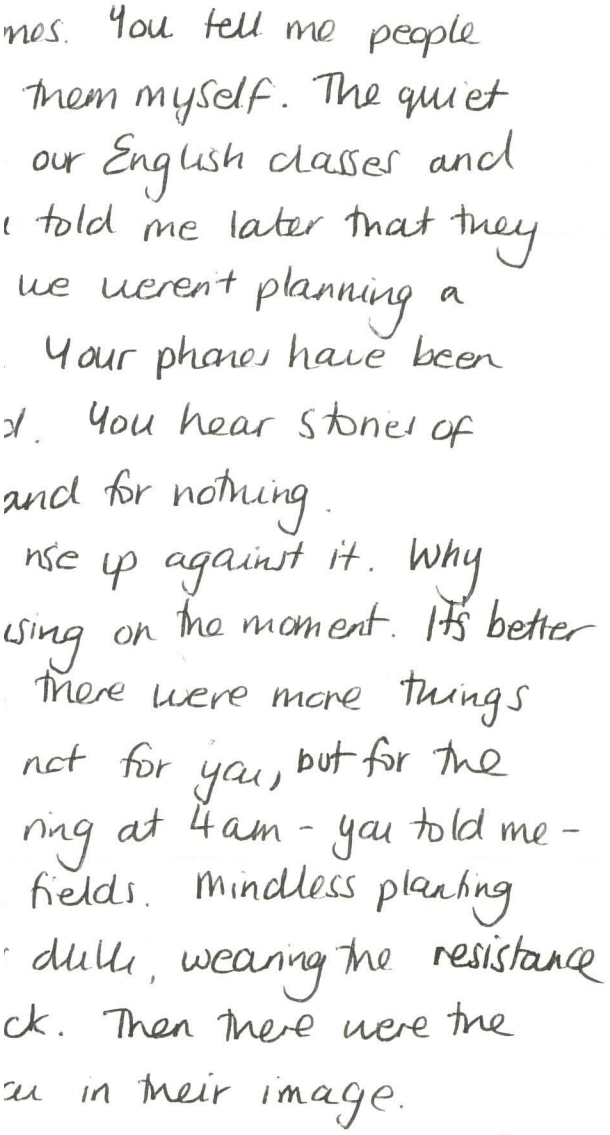
I say you don't protest, but you do – in small ways. You refuse to join the party; you maintain your religion. Even when it puts you in danger. You talk: when it is safe. On the backs of motorbikes, where we cannot be overheard, you tell me your stories.

When I first heard you talk, I was outraged. You cannot leave the country: passports and visas are like hen's teeth (I love explaining English idioms to you). You live in fear, falling over every aspect of your lives like a darkness on even the brightest days, sitting by the lake, surrounded by mountains. Even when you seem happy. It makes me grateful for my freedom: to travel and to say what I think without fear.

You are afraid, but so are they. Fear drives so many things in this life. The people who work in government do not do so out of belief or loyalty. They are the ones sending their teenage children overseas, getting them out of the country they are supposed to love. They are the only ones who are able to do it.

I want to protest for you: to help you. But I worry that by sending more foreigners to help with your English, I am putting you in danger. When I visit, you thank me: but you have given me so much. My words have always been my action. I write this letter to stand with you.

All love, Emma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Emma Chapman is the author of the critically acclaimed psychological thriller *How To Be A Good Wife*, which is a New York Times Notable Book, a Target Book Club Pick and a longlist-selected title for the Dylan Thomas Prize. She is currently working on her second novel, which is about a British war photographer's experiences during the Vietnam War.
In 2012, Emma founded Vietnam Volunteer Teachers, an organisation which organises voluntary teaching placements in Vietnam. For more information, see www.vietnamvolunteerteachers.com

Evelyn Conlon
Dublin

Dear You,

Let me get to the point. I am penning this to you, via the gardener, from the Asylum in Northampton, where I have been forcibly lodged now for the last thirty years. It's the early 1950s and I've been here since 1927. They call me the Irish woman who shot Mussolini, because that is what I am. They, still, say that I am insane to have done such a thing, even though they sent thousands upon thousands upon thousands to their deaths to do that very deed. It is a burden to carry, to have done the right thing early.

I will begin near the beginning, although it is hard to know what bits of our beginning make us take action, or not, as is the case with most people, what bits make us be part of the wider world looking out, often the same things that make a sibling gather into themselves and step back into the comfort of their own pettiness.

