



Issue One - Autumn 2013

**DECLARATION OF CONTENTS**

**DESCRIPTION:**  
*a literary journal in letters.*

**CONTENTS:**  
*reflections on letter writing as a form, as a personal history, as a thriving practice; notes on the diamond-buyers of New York, the probation officers of North London, a strange child on a Prague tram, the overheard music of Berlin, the correspondence histories of Hong Kong, and the price of a marriage ceremony in Toronto.*

**ORIGINATING PERSONNEL:**  
*Magnus Mills.*  
*Xu Xi.*  
*Gerard Donovan.*  
*Laressa Dickey.*  
*Brad Fox.*  
*Ann Hull.*  
*Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer.*  
*Colum McCann.*  
*Clare Wigfall.*

The Letters Page  
School of English  
University of  
Wolfe

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# HAWTHORNDEN INTERNATIONAL RETREAT FOR WRITERS

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 Julia V. Shea  
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 Hamish Robinson



Hawthornden Castle  
Lasswade  
Midlothian  
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23rd of March, 2013

Dear —

being asked for a letter set me thinking about all the letters I used to write. I'm not sure when I started in my mid-twenties, I guess. Only recently long had in storage in Prague. I can't remember! I think bundles of them! I can't remember for sure when I was shipped to you.

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Dear Reader,

I'm writing you this letter as I sit on the bus, heading for the University of Nottingham campus, where this journal's office is based. It's an elegant and leafy campus, set in parkland donated to the people of Nottingham by that entrepreneurial pharmacist of the early 20th century, Jesse Boot. Our building overlooks a boating lake, wildflower meadows, and croquet-smooth lawns across which students will shortly be lugging their armfuls of books and clothes and stereo equipment as they arrive for the new term. Our office overlooks none of this, however. Our view is of a brick wall, and our eyes are on the prize of the launching of a well-respected literary journal. This is what I promised when I took the job here, as a writer-in-residence in the School of English, and it's what we're on the verge of realising now. It's taken a while, as I knew it would. After all, why even think about launching a new literary journal, at this moment? There's no apparent shortage. I was genuinely unsure, at the outset, how to make it a worthwhile enterprise; where to find the excitement, the fun. I started by opening a blog to explore the question, inviting responses in the form of letters and styling the project as 'the letters page of a journal that doesn't yet exist.'

Reader, maybe you know the rest. Our correspondents began almost immediately to focus on the letter as a form; to wonder about the differences between letters-on-paper and emails, to reflect on their own letter-writing history, to notice the democracy of correspondence as a literary practice. The medium became the message, and the idea of *The Letters Page* - a literary journal in letters - was born. I invited submissions for a first issue. I asked that those submissions be written by hand, and sent through the post, and then I sat down with my student assistants and read through them. Those were heady days, reader; we had letters coming in from Canada and the U.S., from Spain and France and Germany and Cyprus, from Donegal and Dublin and Brighton and Hemel Hempstead. Most of the letters were legible; most of the letters had something interesting to say about letter writing; a select few stood out, I felt, as fine pieces of writing regardless of form. We hope you agree.

In this issue, we've focused on letter writing itself as a theme; in future, we'll be taking that 'regardless of form' to heart and looking for fine pieces of writing - essays, stories, poems, memoir, travelogue, reportage - which just happen to fit the generous parameters of the letter format. We're thinking about letters sent home, letters from prison, letters of complaint and thanks and pleading, letters that carry news and love and a sense of time and place. For our second issue, we're thinking in particular about penpals; details of our call for submissions can be found in this issue's postscript.

Meanwhile, we hope you enjoy this first issue of *The Letters Page*. If you do, you'll find that it can be folded neatly into thirds, slipped into an envelope, and posted on to a friend; if you've received your copy in this way, then be sure to sign up to our mailing list in order to receive future issues.

Anything else? Oh, just that you'll find our address on the back page. We'd love to hear from you.

Yours Sincerely,  
The Editor.

