

Luke Neima  
Helena Durham  
Grahame Williams  
Cassie Gonzales  
Ioanna Mavrou  
Catharina van Bohemen  
Sam Riviere  
Kevin Barry

*with illustrations by Gwen Burns*

*Issue 6, Summer 2015*

Dear Reader,

Greetings from Dunwich beach.<sup>1</sup> It's early here, and the dawn is cold and damp. But it's going to be a fine day, and I wish you were here. Perhaps some of you are, in fact; there are a thousand others who have cycled overnight from London and are now reclining on the uncomfortable shingle. There's a tang of ozone in the air, and the waft of vinegar on hot chips. The beach cafe is doing its best trade of the year.

This is the first time I've done the ride,<sup>2</sup> but I've been to Dunwich before. As a child, I came here with my family for summer holidays, staying in a cottage just a short run through the woods from the beach. I knew little about existential dread in those days, but it was still unnerving to stumble across the last few gravestones in those woods, the final remnants of a once-mighty trading port which had long since been washed away by the sea.<sup>3</sup> Within a few summers those gravestones were also gone, fallen to the shingled shore below, where my father would sometimes light a fire with gathered driftwood and barbecue a pan of mackerel, or bake potatoes in the fading coals. This makes him sound more rugged and outdoorsy than he actually was; in truth the beach barbecue probably only happened once or twice, although I'm sure he aspired to it happening more. Most of the time he was more of an indoors dad, by default; there were four of us and we kept him busy. He worked from home, and he knew how to cook, clean, put us to bed. There wasn't often time for adventures. But it's impossible for me to stand on Dunwich beach without thinking of that barbecue: the six of us shivering in the stiff North Sea breeze; the food burning our mouths even as it went cold; Dad trying not to look so proud of himself. And it's impossible for me to stand on this beach without thinking of my father, because he was diagnosed with cancer not very long ago.

'Well, here's the good news,' he told us, after speaking to the doctors: 'I'm not going to die this year.'

He was wrong. The thing happened with a wild kind of speed that was hard to comprehend, and it kept accelerating until three weeks later he was dead. It felt something

---

like the way Timothy Spall, playing the role of Albert Pierrepont in *The Last Hangman*,<sup>4</sup> enters the condemned man's cell and marches him briskly but not unkindly to his death. There was no time to look around or protest, only to accept what was happening and fall into the rhythms of it. There were ten days of visiting him in hospital, still imagining we had months to come, and ten days of nursing him at home, saying those things we would all want to say if we had the chance.

Because I have some news for you: death comes for us all in the end. I know it's the summer and the trees are in their full majesty and the swallows are swinging through the fields and you are probably on holiday somewhere with the sun in your eyes and you desperately want life to be like this for ever. But there it is. We all know it. Death comes for us all; and, worse, death comes to those we love, usually when we least expect it. And so what a privilege it was, in those staggering final days, to be able to say the things that matter, to be able to say goodbye. What a gift it was to sit beside his bed all night, holding his hand and listening to him breathe and watching the sun come up once again.

My father was a decent man, and a wonderful parent, and our relationship was so free of complications that in the end the things you might imagine saying beside a deathbed had already been said many times over. *I love you. Thank you. I owe you everything.* But still it was a privilege to say them out loud.

Reader, I don't know who the important people are in your life, or if they are still with you, or how your relationship with them works. But it will only take a moment to write them a note – in a letter, a text, an email – and let them know what they mean to you. You never know. Time isn't always on our side. The ground is crumbling beneath our feet.

I'm hungry. It's time to go and eat chips. I hope you enjoy this issue, and in particular the very fine illustrations Gwen Burns<sup>5</sup> has done for us. Take care. Write soon. We'd love to hear from you.

Yours,  
The Editor.

<sup>1.</sup> Full disclosure: I'm not actually on Dunwich beach at the time of writing. But I will be there at the point of launching this issue, and the entire narrative construct of the letter works much better if I frame it as being written from the beach, and so I would appreciate it if you would suspend your disbelief.

<sup>2.</sup> The *Dunwich Dynamo*, which follows a route from London Fields in east London to Dunwich on the Suffolk coast, has been running in some form since 1993. It takes place on the Saturday night closest to the full moon in July.

<sup>3.</sup> *Men of Dunwich*, by Rowland Parker, is – despite apparently only being concerned with 50% of the population – a good introduction to the history of this lost city. For the full dose of existential dread and mournful humour, however, it would be difficult to better W.G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*, which passes through as it perambulates the back roads of Norfolk and Suffolk.

<sup>4.</sup> *Pierrepoint: The Last Hangman*, 2005, dir. Adrian Shergold.

<sup>5.</sup> Gwen Burns is an illustrator. More of her work can be found at [www.gwenburns.co.uk](http://www.gwenburns.co.uk)



Dearest Friend,

When you speak of our letters as one-way streets, I think of Walter Benjamin,<sup>1</sup> who found in Proust's letters the 19th century reduced to its essence – words entirely circumscribed by a love of ceremony:

*"My dear Madam,  
I just noticed that I forgot my cane at  
your house yesterday; please be so  
good as to entrust it to the bearer of  
this letter.*

*Marcel Proust*

*P.S. Kindly pardon me for disturbing  
you; I just found my cane."*

That Proust sent his letter anyway is, of course, absurd, but the action also speaks of a sensibility we have lost in the transition to modernity, the knowledge that letter-writing is the act of dialogue condensed into physical form. More absurd than sending the note would be to crumple it up and drop it into the waste basket, as that act would be akin to admitting one had spent the past half-hour making conversation with the figure in a mirror.