When I was nine years old my father was made Lord Chancellor of Ireland. I remember all the talk about it. I remember the flurrying of carriages, the endless sounds of horses pulling up outside, even at night. I think the boys in the house got more important then and the girls were expected to do even less than we had done before, but with a lot of dressing up. I didn't attach undeserved seriousness to that but I went along with it, not knowing what else to do. We had school at home. I particularly liked languages, which were really being taught to my brothers so they could fight wars, if necessary even where English was not spoken. My French is still good, all our time at Boulogne-sur-Mer polished it nicely, and my Italian is a particular love. The Italians still have the best poems. We read what we were told to read until I discovered that you could find other books too, some of which I got from Willie. I should tell you that of the seven of my siblings, Willie, Harry, Elsie, Edward, Victor, Frances, Constance, only three really matter to me now, which is not too bad really. Two of the three who matter to me are now dead.

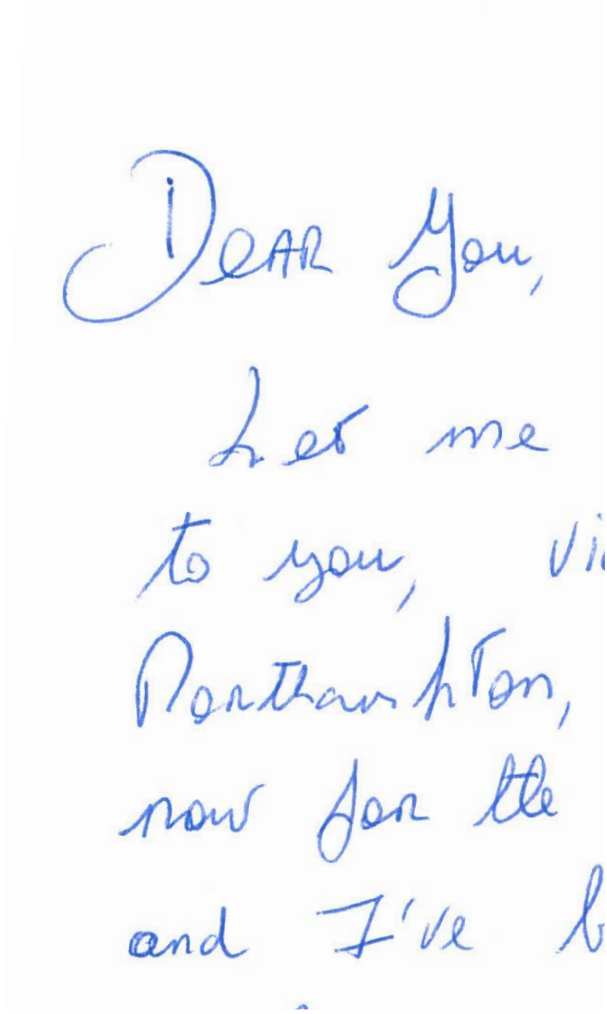
But to get back to my growing up, I did my best to mostly fit in, despite my reading. I occasionally brought up a conversation about women voting – I read mention of it sometimes – and my father congratulated himself that he approved – but I

knew that he would want to tell us how to do if it ever did happen. He had a way of looking at me, rather startled, when I mentioned it. The same look he used when he said, 'Enough is Enough'. I could hear the capitals on the words. And when that day did come, years after he died, I remember that I asked my sister not to put on a corset just for once. I said to her, 'for heaven's sake we're going to vote', and she looked at me like our father used to do.

Despite the beauty of Rome, despite its paintings, its pencil thin trees rising inexplicably towards the blue skies, its lavish avenues and its bright sunsets there was a rotting thing growing through that man Mussolini and his followers. He was destroying Italy, leading it into the fold of his own ego. We could see it, those of us who spread out the map to its full size. As the deeds of this emerging tyrant and his followers grew in darkness and violence I decided upon action. I was old enough by then to know that sometimes there is nothing else, that action is the only sane choice. I got myself ready and set forth to put my destiny and Mussolini's within a breath of each others.

I was fifty when I shot Mussolini, a good age I think to do it, don't you? I would really have liked not to have upset my family but I couldn't not have done it just to keep my family happy.

Signed, Violet Gibson.



This is a work of fiction. The story is based on the life of Violet Gibson, the Irish woman who attempted to assassinate Mussolini, and who could have changed the history of Europe if she had succeeded. The story is based strictly on the facts of what happened, although of course the writer has taken licence by imagining what Violet might have said to us if she had got a chance. The attempt to keep her life secret seems to have finally failed through the work of Frances Stonor Saunders.

