

Name of Sender:

George Saunders  
Eimear McBride  
Ruby Cowling  
Tod Wodicka  
Kevin Barry  
Pete Segall  
Suzanne Joinson  
Kat Dixon  
Ruth Gilligan  
Maria Papas

Description of Contents:  
reflections on letter writing  
in relation to the notion of  
penpals; of writing across time  
and across place; on first kisses  
and impromptu Irish girls,  
on time travel and bicycle  
travel, on death row and Cairo  
and Jerusalem and different  
understandings of a half-  
glimpsed child on a tram in  
Prague



*a literary journal in letters*

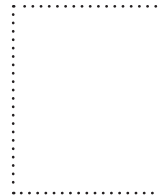
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Winter 2013

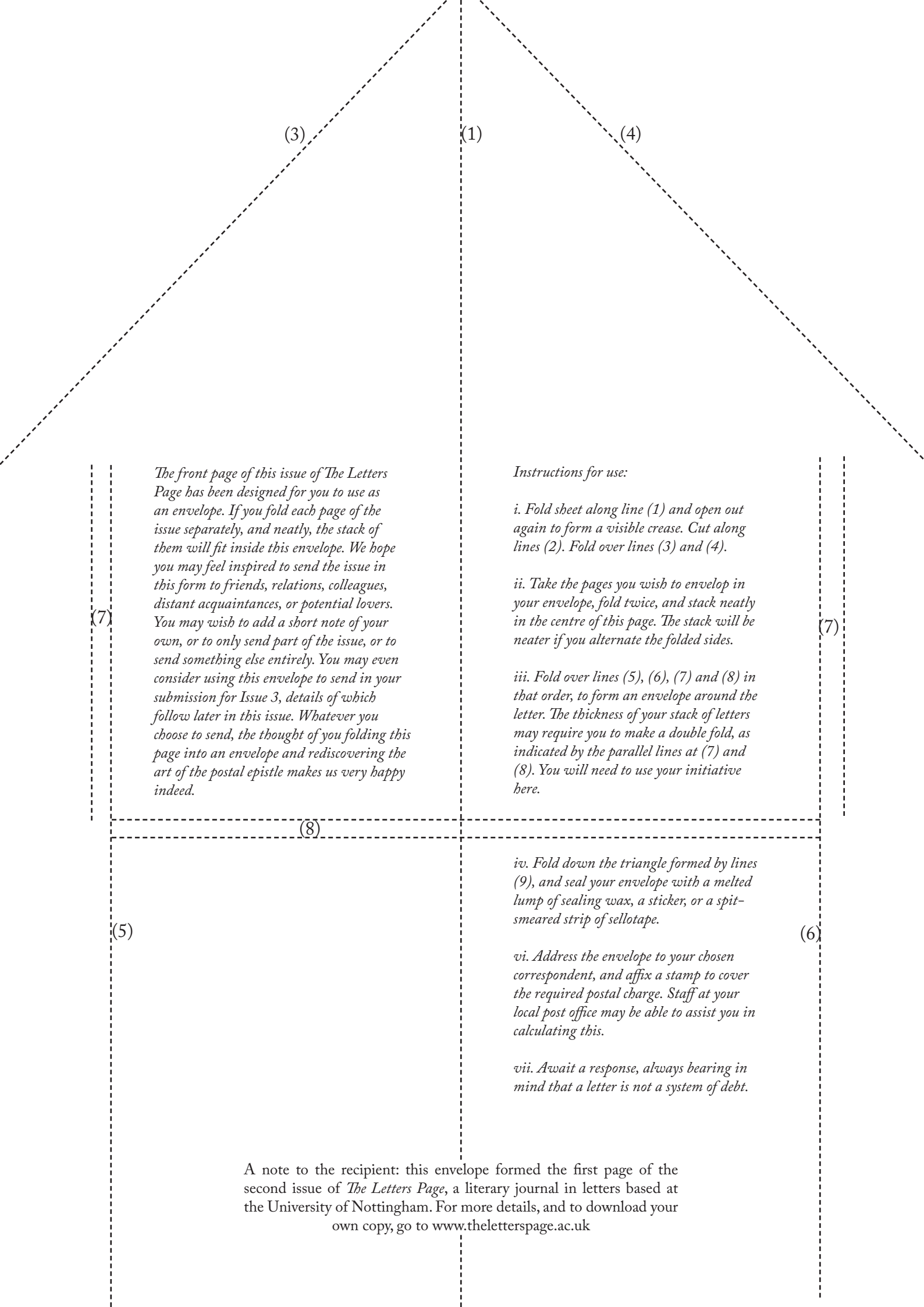
Issue Two

(9)

(6)

(2)

(2)



(3)

(1)

(4)

(7)

*The front page of this issue of *The Letters Page* has been designed for you to use as an envelope. If you fold each page of the issue separately, and neatly, the stack of them will fit inside this envelope. We hope you may feel inspired to send the issue in this form to friends, relations, colleagues, distant acquaintances, or potential lovers. You may wish to add a short note of your own, or to only send part of the issue, or to send something else entirely. You may even consider using this envelope to send in your submission for Issue 3, details of which follow later in this issue. Whatever you choose to send, the thought of you folding this page into an envelope and rediscovering the art of the postal epistle makes us very happy indeed.*

*Instructions for use:*

*i. Fold sheet along line (1) and open out again to form a visible crease. Cut along lines (2). Fold over lines (3) and (4).*

*ii. Take the pages you wish to envelop in your envelope, fold twice, and stack neatly in the centre of this page. The stack will be neater if you alternate the folded sides.*