A true master of the form, like Proust, is only too aware that the letter can be an end-in-itself, and that it can only be so insofar as the ceremony surrounding it transcends any message it contains. Every epistolary address calls a series into being – the ideal exchange that each mailed sheet of A4 aspires to. A letter is a single shard in an ever-growing mosaic of relationship, the art of which embarrasses silence, commands continuation. Despite finding itself somewhat neglected by our modern culture, the epistolary form remains the original literature of fragmentation.<sup>2</sup>

I remain your humble and trusting etc. etc. etc.

Luke Neima<sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup> If you don't already know of Walter Benjamin then perhaps it's best you start with *The Arcades Project*, which remained unfinished at the time of his death in 1940.

<sup>2</sup> This letter was originally submitted for the first issue of *The Letters Page*, and recently discovered crammed behind the desk with a stack of other important papers. We feel it has stood the test of time.

<sup>3</sup> Luke Neima's writing and translation has appeared online in the *White Review*, *Prospect* and *Granta*. He is an editorial assistant at *Granta*.

Dear Editor,

*The Letters Page!* Available in different formats! Here's hoping an ePub version that enables partially sighted readers such as myself to choose a resizable sans serif font is now in the pipeline.<sup>1</sup>

Talking of sight, I am writing this letter six hours before undergoing cataract surgery on my only eye. The ophthalmologist tells me his surgical complication rate is 0.2%. Although this sounds extremely low, I lingered beneath the salmon pink clouds on Friday, and on Saturday considered the might of the delicate snowdrop planted in memory of my godson, Alex. Will I ever see such sights again?

Have you considered an audio version of the journal?

Three words are on my mind: serendipitous, phacoemulsification and toric. Thankfully no one will poke a stick into my eye to dislodge the opaque lens, as might have happened in the 6th century BC. But, as they say, what goes around comes around, somewhat differently.

When Perspex cockpit shields shattered, wartime RAF pilots sometimes sustained penetrating ocular injuries. Ophthalmologist Harold Ridley realised Perspex was inert. The eye would heal even though fragments remained. Later in the 1940s he developed an intraocular lens (IOL), made from similar material, to replace an extracted cataract-affected lens. Initial results were poor.

The introduction of the operating microscope, and subsequently micro-instruments, made extra- rather than intra-capsular extraction possible. This leaves some of the lens's bag behind, into which the IOL is placed securely. By the late '80s the insertion of an IOL became standard practice. Thick-lensed spectacles were consigned to the museum.

The next challenge was to reduce the incision size (and thus the complication rate), and to develop a lens that would fit through it.

---

Phacoemulsification, first used in the 1960s but not generally in the NHS until the '90s, emulsifies the lens with ultrasound. The same instrument (a very small and hygienic stick) aspirates the lens remnants.

In the third millennium AD along came the rollable lens. This is placed within an instrument (a very clever stick) small enough to fit through the tiny 2-3mm incision needed for phacoemulsification. The IOL is released and unfurls within the residual lens capsule. Sutures are no longer needed.

A standard intraocular lens replaces the natural lens and corrects any pre-existing myopia or hypermetropia. A toric lens also corrects astigmatism and is the one for me. Fancier IOLs are available privately.

Well, that shift into the factual has whiled away some of the morning and depersonalized the events now four hours away. As a former ophthalmic nursing tutor, I would rather be scrubbed-up, assisting and teaching, than lying on the table, under the knife. When I started nursing, cataract patients were nursed in bed for several days. Today, DV,<sup>2</sup> I will be home and eating shepherd's pie by 8pm.

Would you like to know which post-operative format of *The Letters Page* I will need?<sup>3</sup>

Kind regards,

Helena Durham<sup>4</sup>



<sup>1</sup>. There are indeed plans for a digital edition of *The Letters Page* which will include full accessibility options and, potentially, an audio version. Bear with us.

<sup>2</sup>. An abbreviation of 'Deo volante,' the latin phrase meaning 'God willing' or 'if God wills it'. Which we totally knew without having to ask or look it up.

