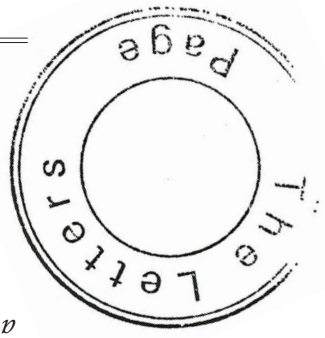
Description of Contents:
letters written to and from places between which people are divided; letters from people with divided loyalties, or divided hearts; thoughts on living in the city or the fields or the mountains; a letter from a caravan in the Isle of Wight; a letter from St Ives, and a letter from St Ives.

Name of Sender:

Simon Garfield
Vesna Lemaić
Alexander Crow
Paolo Cognetti
Xiaolu Guo
Evie Wyld
Togara Muzanenhamo
Lily Akerman
Lucy Durneen

(4)

(4)



a literary journal in letters

(6)

Issue Four

Summer 2014

(6)

(2) (1) (3)

(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 send only part of the issue, or to send something else entirely. You may even consider using this envelope to send in your submission for Issue 5, 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. Fold over lines (2) and (3). Cut along lines (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.

(7)

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.

(8)

(5)

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.

(6)

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.

A note to the recipient: this envelope formed the first page of the fourth 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

Jon McGregor
Nottingham / Nottingham

Dear Reader,

I'm writing to you from the café area of the Nottingham Climbing Centre, watching people pick their way up the artificial rock faces that rise three storeys out of what was once an Edwardian swimming baths. When I first came to Nottingham this was where I came to swim, which makes climbing here now somewhat disorientating. Although, thinking back, I was disorientated then as well, having landed in a new city I wasn't yet ready to call home. Fifteen years later I do now use that word, but I still hesitate when asked where I'm from. Where you're from, where you're home, where you are: these can be complicated questions. I've always been struck by the Scots usage of 'stay' for 'live', as in 'where do you stay?' The expression has always sounded lightfooted, to my ears at least, as though all accommodation was only temporary (which it is of course, in the long run). And yet the word 'stay' also has a solid permanence about it. Which I suppose goes to show only that language is malleable and ambiguous and we can never quite be at home with what we think we mean.

We were thinking about home when we announced the theme for this issue: specifically, about those writers whose biographies describe them as dividing their time between various – often glamorous – locations. We couldn't help wondering what this kind of constant relocation means: is it a lack of attachment, or an abundance of attachments? If you've never spent a full year in a place can you ever really know it? And yet we do all divide our time, to a greater or lesser extent. We are people at home, people at work, people alone, people in company. We take the time to prepare a face to meet the faces that we meet, as some guy once said.

I divided my time a lot this summer. For a short period I experienced the life of the Professional Writer: that rare breed who do all their writing in hotel rooms and transit lounges, and tweet about how they wish they had more time for writing. I went from a judging panel in Dublin to a short story festival in Zagreb, then to a literature conference in Norwich, then to a week's tutoring at Arvon in Devon. I met a lot of writers, and I got a surprising amount of writing done. The dislocated lifestyle began to seem quite appealing. But in the end I needed somewhere to do my laundry, and I came home, carrying with me some of the letters which feature in this issue; letters which were prompted by conversations with the writers I'd met, and which were delivered by hand, passed across breakfast tables or pushed under hotel room doors by people who were not quite at home.

The other letters in this issue came, as they always do, from writers I've never met and in most cases never will, flapping through the brass letterbox of the *The Letters Page* office and discovered with delight amongst the many other letters which we spent time reading carefully through. Our new call for submissions has just gone out – details are in the notes overleaf – and we very much hope to see a letter from you, dear reader, come flapping through that same brass letterbox.

In the meantime, we hope you enjoy this issue. And we hope you find yourself feeling at home wherever you may be today. Keep in touch.

Yours,
The Editor.

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

www.theletterspage.ac.uk

Issue Number Four, Summer 2014

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

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

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

One Last Thing: Submissions are now open for our fifth issue, the Protest Issue. We're asking for letters of complaint, objection, and furious indignation; eyewitness reports from protests around the world; recollections of protests and sit-ins and camps and campaigns; reflections on the use of the letter as a political tool, and anything else you feel responds to the theme. We're looking for letters with a sense of urgency. We're looking for some news from now.

Letters should be around 500 words long, handwritten and posted to us at the address below. The closing date for submissions is 29th October 2014. For more details, or to sign up to our regular email memoranda, see www.theletterspage.ac.uk. You can also follow us on Twitter @TheLettersPage.

Or you can write. Our address is:

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

Simon Garfield
St Ives / London

Dear Reader,

Of course I'm writing this overlooking the beach. It's about 70 degrees, the coffee's going down sweetly, and from my seat at the café I can see that the surf school is about to start training a new bunch of tiny wetsuits. Best of all, this all sort of counts as work. I've been coming down to St Ives, Cornwall (as opposed to the St Ives in Cambridgeshire; that would be a really stupid sat-nav mistake), since I was 18.[1,2] My mother had just died, and I had to clear my head. I was vaguely aware of some sort of connection the town had with artists, I had probably heard of Barbara Hepworth, but mostly I just wanted to get to the end of England. So I took a train, found a guesthouse when I arrived, and fell in love with the place in ten minutes. Everyone talks about the gauzy Mediterranean light and the slightly hippyish vibe, but there's something else as well: no-one can quite believe their luck. Everyone, even people working here, is smiling. Coming from London, that's what you want.

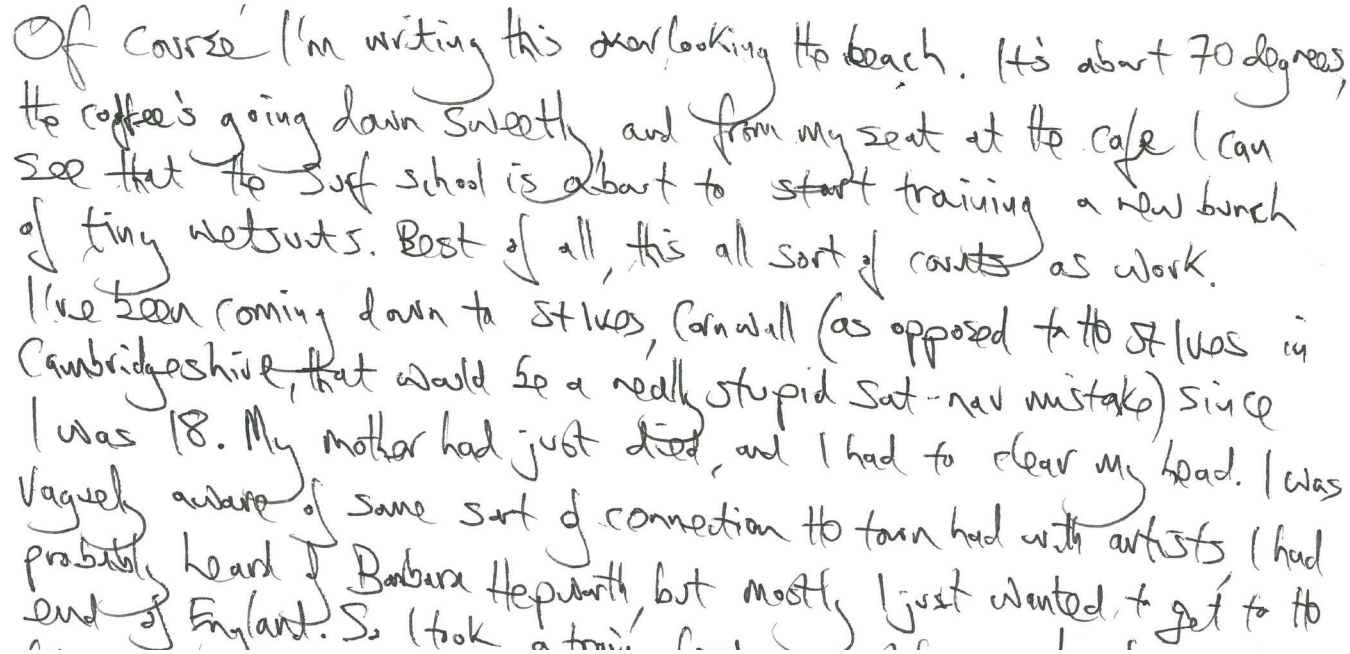
Thirty-five years on, the guesthouse is still here, near the Tate. But now I have my own small place. It's in the middle of town, no view to speak of, but only three minutes to the beaches and four to Hepworth's house (if you haven't been, go: truly inspiring).[3]