Evelyn Conlon is an Irish novelist and short story writer, living in Dublin. She has published three collections of short stories, and contributed to the recent Tramp Press anthology, *Dubliners 100*, in which contemporary Irish writers wrote cover versions of the stories from James Joyce's *Dubliners*. She was recently nominated for Laureate of Irish Fiction.

Melissa Harrison
London

Darling,[1]

Such a wonderful night. Thank you for risking it. It's not enough, of course – it's never enough – but it will keep me going.

I got here later yesterday evening – too late to write. Too cold, too; you could tell the place had been standing empty. I piled all the blankets on the bed, the rug too, got Nin on there for warmth though she snored half the night. This morning I chopped some wood and got the fire going, and then I walked to the village for supplies. I have enough ribbons and paper to last the winter, and I have the Laphroaig – thank you, thank you, thank you. I may go raving mad before spring, but I shall at least enjoy it.

Nin misses you terribly, of course. Do you remember when you were here and she brought back that cock pheasant in, and we had to take it back to the woods in the dead of night? Thank goodness it didn't make that ghastly screeching noise, or we'd have been done for. And thank goodness for Nin's soft mouth. She's too old for poaching now, of course.

The gamekeeper has gone and one can walk anywhere now, though I don't think the villagers dare to yet. Really, it's a surprise they kept up the shooting for so long after the manor was sold. Perhaps it was the only part of the estate to make money; perhaps the settlement required it. I suppose there will have been rather a lot of creditors. But it's the same the country over, or so I hear.

The woman in the shop told me they evicted the last of the labourers from the tied cottages a few months ago; they are all quite derelict now. There was a curious scene when the bailiffs came to turn the poor old boy out, she told me; the villagers, all holding boughs of greenery, lined the road in silence as he was put on a cart, with his few sticks of furniture, and driven away. He died within a month, she said; hardly surprising, as he'd lived on the estate all his life. She didn't know what the reason was for the greenery – or if she did she wouldn't say. The bailiffs and parish councillors blanched when they saw it, apparently.

I miss you already, my sweet. Come if you can, and in the mean-time I'll write – if you really think it's

Nin misses you
you were here
and we had to
night? Thank g
ing noise, or
for Nin's soft
of course.

The gamekeeper
though I don't
it's a surpris
after the mano
of the estate
required it. I
of creditors.
so I hear.

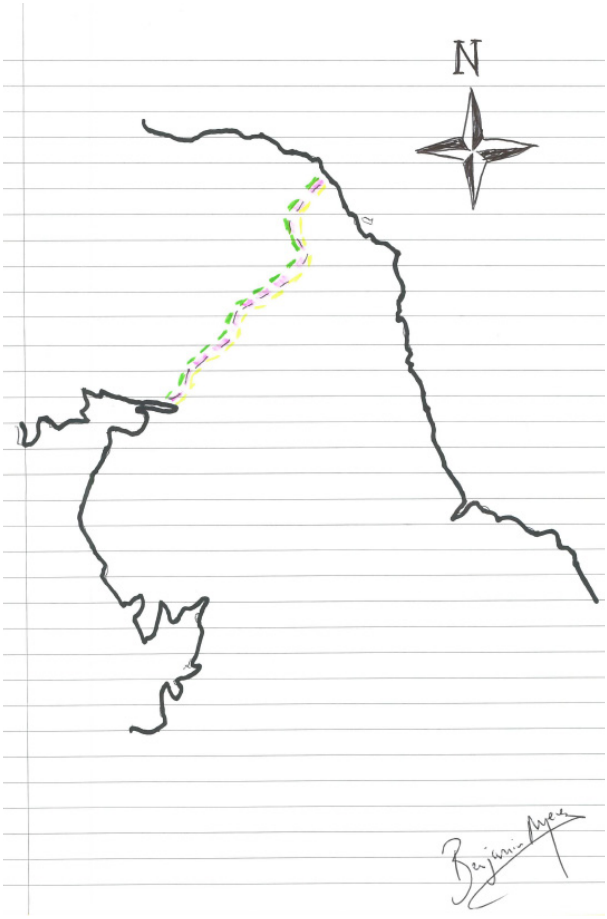
The woman in t
the labourers
they are all q
scene when the

safe. Send me word by return of post, so I know that this has reached you. If I don't hear, I shan't write again, but I'll telephone you when I'm back, in Spring, and I'll take you out for supper and we'll talk about the future. Don't let him frighten you, darling goose. It will be all right.