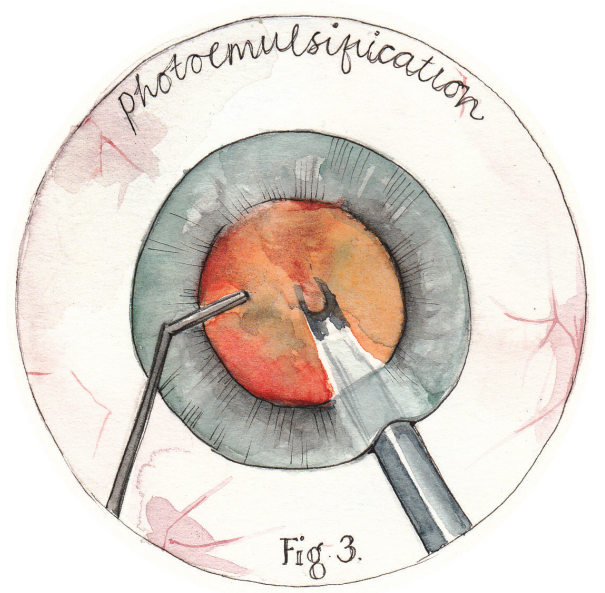
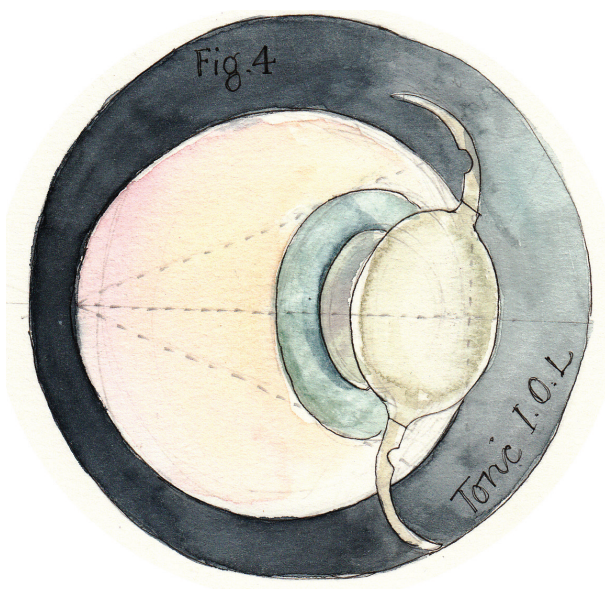
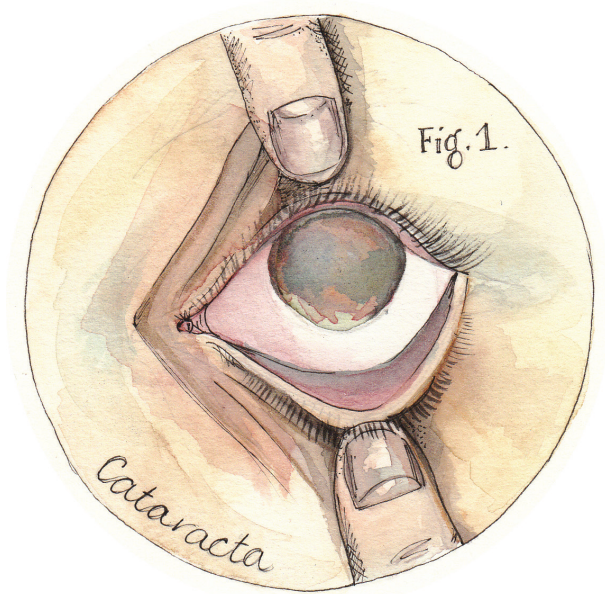
<sup>3</sup>. We did want to know. We expect, dear kind reader, that you would also like to know. Here's what Helena told us:

'Fear not! The operation went very well, thanks. The surgeon came to remove the dressing a couple of hours after surgery. Instantly (no exaggeration) the world, as much of it as could be seen from my hospital bed, appeared so much brighter and sharper-edged than it had earlier: contrast was more apparent and colours more vivid and intense (a lemon yellow wall, a pale wood door with white architrave and scarlet and white NHS slipper socks). I realised then how much the cataract had dimmed and faded everything. I'd kept thinking things were mucky, so when I returned home the following day I found I'd been keeping my house super clean.

Being driven along the ring road that evening to stay with friends was a scary experience as all the single lights appeared to have multiplied many-fold. A personal firework display! This temporary aberration settled within a few days. The shepherd's pie was very tasty, particularly the crispy edging scraped off the inside of the dish'.

<sup>4</sup>. Helena Durham has been a staff nurse, clinical nurse teacher, curate, hospital chaplain, and a mature undergraduate at the University of Nottingham. She has published work in *The Lumen*, a journal of medical humanities.





*In the library*

Dear Sadie, Alice, Sacha,

Mum was sorting out the roof-space last week and she found the Super-Valu<sup>1</sup> bags full of old letters. She wants to throw them out. Imaginary girls, I need your advice.

It started in second form. Before maths on a Monday morning the boy Lyttle doled out folded squares of paper with names handwritten on them. For weeks I watched and didn't know what they were. Then my friend Ben got one. He explained. If Lyttle likes you he'll tell the girls at his church about you and they'll write you a letter. After that I did all kinds to make Lyttle like me: faked an interest in Christian rock music, played touch rugby, laughed at his toothless jokes.

It paid off. I got one. Her name was Rachel and she ended her letter with three kisses. Lyttle said she was blonde and wore hats. I poured everything I had into my reply, went on for pages in my neatest cursive, crossed four capital letter kisses at the end, added a PS, a PPS and a PPPS. I gave the letter to Lyttle and waited. The next Monday he brought five replies, one from Rachel and one each from four new girls. It was like hitting the jackpot on the chip shop gambling machine we weren't supposed to play. I wrote them all. A week later, more wrote back.

Sometimes I'd get letters written by more than one girl, the handwriting and pen colour changing mid-page to **Hi Grahame, this is Kerstin, I'm sitting next to Aoife in English and she keeps talking about you. You should write to me. Oops, she won't allow that. Sorry Aoife! :p Lots of love, Kerstin xxx** Then I'd write to Kerstin too.