I'm down here about one week in four, perhaps ten days a month if I've got a deadline. It's still where I come to clear my head, the only place I can really think creatively and do proper work rather than drudge work. I get up early if I'm firing, and don't worry about meal times or other annoying things. My kids and friends (grown-up kids!) come down usually when I'm not here, and use St Ives as most sane tourists do, for pleasure.

But today I went old-school, and I sat overlooking the beach editing my next book, an extraordinary collection of letters that contain the best love story I've ever read – a wartime romance, not at all clichéd, full of passion, worry, jealousy and tiny psychological dramas. I've just read a passage where the man finds a blood clot in his mouth and thinks it's early TB. The doctor tells him it's due to whistling.

More soon!

Wish you were here,
Simon.[4]


Of course I'm writing this overlooking the beach. It's about 70 degrees, the coffee's going down smoothly, and from my seat at the cafe I can see that the surf school is about to start training a new bunch of tiny wetsuits. Best of all, this all sort of counts as work. I've been coming down to St Ives, Cornwall (as opposed to the St Ives in Cambridgeshire, that would be a really stupid Sat-nav mistake) since I was 18. My mother had just died, and I had to clear my head. I was vaguely aware of some sort of connection the town had with artists (I had probably heard of Barbara Hepworth, but mostly I just wanted to get to the end of England. So I took a train [illegible]

[1.] The St Ives in Cornwall and the St Ives in Cambridgeshire have both been cited as inspiration for the traditional English folk riddle, 'As I was going to St Ives':

As I was going to St Ives,
I met a man with seven wives.
Each wife had seven sacks,
Each sack had seven cats,
Each cat had seven kits.
Kits, cats, sacks and wives,
How many were going to St Ives?

The wikipedia entry on this riddle proposes the answer as being any of 0, 1, 2, 7, 9, 2753, 2800 and 2802, depending on your reading of the riddle's grammatical ambiguities. This footnote has very little to do with Simon's letter, besides the impossibility of hearing someone say 'St Ives' without Pavlovianly responding with a reference to seven wives.

[2.] The correct postcode, if using a sat-nav to visit Simon's Cornish bolthole, would be TR26, as opposed to PE27 for the St Ives in Cambridgeshire.

[3.] On Barnoon Hill, St Ives, Cornwall. Open daily, 10.00-17.20, March-October; open Tuesday-Sunday, 10.00-16.20, November-February. Closed 24-26 December. Admission £6.60/4.40.

[4.] Simon Garfield's most recent book, *To The Letter: A Curious History of Correspondence*, is a celebration of letter-writing throughout history which contains some fine examples of postal practices and personal correspondence, and has quickly become required reading for anyone seeking to work in our offices. We particularly enjoy the story, on p.264, of the nineteen year old Reginald Bray arranging to have himself posted home in 1900.

Simon Garfield has also published fine books on maps, fonts, stamps, wartime diaries, purple dye, the Mini, and wrestling, amongst others. He divides his time between London and St Ives.

Vesna Lemaić
Šibenik / Ljubljana

Dear Grandma,

Have you ever felt like a second-rate person?

I'm in Dalmatia, in your birth town. I haven't come here led by mourning emotions; I could be just another tourist visiting Šibenik,[1] hoping to relax a bit by the seaside. But I can't relax. I'm trapped in this snare of nerves, with your stories of the Italian occupation during World War II stalking me... and of you as the activist of illegal Yugoslav revolutionary communist youth.[2]

At nights you climbed out through the window of your parents' house and hid yourself from Italian patrols... I've learned how to hide myself from police, too. I've learned how to keep watch when my comrades are... I don't believe in communism, Grandma, I don't believe in the State. But the things you did at that time, carrying bombs under your skirt... I can't compare with you. You were a terrorist at that time, and what am I? Your anti-fascist slogans on Šibenik's walls made Italian soldiers less cocky. My anti-capitalist graffitti only make the neighbours nag about the ruined façade.

When I get drunk with my comrades on the eve of some demonstration we fantasise about a mess we're going to do, but usually it ends with my throwing up in a bush on the way home. I am a second-rate person. I remember the first time we broke through a police blockade on the protest against European austerity measures. I was overwhelmed by the common power. Do you know the feeling? I was under this spell until police units trapped us in a small alley and transferred us to a prison. Fascists never caught you, you didn't let them. If they had they would have shot you. Policemen didn't let me close the toilet door when I asked to pee.

I understand why sometimes people shoot in all directions. The oppression now is so indefinite. You can't blame fascists now, Grandma.

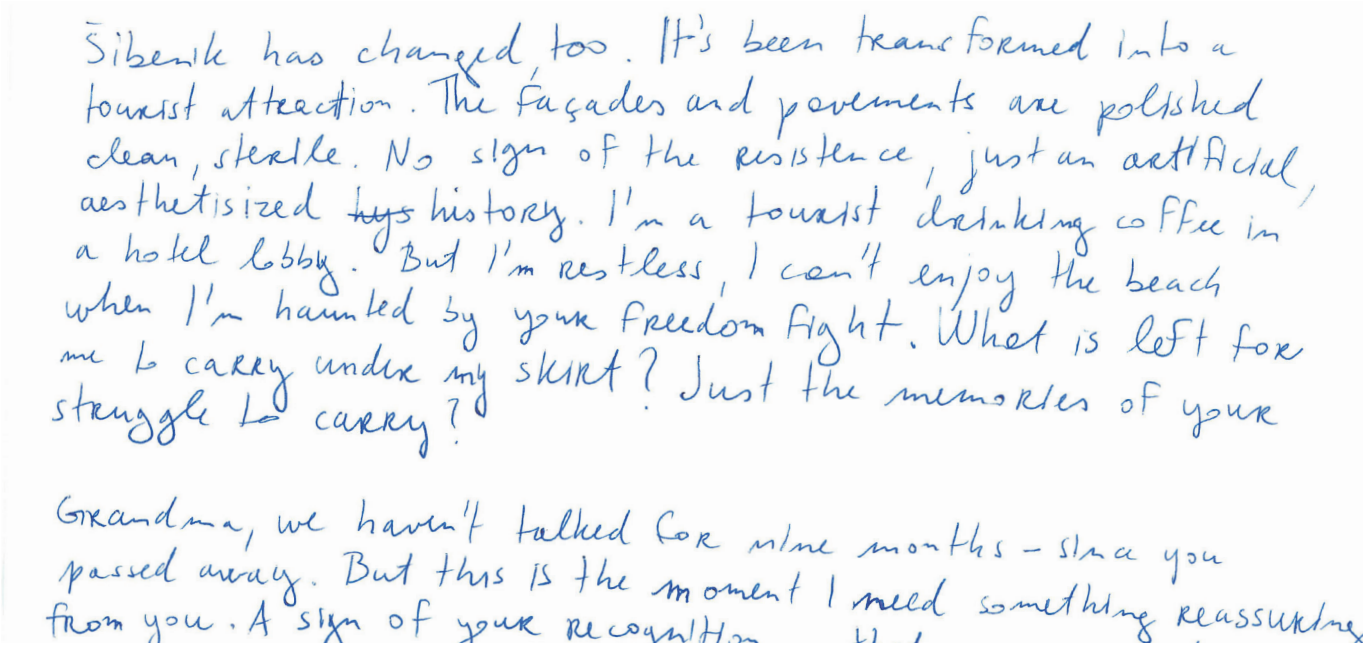
Šibenik has changed, too. It's been transformed into a tourist attraction. The façades and pavements are polished clean, sterile. No sign of the resistance, just an artificial, aesthetisized history. I'm a tourist drinking coffee in a hotel lobby. But I'm restless, I can't enjoy the beach when I'm haunted by your freedom fight. What is left for me to carry under my skirt? Just the memories of your struggle to carry?