Love, love, love…
Clive
X

[1.] This letter, typed on faded cream typing paper using what looks to have been an Olivetti typewriter – possibly even the renowned Lettera 22 which was in widespread use in the postwar period – was received accompanied only by a note reading as follows: 'Mark – found this among Dad's papers when I cleared the house. It was addressed to Mum – but the envelope had been slit open. Might explain the will…?'

Melissa Harrison's debut novel, *Clay*, was published by Bloomsbury in January 2013. It was chosen as an Amazon Rising Star for 2013, won the Portsmouth First Fiction award and was named by Ali Smith as one of her books of the year. A freelance writer and occasional photographer, she is a monthly contributor to *The Times's* weekly '*Nature Notebook*' column. Her second novel, *At Hawthorn Time,* will be published by Bloomsbury in April 2015, as will her non-fiction book about rain, for Dorset publisher Little Toller.


N

Comrades –

Either everyone in this strange hinterland that straddles the divide between two countries drives a silver 4x4 or I am being followed on a daily basis. Or I am a touch paranoid. How does the line go? 'Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't after you…'

Certainly I arrived here in a state. Exhaustion, anxiety. Self doubt. The type of malady that had the wealthy of days gone by dispatched to Alpine spa towns to 'take the waters'. I resorted to my usual crutches in such times of existential crisis: long walks, fire, confectionery. The very basics.

The cottage I have been afforded the use of for several weeks is in a very small village. The nearest shop is seven miles away; the pubs too. The closest train station is thirty miles. There is a bus stop but no buses. A phone-box but no phone.

Around me purple heathered moorland stretches in all directions so that on certain days when the light is just so it feels as if I am adrift on a distant lunar ocean. Fat pheasants so beautiful when grounded but vulgar and clumsy in flight explode from the thicket as I pass by. I track a hare for several consecutive days through the same pine wood and in my rural reverie its proportions appear distorted. Elongated. The hare appears as large as a horse. It is British mythology made real as it sits on its haunches, sniffing the air.

On a day like this it is hard to believe that the world is rife with war. All these despots need to come and observe the beautiful hare at play.

But then the next day I find it splayed on the road. Flattened. Its belly removed, entrails imprinted on the tarmac. Eyes pecked.

In time it becomes difficult not to see such omens and portents in the landscape. Small protests against my appearance here. Markers of my disturbance. It is a no-man's land, the borders. An area of battles and bloodshed.

Perhaps that is why binoculars watch me from afar. The glint of a gamekeeper's lens from the opposite hillside… later he pulls up in a car and just stares. When he speaks he warns me of hidden traps, dangerous snares. At night a mounted lamp

blinds me in white light as I walk down the lane in darkness. On another occasion I introduce myself to a villager. 'I know who you are', he says. 'I had an email about you last night'.

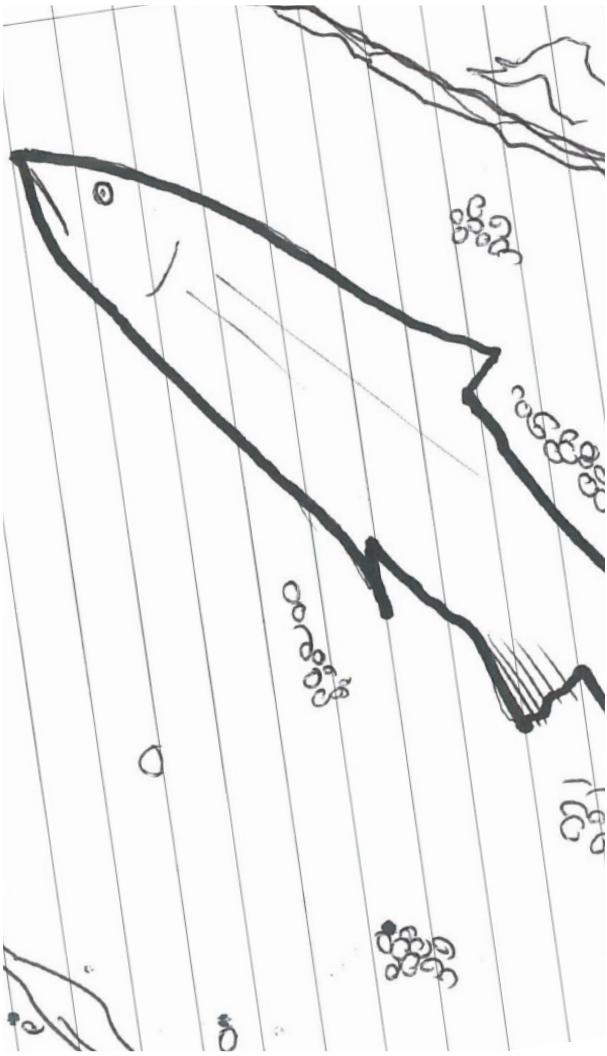
And the same silver 4x4. Always there. In the distance on silently turning empty village corners so that I only catch a fleeting glimpse of its tail-gate. Across the moor, watching as I stumble through tussocks of grass and methane bog.