The best were the long letters, the endurance letters, Lyttle handing me fat envelopes stuffed with six, seven pages of A4, the rest of the boys settling for wee notes scrawled on graph paper, their kiss count dropping. It got so I didn't have time to read them all. They soon came with friendship bracelets and drawings, pages

So look the summer's come again

Hello, mein  
name ist Kerstin!! Aoife!!!

She's coming over, we'll go out walking, make a call on the phone



---

doused with Chloë, bits of scissor-snipped ties, cut hair, eyelashes.<sup>2,3</sup> **Writing to you is magical somehow, as if every word I put on each sheet of paper is worth its weight in gold.** I thought it would lead to them giving me everything.

Only I wouldn't meet the girls from the letters. Lyttle kept telling me what they looked like, how knockout they were. He kept trying to persuade me to come to the park after school. I told myself that meeting them was cheating, that what they looked like didn't matter, that the letter meant I could speak to them as they really were, with complete honesty. Twenty-two years later and I haven't shaken that last thought. I can't quite trust a relationship that doesn't have an exchange of letters at its heart. That can't be right can it?

Eventually Lyttle refused to deliver the letters. He said I was getting too big for my boots and the girls were getting mad. Everything ended.

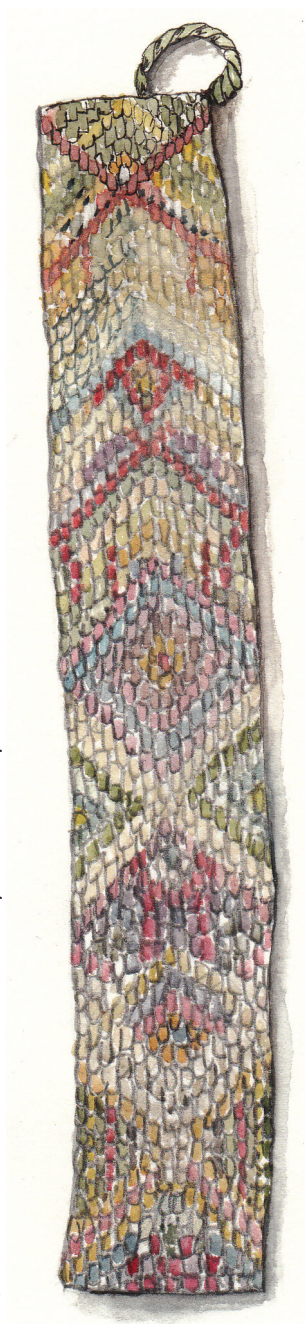
So, what do you think? Should I let Mum throw out the letters? What use can I have for them? I've written you all one the last three years and known I'd not get a reply. Send me one or two words, anything.

All my love,

Grahame<sup>4</sup>

xxxx

You're not going to get me through this are you? X4



<sup>1</sup> Super-Valu is a chain of convenience stores common in Northern Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> The original copy of this letter came with a fragment of friendship bracelet, along with a large lock of hair. There were some in the editorial office who found this somewhat unsettling.

<sup>3</sup> The original copy of this letter also came doused in a perfume later identified as 'Fantasy by Britney Spears', a fragrance both unsubtle and pervasive which soon coated most of the other paperwork in the office along with the clothes and skin of those working there. We would encourage other writers making submissions not to follow Mr Williams' example.

<sup>4</sup> Grahame Williams was born in County Down, Northern Ireland and now lives and works in London. In 2014 Grahame won a place as a fiction writer on the Jerwood/Arvon mentoring scheme and has been mentored by Jenn Ashworth. He spent the mentorship year completing his first novel, *Samson & Goliath*, as well as working on a series of stories related to the novel. The letter that appears in *The Letters Page* is addressed to the three girls who feature in *Samson & Goliath*, two fictional and stolen from other books, one 'real'.

Dear Sadie, A  
out the roof - up  
found the su  
old letter  
out. Imagine  
advice.



It st  
Matty on a M  
Lytle doped  
paper with no  
weeks & water  
they were. The  
He explained.  
the girls at his  
write you a  
kinds to make  
interest in Chris  
touch rugby. It

was Rachel and  
kisses. Lytle  
hats. I poured  
went on for  
scored four cap  
added a PS  
gave the letter  
next Monday  
from Rachel  
girls. It, w

So look the summer's come again.

---

Dear ~~Mr McGreggor~~ Sirs,

I think they call this a speculative letter.<sup>1</sup> I guess because I have to speculate that you find it interesting. I don't know. I heard you're looking for other people's letters and I got a good one for you, only it's not a letter. I got it in the mail a few years ago, and, I don't know. Maybe it's not the kind of thing you want.

In this tape some girl, a cute girl, maybe fourteen years old walks into the scene and she's wearing some ridiculous Sherlock Holmes hat and her t-shirt is stretched all tight across her belly because she's maybe six months pregnant. You can't always tell with real young girls. *[Redacted section]*<sup>2</sup> But that's not the point of this letter.

So Prego examines this dead body, some old lady, lying spread-~~fucking~~-eagle on some dinky linoleum floor and then she calls for her sergeant and this little boy comes running into the scene. He's scribbling madly into his notebook, like there's no way he's actually writing anything, and then Prego says, she ~~fucking~~ proclaims, 'cause of death: Murder!'