Grandma, we haven't talked for nine months – since you passed away. But this is the moment I need something reassuring from you. A sign of your recognition... that you are proud of me.

But you give me no signal at these small hours. Not the sound of a distant firecracker, not even a seagull's cry. I'd like to hear your running steps echoing between the narrow streets of Šibenik. But I don't mind your silence. I'll keep trying to creep into your skirt... hidden pockets under it need to be reloaded.

With love,

your granddaughter.[3]



1. Šibenik, on the Dalmatian coast of Croatia, is best known for its UNESCO-listed fifteenth-century cathedral, hilltop fort, narrow cobbled streets and ancient stone buildings, and for the excellent sardines sold at the bar beside the fishing harbour.

2. Šibenik was occupied by Italian forces from 1941, as part of the wider Axis occupation of Yugoslavia, until its liberation in 1944 by the Partisans.

3. Vesna Lemaić is a fiction writer from Ljubljana, Slovenia. She made her debut in 2008 with *Popularne Zgodbe* (*Popular Stories*), which won the 2009 Zlata Ptica Award, the 2009 Slovenian Book Fair Award, and the 2010 Fabula Award. In 2010, her novel *Odlagališče* (*The Dumping Ground*) was published, and in 2014 she had a story included in the Dalkey Archive's *Best European Fiction 2014*. Which, if you ever feel your short fiction reading is becoming dominated by UK and US writers (which if you live in the UK or US it almost certainly is), is well worth your attention. Vesna divides her time.

Dear Reader,

We do not all have an inheritance, a rich lover or patron (or even savings), yet I found I do not need these to split my time between two homes. When I left what others call my 'proper job' for the clearly improper life of an itinerant writer-adventurer, I decided to find a space, a place to call my own (yet it is NOT mine; being hidden away on someone else's land – everything is owned by THEM).

That summer I left the train in what was officially the Middle of Nowhere (a request stop).[1] Alone in the woods and hills. Alone? No – for I was surrounded by the wild things. I saw other humans on but two occasions (when I was not resupplying).

I built a house. Although to call it a house may be a misnomer. It was a shelter, a shanty, a Thoreauvian shack. Wood and heather, bracken and stone and roll upon roll of emerald and earthy living moss to cover it all.[2] I found the skull of a red deer and it became One Skull Shack. I stayed until the fall (do you prefer fall or autumn – I am English born and Scottish raised, yet I love the simple statement of the former. It fits.) had passed and Christmas was close, by which time it was Five Skull Shack. I have been back since and will again, soon.[3]

I am more whole when I split my time between these two places, betwixt civilisation and a wilder state. One balances the other perfectly. It is not self which is divided, but simply location; locations can, and should, change. One sharpens the other – when I can no longer smell traffic fumes I find describing them becomes simpler, more fluid, memory sharpening pencil. When I no longer have to pick ticks from my clothes before they latch on and feast, or collect my firewood and water, I find I can concentrate on what I gained from such experience, distil it into my worth. It is not wild versus civilisation, pen and ink against keyboard and computer, letter vs email, analogue v. digital – rather, these pairs form partnerships. By understanding the strengths and weaknesses of both I find my work and I are less of a dichotomy and more of a complete article. I find writing by hand in a notebook (or dry leaf), near a fire, and with my favourite – if temperamental – fountain pen (THIS pen – I have used her for nearly thirty years [and take great care her ink does not freeze]) is perfect for planning, for drafts and sketches of character and place and plot. These take on a different, smokier flavour. In civilisation I have my PC and I can type four times faster than I write by hand. This is the place for full copy, for edits.

In answer to your query, when I am in the wild I certainly use Poste Restante, principally for items I cannot purchase locally; a new bow saw blade, a star map, many batteries, pipe cleaners, all procured and posted with a letter by my sister. I carry my passport as ID, although the assistant has to peer beneath fresh beard and mad mountain-man stare in order to ascertain whether I truly exist. It can be difficult making small-talk, when the last thing you spoke to were the tracks of a Scottish wild cat. Similarly, when I return to the world of duvet and shower, there can be a process of readjustment. Fascinating in itself. When I am out in the wild I have time to think. Time is different out there; deadlines and hours mean little, beyond the constant search for food, water, and fuel. Here, however, the day is passing and I live by the schedules of others – and the post will soon be collected. Time to catch it, and dinner.

Until the next time,
Alex. [4]

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In answer to your query, when I am in the wild I certainly use Poste Restante (after a long hike and a train ride to the nearest post office - a day's adventure I combine with resupply), principally for items I cannot purchase locally (a new bow saw blade, a star map, many batteries, pipe cleaners, all procured and posted with a letter by my sister). I carry my passport as ID, although the assistant has to peer beneath fresh beard and mad mountain man stare in order to ascertain whether I truly exist. It can be difficult making small-talk when the last thing you spoke to was the tracks of a Scottish wild cat. Similarly, when I return to the

1. The station in question is Lochailort, on the line called Rathad Iarainn nan Eilean in Gaelic — the Iron Road to the Isles. Lochailort is the next station after Glenfinnan Viaduct, known from the Harry Potter films.

2. An illustrated design guide to the self-built vernacular shelter was included with Alexander's letter, inked on to an oak leaf, and is pictured here.

3. We have pushed Alexander for the location of his shack, and he has been understandably coy. This is the closest he has come to telling us: 'My wilderness home, originally One Skull Shack, now Seven Skull Shack, is in a small wooded glen, nestling between the hills and not too far from the coastline. It would be very difficult to find, even with GPS or O/S grid references, it is so well hidden. As far as I am aware no-one has yet found it. It sits snuggly in the middle of the area called the Rough Bounds of Lochaber (Garbh-Chrìochan Loch Abar), a name which truly fits.'

4. Alexander Crow is a freelance writer and web designer, and is currently working on his first three novels. He divides his time between Wick, in northern Scotland, and Seven Skull Shack, in the Rough Bounds of Lochaber.

Paolo Cognetti
Valle d'Aosta / Milano

Dear Jon,[1]

Here, where I am, I often think of the old Captain Willard, when he gets up from his bed after drinking, goes to the window, peeps through the Venetian blind as if he doesn't remember where he is, and says: 'Saigon. Shit. I'm still only in Saigon'. And then there is the voiceover in which he confesses that he misses his home, but that when he is at home he can't manage to think of anything other than going back to the jungle.[2]

I was born and raised in Milan. I don't like it much, but it's my home. Some years ago, in a time of crisis in my life, and especially in my writing, I went to stay in a herdsman's hut, in the mountains, and since then I have spent several months there each year.[3] Up there, the snow melts in May and starts falling again in October. During the summer, shepherds come up with cows and dogs. One of them has become a good friend of mine, someone with whom I can have a drink at night, and, for the rest, all that surrounds me is the forest, the pastures, the mountains, the ruins of old houses. In spring and autumn, a week can pass without me seeing any living soul.