*iii. Fold over lines (5), (6), (7) and (8) in that order, to form an envelope around the letter. The thickness of your stack of letters may require you to make a double fold, as indicated by the parallel lines at (7) and (8). You will need to use your initiative here.*

(7)

(8)

*iv. Fold down the triangle formed by lines (9), and seal your envelope with a melted lump of sealing wax, a sticker, or a spit-smeared strip of sellotape.*

*vi. Address the envelope to your chosen correspondent, and affix a stamp to cover the required postal charge. Staff at your local post office may be able to assist you in calculating this.*

*vii. Await a response, always bearing in mind that a letter is not a system of debt.*

(6)

(5)

A note to the recipient: this envelope formed the first page of the second issue of *The Letters Page*, a literary journal in letters based at the University of Nottingham. For more details, and to download your own copy, go to [www.theletterspage.ac.uk](http://www.theletterspage.ac.uk)

Dear Reader,

When I last wrote to you, I described students ‘lolling about’ on the green lawns of the University of Nottingham’s handsome campus. I can assure you that no such lolling is taking place today. The high beeches and oaks around the lake have shaken their leaves to their ankles and the sky has turned a narrow-eyed grey and it is *cold*. It will get colder before the winter is through, no doubt, but after the blue fresh days of autumn this feels cold enough for now.

So I hope you are reading this in a warm place; if not beside a blazing log fire then at least in a room with a source of heat and a comfortable chair. We have ten letters gathered in this issue, and although the given theme was penpals most of our correspondents have taken that idea and run on ahead to consider the ways in which a letter – any piece of writing – speaks from one person to another, often in ways the original writer could never have foreseen. We’ve enjoyed reading them, along with the many other letters that came flooding through the brass letterbox which the School of English have newly installed in our office door.

But the last couple of months haven’t just been about reading letters. We’ve been talking about them as well. When we launched our first issue, back in early October, we were hoping for a handful of social media mentions and maybe an interview with a literary blog or two. But, thanks mainly to the power of the press release (remember those?), we found ourselves blinking in the headlights of publicity for a brief moment. There were articles in *the Guardian*, the *Independent*, the *Financial Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, and interviews on BBC television and radio. (Shortly after an interview on BBC World, a young production assistant mentioned that their typical viewing figure was around 200 million. We are slightly disappointed that some of those viewers have not yet subscribed to our mailing list.)

We mention this not by way of bragging, but as an observation that there is an obvious level of interest in the idea of letters and letter-writing. Intriguingly, just about every one of the dozen local radio stations this editor was interviewed by asked whether ‘people are really still interested in letter writing.’ The affirmative answer seemed to be implicit in the question being so repeatedly asked, and we’ve been wondering why.

Clearly, *we* think letters and letter-writing are good starting points for a literary journal. But we were surprised to find how many other people feel the same way. Partly this is down to nostalgia, of course, and a realisation that handwritten letters are going the way of all superseded technologies. But it seems that in the letter people see a form of writing which is still both accessible and meaningful. The point was often made, in interviews, that those who rely entirely on email will still use the letter for moments of significance; a letter of condolence, of complaint, of thanks. And we persist in thinking, against accusations of nostalgia or worse, that there can be something uniquely considered about the letter form; that the slow pace of delivery creates a tone of thought and response which is different from the immediacy of digital correspondence.

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So the letter isn't dead yet, and people still feel a need for it as a form. Which is good news for us, and for our marketing department. But let's be clear: this journal isn't attempting to revive a dwindling medium or campaign on its behalf. Rather, we're here to enjoy letters and letter-writing, to celebrate what letters can do, and to explore what the passing of the medium might mean.

Our next issue, due out in April, is on the theme of travelling light. More details in the footnotes below. We'd love to hear from you. Meanwhile, enjoy this issue, pass it on to a friend, and tell everyone you know that it's free to subscribe to *The Letters Page*. We have metrics to hit, apparently. We're not sure what a metric is, but we're going to try and hit one before writing to you again.

Yours Sincerely,  
The Editor

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

Editor: Jon McGregor  
Submissions Editor: Paige Richardson  
Production Manager: Olivia French  
Online Editor: Hannah Jackson  
Publicity Manager: Elexa Rose  
Additional assistance: Lyn Heath, Holly Jackson, Debbie Moss, Elizabeth O'Neill, Peter Rumble, Emily Zinkin.  
Administrative Support: Rebecca Peck, Denine Carmichael, Mari Hughes  
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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. We're not saying that our editorial office is *the* smartest place to spend time honing your/their love of reading and sense of writing craft, but it's pretty close. Also, there are sometimes doughnuts. 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), or by writing to:

Admissions,  
School of English,  
University of Nottingham,  
Nottingham NG7 2RD,  
UK.

One Last Thing: Submissions are now open for our third issue, loosely based around the notion of 'travelling light'. We're thinking about travel, and travelling, and being away from home. We're thinking about the song, *Travelling Light*, from the second Tindersticks album, but that's probably just us. We're thinking about being away from home, and writing home, and writing away. We're thinking about how distant you can really ever be in the digital age. We're hoping that our correspondents will interpret this thematic starting point in as loose or associative or casual a way as they see fit. Letters should be handwritten and posted to us at the address below. Closing date is January 15th 2014; for more details, or to sign up to our regular email memoranda, see [www.theletterspage.ac.uk](http://www.theletterspage.ac.uk). You can also follow us on Twitter @TheLettersPage. And of course, if you'd like to just write to us about nothing much at all, we would welcome that as well. Our address is:

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

Dear Reader,

Interesting to think that words on a page can create a disturbance in a brain thousands of miles or hundreds of years away. How does that work? If I write: 'first kiss; please pause to remember the taste/smell phenomenon associated with that event, especially the pleasant ones that still have the power to make you happy,' and you do pause & remember – why does that work?

