

The Letters Page: a literary journal in letters

Issue 7, Winter 2015

DECLARATION OF CONTENTS

DESCRIPTION:
a literary journal in letters, seventh issue of

CONTENTS:
reflections on death, loss, and grieving, a study of the prehispanic obsidian blade core, postcards that require cutting out, more news from Alan the Postman, a haunting belt, and at least one reference to William Carlos Williams.

ORIGINATING PERSONNEL:

Myna Trustram.....
Sylee Gore.....
Clito Valenzuela.....
Kallen Rowe.....
Kathryn Hummel.....
Jonathan Myers.....
Benjamin.....
Rolf Venner.....
Claire-Louise Bennett.....



We want your letters for Issue 8 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 8 is January 22, 2016.
Send submissions to:

The Letters Page,
School of English,
University of Nottingham,
NG7 2RD,
UK.

If undelivered, please return to:
The Letters Page,
School of English,
University of Nottingham,
NG7 2RD.

www.theletterspage.ac.uk

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 that 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/english/

Squeeze! Devoured it all. And I'll smile and scoop that pure beautiful ice-cream into softly scuffed furls and slide it into those oblivious impeccable bowls just like an outlaw who has come upon an enchanting and momentary shelter. There is a pond with deep down carp and a statue watching over, there are fruit trees and vines and haphazard herbs, there is even a dog who waits silently for the croissant to shed its flaking shell and a smooth-skinned boy who skims the pool with a white net. I think you would like him very much. Do not forget me.

Do not forget me – I do not forget you. I believe you are in the leaves. Which are all in great big piles now. And come into the house.

Love & embraces,
 Clara xxx

¹Claire-Louise Bennett is an English writer living in Galway. Her debut work of fiction, *Pond*, was published this year by Stinging Fly in Dublin, and Fitzcarraldo Editions in London. She has also published stories in *The Irish Times*, *The White Review*, and *gorse*.

I cannot tear myself away.

My companion is going to prepare tagine & I'm going to concoct my very delectable apple crumble. I'm going to stir in ginger and a cinnamon stick and something else I cannot mention while the apples let off steam and I'm going to sprinkle the crumble with bashed hazelnuts and mollifying oats and something else I dare not mention. And I'm going to stand upstairs in the kitchen while the buried apples bake, with dirt on my heels and below my nails and the buttons done right up to my throat and way down to my silvery shuddering wrists. And I'm going to take the ice-cream, the pure beautiful ice-cream she so kindly brought, out of the freezer box and I'm going to leave it there to soften on the side next to the bowls in a stack while I roll and smoke a cigarette. And then my companion will come up to the kitchen and she'll stand behind me, much smaller than ever she is, and she'll say, she'll say, the music is wonderful, and slip an arm about my waist. The music is wonderful and everyone has eaten everything.

Dear Reader,

I'm writing to you from the Eurostar train, speeding between London and Paris. I am somewhere in Kent. I am on my way to a short story conference in the town of Angers, to speak on the theme of hauntings in short fiction. I don't mind admitting that I'm a little anxious about travelling through Paris, so soon after the nightmarish events of November 13th. It's not a rational fear, I admit – or at least no more nightmarish than the fear of the train crashing, or being hit by a taxi outside the station, or crushed by falling luggage in the hotel lobby, or stricken with food poisoning, or felled by a stroke in the moonlit streets of Angers – but then the point of fear is that it rarely is rational.

We stopped using themes for *The Letters Page* with Issue 5, but it has to be said that every letter in this issue is either haunted by death or bursting defiantly with life. Sometimes a certain mood just coheres in that way. Two of our letters arrived as postcards, and we have reproduced them as such in our centre pages; these will read best if you go to the trouble of cutting out and collating them.

I should sign off here; we're going into the tunnel, and I won't have a signal. I'll talk to you again when I come out into the light. Do write and let us know what you think of this issue, or send us something for the next. We'd love to hear from you.

Yours,
Jon McGregor, The Editor

In a letter he wrote
 in 1958 he said that
 (or as we might say)
 'I can see nothing
 turning onward
 suffering along with

¹ Myna Trustram's book *Women of the Regiment: The Victorian Army at Home* was published by Cambridge University Press in 1984. Since then she has worked in museums and galleries, returning recently to university life as a researcher

at Manchester School of Art. She writes academic articles but also works in other written forms that move around essay, memoir and performance. Her work is about loss, melancholy and the abundance of museum collections.

Hours I was there, reading over my waiting and flipping the tassels like the way a horse flicks its tail and he did come, but was so hard to see, barely there at all, because of this washed out mind of mine and the sudden sun right there behind him – what did I see of him? His hair-tips and belt hooks, and then he turned and rested, and that was all, all for that day.