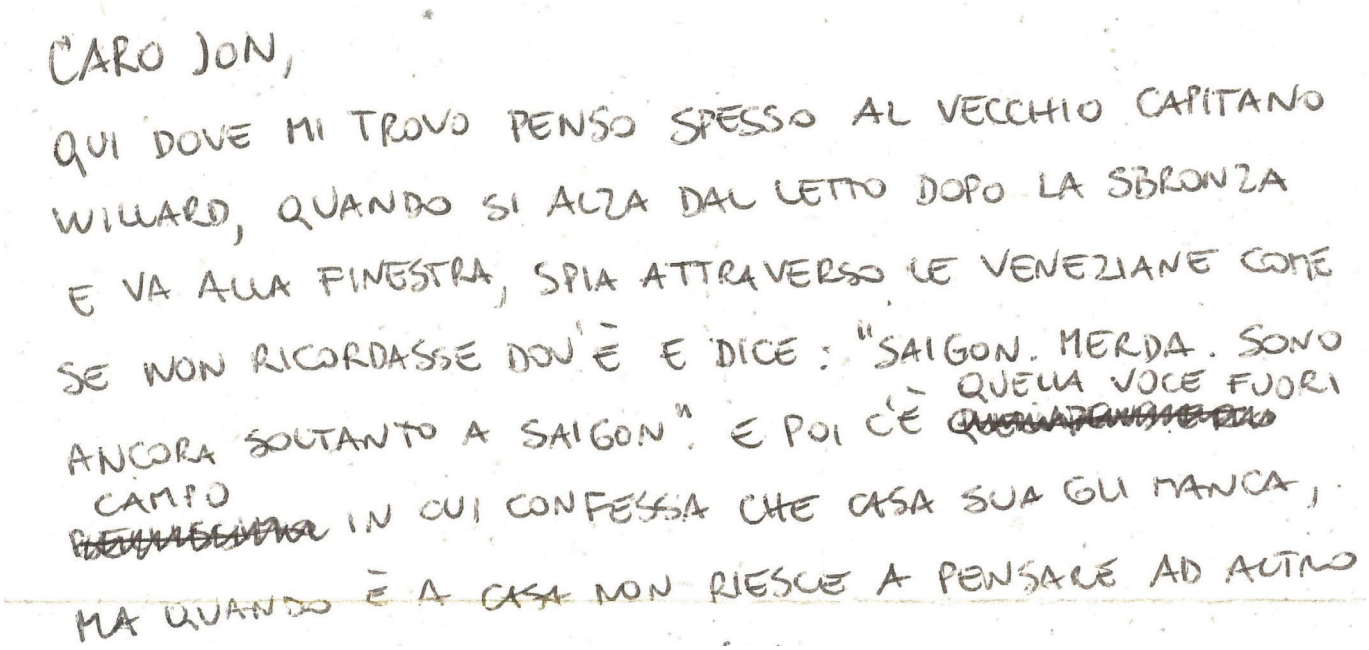
In my language, there is no distinction between the state of 'solitude' and the feeling of 'loneliness'. We have only one word, and it's sad; to be happy we have to be with others. That's an idea against which, intellectually, I am rebelling with all my might. But physically, I know how much it can be true. It's very risky to stay alone. There is the risk of drowning in sadness, and we have to manage to stay afloat and joyful; the moments of happiness are powerful but rare, as when you find yourself on top of a mountain of an evening, and you meet a wild animal and you feel like him, strong and free. I live like him. As a matter of fact, this is also the writing state. You know that as well as I do: when we write, we miss the others terribly, and we'd like to forget about it, or choose another vocation, or be one of these mysteriously sane writers, but when we are in the world, in the midst of society, we can think of nothing other than going back to the jungle.

My Saigon is writing, and it's the mountain. I can't really maintain a distinction between those two anymore. I've started to understand why writers, at the end of their books, thank, in such a childish way, so gushingly, their partners and children: we are solitary sailors and climbers, blocked, shaking, in a storm, we find ourselves in a shipwreck gripping a flimsy plank of wood, and it's incredible that anyone might have chosen to stay close to us, to love us.

'I wanted a mission. In order to punish me for my sins, they gave me one.'

Dear Jon, I hope that you are well and that you have someone close to you, who cares for you.[4] From a far, far away place,

Yours,
Paolo


CARO JON,
QUI DOVE MI TROVO PENSO SPESSO AL VECCHIO CAPITANO
WILLARD, QUANDO SI ALZA DAL LETTO DOPO LA SBRONZA
E VA ALLA FINESTRA, SPIA ATTRAVERSO LE VENEZIANE COME
SE NON RICORDASSE DOV'È E DICE: "SAIGON. MERDA. SONO
ANCORA SOLTANTO A SAIGON". E POI C'È QUELLA VOCE FUORI
CAMPO IN CUI CONFESSA CHE CASA SUA GLI MANCA,
MA QUANDO È A CASA NON RIESCE A PENSARE AD ALTRO

[1.] This letter was written on the blank pages at the back of the brochure for the *Festival of the European Short Story,* and given to the editor of this journal, by hand, at the end of a long coach journey from Šibenik to Zagreb. Originally written in Italian, the letter has been translated for us here by Pascale Quiviger, for which we thank her from the bottom of our monolingual hearts. For the record, here is the original text:

'Caro Jon,
Qui dove mi trovo, penso spesso al vecchio Capitano Willard, quando si alza dal letto dopo la sbronza e va alla finestra, spia attraverso le veneziane come se non ricordasse dov'è, dice: 'Saigon. Merda. Sono ancora soltanto a Saigon.' E poi c'è quella voce fuori campo in cui confessa che casa sua gli manca, ma quando è a casa non riesce a pensare ad altro che a tornare nella giungla.
Io sono nato e cresciuto a Milano. Non che mi piaccia molto, ma quella è casa mia. Però qualche anno fa, in un momento di crisi della mia vita e soprattutto della mia scrittura, me ne sono andato a stare in una baita d'alta montagna, e da allora ci passo molti mesi all'anno. Lassù, la neve si scioglie in maggio e ricomincia a cadere in ottobre. D'estate salgono i pastori con le mucche e i cani. Uno di loro è diventato un mio buon amico, qualcuno con cui bere un bicchiere la sera, e per il resto tutto quello che ho intorno è il bosco, i pascoli, le montagne, i ruderi delle vecchie case. In primavera e in autunno, può anche passare una settimana senza che io veda anima viva.
Nella mia lingua non c'è una distinzione tra lo stato di "solitude" e il sentimento di "loneliness". Abbiamo una parola sola ed è triste, per essere felici bisogna stare con gli altri. È un'idea a cui, intellettualmente, mi ribello con tutte le mie forze. Ma fisicamente so quanto puo' essere vera. È molto rischioso stare da solo, c'è il pericolo di annegare nella tristezza e bisogna impegnarsi per stare a galla e stare allegri; i momenti di felicità sono acuti ma rari, come quando verso sera ti ritrovi in cima a una montagna, incontri un animale selvatico e ti senti come lui, forte e libero e vivo come lui. Il fatto è che quello stato è anche lo stato della scrittura. Tu lo sai bene quanto me: quando scriviamo ci mancano terribilmente tutti quanti, e vorremmo metterci una pietra sopra, o scegliere un'altra vocazione, o essere di quegli scrittori misteriosamente sani, ma quando siamo in mezzo al mondo, in mezzo alla società, non riusciamo a pensare ad altro che a tornare nella giungla.
La mia Saigon è la scrittura ed è la montagna. Non riesco più bene a distinguere tra le due cose. Ho capito perchè gli scrittori, alla fine dei loro libri, ringraziano in modo cosi infantile, cosi zuccheroso le loro mogli e figli: siamo navigatori e alpinisti solitari, ci bloccano tremanti in parete sotto una tempesta, ci ritroviamo naufraghi aggrappati a una povera asse di legno, ed è incredibile che qualcuno abbia scelto di starci vicino, e di volerci bene.
'Volevo una missione. Per punirmi dei miei peccati me ne hanno data una.'
Caro Jon, spero che tu stia bene e che tu abbia vicino a te qualcuno che ti vuole bene.
Da un posto lontano lontano.
Tuo,
Paolo.'