Dear J,

Sorry I didn't reply sooner. Thanks for asking and I'm really very flattered, but I don't think I'll be able to supply a hand-written letter for the collection. This is because I'm working on a book at the moment and I am unable to multi-task. I'm aware that some writers can drop in and out of their current projects while they do extracurricular work (usually to ensure a steady income), but once I get involved with a book I can think of nothing else. Luckily I have a day job<sup>1</sup> to cover the expenses, but when I'm walking to and from work I'm usually going over sentences and pieces of dialogue from the night before. Actually, I've discovered that I do my best writing away from my desk – also, I can conjure up a mental picture of a page and sometimes I realise I've made a mistake e.g. it occurred to me the other day that one of my characters had contradicted herself – I made the amendment when I got home. It's the same when I go swimming or up to the pub – I'm only thinking about my books.

Therefore, I'm sorry<sup>2</sup> but there'll be no letter.<sup>3</sup>

Kind regards,  
Magnus<sup>4</sup>

Dear ,  
Sorry I didn't reply sooner. I hark for asking and I'm really very flattered, but I don't think I'll be able to supply a hand-written letter for the collection. This is because I'm working on a book at the moment and I can't be able to multi-task. I'm aware that some writers can drop in and out of their current projects while they do extracurricular work (usually to ensure

<sup>1</sup>Magnus Mills works as a bus-driver in London, a fact which all literary critics and interviewers are required by law to mention within the first three paragraphs of any published article, along with an acknowledgment of the fact that such a mention has worn thin by now and is almost certainly redundant.

<sup>2</sup>It's worth noting here that a significant proportion of the letters we received for this issue featured prominent apologies; for poor handwriting, for not coming to a conclusion, for not having fully understood the submission guidelines. (Hint: a guideline is not a rule.) And this editor has noticed, in a recent revival of personal correspondence-by-post, how easily people feel the burden of letter writing. 'I'm sorry I haven't replied

sooner,' our letters all seem to begin, in the tone of a muttering student handing in a late assignment. Dear readers and fellow letter-writers, don't be so burdened! Write, or don't write, but enjoy it when you do. It's nice to reply to a letter, but there's no need to turn it into a chore; after all, if there's a message that can't wait, you can always send an email. (Remember email?) One of our editorial board members, the poet and publisher Éireann Lórsung, puts it very well: 'A letter,' she tweeted recently, 'is not a system of debt.'

<sup>3</sup>We are unclear whether the use of a handwritten letter to apologise for there being no handwritten letter is a deliberate or fortuitous irony. Either way, it's an irony we appreciate; hence the inclusion of this letter here. We hope Mr Mills won't object to the international circulation of what he may have considered to be private correspondence. We suspect he won't.

<sup>4</sup>Magnus Mills' most recent novel is *A Cruel Bird Came To The Nest And Looked In*, which we would be tempted to describe as 'a return to form' had his form in any way dipped since his startling debut, *The Restraint of Beasts*.

So!<sup>1</sup>

Do you believe she BURNT all those letters? From Bahrain, Belgium, China, England, France, Indonesia, Italy, Libya, Scotland... we lost count, she & I, there were so many. From the U.S., Hawaii & Massachusetts. The worst part? All those gorgeous, irreplaceable stamps. Irreplaceable, extinct currency (unless the E.U. collapses & nations rewind). Most of these letters were hand written, except from the foreign correspondents (news, I mean). He (who shall remain nameless) typed his on a manual, and what wouldn't you give to have one of those artifacts now that he's moderately famous?

You shouldn't be allowed to burn letters. From anyone.

Space, she said. Tired of lugging boxes from home to home around the world. Bad enough lugging those papers and books. It worried me, because what if she starts burning books as well now that she reads, almost exclusively, E-Books? Don't you miss the feel of paper, I asked, you who used to revel in textures and weight and shades for printing, to which she responded (as she exasperatingly does) with her 'See-no-evil' monkey face.

It's NOT about space. Her art collection takes up way more. She wanted to forget them all, the letter writers, I mean, forget the years when (as I once teased) there was a lover in every port. The time I said it she was mad (although she hid it well, pretending to laugh it off). She has no secrets from me. All work and no play makes Jill, she began . . . Stop, I said. You know your real 'work' is all about love.

Isn't a letter from a lover, even a distant one, a kind of love?