(I will take your heart with me under the stones under the water under the reeds under the sun under my lungs under the sound of the voice of your dear wife calling you in for lunch. If not on this day, then another. For they are all the same, I can't help but notice, and you must know you cannot hide from hunger. It seems we are all condemned to live with some kind of drudgery, well then let this be mine. Let me be cancelled out this way. I take a swipe at my fringe, plop eye drops behind the acrid rims, revolve around the same lipstick. I write letters all day long, saying whatever moves my hand at that hour, depending on what creature might be around – lizard, vulture, boar, finch – and the colour of the sky, and my bones, my meek and grateful bones, pressed up against my petulant and frustrated flesh – I do not know which will get the upper hand and finally take a hold of you. The stars are haunting me. The small creatures are haunting me. Your belt haunts me. The holes in your belt haunt me. If I stand before you and look at the buckle of your belt will you know right away that the holes of your belt haunt me?)

God knows how I fended off drudgery for so long. When more and more they make it look like such a deserved and pretty cake.

It's Halloween soon, in less than a week! I'll do my hair like it is now but I don't have any idea about what I'll wear – I don't have very much with me. I shall simply enswathe myself with all manner and texture of black I think. Velvet, silk, ebony, taffeta, lace, jet, crinoline, gauze, kohl, musk, dusk, coal, musk, dusk, crinoline, gauze, horsehair and firebrand, whalebone and widow's weeds. They won't see me coming! With a big low crucifix and something at the throat and all the tiny buttons done up at throat and wrists. It'll take a lifetime! That's right. Tight, tight, tight. And dust and detached wings on the waistcoat with pearl fasteners and mud on the heels and beneath my nails – yes, mud, dirt, beneath my nails and blurring my hairline. So I can hardly breathe. And those fascinating scratches from the thorns will look just the ticket. To die for! Desire always blackens me so, blackens me so. I don't suppose this droopy raspberry coloured geansai fools anyone. I spent hours down by the stream, we'd barely finished clearing it when I took down the tasselled cushion and made myself right at home there, with my skimmer tipped just so, eclipsing the sunlight.

Dear Bereaved,

I'm sorry to hear you lost your father, and so rapidly. But I'm glad you were able to say the important things to him before he left. It doesn't sound as though you need much help with grieving but I want to tell you that the best living writer I know right now for death is Ali Smith and the best dead one is Sam Beckett. The dead people in *Artful* and *How to be both* just kind of hang around as though they're part of life – the living and the dead talk with one another. And then there's Beckett who as you know also has the dead about. In a letter he wrote to bereaved Barbara Bray in 1958 he said that he can't talk of solace (or as we might say today, 'I don't do solace'): 'I can see nothing for us but the old earth turning onward and time feasting on our suffering along with the rest.'

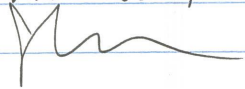
Some say I'm inconsolable but I think in some strange way there's solace for me in that thought of the old earth turning. It's the art, isn't it, the turning of the phrase, that brings the solace? Like cellophane on the wrapt-up flowers at modern places of death, cliché hangs around bereavement. I'm afraid I have to tell you that when death came out of the blue for the one I loved the most I lost all patience with cliché. I picked up instead a bitterness for those more fortunate and, as I realise from my reaction to your letter, for those who have good deaths surrounded by the people they love. Sorry. Tiptoeing around the bereaved isn't quite my style any more. Now it's 'I don't believe you. Tell me where it hurts.'

But still, with many condolences to you and your family,
Myna ¹

How life slips into silence, in their
and my and other lives. Only later do
you realize this silence is worse than
the imperfect — which, in the moment,
seemed the worst thing of all.

Within the day's coolness is
the thought of autumn. I remember
discovering the old Irish calendar —
May in the summer, November in the
winter, August in the fall — in
February, with its light glimmering behind
the curtains when I woke and its
viburnums blossoming pink in the
courtyard, and thinking it was quite
right to place the month in spring.

All best wishes & more soon,



¹ Swiss journalist and
photographer who died in 1942
at the end of a remarkable-
sounding life about which
we very much hope someone
writes us a letter and tells us
more.

² American writer, best known
for *A Wrinkle in Time*, who died
in 2007.

³ Irish furniture designer and
architect who died in 1976.

⁴ American author and aviator
who died in 2001.

⁵ Sylee Gore is a food writer
and photographer in Berlin,
who blogs at berlinreified.com.
She has not died.

Someone will say something, I thought, but
nobody said anything and I hurt myself easily,
straightforwardly, with wide open eyes. You
just keep on reaching around, you don't know
when it will prick or sting. You feel so silly
and pleased and ferocious. Perhaps something,
this, will send me to sleep all night through,
with no visits, no fingers, no hotchpotch pelvis
and ramshackle ribs.