Or maybe I say: 'fresh-cut grass on a summer day.' If you feel something, then it is my brain activity (over here, in the US) that caused it. Suddenly we are in direct connection, mind to mind. We have just established, by implication, that both of us (you, there, in England,<sup>1</sup> say) & me here in my writing shed in Oneonta, New York (door open, dog at my feet, on a clear fall day on which the quality of light is so clean that it has all day been landing on the autumnal woods in a way that makes a person just want to stand there & stare) have each, at one time, experienced a first kiss. And that the effects of those two experiences were not so very different. And that my experience (which occurred in 1974(!), in a 1969 Camaro, parked at the edge of a golf course in Midlothian, Illinois, USA) was similar enough to yours (and how about yours, by the way?)<sup>2</sup> to evoke what us New Agers might call a 'shared emotional space.'

No matter how old you are, or how old I was at the time of writing (54, & thanks for asking), or how alive you are, or how dead I am, and even if that phrase re the kiss or the grass had to be translated before you could read it – there we were just now, lovingly regarding the same human experience, our brains encouraged, by words, to jump through roughly the same hoop. And we were somehow expanded by that. You now believe more fully in my existence and I in yours. We think more highly of one another. And we think better of everyone else too. It seems more likely to us now that other people actually exist. We have experienced a brief elimination of what we might call the 'I/Other' boundary. Soon enough (yes, yes) that boundary springs back into place, and we are merely ourselves again, believing ourselves separate from everything else. But for that brief moment, our understanding of our relation to the greater world was correct.

All the best,

George Saunders<sup>3</sup>

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Dear Reader,

Interesting to think that words on a page can create a disturbance in a brain thousands of miles or hundreds of years away. How does that work? If I write, "first kiss; please pause to remember the taste/smell phenomenon associated w/ that event, especially the pleasant ones that still have the power to make you happy," and you do pause; remember — why does that work? Or

<sup>1</sup> While our editorial office and indeed our hearts are very much based in England, Mr Saunders and others may wish to note that at the last accounting our readership was distributed across Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Canada, China, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Latvia, Lithuania, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Nigeria, Northern Ireland, Norway, Nottinghamshire, Poland, Portugal, Scotland, Singapore, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Netherlands, Turkey, Russia, USA, and Wales. Greetings to all of you across the world. We hope you are experiencing a brief elimination of the 'I/Other' boundary at this very moment. And a special salute to the subscriber who, with a surge of regional pride, put 'Nottinghamshire' as their country of residence.

<sup>2</sup> One member of our editorial team, in response to this question, told a long anecdote about a patch of sandy-soiled woodland on the edge of a housing estate in Thetford, Norfolk, 'circa 1988'. We think further details are unnecessary.

<sup>3</sup> George Saunders was born in Amarillo, Texas, grew up in Chicago, and graduated from the Colorado School of Mines with a degree in exploration geophysics. On the subject of his education and early career, he recalls: 'I'd never met a writer and so it took me a while to realize that a person could actually write for a living.' Since this realisation, the *Wall Street Journal* has said of Saunders that he 'helped change the trajectory of American fiction.' In addition to his latest book, *Tenth of December*, Saunders has written prize-winning children's books and three other short story collections: *Pastoralia*, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award) and *In Persuasion Nation*.

Dear Alla

I did think about writing a long time this since it's years back you know. Since I don't know when you sent me all those Chekhovs and I never wrote thanks back, or again. Twenty maybe. I can't complain. Thirty-seven nearly so you're more forty now I'd say. Chernobyl I remember was the way, it was, was the how we met. Didn't quite but you know what I mean. For the writing of, the starting of it. Up to seventeen I'm pretty sure from five years more before. I snuck a letter into These are schoolbooks for the children of.<sup>1</sup> And were you one? You weren't I'm fairly sure. Unpacker though. Decoder from importuning Irish girl after penpals from Russia. Alighted on it I'd say inside the Buntūs Cainte<sup>2</sup> and who'd have read that anyway out the back of the Soviet gone? But we're giving them we're sending them we're doing what we can. Could. Stuck it in between Book One and Two. Saying Hi and all that yap. Would you like to write whoever finds this and. You months more answering Hello, nice to meet and practise England with the English. And never stooped we either from. Never either said – beneath next door's leylandiied gloom – here's not England here's the Ukraine. Not your granny's leak in an Odessa flat or my dog squashed under some Galwegian's Fiat. There was no boo to that goose. Then one day I went there. Then and never wrote one more. Sucked into their garden. Leapt over the wall. Now I think of it too, you went to Moscow. And now that I'm thinking of all those things, was it Anna maybe after all?

Yours and was, possibly

Eimear<sup>3</sup>



I did think about writing a long time this since it's years since I don't know when you sent me all those Chekhovs never wrote blanks, back, or again. Twenty maybe, I can't thirty-seven nearly so you're more likely not I'd say. A I remember was the way, it was, was the how, he not. quite but you know what I mean. For the writing of, the of it. Up to seventeen I'm pretty sure from five years now I snuck a letter into These are schoolbooks for the child. I remember you? You weren't I'm fairly sure. Unpacker the

<sup>1</sup>. The writer notes that she recalls, at her school, sending old schoolbooks to charities working abroad; in this case on behalf of a charity known as 'Children of Chernobyl'.