When I reminded her recently of this incendiary act, all she said – 'I was young' – and then asked for a recipe for fish maw<sup>2</sup>. Fish maw! As if she gives a stuff. You have to soak the dried maw (nature's plastic) for hours to turn the papery, membranous form to gel & then boil for hours.

These are the missives she now receives by email!

Xu Xi<sup>3,4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>When pressed, Xu Xi described this letter as 'creative non-fiction, the genre that defies definition.' We're happy to live with such ambiguity; an ambiguity which will resurface later in the issue.

<sup>2</sup>A recipe for Fish Maw soup (with chicken, pork and ham), direct from Xu Xi's correspondent:  
Buy the whole chicken, get the thigh, drumsticks and wings removed for steamed consumption and use only the body for soup. Then you get two chicken dishes. Or if you like chicken feet, that's good too. Soak fish maw overnight in sealed container in fridge (it will soften and enlarge slightly). Next day, rinse fish maw with cold water; if preferred cut into bite sized pieces. Blanch all meat ingredients in boiling water for 1 minute to remove blood. Rinse in cold water. Put all meat ingredients in clean pot. Add water and boil for one hour. After one hour, put in fish maw and boil another one hour. Add salt before consumption. Leftover soup gelatinizes in fridge. You can scoop out single servings and heat up in microwave.

<sup>3</sup>Xu Xi was born and raised in Hong Kong, and has also lived in New York City (variously, Brooklyn & Manhattan), Singapore, Morrisonville (New York), Greece (mostly on the island of Hydra but also for a time on Kea and briefly in and out of Athens), Paris (France), Surrey (UK), Bergen (Norway), Orlando (Florida), Aspen (Colorado), Cincinnati (Ohio), Iowa City (Iowa), Amherst (Massachusetts). She has published nine books of stories and essays, the most recent being *Habit of a Foreign Sky*, and currently works as a writer in residence at the City University of Hong Kong. She includes, among an extensive list of previous occupations, currency trading and casino gambling. We wonder if there is any real distinction. She may one day move to Oregon.

<sup>4</sup>Some further notes on Xu Xi's letter-writing history, by the author, in the form of a list of correspondents:  
'Dad, when he disappeared to the mines of Indonesia or to Japan in my childhood; penpal in New Zealand from about age 12 or 13 to 21 or so (we finally met when I tracked her down many years later - her last name was unusual and she proved easy to find in a country of fewer inhabitants than the city of Hong Kong); several writers with whom I maintained a long correspondence (letters, not emails); parents & extended family when I was in college and three siblings over the years until international long distance got cheap and email happened; for a certain era of my misspent youth, letters to a number of lovers in various ports of call around the world; my present partner, with whom I hooked up when I was in Hong Kong and he in New York for the first year of our relationship after which we lived together (in NYC) and then I got restless and in my typical itinerant fashion, disappeared around the world but returned, like a homing pigeon, with regularity to our apartment in NYC and then in 2010 moved to Hong Kong because Mum's Alzheimer's needed my less itinerant presence and here we are, arrived in the present moment. (Mum is now 93, healthy but with a mind somewhere in that final frontier of space and memory.)'

Dear Harriet,<sup>1</sup>

What possessed you to send a letter? Before I respond – and of course I remember the lake in July – I do have to wonder if your/our situation can be that urgent, and if my forthcoming response, which you now have in your hands, can be of much importance to you when your letter has taken, from the postmark, 3 days to reach me. Your number has changed, I phoned a construction site. You do realise, as you read this, that my letter will take another 3 days or even 4 with a Sunday before you will have had the opportunity to do what you're doing now. I'm writing as fast as I can to catch the last post. I have no envelope or stamps. Fact: I use email/text/Twitter, etc. I'm not being sarcastic. Fact: I send an email, within minutes I get a reply, not from a desk but from people in transit, a moving car, a colleague crossing the street, along with additional responses from people they copied in, which often contain the crucial questions. Loaves and fishes, real-time communication. (See? I can't delete what I wrote after 'sarcastic,' and I'm not starting now. So I apologise. [*Happy/quizzical face*]) I will now have to find (how many ~~fucking~~ tenses can there be in the English language??) [*happy face*] an envelope – tried many, many shops and some damn fool thought it was a joke and the queue started yelling. And a stamp? Where do you get a stamp? I may miss the last post and have to sleep on this news tonight. [*Sad face*]. In any case, I've thought about the question you've asked me, so here goes.