He goes by and he is wearing a hat. He stands
and his back is to me. He's wearing a hat
and his back is to me and his shoulders are
very clear and his waist is remarkable, truly
remarkable, so narrow and pivotal above his
belt! He holds a garden hose near the trees he
planted just recently, turns and rests, turns and
rests, and it's too early I think for that so either
he has somewhere to go to today or else he
thought it was about time he stood like that,
just across from the window here.

I cannot tear myself away.

It's been so long since I acted with will and
abandon I hardly recognise myself. Oh Jean-
Christine what has become of me! I got
caught up with making progress of one kind
or another, my reputation got to me and I got
hooked on it, but it does nothing to fill me,
nothing at all. I must break off from all that
now my dear I feel before I end up right back
at the start, which can so easily occur, I'm sure
of it.

What is a crush, my companion asks, hours later – an immoderate interest, I say, in an unknown man’s whereabouts.

And thus it seems I’m doing something with my life, making a little breathtaking instance out of it and gathering up hope in my lungs – who knows, perhaps I might be taken over and dream and dream, wouldn’t that be a fine thing – oh my skin then, oh the mornings then, and the way my miscreant hands feel in those cosy raspberry copious pouches as I walk first thing after a whole night of craving and cavorting with this vivid viscid pungent absence, all over me, all over me, all over me. Oh the stench of the whorl of the pattern of the disarray of my beautiful misspent desire.

So that when finally he passes by here, with his slow and great big biblical stride, his presence is hardly a thing at all, nothing compared to the thick pervasive nocturnal lack of him, night after night after night. I sit on the steps and lean here and there and lose all vigilance, feel my way into a variegated shadow, wallow, overcome and underwhelmed by a craned and cloying lassitude so that I often need to have something in both hands and my hands now are quite altered, you would not know them – scratched terribly both sides and I did that on purpose, it gave me pleasure, to work that way, to go down to the garden and pull at the ivy and brambles near the wall without gloves that way.

But this morning I woke and thought it time for a letter. The breeze through the birch trees is that two degrees cooler, making thought feasible again. Last night’s event celebrating *Dead Ladies* left my head swimming as to whom I’d choose – Annemarie Schwarzenbach,¹ Madeleine L’Engle,² Eileen Gray?³ Or indeed Anne Morrow Lindbergh,⁴ whose late letters I’m reading now.

How life slips into silence, in their and my and other lives. Only later do you realize this silence is worse than the imperfect – which, in the moment, seemed the worst thing of all.

Within the day’s coolness is the thought of autumn. I remember discovering the old Irish calendar – May in the summer, November in the winter, August in the fall – in February, with its light glimmering behind the curtains when I woke and its viburnums blossoming pink in the courtyard, and thinking it was quite right to place the month in spring.

All best wishes and more soon,

Sylee⁵

Dear Friend,

I have been going to a lot of museums lately and I think I finally got it. It's very simple: The world is wrapping around itself.

I did not have to map it out. It came to me in a dream, but don't let anybody know that. If they ask, it's the result of a lifelong study of someone who kept falling into either side of the fence. I'm not really a scientist as you know, but then again, I'm not really anything.

I had a dream about molecular orbitals, which are not really a thing, or a place, but rather the possibility of a place, a specific area where someone was most likely to stumble upon the electron hovering around the nuclei of a molecule, like a carefully designated dog park for the neighbourhood atoms. If you draw these areas, types of molecular orbitals look like a number of things. My favourite looks like a plump butterfly. The one I had a dream about looks a lot like a small bundle of asparagus. Despite the mixed feelings of my waking life, I watched it in my dream with curiosity and love.

Well Jean-Christine perhaps this is where I will go mad – in a place where no one will know it. Then again, I'm fully cognisant of what a ficklebones I am, how zealously I start a thing yet seldom see it through – perhaps it will be the same with losing my head. My head! As if I ever gave any indication of a firm and regular mindset in the first place – no, I never felt much inclination to persuade or preserve, so perhaps, in any case, there isn't a great deal to mislay. There is however an area where I am showing some consistent and considerable prowess, a notable degree of inimical flair even – I frequently lie in order to feel present. To conceal imperturbable indifference, I lie, I lie to myself especially – first & foremost – well I must occasionally convince myself of some abiding trifling thing. There has to be something to look out for while I'm looking out, and lately I traipse about in an enormous raspberry coloured cardigan and every now and then I go right up on my tiptoes and there is something with some effort that rivets me so.

would be shaved, and shallow incisions – in imitation of post-operative stitches – carved on the cranium to make the surgery appear authentic. I didn't think Jack would go along with an operation, but went along with it he did. The nest 'removed', Jack woke right as rain.

All was well for a year; Jack returned to his old, happy self. Then a few weeks ago he came to my apartment one morning in a panic. He had woken in the night hearing a wheezing and clicking in his chest. He's convinced a queen must've entered his nose some weeks before and made her way through his trachea into his lungs. He swears he now coughs up wasps in the night and finds them dead in his sheets. I saw no sign of any nest in his apartment. Mind you, Jack's no fabulist. He never drinks more than two shots of bourbon, and he's no dope-fiend. Also, when I place my hand on his chest I swear I can feel a fizzing beneath – in his ribcage.