<sup>2</sup>. Buntús Cainte (*Basic Speaking*) was an Irish television and radio programme created in 1967 which aimed at teaching the Irish language to young viewers. The material in the programme was published in three books of the same name, containing cartoons and English and Irish text.

<sup>3</sup>. Eimear McBride left Ireland at the age of seventeen, and now lives in Norwich. Her debut novel, *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing* (Galley Beggar Press, 2013), was recently awarded the inaugural Goldsmiths Prize, established to celebrate books which 'embody the spirit of invention which characterises the genre at its best.' She is currently working on her second novel.



Dear Robyn,

Thanks for your letter. Still can't believe this works! (Can you send some more of your paper? This is the last slice.)

Reading about your 'trip' was way buzzy. Tell me more stuff!! It's like since your letter I got this brainthirst. I did a sneaky Old-Era interro but couldn't find much, + anyway, you say it better, you're actually back there.

What news from here... well... Pop's up by 12, which is good – I think we're getting over the parasite thing. They changed the airfilters – I mean it was scheduled + everything, but it meant 2000 pips of Low-Oxy Podtime, which, ugh. Otherwise... boring.

Explain how you do your scenery. Is it like totally, 110% convincing? How is it powered? I loved that bit you said about the mountainal area you went to and it had loads of like outside water you could actually touch forreal? Mazing.

But though, so how do you deal with being atmospherically compromised for any long clocktime? Bet you're paying for it now, right?! I was outside for like 10 pips once, when we had a total de-contam after this really nasty burster? + I just vommed straight off + got this sledding headache for like a week or whatever.

Must be so weird living like you guys.

I can't stop thinking about what you put, that long bit about you got really high up, and your eyes were somehow seeing superfar, with all the greenings laid out before you like a mazing deepscreen, but forreal? And how there was like a freshness + a rightness in it and in you, like you + it were part of the same thing? It's funny, I sort of knew what you meant. It was nice, and but also, it kind of hurt a little bit?

Write back,

R 0 8 1 N

but then, so how do you deal with being atmospherically<sup>1</sup> compromised for any long clocktime? But you're paying for it now, right?! I was outside for like 10 pips once, when we had a total de-contam after this really nasty burst<sup>2</sup>? + I just vommed straight off + got this sledding headache for like a week or whatever.

Must be so weird living like you guys.

I can't stop thinking about what you put, that long bit about you got really high up, and your eyes were somehow seeing superfar, with all the greenings laid out before you like a

<sup>1</sup> This is a work of fiction, we assume. We also assume that it won't be necessary to point out that some idiosyncrasies of spelling and syntax have been incorporated as key elements of the fictional worldview created by the author. Although, to be honest, we're not quite sure whether 'seenery' is just our misreading of the handwritten original, but we love the coinage and so have decided to keep it anyway.

<sup>2</sup> Ruby Cowling was born in Bradford and lives in London, working as a freelance editor and researcher. Her short stories appear here and there online and in print, most recently in *Unthology 4* and *Notes from the Underground*, and have been produced in audio format for *4'33"* and *Bound Off*. She is currently working on a short story collection.

Dear Clare Wigfall,<sup>1</sup>

I hope this letter finds you in time, specifically 1999. It'd be churlish of me to hope these words also find you well, because I know exactly how they will find you. Namely, on the edge of a great gaping maw of shit.

Did you ever see *Terminator*? Time travel isn't like that at all. For one thing, only organic or formerly organic matter can travel. No robots. No, no. Time travel is more like *Remains of the Day*. Everything is pregnant with everything else. Every pause, glance, stoically twitched British eyebrow; on every wobbly tray of weak tea lies a pooling eternity of possibilities. It's actually kind of dull. But it's about hopping back onto those moments, island to island. I couldn't explain the science if I wanted to, but the trick is: only half of it is technically scientific, anyway. The other half is what you might call psychedelic. But in a Merchant Ivory sort of way.

First off, spoiler alert: the strange looking child you described in that letter to me, as you've probably guessed, is your own. However, it will be/was/is a she. Her name is Elsa. The reason she looked so nearly skinless, toothy and odd (not to mention male) is because time travel is bad news for the little ones.

Here's what I'm allowed to tell you: tomorrow morning you must get on that same tram you saw your Holy Fool child on, same seat, same everything, but chill a little on the baroque Walkman<sup>2</sup> rhapsodizing: you've got to stay alert, Wigfall. Then, when you see the man and child, follow them. But shhhh; speak not. They may not have been in 1999 long enough to hear, they may be flickering still, their inner agents flitting from time island to time island. Certainly they're still partially tripping on those time-dislocating DMT mushrooms that living hoppers need to pass backwards. Don't ask. In any event, it usually takes a few days for biological matter to firm up. Paper, if it's pure dead tree, like the one you're holding in your hands right now, is a far easier proposition. Paper was actually the first man-messaged thing we were able to send back in any kind of controlled fashion. Thus the 2013 resurgence of old-fashioned letter writing, even if it was only letters written to The Past, and most often written to oneself at significant financial expense.)

Do not touch them. Him and the baby - your family. Their skin, at this point in the hopping, may be too weak, especially your daughter's. Follow them off the tram. Into Prague. Out of Prague. Into the Bohemian forest. Hope that they see you but don't be too upset if they cannot yet hear you; imagine them sleepwalking through a jabbering mist of 14 years of accumulated time.