[2.] The writer is referring here to the opening scene from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, in which Martin Sheen, playing the central character of Captain Willard, punches a mirror.

[3.] The hut is located in the Valle d'Aosta, close to the French and Swiss borders.

[4.] Excuse us for a moment. One of the editors has something in his eye.

[5.] Paolo Cognetti is the author of three collections of short stories, a diary of life in the mountains, and a literary guide to New York, all published by Minimum Fax in Italy. He has also represented Italy at the Maths Olympics. He divides his time between Milan, Valle d'Aosta, and New York.

Xiaolu Guo
London / Ningbo

Dearest Queen:

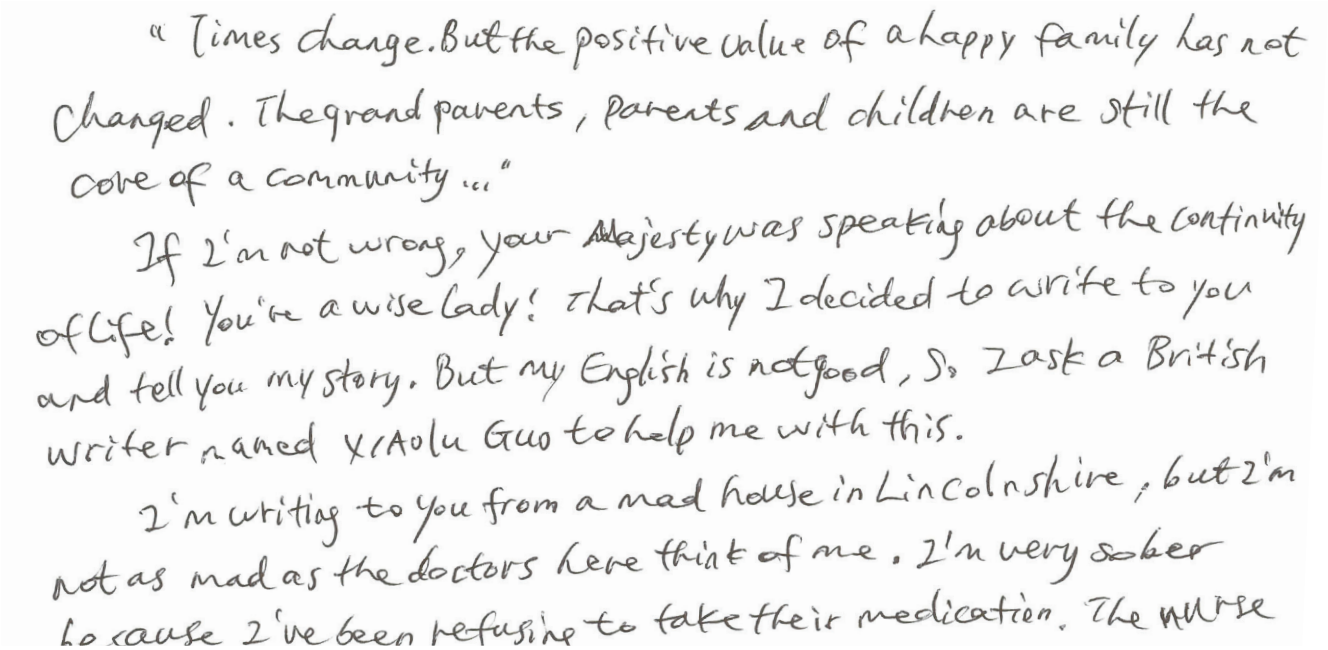
I hope your Christmas lunch and dinner were marvellous. Yesterday I stood before the television with my inmates and watched your Christmas speech. The powder on your cheeks was subtle and your hair was so well combed. You spoke slowly so even a foreigner like me could understand every line: 'Times change. But the positive value of a happy family has not changed. The grandparents, parents and children are still the core of a community...' If I'm not wrong, your Majesty was speaking about the continuity of life! You're a wise lady! That's why I decided to write to you and tell you my story. But my English is not good, so I ask a British writer named Xiaolu Guo to help me with this.

I'm writing to you from a mad house in Lincolnshire, but I'm not as mad as the doctors here think of me. I'm very sober because I've been refusing to take their medication. The nurse believed I'd be better with those pills. You may not know about those pills, but I can tell you – if you have some mental trouble, never take anything like 'spredee'! It'd kill you, I mean, kill your brain dead. They told me that these pills can provide anxiety relief, but all patients here were like zombies after their 'anxiety relief'. I have this trick, you see, I hide my pills. I hide them under my tongue then I spit them out after the nurse leaves. You see why I'm still sober?

Anyway, why I'm here? Your Majesty may ask. I'm here by a total accident! It was a huge misunderstanding between the western doctors and me. I'm an exiled Chinese musician (rock 'n' roll style). My music annoyed the Chinese government so I had to leave the country or I'd be in prison. I had a temporary visa a few months ago when I came to the UK. And I began to apply for a new visa once I arrived at London. But just two weeks ago I learned that the Home Office refused my application. The officer told me I was not qualified as a 'Highly Skilled Migrant', even though I had sung in concerts for 20,000 audiences in Beijing's Olympic Stadium and 30,000 people in Shanghai's Music Hall. I had even sung the Chinese version of the Sex Pistol's *Holidays in the Sun*! I am not a nobody at all. Then upon receiving a denial stamp on my passport I got mad (as I can't return to China facing imprisonment), so I went to 10 Downing St pleading for help. But the police arrested me and after grilling me with some bizarre questions they transferred me to here! The Mad Hospital said I would stay here by virtue of the 'Detention Under Mental Health Act'. But I told them I have no mental health problem; all I need is a valid visa so I won't be sent back!

Your Majesty. I know you don't have to help a Chinese and perhaps you don't like rock music. It might be too bumpy for your delicate ears. As far as I know, the last time you visited China was 1986 and you didn't encounter any modern music scene then. But since you mentioned family values in your Christmas speech, I think you understand how important it is that young people need their voice to be heard by the world. So if you can rescue me from here, I'll be grateful to you and I'll truly believe that Britain still requires a Queen. Please write directly to our Head Nurse Mrs. Mary Wilson if you'd like to discuss my case with her, or call the front desk 01522 565180. If they know it is your Majesty calling, they'll be thrilled, as the English people would say.