P.T.O.<sup>2</sup>

in, which often contain the crucial questions. Loaves and fishes, real-time communication. (See? I can't debate what I wrote after 'sarcastic,' and I'm not starting again. So I apologise<sup>(2)</sup>) I will now have to find (how many fucking tenses can there be in the English language??) (:-) an envelope - tried many, many shops and some damn fool thought it was a joke and the queue started yelling. And a stamp? Where do you get a stamp? I may miss the last post and have to sleep on this news tonight. 😞 In any case, I've thought about the question you've asked me, so here goes.

<sup>1</sup>This letter, which we take to be a work of fiction, was unsigned. Further investigations suggest that it was written and sent by Gerard Donovan, an Irish writer currently living in the state of New York. His most recent publication was the excellent short story collection, *Country of The Grand*.

<sup>2</sup>The reverse side of this letter was blank.

Dear Reader,

This morning I've had the windows cracked a bit, as it's the first day the temperature has reached 9 degrees C, and that felt quite balmy to me. Two floors up a pianist is practising – I usually only hear it in summer, but there it was again, in February, with the windows open. There is something magic to me in hearing music – good music! live music! – unexpected! And by this I don't mean the house party music our neighbours sometimes play till 3 or 4am and that we can feel vibrating through the thick brick walls between us, but the precision and dedication of a lone instrument perhaps – in the middle of the day. I do think this middle of the day is the key – generally we expect to hear music & such at night, at parties and so on – but being a person who grew up in the country and who did not have the opportunity to learn an instrument (read: interest or inclination), I find it terribly inspiring when I hear Debussy floating out some flat's window, especially if it's someone playing for practice.

I will say however, that I did on many occasions have the chance to hear my grandfather and his wife sitting around playing banjo and guitar respectively (in their living room near the stove) – playing a few Hank Williams songs and harmonizing with their voices as they sang. My favourite though was a song they played called Mandolin Man – originally sung by the Kendalls, no doubt a family who sang together as well. The lyrics loosely are – “Mandolin Man, the dance floor is empty. Won't your honkytonk band play the last song for me? Take me away – my soul's feelin' empty. My heart's in your hand, Mandolin Man.” These mini-concerts were impromptu & usually occurred at holidays when the family gathered – if at all.

I have mixed feelings about this memory though; as a kid, I was so embarrassed by this playing & the effusiveness of their voices and harmony – Somehow it was so moving to me inside, but I didn't know what to do with that feeling of immensity, being pressed down by the music, so I felt ashamed and wanted to go run around outside alone. Now, in my memory, I think how amazing it was to see the skill of people who know how to play and sing and offer it out so freely to others. I miss those times. When my grandfather passed away, his wife made copies of an old tape of the two of them singing and playing – badly mixed, with the songs coming in over each other & cutting out jarringly, but it's clear and does the trick of memory a service.

I also here must offer apologies for going on so much without having engaged you at all. I had a friend who wrote letters to me in my 20s and would go on & on and never ask a single question, so I never knew if he was even interested in what I might say. So, please, dear reader – how is it with you? Are you well? Do write when you can<sup>1</sup>.

Sincerely, Laressa.<sup>2,3</sup>

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I will say however, that I did on many occasions have the chance to hear my grandfather and his wife sitting around playing banjo and guitar respectively (in their living room near the stove) - playing a few Hank Williams songs and harmonizing with their voices as they sang. My favorite though was a song they played called Mandolin Man - originally sung by the Kendalls, no doubt a family who sang together as well. The lyrics loosely are - "Mandolin Man, the dance floor is empty. Won't your horkytork band play the last song for me? Take me away - my soul's feelin' empty. My heart's in your hands, Mandolin Man." These mini-concerts were impromptu & usually occurred at holidays when the family gathered - if at all. I have mixed feelings about this memory though; as a kid, I was so embarrassed by this playing & the effusiveness of their voices and harmony - somehow it was so moving to me inside, but I didn't know what to do with

<sup>1</sup>You can, if you so wish, write to Laressa Dickey c/o *The Letters Page*, School of English, University of Nottingham, NG7 2RD. You can probably also write to this issue's other contributors, although we haven't asked them and so offer no promises as to how or whether they might respond. Still, a letter is not a system of debt, so you wouldn't write with any expectation of a response in any case, right?