The story is that it's Christmas Eve and the dead old lady is a social worker in this orphanage. I mean, real stretch, right? She's probably a real social worker in this real foster home and this whole video is probably some art therapy ~~shit~~ or vocational training ~~crap~~ that's she's doing with these kids. I don't know. I'd heard about that kind of stuff going on when I was in juvie, but I never did get to do any of it myself. But my sister did, and that's what I'm trying to tell you. Essy got all kinds of opportunities like that. Things she wouldn't of got to do if I hadn't of *[Redacted section]*<sup>3</sup> made it possible to live in that place. I think she knows that.

In this tape Essy is still a kid and she's playing some kind of local nobody. The town drunk maybe. Prego calls her a hobo at one point but I don't think that's right. She's not on the move. Not going a hundred miles across Nebraska, just you and your trucker. But I'm not trying to say that one is better than the other. Being a hobo isn't some kind of ~~fucking~~ vocation,

---

and most the ones I knew were drinking their meals, same as anybody.

So it's no surprise when the cops arrest Essy for murder, but right then when Prego slams the cuffs on her everything freezes, I mean the fuzz, the orphans, everybody, and Essy stands there with her face looking up to the sky and the whole thing is like the ~~fucking~~ last supper. They call it a Tableau. It's a ~~fucking~~ TABLEAU.

So there's a murder trial and it's full of these kids in ridiculous hats and tiaras talking, giving witness against Essy. No one has any real evidence but a couple of them say she probably did something to someone and getting her for this crime is making up for the last one they didn't get her for. 'The greater good,' one of them says.

Finally there's this scene where Essy ~~finally~~ tells her lawyer her alibi. Turns out right when the old lady was kicking it Essy was at the other orphanage across town bringing secret presents to all those little unwanted kids. And her lawyer is ~~fucking~~ over the MOON. 'The jury is going to love the orphan angle! People go ~~fucking~~ crazy for orphans', she says. And it's true. People ~~fucking~~ love stories with little orphan white kids who can sing and dance their tragedy like it's comedy. Whatever. But Essy says she can't tell her alibi, because then those little kids will know there's no Santa. 'They already lost their families, I can't take Santy from them too', she says.

So we're back in the courtroom and the judge says, 'guilty!' and the camera is looking over Essy's shoulder at all the other kids from all the other scenes, only now they're dressed in rags and have dirt smeared all over their faces. A dozen Tiny ~~fucking~~ Tims. And the camera sits there, and it's like two minutes of these golden reactions. Yeah, there are a couple of kids mugging it up, but for the most part it's some god ~~damned~~ subtle shit. I look at those kids and I know I have no regrets. I guess that's not what I'm supposed to say. But we all got to find our own way out of the past, and I still got 7 to 10 years to work on mine. I don't know.

---

Then the video goes black. No credits. No music, nothing. The tape came a few years ago in a plain brown envelope, and I guess I'm still unwrapping it. Maybe you could use it for your project. I don't know. It's the best letter I ever got.

Sincerely,

Linda Lopez.  
L.L.

<sup>1</sup> This letter is a work of fiction. The original typescript carried strikethroughs, redacted sections, and handwritten corrections. We have followed the corrections, indicated the strikethroughs, and noted the redacted sections below.

<sup>2</sup> 'Like I know this one girl and one day she looks like she finished a good sized hoagie and the next day she goes into labor right there in the dining hall. At first some of us thought she'd been stabbed, which we'd all been waiting for anyway'.

<sup>3</sup> 'hadn't of ~~created the~~ killed our mom'

<sup>4</sup> Cassie Gonzales's work has been published by *The Kenyon Review* and *Tin House*, and has won or been shortlisted for writing competitions held by *Granta*, *The Paris Review*, and the BBC, among others. Originally from Tucson, Arizona, Cassie now lives in Stockholm, Sweden and blogs at [www.cassiegonzales.com](http://www.cassiegonzales.com).







so it's no surprise when the cops arrest Essy for murder, but right then when Prego slams the cuffs on her everything freezes, I mean the fuzz, the orphans, everybody, and Essy stands there with her face looking up to the sky and the whole thing is like the ~~fucking~~ last supper. They call it a Tableau. It's a ~~fucking~~ Tableau.

so there's a murder trial and it's full of these kids incredible hats and tiaras talking, giving witness against Essy. No one has any real evidence but a couple of them say she probably did something to someone, and getting her for this crime is making up for the last one they didn't get her for. "The greater good," one of them says.

Finally there's this scene where Essy ~~finally~~ tells her lawyer her alibi. Turns out right when the old lady was kicking it Essy was at the other orphanage across town bringin' secret presents to all those little unwanted kids. And her lawyer is ~~swearing~~ over the moon. "The jury is going to love the orphan angle! People go ~~fucking~~ crazy for orphans." she says. And it's true. People ~~fucking~~ love stories with little orphan white kids who can sing and dance their tragedy like it's comedy. Whatever. But Essy says she can't tell her alibi, because then those little kids will know there's no Santa. "They already lost their families, I can't take Santa from them too," she says.

so were back in the courtroom and the judge says, "guilty!" and the camera is looking over Essy's shoulder at all the other kids from all the other scenes, only now they're dressed in rags and have dirt smeared all over their faces. A dozen tiny ~~fucking~~ films. And the camera sits there, and it's like two minutes of these golden reactions. Yeah, there are a couple of kids mugging it up, but for the most part it's some god ~~damn~~ subtle shit. I look at those kids and I know I have no regrets. I guess that's not what I'm supposed to say. But we all got to find our own way out of the past, and I still got 7 to 10 years to work on mine. I don't know.