Elsa will see you because she's made of you. The man will not see you. Or, he will see you, but only along with everything else that has existed in that space and moment in the fourteen years of time that, technically, separate him and you. Thus, the forest. Once there it will only be you and they and fourteen years of accumulated Czech mushroom pickers and the gorgeous, painterly mesh of birdflight and hanging, falling, twirling autumn leaves; and snow and rain and, of course, the ash from the war I'm not allowed to

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mention. But this should be easy for the man to see through. He's been trained well. The child will only have eyes for you. Elsa has another letter for you. It's written on her back, in henna. Read it before the blood starts pooling in her eyes. It is my hope - and your future self's hope, I might add - that, once you've gotten this message, you will be able to begin the process of tweaking the future, of stepping away from something just in time. Ideally, you may never know how close you came to the ruin I find you in now, here, in 2013. You really look ghastly.

What else can I say? In *Remains of the Day*, wasn't the guy Anthony Hopkins devoted his sad life to a secret fascist? Well, the future is all kind of like that.

Sincerely,  
Tod Wodicka<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This letter was written in response to the letter from Clare Wigfall which we published in our first issue; you may wish, if you haven't done so already, to download our first issue from the archive section of our website, [www.theletterspage.ac.uk](http://www.theletterspage.ac.uk), and read that letter before going any further.

Otherwise, perhaps a recap will suffice: that letter was originally written by Clare in 1999, addressed to Tod Wodicka, and described Clare's feelings of anxiety and disturbance on seeing a young boy with a 'serene and beautiful profundity evident in his being,' with 'limbs like sticks' and 'eyes with the quality of having either shrunk or perhaps only opened for the first time.' She also talked about listening to Vivaldi on headphones when she saw him. Her letter closed with Clare acknowledging that she couldn't 'explain why this incident had such an effect on me,' and that it would 'sound silly to you I know.'

In the notes she gave us to accompany this letter, Clare explained that the original had never reached Tod, and that she'd later given it to him in person. It occurred to us that Tod might be interested in seeing this letter from the past and, moreover, might consider writing a reply. We got in touch, and he sent us this. As it turned out, he wasn't the only contributor to respond to Clare's letter.

<sup>2</sup>Younger readers may not know that 'Walkman' refers to a personal stereo cassette player; actually a trademark of the Sony Corporation, the word was used generically, in much the same way as 'ipod' is now used to stand for any MP3 music player. Although, come to think of it, does anyone still remember ipods? People used them before they started keeping all their music on their phones.

<sup>3</sup>Tod Wodicka grew up in Queensbury, New York, and lives in Berlin. His debut novel, *All Shall Be Well; And All Shall Be Well; And All Manner of Things Shall Be Well*, was published in 2007, and shortlisted for the *Believer Award*. He is working on his second novel.

Dear Reader

Apologies<sup>1</sup> first for the spidery, neurotic handwriting – evidence of a gifted mind? – which is an affront even to my own eyes. It has changed very little since I was a child and so is similar to what my two penpals would have had to decipher.

I don't remember his name but one was a lad in Texas. We were both about ten and had expressed mutual interest in the other's life and culture. Mine involved morbid levels of television, white-sugar dependency and hiding from the light – my penpal told me that he mainly liked to drive his truck around the ranch. I was at this point still unable to ride a bicycle. I would try, even so, out in the back garden, the trainer wheels removed, but would inevitably teeter sideways and over after a yard or two. I can still see my father, pale with shame, as he looks out at me, clambering up from the muck, tearful, scuff-kneed, and approaching puberty.

My other penpal was a little girl somewhere in Switzerland who very charmingly wrote that as I was so interested in her country's culture, I was more than welcome to come and visit for a holiday. My ability to talk to girls being more inept again than my bicycling, I replied that I would not be able to make it, but given that she was so interested in my culture, I enclosed four postage stamps featuring typical scenes of Irish life. All true, I'm afraid.

I think I was about thirteen before I could ride a bike, and I took to it with the zeal of a convert, the summer of what must have been '82 or '83 spent circling obsessively the estate, thrilled by the sensation of velocity. I learned to swim when I was 29, and I published my first 'slim vol' of stories<sup>2</sup> when I was 37. In the last year, at 43 going on 44, I have learned to drive, and like nothing more now than powering my 11-year-old Megane through the drizzly Sligo hills, the window down, the wind rustling my hair, and the radio on.

Yours,

Kevin Barry<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Attentive readers may remember that we appealed in the previous issue for our writers not to feel the need to apologise. The appeal seems to have gone unheard; during submissions our editorial office received apologies from writers for: not writing neatly enough, writing in an unusual shade of ink, not sending a nicer envelope, not using fancier paper, mislaying the photograph that was supposed to be photocopied and included, spilling various substances on the page, not writing sooner, not mentioning vital information sooner, and even, in two instances, for writing to us at all.

<sup>2</sup> The 'slim vol' was *These are Little Kingdoms*, which was published by Stinging Fly in 2007 and won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature in the same year.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Barry was born in Limerick and now lives in Dublin. His debut novel, *City of Bohane*, was published in 2011 and won the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2013. (Readers who notice these things will recall that our first issue also featured an IMPAC award winner, Colum McCann. This is a trend we fully intend to continue.) He also won the Edgehill Short Story Prize in 2013 for his collection *Dark Lies the Island*, and in fact has probably won enough prizes for the time being.