I beg you, from the bottom of my heart,
Kublai Jian


« Times change. But the positive value of a happy family has not changed. The grand parents, parents and children are still the core of a community ... »

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[1] Xiaolu Guo, a film-maker and novelist, grew up in south China and has lived in London since 2002. Her most recent novel, *I Am China*, is an epistolary novel about translation, love, visas, and the state repression which followed the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. The fictional letter published here is drawn from that novel. Her earlier novels include *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* and *Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*.
In 2013, Xiaolu was named as one of the twenty Best Young British Novelists by *Granta Magazine*.
Xiaolu Guo divides her time between writing and film-making.

Evie Wyld
Peckham / Isle of Wight

Dear Jon,[1]

Once I took myself to the Isle of Wight with two dogs to try to write. I stayed in a caravan in the woods, my nearest neighbours about a twenty minute drive away – so there was that feeling of isolation that I felt would probably be important on retreat. This was mid August, but a wet August, and after the first evening, a windy August, and then a gale-y August with hailstones. Which all sounds fine, if you're in a caravan with a heater and a bottle of whisky and two noble dogs at your feet. But the caravan had no heater, or any electricity or running water, so after around 6pm when the sun was blotted out by black clouds I could either sit in the car or go to bed.

The caravan also lacked a table; in fact, inside it was only a bed. The idea was you spent your days outdoors and only used it to sleep in. I was able to attach a torch to a cupboard by its wrist loop, but when the wind got up and the caravan rocked in the weather, the torch would swing about like we were on a boat, unnerving for the dogs and not fantastic for me either.

The dogs required two walks a day – not just potters through the woods, but a total change of scenery – a hike on the downs or a sizeable length of coast. If they didn't, or thought they might not, get these two walks, one of them would stand on me and breathe mackerel breath in my face, while the other would get the worries, like the world was ending and we all needed a place to hide. At night they insisted on sleeping in bed with me – too terrified by whatever it was that was outside and moving through the undergrowth to sleep on their own. Turned out a tree had fallen in the woods and taken down the fence that kept the sheep in the neighbouring field out, and they'd become tangled in blackberries, dragging themselves around and making terrible sounds. I spent most nights awake feeling the caravan move and hearing those sounds.

There was a day I decided I had to have a wash, and I warmed a kettle over a fire, while I held an umbrella over it, then stripped off in the woods in the middle of a rainstorm. I cooked on the same fire some nights, usually kidney beans and tomatoes. I tried to stop dinner from being crisps in bed, and won that fight maybe three times. All in all I'm not sure I wrote more than a paragraph on my retreat, too concerned with trying to do the things that needed to be done in order to get through the day. On one walk along the beach, a shoal of poisonous Portuguese Man-of-War jellyfish[2] had washed up and the dogs kept trying to eat them. On another trip to the downs I collected sloes in a hailstorm so that at least I could say that on my retreat I'd made sloe gin. Four days afterwards, at 6am, when the gale became too strong to be so close to so many large trees, I dropped this bag of sloes in a bin at the ferry terminal.[3]

Hope that helps. I had no idea my handwriting had become this chronic.

With love,
Evie[4]
x

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[1] As this is the second letter in this issue to be addressed to 'Jon', we feel we should remind contributors and potential contributors that we prefer letters, when not addressed to a fictional recipient, to be addressed to the general reader, or a particular reader, or even to *The Letters Page* as a corporate entity. But not Jon. That guy gets enough post as it is.

[2] Also known as a Portuguese man o'war, or Portuguese Man-of-war, and renowned for the severity of its sting, the *physalia physalis* is not a true jellyfish at all, but rather a siphonophore: a colony of specialised individual organisms which are so connected and interdependent as to be unable to conceive of life as truly independent beings. Much like the rest of us, then.

[3] We really don't mean to judge, but this doesn't sound like the most productive or enjoyable of writing retreats. We happen to know that a member of our editorial board, Éireann Lorsung, has established a writing retreat near Ghent which is very likely to be comfortable, hospitable, and geared towards offering the space and calm in which to write well and clearly for a period of time. Details at http://dickinsonhouse.be/possibility/ Other writing retreat venues are available.

[4] Evie Wyld was born in London and grew up in Australia and South London. Her first novel, *After the Fire, a Still Small Voice*, won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and a Betty Trask Award and was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for New Writers, the Commonwealth Prize and the International IMPAC Dublin literary award. Her second novel, *All the Birds, Singing,* won the Miles Franklin Award, the Encore Award and the Jerwood Fiction Uncovered Prize.
In 2013 she was included on Granta Magazine's once a decade Best of Young British Novelists list. All the best minds of our generation were, it seems. But no-one's bitter about it. Evie Wyld divides her time between Peckham and the Isle of Wight.

Togara Muzanenhamo
West Mashonaland / East Mashonaland

Dearest Sanaa,

It's amazing how quiet this house is without you. As I settled into my chair I began to notice just how surprisingly polished and crisp the silence is, the sting of loneliness ringing everywhere like tinnitus. Before you were born, I'd grown used to being alone in this house, I'd grown used to its strange creaks and noises, the haunting winds travelling under the gaps of doors – in fact the solitude and silence became vital to the way of life I had fallen into, a way of life burdened with its various restrictions and obligations. And all through those years when I sat here and listened to this house breathe – I had never listened to my own breaths nor considered that other breaths could again fill the house with conversation and laughter, with the noises of life.

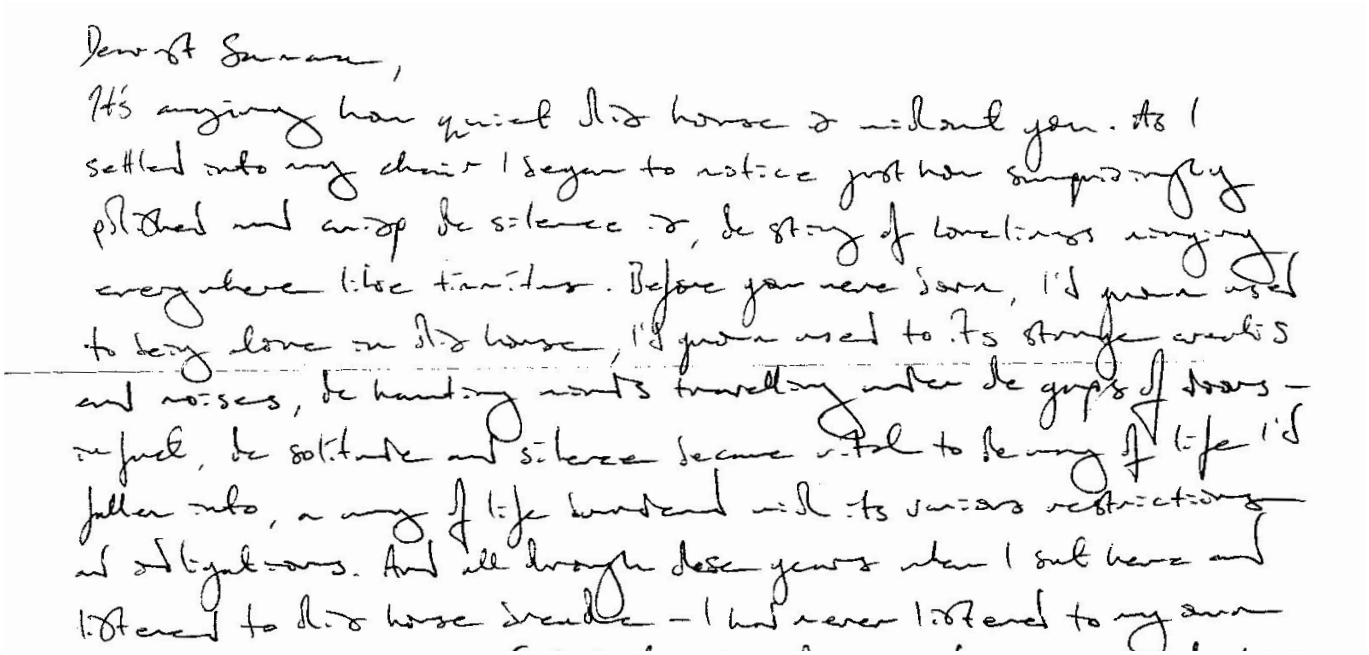
Before I stepped into the house and sat here, I phoned your mother – said I was home safe – asked to speak to you, but you were asleep. Come to think of it – this last day here on the farm was quite full: Lionel's mid-morning party, the walk to the pens where the sheep, goats and cows all came in at once for an afternoon drink, the drive to the dam in search of the boundary's beacon that seems to have disappeared beneath the waters. And then the long drive out to your mother's place – that white bungalow up in the hills, the eaves forever ringing with wind chimes. I could see the fatigue on your face during dinner, and way before I got up – you had already sensed I was leaving.