<sup>2</sup>Laressa Dickey has lived in Tennessee, California, and Minneapolis, spent some time in Portugal, and is now resident in Berlin. When she left home to attend university in Memphis and, later, after moving to California, she wrote letters back and forth with one of the most reliable pen pals she's ever had, Katherine Rosson, the neighbor of her grandmother who was a good 70 years older than Laressa but young and spry and still squatting in her garden in her 90s. She taught Laressa a lot about letter writing: a bit of news, a bit of memory, some current thoughts and scenes mixed in, followed by a warm goodbye. Laressa has lived over 10 years now without her letters. Laressa Dickey's poems have been published by, among many others, MIEL press; her debut collection, *Bottomland*, will be published by Shearsman Books in the UK in Spring 2014.

<sup>3</sup>This letter was sent to us on a sheet of paper with a printed poem on the reverse. Although unattributed, and not necessarily intended to correspond to the letter, we couldn't help noticing that the last few lines seemed significant:

*Crumbs on / yesterday's plate. A lover floating in the window. Outside, the / postman on the way to deliver a letter.*

We asked Laressa whether we could include the poem here in full, as an early phase in what we hope will become a detailed exploration of the possibilities of paratext; sadly, for us, the poem is due for publication shortly in *Blood Orange Review* and so is effectively embargoed until then. We would encourage you to seek it out.

Carnál<sup>1</sup> –

There's a kid I talk to on my daily walk through the Diamond District<sup>2</sup>, who stands in front of Ali's Exchange<sup>3</sup> calling We buy! We buy! He tells me he comes from a long line of Veracruz musicians. His father marched out to the fields carrying a tiny guitar hacked with a machete<sup>4</sup>, calling out verses across the stalks of corn: Heart of melon for the women of St. Simón. Heart of Manteca for the mujer Chichimeca<sup>5</sup>. Now the kid uses those skills on this block stuffed with smuggled tusks & gold nuggets melted into screws & bolts<sup>6</sup>, Hasidic hats covered in plastic to keep the rain from stinking up the fine wool<sup>7</sup>, among Turks & Russians & Dominicans – Gold & diamonds! Gold & diamonds! – beckoning the gem stalkers of 47th St. I can hear him all the way up on the 6th floor of the Mercantile Library<sup>8</sup>. Maybe this A4 pulp, sucking in his voice with the rain, can transform it back into a distant greeting – Heart of almond! Heart of salt! – folded in thirds and fired into postal space.

Salud<sup>9</sup>

Brad Fox<sup>10</sup>

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calling we bay! We bay! He tells me he comes from a long line of Veracruz musicians. His father ~~used to~~ marched out to the fields carrying a tiny guitar packed with a machete, calling out verses across the stalks of corn: Heart of melon for the woman of St. Simo Heart of manteca for the mujer Chichimeca. Now ~~he uses~~ the kid uses those skills on this block stuffed with

<sup>1</sup> Mexican Spanish, meaning *of the flesh*, as in comrade or brother. [Contextual notes to this letter have been kindly provided by the author, Brad Fox.]

<sup>2</sup> In New York, from where the author writes.

<sup>3</sup> Ali's Jewelry Exchange is one of over two thousand diamond wholesalers, cutters, jewellers, and pawn shops that line the stretch of 47th street between 5th and 6th Avenues in Manhattan.

<sup>4</sup> In the Mexican state of Veracruz, *lauderos* such as Don Lara of Jaltipan still use a simple machete to craft the 7-string *jaranas* used in traditional Son Jarocho music. Like a letter written with pen and ink, handmade *jaranas* have a richness of tone unmatched by machine-made instruments.