You will, Sir, appreciate Jack's predicament, the thing is, operations are very costly, which is why I'm writing to you – as an eminent publisher in England – for a small contribution to his treatment.

I appeal to your humanity, which is to say, to your appreciation of literature. For I fear the wasps' next port of call will be Jack's heart.

I am writing to you from the lobby of the Waldorf Hotel, a cobble's lob from my lodgings on Bleecker Street. I know not which century I am in, but no matter. Time may be given the slip where the imagination is concerned, I hope you'll agree. I've looked for signs of having lived a previous existence here. I know only that I was a poet; I have to conclude I never came to New York.

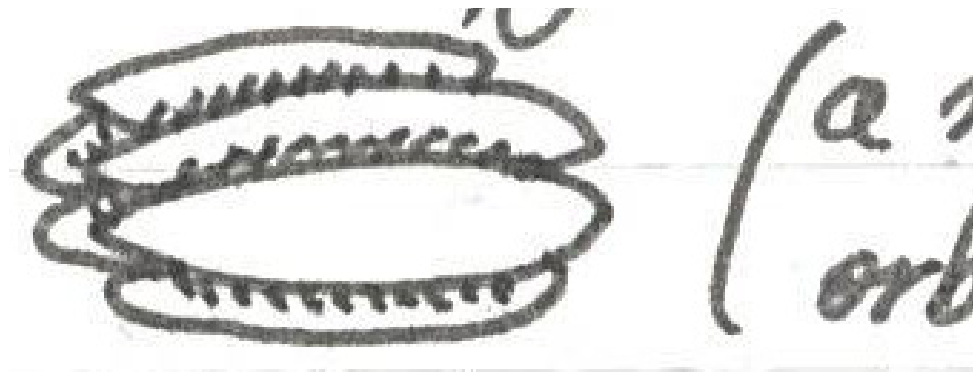
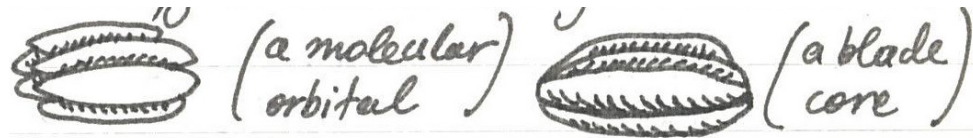
I remain, Sir, your most humble and obedient servant,
Francisco Scardanetti

Dear Friend,

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The other thing I dreamt about was not unlike the stone of a fruit, and it wasn't until I woke up that I knew what it was: a prehistoric obsidian blade core. A little thing like a bullet or an egg, ridged throughout its length. It was what was left from a piece of obsidian when the tool-smith had chipped off all the little blades they could. A practice as I understand about two million years old, give or take according to regions I suppose. It was trash in its time, but now cores like this can be found in several museums.



¹Clio Velentza lives in Athens, Greece. She has been a writer in residence at Dickinson House, Belgium (2015), and awarded in the 4th National Short Story competition of Diavasame.gr (2011). Her fiction and non-fiction has appeared in *21 New Voices*, *Gravel Magazine*, *The Vignette Review*, *Whiskey Paper*, and *Atlas & Alice*, amongst others.