Then the video goes black. Not credits. No music, nothing. ~~It~~ <sup>The tape</sup> came a few years ago in a plain brown envelope, and I guess I'm still unwrapping it. X maybe you could use it for your project. I don't know. It's the best letter I ever got.

Sincerely,

Linda Lopez

L. L.

---

*Layover Jetlag Lei Plane Ghost Love*

Ghosts are not what I thought they would be, says a man with a backwards baseball cap to a woman wearing a Louisiana State t-shirt and way too much eye make-up. She has cartoon eye, here exaggerated eyelashes and blue eye-shadow make the blue of her eyes even more pronounced, her expression of surprise at what the man is saying blown out of proportion. And when she answers, she speaks in Spanish. She says, Well, ghosts are tricky.

The man replies, also in Spanish, something about fog, and I'm either suddenly fluent in a new language or so tired that I'm having auditory hallucinations. I look at the woman's eyes again. They seem big but not so weird anymore. They laugh and sip their coffee and I go back to waiting for my flight.

This terminal is haunted, says one flight attendant to another as they pass us by. I turn to check if the couple heard but they are lost in conversation and this time I can't understand a word they're saying.

Jetlag takes over and my eyes are heavy.

Try not to think about it, I hear someone say as I drift, and though they're not saying it to me I try to follow the advice. I try not to think about how I got on one plane crossing the Atlantic and then another from East to West coast and now wait to take a third to the middle of the Pacific while he's already reached his destination just hours from where we started from. I try not to think about beginnings and endings and all these places that are simultaneously home, and I am several people, one of whom is currently sitting with her feet up on a beat-up suitcase in LAX waiting, another one still on a plane flying, always flying, one back home, another somewhere else entirely, all those multiple versions of me, I try not to think because there are too many thoughts. One of my other selves somewhere jumps in a warm pool, listens to palm trees, this is the self I think about when I need quiet, I slip in and out of her consciousness,

---

feel the water and sun on my face, close my eyes, feet on suitcase, airport traffic buzzing by.

Maybe I'm the ghost haunting the terminal. Maybe this isn't really LAX. Maybe the plane crashed and I never made it to the other side. Or maybe I'm lazy with jetlag and I'm sad that nobody's picking me up and when I get home to Honolulu I'll buy myself a drink, and a lei from one of the airport stands and welcome myself home.

I.M.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ioanna Mavrou is a writer from Nicosia, Cyprus. Her short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Electric Literature*, *Okey-Panky*, *The Rumpus*, *The Drum*, and elsewhere. She runs a tiny publishing house called Book Ex Machina and is the editor of *Matchbook Stories*: a literary magazine in matchbook form.

## Layover Jetlag

Ghosts are not what a man with a bag wearing a Louisiana eye makeup. She eyelashes and blue eyes even more prone at what the man. And when she ~~says~~ says, Well, ghosts are the man replies, and I'm either so tired that I look at the woman not so weird anymore and I go back to this terminal is to another as the couple heard but and this time I saying.

Jetlag takes over  
Try not to think  
I drift, and that  
I try to follow the  
law I got an one

P,

This morning I went to see my friend Gabrielle who lives with her cat and some prayer flags through the trees. If she's opened her blinds, I can tell whether she's downstairs. But she's often in bed. She's very sick. Anyway, this morning she was making toast, the nurse was coming and I made a great mess of grass clippings all over her floor. 'Look,' she said and gave me a beautiful, battered bamboo broom to deal with them. Then the nurse came and I went to the letterbox and there was your postcard: *Composition II in Red, Blue and Yellow*<sup>1</sup> saying you were going to Andalusia because that is what I need after my heart operation with lots of pain, but do you know some good cheap restaurants in New Zealand because friends are coming there in October?

We never went to the Mondrian museum that day. I didn't understand that everything was so close – is so close in Holland – or the Netherlands – which we never call it down here. But I wanted Vermeer and the Rijksmuseum. I'll sit, you look, you said when we got there. Too many people – I have a headache thinking about my park in Persia but look at the broom and the clouds in Little Street. Of course I wanted to see everything – if you live this far away and are a little bit Dutch... But someone who had to sit because his head hurt from thinking about his park in Persia – that was a new sentence, a new thought. And now it's your heart, more pain and Andalusia. Oh dear oh dear. Your poor heart – I hope you are still in love. Are you? It will be hot and Arabic in Andalusia. You will love it – all those arabesques. I have never been but once I walked the Camino and met a man from Andalusia who knew about trees. He said there was a tree from New Zealand in Cataluña called metrosideros, with red flowers. We have a tree called a pohutukawa with red flowers but I didn't think there could be one in Spain. Anyway, when I came home, I discovered that it really is called metrosideros – which means iron heart – it's a very tough tree AND there really is one in Cataluña. V old.