Dear Mr D.G., Terrell Unit,<sup>1</sup> Texas Dept of Criminal Justice,

Thirteen years ago, in a fit of grandiosity that only prolonged periods of loneliness can bring about, I wrote to you, having found your name online, on a site for death row inmates seeking penpals, I wrote to you in the awful morally parasitic hope that by speaking to someone facing an imminent death I may find some clue about how to operate within life since that was a task at which I was failing at the time, failing mightily, although not grandly or destructively or profoundly, rather I was lonely in one of the worst places to suffer from that condition, Manhattan, lonely and politely adrift and fiercely unable to lift myself into the thundering, physical, frictive dynamo of that city, which is more than an inflated way of saying I wasn't getting laid but really did feel a tangible sense of distance between myself and every other person on that pulsating island, and so I wrote to you, unloading several pages of much the same sentiment that I just described but with more autobiographical detail, the names of friends now long unseen, the routines of a job I'd soon lose, the romantic targets, the familial history, whatever seemed pertinent and illuminating, along with some questions about your situation, your timed life, your marked minutes, and when I dropped the envelope into the mail with its lengthy, encoded address to some correctional dispensary I thought: There, I've done it, I've reached out, extended a hand into the world, but not the surrounding world, the elusive world, but a truer one where experience and consequence were the crucial things, perhaps the only things, and I'd graciously reached in offering my attention and I suppose you could say support and what did I expect in return, what did I want to take out but consolation, support of my own, a reminder that people are lonely everywhere and here is how you can cope because this is coming from a place where all you can do is cope, here is how you exist because I, who know when my time is up, know how to exist, but of course that isn't what you wrote back, when I got the envelope with the gnomic Texas return address and the strangely bubbly handwriting, six weeks of slow, fleshy Manhattan summer later what it was filled with was your own story, neglectful parents, abuse of drugs, missed but readily reachable opportunities, mistakes, the unfairness of the law, the unacceptable fate, you had a story to tell because you had to tell it to anyone who would listen, you were not resigned or in a mood for commiseration, you had to get this story out because your story was what would free you, not in a cheap metaphorical sense but in the actual legal and breathing sense – it was your life – and I silently expressed thanks that you'd written back, felt in an inarticulate way justified if not unlistened to, can you see what I've done, I thought, I'm bonding with the realest of all people, so much more substantial than this city, so much more, and I always believed you never responded to my next letter because I went into too much detail about not getting laid and you thought I was looking for something romantic or pornographic from you, a private penal Penthouse forum but now, nine years after your story failed and you were executed, I know that you simply had no time for me, that the best advice you could have given me was quit fucking around and wasting time but that the pragmatic everlasting silence you deployed would have to suffice and I want you to know that I still listen to that silence, thirteen years on, and there's no hard feelings.

Yrs,  
Pete<sup>2</sup>

of slow, fleshy Manhattan summer later when it was filled with was your own story. Neglectful parents, abuse of drugs, missed but readily reachable opportunities, mistakes, the unfairness of the law, the unacceptable fate, you had a story to tell because you had to tell it to anyone who would listen, you were not resigned or in a mood for commiseration, you had to get this story out because your story was what would free you, not in a cheap metaphorical sense but in the actual legal and breathing sense - it was your life - and I silently expressed thanks that you'd written back, felt in an inarticulate way justified if not unlistened to, can you see what I've done, I thought, I'm bonding with the realest of all people, so much more substantial than this city, so much more, and I always believed you never responded to my next letter because I went into too much detail about not getting laid and you thought I was looking for something romantic or pornographic from you, a private pencil Penthouse forum but now, nine years after your story failed and you were executed, I know that you simply had no time for me, that the best advice you could have given me was quit fucking around and wasting time but that the pragmatic everlasting silence you deployed would have to suffice and I want you to know that I still listen to that silence, thirteen years on, and there's no hard feelings.

YPS,

<sup>1</sup> The Terrell Unit, as it would originally have been addressed by the author, no longer exists. The original Terrell Unit opened in 1993, but did not start receiving death row inmates until 1999, at which point the unit's namesake, a Dallas insurance executive, asked for the name of the unit to be changed. Charles Terrell was reported to have not wanted his name associated with death row because of concerns over the administration of the death penalty. The unit was renamed the Polunsky Unit in 2001, and Terrell's name transferred to another unit. Correspondence with an inmate thirteen years ago would likely have been after the site was moved but before the names were altered. Were this letter to be posted today, it would reach an institution which has specifically never housed or received death row inmates, addressed to an inmate who is no longer alive.

<sup>2</sup> Pete Segall is a 36-year-old writer who lives in Chicago. He is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and writes for *The Classical*.

To: CAIRO

██████<sup>1</sup> told me I can send this through the 'diplomatic bag' to avoid the censors. I hope it works. If not: \*hello censors!\* After you told me last night, I looked it all up online & it left me speechless. I know you are cross with me because of what I said about the word 'massacre' so let me try again... I meant that the word is meaningless to me because it's entirely beyond my frame of reference. It's a word, begins with M, after that my brain collapses, really. A line from your Glasgow letter sticks in my mind: 'There you are sitting next to your Christmas trees with your family but your trees may fall down, it's not as far away as you think.' Which is what my new book is about. (\*\*don't you see how guilty I feel when I say I can't clearly comprehend it?\*\*)

You of all people know how I feel about massacres involving children, or anyone. You asked me to tell you about the dream so I will: Scout woke early, 5am, I let her come into bed with me & we fell back to sleep. I dreamt we were together in a dark, narrow house & I could see into a courtyard area where bodies were being dragged across the floor, bleeding & dead. The corpses being pushed by a big broom. It was terrifying. I'm ashamed to admit this but I couldn't speak to ██████ online last night because I was worried these dreams would continue. 'You are safe in Sussex,' she says & I can't tell how she means it. I told you before that whenever relationships in my life go wrong all the war zone dreams start up again. It took me 2 years to stop the Velvet Revolution ones! ██████ & her sisters alone every night, she is too scared to have a bath now she told me.