The journey back to the farm was a difficult one.[1] I am coming to dislike having to tackle the busy highways, there's always an incident of some sort along the road. This evening it was something to do with an overloaded flatbed truck and a tiny saloon. I chose not to look too closely, but couldn't ignore the glass and bricks everywhere. But it isn't really the physical drive that's becoming difficult – it's more the feeling of having to go away, it's more the act of creating a distance that leaves me heavy with something almost as dark as grief.

As I drove, I came to think about how we live – us as a family. Apart from it not being the most conventional way of living – half here, half there – it made me think over what becomes home; it particularly made me think of what you think is home – if home is a place for you, or if home is a feeling that surrounds you. This thought especially troubled me this evening when I kissed you and your mother goodbye and jumped into the car. As I drove down the slope, away from the house, I could still see you clawing at the air, crying. It was a difficult thing to lock the gate and drive down into the valley – in my rear view I could still see you and your mother standing in the jamb of the door. From the verandah, beside the dining room – you must have seen the car slip into the darkness that leads to the narrow rural road, the road that eventually snakes out to the highway. All through the drive – the image of you tearing away at your mother's shoulder stuck with me, and sits heavily with me now. Several times I wanted to stop, return – perhaps spend the night, leave tomorrow morning... But I couldn't, it can't be that way for now – I had to drive back here, to these flat farm fields, to this empty house that I've known as home for most of my life, as long as your mother has known Traveller's Joy as home.[2]

So when I stepped into the house, after phoning your mother, I decided to sit here and write to you. Initially I wanted to sit down and explain the distances and separations that define our relationship. I wanted to describe in detail how heavy I feel when having to leave you behind. But as I sat here I realised that perhaps what I was searching for was simply a way of being close to you, the intimacy of speaking to you in my head. I'm not sure when you'll get to read this, but I hope by the time you do – all our distances will be erased, and by then – as you read this now – we'd have found one rooted place, a place where we'll all be together, a place we simply call home.

All the hugs and kisses, Dad.[3]



Dear St Sauveur,

It's amazing how quiet this house is without you. As I settled into my chair I began to notice just how surprisingly pitched and unique the silence is, the story of loneliness singing everywhere like tinnitus. Before you were born, I'd grown used to being alone in this house, I'd grown used to its strange events and noises, the haunting words travelling under the gaps of doors – in fact, the solitude and silence became vital to the way of life I'd fallen into, a way of life burdened with its various restrictions and obligations. And all through these years when I sat here and listened to this house breathe – I had never listened to my own

[1.] The farm in question is situated in Lancaster Park, West Mashonaland, Zimbabwe.

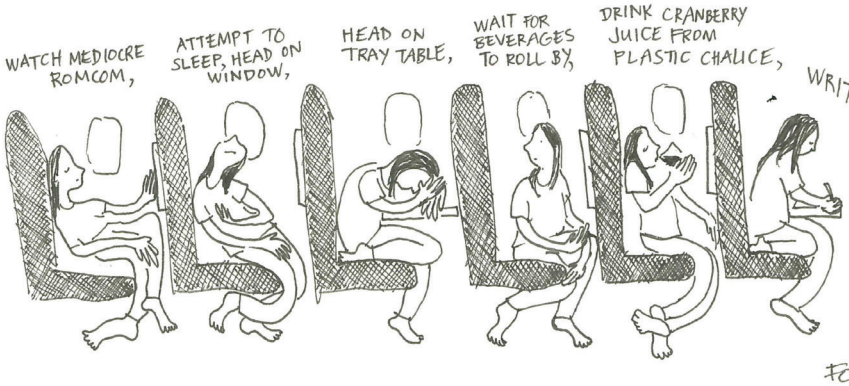
[2.] 'Traveller's Joy' is the name of the house in East Mashonaland where Togara's partner and child live.

[3.] Togara Muzanenhamo was born in Lusaka, Zambia, to Zimbabwean parents. He was raised on his family's farm thirty miles south of Harare, and educated in Paris and The Hague. He has worked as a journalist, screenplay editor and copywriter. His poems have appeared in journals in Africa, Europe and the U.S. His two collections of poems, *Spirit Brides* and *Gumiguru*, are published by Carcanet Press. Togara Muzanenhamo divides his time between West Mashonaland and East Mashonaland, and between farming and poetry.

Lily Akerman
Dublin / New York

DEAR READER,

I'M ON THE PLANE BACK TO NEW YORK, OBSERVING MY IN-FLIGHT RITUALS:



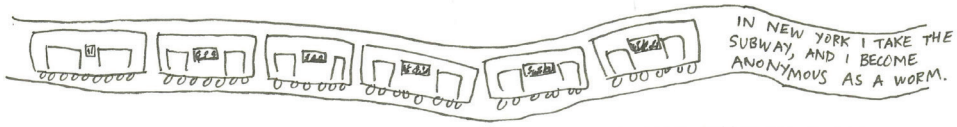
SOMEHOW DURING THESE RITES I'M TRANSPORTED/ TRANSPOSED/ TRANSFORMED FROM DUBLIN TO NEW YORK, 2ND HOME TO 1ST HOME, FOREIGNER TO NATIVE...

LIKE AN ACTOR IN HER DRESSING ROOM, PUTTING ON HER OLD COSTUME

NO ONE WILL NOTICE ME CHANGING HERE, BECAUSE THE CHANGES ARE INTERNAL.

NOGUCHI (THE SCULPTOR) SAID THAT WHEN HE WORKED IN HEAVY GRANITE, HE BECAME HEAVY IN THOUGHT AND EMOTION.

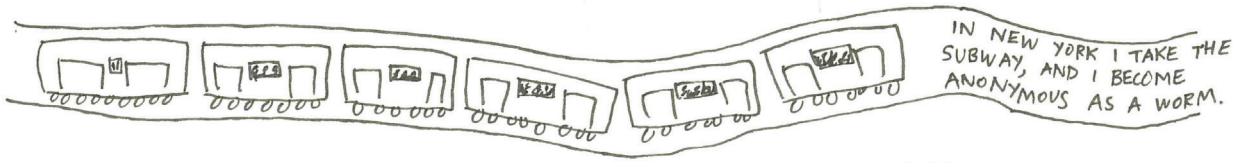
LIKE SO— I FEEL INSUPERABLE AT THE TOP OF A MOUNTAIN, AND HUMBLE AT THE BOTTOM, AND MY THOUGHTS TEND TO STAGNATE WHEN I'M AT MY DESK, BUT THEY BARREL ALONG WHEN I'M ON A TRAIN...



IF THIS PLANE IS MY DRESSING ROOM, I DON'T KNOW WHETHER I'M GETTING INTO CHARACTER, OR OUT OF CHARACTER, OR JUST SWITCHING FROM ROLE TO ROLE.