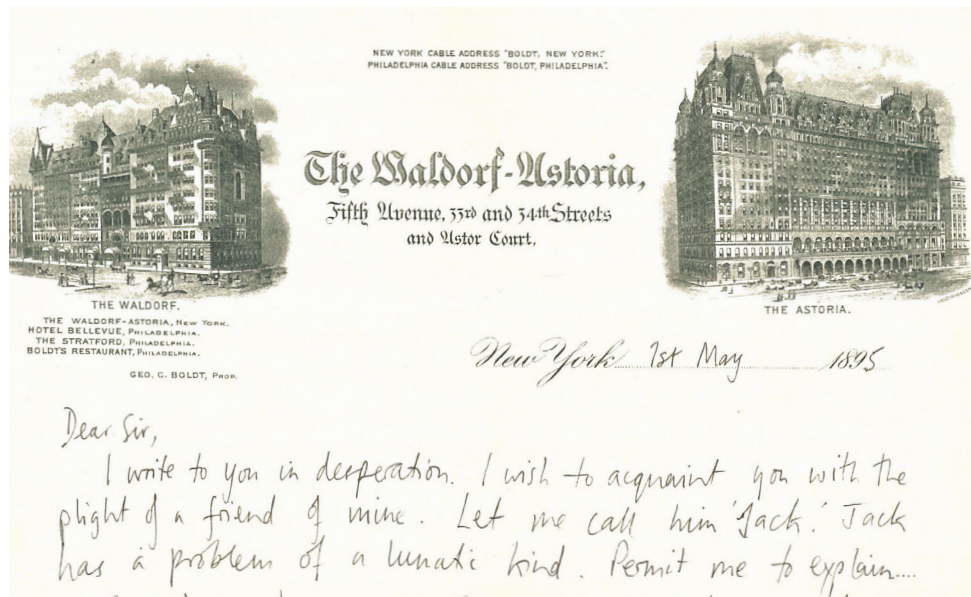
*New York, 1st May 1895*¹

Dear Sir,

I write to you in desperation. I wish to acquaint you with the plight of a friend of mine. Let me call him 'Jack'. Jack has a problem of a lunatic kind. Permit me to explain...

This time last year, Jack knocked on the door of my apartment and told me he had a wasps' nest in his brain. He claimed a queen had crawled into his ear one night several weeks before; now the chambers of his skull were filled with workers. Nothing I said would dislodge his belief – or the wasps. As for myself, I was sceptical, although I must admit that when I touched Jack's skull, to my amazement it was warm and fizzing. I proceeded to New York City Health Dept, who proved sympathetic but unhelpful. I was told a queen will take up residence in soft, rotting wood, wherever it may be found (which didn't say much for Jack's brain). The Health Dept insisted it restricted its insecticidal interventions to dwellings and business premises; it was forbidden to carry out any procedures on nests built inside living creatures, whether animal or human.

I subsequently tried a series of physicians – to no avail. They shook their heads and said Jack was ripe for the booby-hatch. This seemed to me an exaggeration, for in all other respects Jack's mind is sound. In the end I consulted a reputable alienist on Jack's behalf. The experienced doc claimed to have corresponded with Charcot in Paris on a similar case. The sole solution for the amelioration of Jack's condition would be to pretend to operate on him and remove the nest. The procedure involved a full anaesthetic during which the patient's head



¹This letter fell out of a foxed copy of an 1813 travelogue by Johanna Schopenhauer (the best-selling author and mother of the Great Pessimist) I found in an antiquarian bookshop in Leipzig at the end of the Cold War. I kept the letter but couldn't afford the book (which incidentally gives an atmospheric portrait of Nottingham in the early 1800s and is reserved in its praise of Derby...). The letter's provenance is unknown & there was no envelope,' said Rolf Venner, when we asked him.

²Rolf Venner has worked as a translator, bookseller, conference administrator, and lecturer (French Language, Literature, & Film at the University of Kent; German/English Translation & Interpreting at the University of Leipzig). He writes fiction and lives in Derby.

When I woke up I decided to draw the two things side by side and, guess what. They looked almost identical:

There it was. The whole spectrum of human technology. The cosmic dust that makes up everything is identical to prehistoric junk found in a well. From the hands' work to the deepest insides of the hands themselves. Between all these a straight line drawn through time, or through space, or through the possibility of space. A line going through the possibility of us perhaps existing, perhaps found in the bottom of a well, perhaps wrapping still around a cosmic bobbin.

It was the middle of the night. I was very groggy and I missed you. I tried to imagine the little orbitals that made up you, and all I could remember were your hands full of salt, chipping off bar nuts.

My dream comforted me, I was glad to finally know what the world was up to, and a universe spooling around itself meant that we would meet again.

And so I'm writing to you, because I wanted you to know too. I hope this letter finds you.

(Well.)

Love,
Clio

P.S. If you're reading this, then it's for you.

s the years away. This letter
 and many others - will be lost
 wd together in hovels. We mus
 Refresh. We have not yet kill
 ation to exterminate - all, b
 stop deluding its imagination
 warheads locked beneath your
 , lying on the stairs. Please
 Let us erase and start over.
 ers are written by another mi
 lls them beings. "Nothing is
 , circling and wheeling onto
 the flap. A reward of some s
 ngs. Would I falter to speak
 what of December? Everything
 ouches, they have carried , b

¹ *Spring and All* is a book of poems first published in 1923 by William Carlos Williams, to whom this letter is notionally addressed.

² Kalen Rowe runs Anklebiters Publishing, a DIY tiny press in Houston, TX providing the community with bled-over printed objects. He has been published in *Gravel*, *Fractal*, *Gargoyle*, and other magazines. Visit him at kalenrowe.com or anklebiterspublishing.co.

shaking his head: 'I won't be needing this.' He prefers Žižek. But his primary passion is painting. Recently he has been preoccupied with attempting to capture 'the spirit of jazz' on canvas. Imagine what that looks like. He does landscapes too. A fantastic oil painting of the post-war prefabs across the valley adorns our living room wall.

I saw him the other day, doing his round.

'What have you been up to, Alan?'

'Only four hundred and forty days until I retire. Just over a year of this fucker left to go!'