Is, I wonder, the countryside conspiring to remind me I am but an interloper? A borderland intruder? Perhaps, perhaps…

They say the city has eyes but out here you cannot be anonymous. This is the paradox. You can climb a hill and watch the land roll away for thirty miles in all directions but still feel enclosed. Each twig I snap or foot-print I leave seems not to qualify my existence but protest my movement. It is as if the landscape – this ragged, raw, mesmerising, poetic landscape of life and death and sky – is only tolerating me. It knows I shall be leaving soon. And it looks forward to the day.

I, however, do not. I love it here.

Keep the powder dry –
Benjamin Myers



Benjamin Myers was born in Durham, UK. His novels include *Beastings* (2014), which won the Northern Writers' Award, *Pig Iron* (2012), winner of the inaugural Gordon Burn Prize, and *Richard* (2010), a *Sunday Times* book of the year. His poems and short stories have been widely published and other recent publications include a poetry collection *Heathcliff Adrift* and a novella, *Snorri & Frosti*.

Benjamin Myers's journalism has appeared in publications including *New Statesman, The Guardian, Mojo*, and *Caught By The River*. He currently lives in the Upper Calder Valley, West Yorkshire, where he spends a lot of time just wandering about and watching. The illustrations seen here and on the preceding page were enclosed with Benjamin's letter. We thoroughly approve of illustrations – and the Sad Salmon pictured above has become a particular favourite in the office – but would ask future correspondents to consider using unlined paper.

Karen McLeod
Penge

Dear Alan Bennett,[1]

As you know our chats have traditionally taken place in the bath with Neal's Yard foaming oil, so writing a letter feels a little, well, upright.

You know my father is also an Alan. The good news is that he is still very much here in body. Good days his mind is too. The other day I noticed how he has a similar soft pallor to his face as yours. I suppose it's the increased oestrogen that older men produce, lending them a buttery softness to the jowls and lips. Skin smooth as scone-tops.

Recently I opened your '*Untold Stories*'[2] and found a one-day Travelcard dated 2005. I recalled carrying the book, as hefty as a breeze block, in my wheelie bag across the globe, as I was an air-hostess back then. The weight was impractical but the book served as a kind of anchor to home, albeit your 'Mam' and 'Dad'. Then, you were the kind of Alan I wished for in a father, because you had words, oodles of them – and they spoke to me and in a way no man ever had before.

Do you remember the 'Shed Story', in March? I was back at Mum and Dad's collecting a trunk from the garden shed containing all my diaries? Mum, the intermediary between me and Dad, was out shopping. Without her we had to communicate head-on. It was 5pm and dark. Dad comes down to the end of the garden with me. This is a man who never touches, seldom kisses, and has certainly never offered to help.

'Here', he says. 'Let me.' He takes hold of the key for the padlock and I shine a torch on the lock area. Over and over he misses by a centimetre or so. I do not fail to appreciate the magnitude of this gesture and, bathing in his attention, I let him carry on missing the lock until I have to take control of the situation.

This year has been a series of 'Untold Stories' to most of my friends and family. But you might recall the 'Finger Story' from July? A quick recap: Dad was released from hospital after another failed attempt at being diagnosed with a stroke and he falls over getting out of the mini-cab outside number 47 where they live. By the time I get there, Mum's face is blotched red with stress. In the front room with Dad settled into his T.V. chair I ask him how he is? He holds up his forefinger. I study it; crooked from years as a wicket keeper, a long manicured cuticle; a tower of blood, bone and

energy.[3]

'Chaos', he says, keeping the finger raised.

'I… no'. His eyes dart about and then he thinks for a long time. I can feel the urge in my tongue to donate words, like you do when someone is mid-stutter. But he is speechless and frustrated.

August – Dad gives me £50 'pocket money' to spend in France.