Here's what I think about your house situation in ██████: if the ██████ family stay there, at least the house won't be empty [sidenote: empty houses during war are very vulnerable]. I'm glad you've got someone you trust in the apartment, with your book contract & all of your books. Definitely don't tell the cousin who works for the first lady!! I'm in the middle of writing this book & everything flows into it, as if there's no filter system whatsoever. This is why I have to be careful about the dreams, about talking to ██████ at midnight, about fully understanding the word 'massacre'. Is this selfish? (Yes.) I miss you.<sup>2</sup>

Suzy<sup>3</sup>

with your family but your trees may fall down, it's not as far away as you think.' Which is what my new book is about. (\*\* don't you see how guilty I feel when I say I can't clearly comprehend it?\*\*) You of all people know how I feel about massacres involving children, or anyone. You asked me to tell you about the dream so I will: Scout woke early, Sam, I let her come into bed with me & I dreamt <sup>we fell back to sleep.</sup> we were together in a dark, narrow house & I could see into a courtyard area where bodies were being dragged across the floor, bleeding & dead. The corpses being pushed by a big broom. It was terrifying. I'm ashamed to

<sup>1</sup> Some names and locations in this letter have been redacted at the request of the author.

<sup>2</sup> We asked Suzy for some background to her letter. She sent us this:

'For the last five years I've been writing to friends in the Middle East, mostly Syria, Lebanon, Morocco and Egypt, either by letters or on Facebook. When the Syrian revolution occurred it was very dangerous to email as the Syrian regime had access to all servers and so we began to correspond using real letters via the British internal diplomatic mail service. This letter is a fictionalized version of a long and on-going correspondence between various women. We regularly exchange drawings and cards between our children. We tell each other secrets, dreams and obsessions. Sometimes there are misunderstandings and frustrations, guilt and full-blown arguments. The theme of stranded houses, of the vulnerability of homes and the trauma of losing houses comes up a lot. I'm not sure whether the letters are censored or not now but anyway, there is always an internal censor. Words can still be dangerous and we don't forget that. Still, regardless, we spill our secrets and doodle drawings of cats. One day we'll meet up in person again.'

<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Joinson's debut novel, *A Lady Cyclists Guide to Kashgar*, was published by Bloomsbury in 2012 and has been translated into 14 languages. It was longlisted for the 2014 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the Authors' Club Best First Novel Award. From January 2014 she will be writer in residence at the Al Qattan Foundation in Ramallah. She is currently working on a new novel, which is partly set in the British Mandate era Palestine and partly in Sussex and London.

Dearest S,<sup>1</sup>

I took your advice and broke down Lurcher's door. He is not so bad as after the accident (and better than June) but I am concerned. He is sleeping now face-down on his mattress by a bowl of rotting fruit. I can't think how he was planning to eat them but he won't let me throw them away. His mattress is on the floorboards and I'm leaning on a blanket box because the chairs and table have gone. I'm wondering if he found some hired help and if so where are they now? Did you send him the money?

He has stopped writing his letters. At this rate they will stop writing too and I don't know what will happen. Last month I brought a bundle through and he was at my side at once, telling me which ones to open, which ones we should answer first. He made me read the dates twice, though with Europe's lousy postal system it hardly seems worth the trouble.

We answered Elena first, then Beatrice, Klaudia, Markus (yes, there are men among the women), and after that I forget. The list of loveless lovers has grown slowly but I can't keep up the way he does. I threw in the odd suggestion from the sonnets I've memorised of late and I even offered a line from one of P's letters. I know, I feel terrible about that. It was about birds flying low over the lake and how they mirrored themselves, like love's return. I regretted it as soon as I had said it. Last week I thought I saw her buying bratwurst at the market but I followed for a few streets and it wasn't her. When I thought about it, I realised she was taller and would never wear a skirt so blue.

This morning I found some unsent letters scrunched up behind the stove. I can't remember if I told you, but I found a fountain pen that fits his toes more comfortably and his Ys finish strongly now, not tailing off the way they used to. Each letter is beautiful, painful.

I thought this project would bring his old self back and yet he's stopped. Perhaps he's tired of the deceit. It seems he cannot write without breaking off a part of him, making it new. Sometimes, when his body is balanced and the words flow seamlessly from one page to the next, his face looks calm, an expression I did not expect to see again, don't you agree?

I will write again if he does not improve, but I know you will not come. Enough. How is Herr Duckface? Has he trained your sweet peas to their frame?

With love of course,

B.



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<sup>1</sup> This letter is a work of fiction. The author, Kat Dixon, is a writer from the UK and a recent graduate of the English with Creative Writing degree at the University of Nottingham. Kat has recently moved to New Zealand, so we were delighted to find her letter in the huge pile of submissions for this issue; and even more delighted that it was as good as this. Kat works on a steam ship in Queenstown, pouring wine and scrubbing decks. Her graduate plans include finding the sunniest beach and reading as much poetry as is humanly possible. She is working on her first collection. We don't know if she means poetry or stories or interesting stones, but we await the results with interest.



Dear God,<sup>1</sup>

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

‘Dear God, let my mother live another year...’

‘Dear God, let the baby be a boy...’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Dear God...’

‘Your faithful servant...’

‘Your humble penpal...’)

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

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

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

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

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

Dear Clare,<sup>1</sup>

I know it's an unusual thing, because we haven't at all met and are unlikely to, but I am compelled to tell you how moving your picture of the boy on the tram was.

How familiar.

I too have experienced something extraordinary and unforgettable in the face of a child.