All the best,
 Benjamin Myers¹

"It was amusing in places," he sniffed. "But generally speaking a minor work."
 When he is not working Alan is an ~~avid~~ avid

¹ Benjamin Myers' novels include *Pig Iron*, and *Beastings*, which recently won the 2015 Portico Prize. He has also published poetry and journalism. He lives in the Upper Calder Valley, West Yorkshire, where he spends a lot of time just wandering about and watching.

He has written to us about Alan the Postman before, and we hope he does so again. One day, we hope to perhaps feature a letter from Alan himself. Perhaps we will need to wait for another four hundred and forty days.

walking the cobbles, lanes, ginnels and streets that are slick with Pennine rain for years now. Decades. He also knows exactly how many days he has left until retirement.

‘How’s it going Alan?’ I ask.

‘Only one thousand four hundred and thirty one days until retirement.’

Or:

‘What’s new Alan?’

‘Only one thousand one hundred and seventeen days and –’ (here he checks his watch) ‘– three hours until retirement. I’m surrounded by idiots.’

Or:

‘Winter’s coming in cold.’

‘Yes. And only eight hundred days to go exactly. This job is killing me.’

Six years I have known Alan and not once has he been unable to tell me how many days of stuffing soggy parcels through the letterboxes of the valley he has left until retirement.

He has no television or internet or mobile phone. He lives in a house in the woods down the hill from Ted Hughes’s old place. His water comes from a storage tank and in the big freeze of winter 2010 his supply froze completely so he took to bathing in the river instead. I lent him *Post Office* by Charles Bukowski.

‘What did you think?’

‘It was amusing in places,’ he sniffed. ‘But generally speaking, a minor work.’

When he is not working, Alan is an avid attendee of the local cinema. He sends me six page letters critiquing each new release. When he ascertained that I am a writer I gave him a signed copy of one of my novels. A week later he returned it,

Dear Writer,

I have read *Spring and All* too late.¹ The imagination has done more than you could imagine. You sang of parts and made minds tools. And a machine with too many gears to count grinds the years away. This letter, if it appears to be another part – this letter and many others – will be lost. Plums are tossed over the fence. Shovels crowd together in hovels. We must keep going. Refresh. Scroll up, scroll down. Refresh. We have not yet killed each other – all. We have not used the imagination to exterminate – all, but excuse this generation aptly and without stop deluding its imagination with the imagination. Excuse the imaginary warheads locked beneath your floorboards, the complacent blossoms brought in, lying on the stairs. Please excuse everything that begins in winter. Let us erase and start over. I have read *Spring and All* too later. My letters are written by another mind. Another contraption spits out seeds and calls them beings. ‘Nothing is new.’ Quarters slip into space and follow a track, circling and wheeling onto a pile of siblings. The same thing comes out the flap. A reward of some sort, for all our time spent clinging to beginnings. Would I falter to speak of Fall? Yes, that dying is so common. But what of December? Everything already dead. Help the dead souls out of their couches, they have carried, been carried, inside pockets all their lives – they have taken the imagination and loosed it inside boxes smaller than a head – they no longer care to die and simply keep on living thumbs on knobs and buttons. What about the war? Which part in the cycle are we in? Who cares. I am dizzy. Writer, I wish your life braked more todays, more nows – the speed has picked up past all our efforts to grasp on without our arms and then the whole body flailed into orbit. You spoke of an end, but now it passes in a glimpse. Right now – right now I sit on a porch and see a rotted table, became like paper as the a/c leaked on to its

back, slowly, it slowly collapsed to its knees, and then its elbows, until my roommate leaned it against a crate and kicked its spine in. Its legs and arms lay in the weeds where nothing with its own life touches them now. Maybe these words are cruel. I have spoken nothing of Spring! I have not healed any suffering but my own. That word, own, is just now getting ahead of itself. How long must we keep digging? How much dirt must we load into the rusted wheelbarrow that keeps spilling it all back out? All we have is our dirt. Our biology. Our shapes and sounds, you left us with the parts standing in for their wholes. And I have done nothing but to take them and scatter something old.

Thank you,
Kalen Rowe²

Dear Jon and co,

The cottage was down a narrow lane hemmed in by ancient dry stone walls. It was built in 1641 to house weavers who worked their looms in the half-light and slept beneath rafters slung with the fetid woollen hides of sheep and alpacas. Its frontage was covered with a thick Virginia creeper whose waxy leaves would turn a fire-red colour that first autumn. The postman had delivered our mail several times before he stopped on the doorstep one day with a stack of jiffy bags in his hand and, with one eyebrow raised, said, “What is all this stuff?” His accent was not that of a local and his trimmed beard suggested an artistic bent. I explained that it was mainly CDs and books that I had been sent for review.

‘What type of music?’ he wondered.

‘All sorts. Mainly guitar music. Rock.’