October – Mum and I find Dad in the Ladies stroke unit at the hospital. When we get to his bed, he is all scrunched up far down the bed uncomfortable. He tells me there is someone behind the curtain who is listening to every word he says.

After I kiss him hello, I tell him I climbed a tree for the first time. 'A forty-year old woman!' I say. He comes back into his eyes and laughs.

As Mum arranges the biscuits on his tray table he becomes distant again. I sit in the blue chair to the side of him. As I do this, I realise the chair is too far back and out of his field of vision. I decide to test his memory to see if he can remember I have come. I sit silently.

'Where's Karen?' he says, after a minute or two. And I delight in this, in him speaking my name. I am a sad little girl, still wanting to be noticed.

Later that night, I am walking home from Mum and Dad's house. On the other side of the road a driving school car slows down. The word 'RED' marks the driving school's name on the doors and on the roof. An instructor leans out the window and makes a funnel with his mouth.

'Oooooh', he says in a long growl. Then he mumbles something equally sexual sounding. It takes me a few moments to work out what the words are. Then it clicks, he's said 'Hello sweet-cheeks!' I presume he is referring to my bottom. The car drives off and I am left speechless. I think of the blocks of blood, bone and energy at the ends of my arms. I raise both hands and shape my fore-fingers and middle fingers into V's. Death is making a girl of me. I dart my hands up and down, flicking them at the car bumper, over and over and for too long.

No words needed. Daddy's girl.

Speak soon Alan, probably Sunday when I'll be in for a long soak.

Love, Karen

[1.] Alan Bennett is a playwright and diarist from Leeds. You probably knew that already, but it's best never to assume. We will of course ensure that this letter reaches him.

[2.] *Untold Stories* (Faber, 2005) is a collection of autobiographical pieces and essays which followed the hugely successful memoir *Writing Home* (Faber, 1991).

[3.] The writer's father has been diagnosed with a condition known as 'Lewy Body Disease', a form of dementia which shares symptoms with both Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, and usually involves having hallucinations. Further information on the condition can be found at www.alzheimers.org.uk

Karen McLeod studied performance art in Cardiff, where she convinced audiences she was a drag queen. Struggling to make ends meet she worked as a long haul air hostess for British Airways. After publishing *In Search of the Missing Eyelash* (Jonathan Cape, 2007), which won a Betty Trask award, she left flying and is now writer-in-residence at the Bookseller Crow Bookshop in Crystal Palace, South London. Karen McLeod grew up in Penge, South London, and now lives in a tower block overlooking Croydon. Her new novel is set in a block very similar to the one she lives in. She divides her time between writing and performing, listening and thinking, and trying to work out whose voice is whose and whose voice is hers.

Dear Alan Bennett,

As you know
place in the bath with
feels a little, well, up

You know my fa
that he is still very m
The other day I noticed
face as yours. I suppose
men produce, lending th
Skin smooth as scone-t

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as a breeze block, in
air-hostess back then.
served as a kind of anc
Then, you were the kin
you had words, oodle
man ever had before.

Do you remember th
I was back at Mum a
shed containing all my
me and Dad, was out

We feel that some of the following should take responsibility for the contents of these pages:

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Additional Notes: *The Letters Page* is a project run within the Creative Writing section of the School of English at the University of Nottingham, and is entirely funded by the University of Nottingham. We are grateful for the opportunity, and for their support, and excited about the enthusiasm and insight which our student assistants have brought to the project. We don't feel it would be inappropriate at this point to mention that, should you or any of your close friends and relations be considering studying for an undergraduate or postgraduate degree in English or especially in Creative Writing, it would be well worth your/their while looking at the courses available here.

Details of both undergraduate and postgraduate courses can be found at www.nottingham.ac.uk/ugstudy/courses/english/english.aspx, or by writing to:

Admissions,
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University of Nottingham,
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A closing note about Issue 6, due out in June 2015:

Thank you for reading Issue 5. We hope you've enjoyed it, and will share it with others.

We want your letters for Issue 6, and we want them soon. We want stories, essays, poems, memoir, travelogue, reportage, conversation, criticism, speculation, illustration, deviation, and more. If you can fit it in an envelope and put it in the post to us, we will consider it for publication. There is no theme; there are no restrictions. Be smart about it: we are a correspondence-based literary journal with a limited number of pages, and in general shortness and smallness is a virtue. But we are looking for works of literary wonder, and we have no wish to inhibit you. Surprise us.

We will pay £100 for every submission published.

Closing Date for Issue 6 is April 22, 2015.

Send submissions to:

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