ABOUT TO BEGIN THE DESCENT.

YOURS, LILY



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ABOUT TO BEGIN THE DESCENT.

YOURS, LILY

[1] This is the first fully illustrated letter we've published, and it seemed appropriate to show it to you in full rather than stick to our usual format of a transcription with a teasing fragment of the original. But for those of you uncomfortable with even the neatest of handwriting (and Lily does have particularly legible handwriting here, we think you'll agree), here is a transcription of her text:

'Dear Reader,

I'm on the plane back to New York, observing my in-flight rituals: watch mediocre rom-com; attempt to sleep, head on window, head on tray table; wait for beverages to roll by; drink cranberry juice from plastic chalice; write...

Somehow during these rites I'm transported/transposed/transformed from Dublin to New York, 2nd home to 1st home, foreigner to native...

Like an actor in her dressing room, putting on her old costume.

No-one will notice me changing here, because the changes are internal.

Noguchi (the sculptor) said that when he worked in heavy granite, he became heavy in thought and emotion.

Like so – I feel insuperable at the top of a mountain, and humble at the bottom, and my thoughts tend to stagnate when I'm at my desk, but they barrel along when I'm on a train.

Winter hardens me.

Spring makes me angsty.

Cycling through Dublin, I feel light.

In New York I take the subway, and I become anonymous as a worm.

If this plane is my dressing room, I don't know whether I'm getting into character, or out of character, or just switching from role to role.

About to begin the descent.

Yours, Lily.'

[2] Lily Akerman is a writer, lyricist, illustrator, and puppeteer. She graduated from Princeton University with a degree in Comparative Literature, with certificates in Theatre and Creative Writing. She is currently living in Dublin on a Fulbright Scholarship to write lyrics. She tells us that she has not actually been home since arriving in Dublin a year ago, so the setting of her piece is fictional. In her mind, she says, she often lives between two places. Her poetry has been published in *The Stinging Fly* and *The Pickled Body*. This is her first published illustration, and indeed ours. Lily Akerman divides her time between Dublin and New York.

Lucy Durneen
St Ives / Liskeard

Dear L --,

Hi. I'm in Paris. The last time I was in Paris was probably the last time I wrote a letter. I'll apologise right off for my handwriting; I want to say it's screwed from years of typing but the truth is I'm just impatient and ink hurts. And yes, I have a passport now, I can go anywhere, which is a thing I haven't been able to say for more than ten years, (did I tell you this story? It ends with the lesson – never destroy your marriage certificate, no matter how much you hate the bastard…). The first thing the Immigration guy said to me was, hey – now you can flee if you want to – like running away was something I'd won. Did I want to? Is this what I'm doing? It was you who told me once, all that stands between the moment of disaster and the collapse of humanity is seven days. Or perhaps it was less optimistic – five. I try to imagine you striding out against the apocalypse with a gun and can only suppose you must be right. I think what I'm saying is: aren't we all, always, ready to flee – at some level?

I'm writing this from a Salon de Thé on the rue de Rivoli.[1] The signature drink is hot chocolate, strong as coffee, the milk served in white china jugs and rosettes of Chantilly cream on gilt-edged saucers. None of it looks particularly generous at first, but I promise you, five minutes in and you're seeing stars. The queue to get in the place was long; I was an hour just in line on the street, not even inside, face pressed to the window looking at the macaroons like they were terracotta kings in the Forbidden Palace. Not everybody would consider patisserie to be worth the ordeal – but there's a signature drink! And the all-important question: milk or chocolate in first? The waitress was definitely telling me something about the correct order but I wasn't going to ask her to speak, thinking the system would be self-evident. Here's a sign the establishment you're in is way out of your usual league; your drink has a system and an understanding of it cannot be assumed. It goes where? And – when? (A measure of one's loneliness: that there is no-one to turn and ask. Or this, learned at a talk at the Polar Institute right before I left; there are whole islands in 'existence', literally imagined by explorers, willed into being by the enormity of the emptinesses they were trying to chart…)

There is an American girl at the table opposite. Long-haired and kind of hip. She's with a Frenchman, he's older, of course. Sometimes she looks over from her Chocolat Africain and catches my eye and I think of the last time I was with someone this way, doing that thing where the conversation is mostly about figuring out which parts of yourself you're going to conceal. And don't think badly of me that I imagine them in bed later – I mean after – and if, sans l'urgence, they will lie in separate silences, if he will be cold, if this will confuse her – if everyone feels this. Fifty Euros says he'll be fucking someone else this time next year. And yet. Maybe I should have done this; loved less, and more often.

I am trying to tell you --. I'm writing everything down as if I will forget it.

When I came here last, the beautiful girl I was travelling with was stopped on the steps of the Montmartre funicular by a stranger who wanted to take her photograph. Her surprised face, turning from the light of a winter-pallid sun: that is the picture of her I carry in my mind, as if I were the camera, the composition my own. I was 19 when I came here last, when I

last wrote letters. It seems an impossibility, that I was ever that age. And then there will be the time when I will think it an impossibility that I was ever 37. Is this the best I can say, that the past seems like a time when I was almost alive? Just this morning I saw something when I crossed the street at Solferino, a bird in the road, hit by a car and thrashing into the tarmac, its neck and legs broken in opposite directions like someone had stamped on a clockwork toy. Not death throes, life throes, shaking loose the last of its life. I wonder if this is what I am doing in Paris. I wonder if I am shaking loose the last of a life.

They're warriors, not kings – aren't they? You called me at 3am. It was a mistake, I know that – for you it would have been, what, evening maybe? I'm not good with the time difference. I don't know whether you're even in New York; it is that time of year when there is no way to find you if you do not want to be found. It would have been a pressure in your pocket, an accidental combination of buttons pressed, or missed, at just the right moments – not a decision, not desire. And if most of me believes in Baudrillard's hypotheses of Chance, there is equally a part that made you an island, willed into being by something I need that I can't explain. It is just possible that maybe, on the other side of the world, you were writing, looking out of a window, and some word or song made you stop, put down your pen, (oh who of us really does this?) and this something made me worthy of your call. I know it isn't true, but because I didn't answer --.

What you asked me to tell you was the story of the human heart. But L--, my heart is tired. It disappoints me that all I can manage is this, and I don't even know if I should send it.

X.[3,4]

[1.] To be precise, *Cafe Angelina* on the rue de Rivoli, in Paris's 4th arrondissement.

[2.] As seems to have become traditional for us, we somewhat intrusively asked whether this piece was fiction or non-fiction; and, as is also traditional, we received an elegantly ambiguous response: 'This piece is a mix of non-fiction and fiction. Maybe I should leave it up to the imagination as to which bits are most made-up, but it's certainly true that I would go to extraordinary lengths for good patisserie. (And I also wouldn't recommend pretending to be Nicole Kidman when your decree absolute arrives...)'

[3.] Lucy Durneen grew up in the Fens, but has lived and worked in Berlin, Brussels and York, before moving to Cornwall. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from Plymouth University and lectures in Creative Writing at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge. Her stories and poems have been published in *The Manchester Review*, *Short Fiction* and *Poetry Ireland Review*. She is currently completing her first short story collection. Lucy divides her time between St Ives, Cambridgeshire, and Liskeard, Cornwall.

[4.] Yes, we do wish her Cornwall home was in St Ives, so that we could have ended the issue by saying that she divided her time betweeen St Ives and St Ives. But you can't have everything. Is it not enough that we brought you a letter from St Ives, Cornwall, *and* a letter from St Ives, Cambridgeshire?