‘I hate rock music. *Hate it*. Now jazz, however...’

Soon I was conversing each day on the doorstep with Alan. He liked critical theory, jazz – especially Scandinavian contemporary jazz – and painting. He told me that once a year he and his girlfriend go to Newcastle and then take a ferry to Norway, where they spend a fortnight cycling through forests, sleeping in a tent and living off nuts and nips of whisky. Occasionally, if their budget will allow, Alan treats them to a café meal.

Alan did a PhD in the cinematic output of Hitchcock and is officially a qualified Doctor of Horror. After three days as a trainee teacher he walked out and enrolled at the post office instead. He’s well into his fifties now and has been

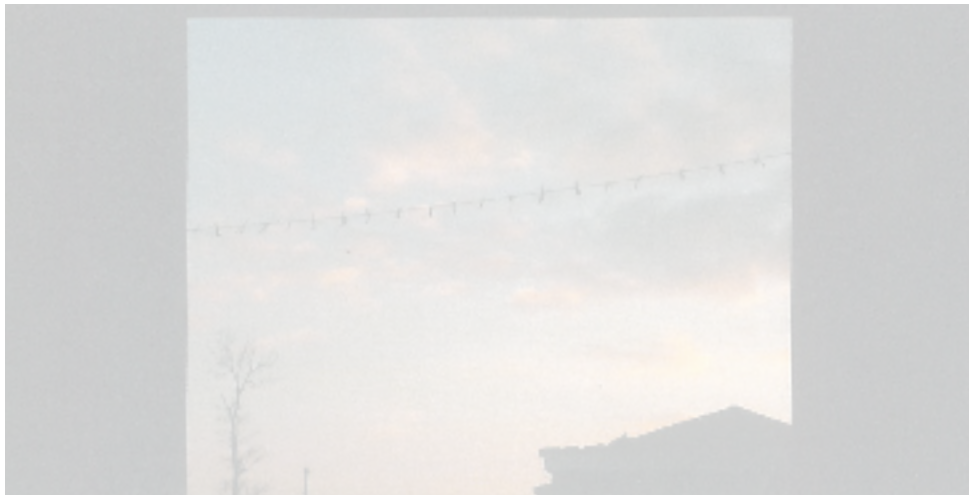


⁴'I just want to be paid what I am owed, on time and every month, and to be treated with respect. Is that too much to ask?' - Sita Ram, a plaster and masonry worker based in Qatar, quoted in an Amnesty International report on Migrant Labour Abuse, May 2015.

A note to the reader:

Kathryn's letter arrived as a series of postcards, some of which appear to have been mislaid en route and all of which were water-damaged in some way. We have reproduced them here as far as we were able. We would recommend removing the two sheets on which these postcards appear, cutting along the dotted lines, and reading them in sequence. If you are reading this issue on a screen then you will just have to use your imagination.

2. Momos - Tibetan dumplings



⁵Kathryn Hummel is the author of *Poems from Here* (2014) and the forthcoming *Broken Lines: Writings from a Disrupted Lifetime in Bangladesh*. Her poetry, fiction and non-fiction has been published and performed throughout Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the US and Asia, often in collaboration with musicians and fellow writers. Her website www.kathrynhummel.com serves as a travel diary/static set of postcards.



³Lentil curry and rice, a staple dish in Nepal.

7/

Ishmael, I am writing to you because I thought I should miss somebody, though I didn't and I don't. [...] You'd approve of this drifting, though I have the safety of anchors in sight. There's a presence of gadgets and humans but I'm choosing to be alone [...] There is sunshine in the blue sky and on the sheet of the lake below; there are momos² and lemon tea [...] I've attained the desired state of mind with no witnesses. Maybe this is my way and always will be [...] Just know that it has happened, Ishmael, and be happy too.

8/

[...] We should live every night with the knowledge that there is a party waiting for us. I'm in a side street tea shop with the chaos at my left shoulder. The waiters have sat down to dhal bhat,³ which seems a good meal to have to last you until midnight: you're unlikely to do anything too mad with dhal bhat in your belly. This waning year has not been bad. I have crossed boundaries; I have kicked the prostrate; I have bled from my mouth and still [...] I met you and felt the hours, the heights and the mornings. God give you joy, if you follow a Gregorian calendar.

11/

Dear Ishmael, I fear my time is up. Perhaps the well-intended hints have been correct and it is indeed time to stop being a disaster, though it's too early in this interval of freedom and transience to make convictions. I am waiting to go back to your country while the new era's slaves are waiting to board for Doha.⁴ Truly I have too much leisure – even writing to you is self-indulgent. There is space in transit to take a few more missteps before landing. What I am supposed to do here is [...]

12/

Kathmandu did not want to see me leave [...] Only a bodhisattva may forget that peace is relative to entropy. When two forces push against each other is it possible to remain serene?