---

But to your friends. There are many places to eat, especially in Auckland, but I don't know the South Island so well – I think of it as empty, cold, beautiful, and probably bad coffee. But I'm probably wrong – just haven't been for ages.

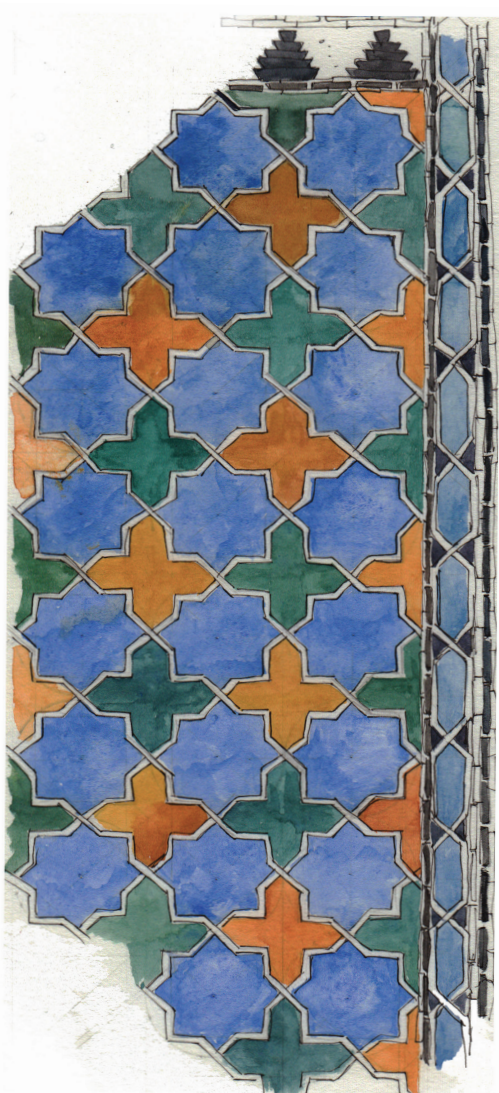
And now my neighbour across the landing is doing his violin practice – slow arpeggios followed by Bach – I know his routine pretty well. Soon Pierre the French hippy will wake and put the Rolling Stones on. He has a table and a mirror outside his flat – he lives on the ground floor and the children from the other flats seem to run in and out of his all day – it's the school holidays. I think he is a kind of Pied Piper.

I wish it was not your friends coming – but you could never bear the long flight – your poor head, your poor heart.

*Kia kahi*<sup>2</sup> is what we say here – like *courage mon brave*.

C<sup>3</sup>





<sup>1.</sup> *Composition II in Red, Blue and Yellow* is a 1930 painting by Piet Mondrian, with the three primary colours arranged as square tiles against a white ground.

<sup>2.</sup> A Maori phrase translated as 'be strong, be brave, keep going, get stuck in,' according to [maoridictionary.co.nz](http://maoridictionary.co.nz)

<sup>3.</sup> Catharina van Bohemen was born to a Dutch father and an English mother who met at the Princess Ballroom in Wellington after WWII. They had no other family in New Zealand, and her mother, an orphan who never met her Dutch grandmother, made her and her siblings write to Oma and Opa the moment they could hold pencils. Letters were almost sacred – a sign that they were not alone and that there was another place where she once belonged. She loves writing, receiving and reading letters. She has recently completed two essays in letter form about Jane Austen and is presently working on an essay about the Madonna in art – which may also be a letter.



*To whomever, if the following does not pertain to you please stop reading. I am away from my offices for the rest of the future with little or no internet access.*

To the man with the pink bougainvillea in his buttonhole on the steps outside:

This time yesterday I was yet to collect from the clear bay-bottom the conch shell that forms the centrepiece of my outfit, guided by the lissom and abbreviated forms of local divers. As I yanked away my goggles and heaved onto the wooden pier, the director informed me of our impending departure, and a jeep pulled up in a flourish of dust to take us to the island's one-strip airport, where we boarded the next available flight – nine and a half hours of stomachless gliding, during which I read the last half of Honoré de Balzac's *Lost Illusions* and then took online personality tests until my battery died, when we all stopped what we were doing to watch a storm sparking below us from the tiny windows, its sickness of flashes and smoke like watching a party from a balcony... not this kind of party. Once we touched down, we taxi'd through the city to the one train service that still runs a fully functioning dining carriage, and I ate a magnificent half-lobster then a slice of baked cheesecake while the darkened countryside passed without meaning or consequence, arriving here at twenty minutes to midnight, when I saw you on the steps, on the marble steps outside, shooting you a look, my entourage palming you a cream-coloured business card in the hope that you'd find me, in the fern room, under a green light, looking at something virtual. You know, the pictures don't do you justice, and despite the venom of our earlier correspondence all the antipathy melted away at first sight. If this is a poem, like every arrival it's a story of departure. If it is a letter, it's like something discarded on the floor inside a painting. If this is a request, it's evidence of its origins, which are plain and heartfelt. If this is a receipt, it is the notice of its hopelessness. If it is a list, it doesn't know when to stop listing. If this is a missed connection or a placeholder in disguise, I'll only know when you say hello, if you took a while, it's fine.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup>. Sam Riviere is the author of *81 Austerities* (2012), *Standard Twin Fantasy* (2014) and *Kim Kardashian's Marriage* (2015).