The girl in my past was small, no older than 3 or 4 years old. She had run ahead of her mother and she was holding a helium balloon and singing that old Disney song. You know the one: *It's a small world after all ... it's a small world after all ... It's a small, small world.* This tiny stranger, bouncing and singing and holding her balloon like there was nothing at all that I or anyone else should ever be unhappy about. She was beautiful. Free. But she was also pale and a little underweight for her height. Her hair, quite oddly, was cropped short. Like you all I could do was stare.

This was a long time ago. Before I had children of my own. And although I never forgot her, I first thought of her – really thought of her – when my own daughter was also four and we were at school watching another group of children perform *In the Jungle* with their cardboard lion hats and felt paws. She was on my hip, my daughter, a little too clingy, and I had this feeling – I don't know what it was – this feeling I guess that her zest was different. We left not long after, her singing in the car on the way to the shops – *a wumba-wumba wumba-wumba* – and me reassuring myself that everything was okay. At the supermarket a man blew up a balloon and popped it on a stick for her. It was promotional, one of those yellow and black 'Buy West Australian' advertisements, but she held it high nonetheless, skipping through the aisles and to the checkout where she rubbed it back and forth on the ground and cried when the friction caused it to burst. That was when I thought of the girl. The one from my past. How pale she was. How pale my daughter now seemed. And also how innocent, how nice to have that part of childhood – a part we all once knew – when the best thing in life was a balloon, and the worst was as simple and easy to replace as a broken trinket.

If only.

That same evening I learned my daughter had leukaemia.

Soon after her pigtails and her plump lips disappeared. She was elfin. Hairless but for a few odd strands. Her frame was not unlike the one you described. Little stick arms. Fragile legs. Large over-sized eyes. No eyebrows. No eyelashes. A paleness so ethereal she seemed from outer-space. Chemotherapy ravaged her. It made her small for her age. Thin. She too used to grab at me like the baby monkey you wrote of, and I would pick her up and hold her and carry her places. And it was easy. Because she was so light.

Back then I found strange comfort in Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*.<sup>3</sup> It was, in amongst all the shock and fear, the only book I could concentrate on. I read it again and again. Especially the part when Lauren, racked with grief, suddenly finds a 'smallish' and 'fine-bodied' man-child in her home. I recognised my daughter in this being. Things like his 'unfinished look' and

---

the 'thinness of physical address'. That's what it was like. I would look at my child and ... I don't know how to explain it ... I would look at her and it was as if she ... I don't know. She was different. I was trying to find her, trying to remember her. And yet at the same time, there she was.

People stared. Like you on the tram I suppose. Like me all those years ago.

I spent all last night dreaming about what it was I wanted to say. All night churning over those last few sentences, and when I woke this morning, the words had come. I would look at my child and it was as if she had been stripped to her essence.

That boy on the tram?<sup>4</sup> I both know him and do not know him. He is my daughter in the days and weeks following the most gruelling part of her treatment. He is her at the beginning of the healing process. But he is also a product of my own desire, a representation which you have written and I have interpreted. I hold your letter and add the image that moves my own experience. But the real him – a him I can never know – hides behind a wall of language, inaccessible but for that brief, strange moment you wrote about. A moment. Out of context. Changed. It strikes me, the ease with which I can now make him up. Don't I see him ill and on the verge of recovery because that's exactly what I need to see?

If I could go back in time to that helium-filled song of my past, I would look for a scar, a 2-3cm stripe across the base of the girl's neck. That's how I would know. A lifelong incision. But I'm tired, and it's too complicated to explain right now.

The weather is still cool here. October and yet more winter than spring. I lit the fire today, and I'm sitting beside it now to finish this letter. My daughter and son are splashing in the bath. Her fleshy padding has surely returned. As has her colour. They're squealing, the two of them, overcompensating I think, for all the days spent in a hospital bed.

I too just wanted you to know.

Love,  
Maria<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This letter is written in response to Clare Wigfall's letter in our first issue, a full recap of which you can find in the footnotes to Tod Wodicka's letter earlier in this issue.

<sup>2</sup>The Disney song *It's a Small World* was written for a World's Fair exhibit in New York, 1964. The Fair's official guidebook describes the exhibit as 'A salute to the children of the world'. The exhibit was so successful that it was recreated in the original Disneyland theme park in 1966. Walt Disney died the same year, from cancer.

<sup>3</sup>A slim novel of 128 pages and two and a half characters, *The Body Artist* is considered by at least one of our editors to be DeLillo's finest work, and a remarkable way to follow up the crushing success of *Underworld*.

<sup>4</sup>That boy on the tram, one late 20th century day in the centre of Europe, has now been responsible for three of the letters we've published. We wouldn't be all that surprised to receive a letter from the boy himself for our next issue.

The juxtaposition of Maria's letter with Tod Wodicka's generated some discussion in the editorial office: Did the emotional weight of the one conflict with the exuberant tone of the other? Should that even matter? Reader, we had a long discussion about the text and the context. Roland Barthes would have been proud of us. We spoke to both Maria and Tod, and to Clare, although sadly not to the boy on the tram. In the end, we decided that we loved both letters, and the wild divergence between them, and so we happily offer them both to you here.

<sup>5</sup>Maria Papas is an Australian writer who is currently studying a PhD in English at the University of Western Australia. Her research topic (which involves writing a novel and an exegesis) loosely explores the interaction between strangers in fiction. You can contact her on Twitter @MariaPapas5.

caused it to burst. That was when I thought of the girl. The one from my past. How pale she was. And how pale my daughter now seemed. And also how innocent, how nice to have that part of childhood — a part we all once knew — when the best thing in life was a balloon, and the worst was as simple and easy to replace as a broken trinket  
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