I tried to phone you from this airport. I'll try you from the next.



¹Reference to the final line of *Tonight* by Agha Shahid Ali.



1/

I know you don't like the name Ishmael but I need to call you something; your real and chosen names just don't fit. 'Call me 'the Sage' tonight?'¹ I would like to go one day to your house in the hills. I know you won't mind receiving me in your casual generosity, large as the span of your boringly beautiful hands. Be there when I am there. Let's repeat the same conversation, without the termination so impending, without my trauma and my drunkenness (yours, I can't control) [...] Under the frigid sun I feel free, a country away from yours. Mountains do not scrutinise, do not judge.

3/

I telephoned last night to report pleasant things from under Macchapucchere. Despite the lectures that came in its shadow, I know (more than you) that the worst things about myself – about anyone – are already inscribed; known; near; closed; embraced and reviled.

4/

I'm impatient until I get what I want, wearing myself down and out. Isn't that what you noticed? [...] Running to here, the plan was to make my peace with the last place by the date of my return. Timing is important in this way, but distance lengthens it. Yesterday I wondered what I should do about you; how to fix more hours together. You will always be connected to the breach of the land I wish to make right again, want to have all over again.

6/

Today I feel the absence of all the birds that have flown. Ours, especially. I wonder why I write, when all the effort is mine. [...] Ishmael, I wanted more of you then, but wanting wanes. There is an abundance of people in the world who desire our hides. Maybe this will soothe my teeming head more than wine, hemlock, limbs and all derivatives.

Jonathan Ellis

Sheffield

Note to the reader: This is our second set of postcards in this issue. Again, we recommend that you remove these three sheets, cut along the dotted lines, and read these numbered cards in sequence. We think you will find it worth your while going to the trouble.



¹ According to the author: 'The house, which my parents lived in since 1971, was sold on 9 October. The last thing I took from the house was a handful of cooking apples from a neighbour's tree that overhangs the back garden; I left some for the new owners. The post has been re-directed.'

19



² These cards were originally written on squares of bright and texturally pleasing yellow paper. The author initially believed the paper to have come from a Japanese stationery shop in Montreal, which he visited on his honeymoon eight years ago; on further reflection, he suspects it was purchased in 2004, on a trip to Japan to interview the novelist Haruki Murakami. In either case, the paper was made in Japan. We wish we could share it with you. The author also notes that his father's Post-It notes were not half as beautiful as the yellow Japanese paper, but that he has kept them all. For safe keeping. Even the last one.



³ Jonathan Ellis teaches at the University of Sheffield. His edited book, *Letter Writing Among Poets: From William Wordsworth to Elizabeth Bishop*, has just been published by Edinburgh University Press.

The photos used here were taken by the author at his parent's house when he was clearing it out in preparation for sale. They depict: the windfall apples from a neighbour's tree, the front garden path, and a fallen-down bird-feeder.



17/

The occasional postcard.

18/

Circulars. Reminders.

19/

I probably need to re-direct this post
when the family house is sold.¹

20/

'Don't tell your brother I'm not eating',
were I think his final words.

21/

Or 6206 on the Post-It note.²

22/

They probably mean something I'll never
know.

23/

If you know, can you tell me?

24/

I'm not sure who this is addressed to but
it's by me.³



9/

He gave Mum insulin twice a day. Remembering it was one of the last things he remembered to do.

10/

I don't know if he remembered to shave. I forgot to ask my brother.

11/

The PIN no. worked for a week until the bank received the letter he was dead.

12/

They wrote me a letter to apologise. 'You may still continue to receive letters addressed to your father.'

13/

Yes. They keep arriving.

14/

Subscriptions to *Time Magazine*.
National Geographic. The Open University.

15/

Other banks.

16/

Debt companies.



1/

On 25 May my Dad died suddenly in his sleep. I've written that sentence so many times in the last few months that I almost believe it to be true.

2/

I don't really know if it was sudden or in his sleep. I don't even know if it was 25 May. Perhaps it was the day before. Around midnight.

3/

For the last two weeks of his life Dad didn't eat or drink. He had what most people euphemistically call a 'water infection'. It hurt when he went to pee.

4/

Dad's solution to this problem was to stop drinking. He gave up liquid in stages. First tea. Then orange juice. Then milk.

5/

He never gave up water because he never drank water.

6/

'Dad, you can't stop drinking,' I said. 'You're going to die.'
Not believing me, or perhaps believing me, the last drink he gave up was Lucozade. 'Everything else tastes of metal.'

7/

The water infection didn't kill him. The death certificate said it was a secondary cause.

8/

On arriving at the house I found his last letter. It was written to himself as much as anybody else. A rectangular yellow Post-It note, reminding himself to give Mum her insulin and to shave. He also wrote the PIN no. of his debit card in the top right-hand corner. He couldn't seem to remember numbers the last few months.