Dear *The Letters Page*,

Not the least of our problems on setting up home in an 1840s constabulary barracks in a remote district of County Sligo was the fact of the crows in the bedroom. This made for an especially demonic scene on Sunday mornings – nothing quite gives an existential frisson to one's hangover like a crow beating its wings above the bed. The problem was the cracked old chimney pots. The crows were in and out of the place at will. In truth, I did not cover myself in glory when the crows appeared. My tactic was to put my head under the duvet until my girlfriend had handled the situation. She kept a bath towel by the side of the bed for the purpose of catching the crows and bundling them out the window. It was quite a traumatic period in my life and even now, eight years later, I'm not sure I'm the better of it.

I told the writer Dermot Healy about the crows and he said well, in all fairness to the girl, you'd want to sort that out. He sent us down a builder from his part of County Sligo and the chimneys were quickly and efficiently repaired – there hasn't been a crow seen in the bedroom since, except for the ones that haunt my dreams.

Mr Healy went down the road last summer, and as is the way when a writer dies, the critical evaluation of the work immediately and somewhat rudely enters a summing-up phase. I am constantly astonished that his name is not more widely known outside Ireland. Novels like *A Goat's Song*, *Long Time No See*, and *Sudden Times* are the equal of anything that has come out of this country in the last thirty or forty years. They are spare and effortless but at the same time intensely worked, and they are extremely wise, passionate and emotional books.<sup>1</sup>

The accents and humours of County Sligo are captured precisely in his pages. It's an odd kind of place. When we first set up here, I called it The Land Of The Pregnant Pause – conversations seemed to enter frequently into these black oily periods of repose, and you were never quite sure what was being said while the talk was resting. The humour is bone-dry and

---

blackish and inclined often towards the surreal. I have the sensation wandering around the country lanes among the squadrons of black dragonflies on these evilly cold spring days that the past has not properly been tamped down in this neck of the woods. It is eerily beautiful and has a kind of hauntedness to it and sometimes you wouldn't know where you are nor when.

It's crawling with writers. You'll see Leland Bardwell<sup>2</sup> on the train often, headed to Dublin on unknowable escapades in her late 80s. Eoin McNamee<sup>3</sup> is writing his splendid noirs and policiers up on the coast. DBC Pierre<sup>4</sup> continues his own wonderful project somewhere over that way, about twenty miles east in the Leitrim hills. Most days I pass by Lough Key on my bike – W.B. Yeats<sup>5</sup> wanted to set up a commune dedicated to free love on a little island out there. He used to purchase tincture of cannabis from the chemist shop in Sligo town and roll naked by moonlight on the beach at Rosses. I had never been to the county before the morning we first viewed the barracks and I knew instantly that I was at home.

- kb <sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>. If this letter is starting to take something of the flavour of a book review or critical essay then let it be noted that the editors are most pleased at the turn of events. We feel that a good literary journal should always carry a critical essay or two in its closing pages, and will welcome future letters which take a notes-from-the-reader tone. Thank you, Kevin. Carry on now.

<sup>2</sup>. The writer is here referring to the Irish poet, novelist and playwright, to whom *The White Beach: New and Selected Poems* would be a very good introduction.

<sup>3</sup>. Awarded the Macauley Fellowship for Irish Literature in 1990, McNamee's novels include *Resurrection Man*, *The Blue Tango*, and *Orchid Blue*.

<sup>4</sup>. DBC Pierre won the Man Booker Prize in 2003 for *Vernon God Little*. His most recent work is *Breakfast with The Borgias*.

<sup>5</sup>. Dude wrote some poems.

<sup>6</sup>. Kevin Barry is the author of two collections of short stories, *There are Little Kingdoms* (2007) which won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, and *Dark Lies the Island* (2012). He has also written a novel, *City of Bohane* (2011), for which he won the 2013 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. He currently lives in County Sligo.



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

Editor: Jon McGregor  
Office Manager: Rachael Stanley  
Illustrations: Gwen Burns  
Administrative Support: Rebecca Peck,  
Denine Carmichael, Mari Hughes  
Technical Support: Helen Frost  
Copy-editing: Gillian Roberts

Submissions Editor: Alyson Kissner  
Subscriptions Manager: Ellen Hart  
Online Editor: Harriet Dunlea  
Offline Editor: Kate Butcher

Editorial Board:  
Naomi Alderman, Tash Aw,  
Roddy Doyle, Patricia Duncker,  
William Fiennes, Chris Gribble,  
Sarah Hall, Kirsten Harris,  
Chloe Hooper, Mick Jackson,  
Ben Johncock, Cormac Kinsella,  
Katie Kitamura, Éireann Lorsung,  
Colum McCann, Maile Meloy,  
Kei Miller, Nick Mount, Emily Perkins,  
Julie Sanders, Kamila Shamsie,  
Craig Taylor, Xu Xi.

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/ugstudy/courses/english/english.aspx](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/ugstudy/courses/english/english.aspx)





p.s.

We want your letters for Issue 7, 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 7 is September 15th, 2015.

Send submissions to:

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