<sup>5</sup> The *sones* that Jarocho musicians play are not songs, exactly, but sets of chord changes with associated verses, sung out in any order, often intershot with newly improvised quatrains or ten-lined *decimas*. In Las Poblans—dedicated to the women of Puebla, left alone while their men fought US forces around the port of Veracruz—the substance of the singer's heart must rhyme with his lover's home.

<sup>6</sup> The New York Department of Environmental Conservation reports that over a ton of illegal ivory has been seized in the Diamond District since 2012. In 2003, eleven dealers on the block were arrested for facilitating the drug trade. Traffickers had been found converting their payments to gold, which was melted down and formed into every day objects like belt buckles, wrenches, and screws that could be smuggled into Colombia to finance further shipments.

<sup>7</sup> The Lubavitcher Hasidim in New York favour the Borsolino, a felt hat that costs \$150-200 in Brooklyn. The Satram and Skver Hasidim prefer costlier "beaver hats" with a rabbit fur finish.

<sup>8</sup> A subscription library that opened on Fulton Street in 1821, the Merc has slowly moved uptown ever since. It now occupies a skinny eight-floor structure just east of the Diamond District, tucked between an abandoned building and the Ghanaian consulate.

<sup>9</sup> *To your health!*

<sup>10</sup> Brad Fox grew up in Kansas City and sent dispatches from the former Yugoslavia, Berlin, Mexico City, and Istanbul before settling in New York last year. He is finishing a novel and occasionally hoisting sails on the Clipper City, New York Harbour's only tall ship.

Dear Reader,<sup>1</sup>

This letter was once intact. Perhaps you weighed the heft of the envelope, speculating on the content from some outer shape and form. I did the same, a quarter-century ago, sealed in my office high above the belch and lurch of London traffic, staring at the Irish stamp and careful copperplate handwriting on the envelope that lay on my desk. For a moment, I had thought that it was from my mother, and wondered why she was writing to me at work. It looked hopelessly vulnerable, too small and intimate to be official and kept at arm's length. Before I had even opened it, I knew disturbance. It came from the Parochial House of a small town in the west of Ireland. The Reverend Father thanked me for my recent letter informing him that his brother had been sentenced to a short term or imprisonment for housing benefit fraud. I remembered well that day in the Magistrates' Court. As duty officer, my job was to 'advise, assist and befriend' those who passed through the system. It was hard to live up to that description, shouting platitudes through the cell doors of the urine-scented custody suite under the sardonic eye of a police officer.

Most of those remanded did not want much to do with me, but the large shabby man with the soft Galway accent responded, drew me in, softened me. I was flattered that he trusted me enough to ask that I write to his brother, the priest. That evening, I walked to the tube station feeling, for once, that I had done a good thing.

The letter from the priest was warm and simple. His brother had been estranged from the family for years, drinking and living hard, and they had feared the worst. They longed for contact, wanted him to come home and start again. If I would only write back and tell them where he was, the relationship could be renewed, the ruptured ties restored and healed.

Even now, my stomach lurches as I think of that long, fruitless afternoon, telephoning every prison, trying to find the priest's brother. His sentence had been short. He had already been released. There was no statutory aftercare, no fixed abode. As the hope the letter had stirred evaporated, a helpless lethargy descended on me. I could not reply to the letter, which festered on my desk. I resigned soon afterwards.

Yours regretfully,  
A former member of the Probation Service

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Most of those remanded did not want much to do with me, but the large shabby man with the soft Galway accent responded, drew me in, softened me. I was flattered that he trusted me enough to ask that I write to his brother, the priest. That evening, I walked to the tube station feeling, for once, that I had done a good thing.

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<sup>1</sup>This letter is a work of fiction, although the writer, Ann Hull,<sup>2</sup> has drawn on knowledge and experience from her time working with the Probation Service.

<sup>2</sup>Ann Hull was born in London of Irish parents. She sat next to Patsy Kensit's brother at primary school, while her mum reared seven children and her dad got on with building Euston Station and various English motorways. By the time he'd finished Staples Corner and they had decided to go back to Donegal, she had survived bouts of education at Gumley House F.C.J. and the London School of Economics, and was employed for several years by the Inner London Probation Service as a research assistant, honing her letter-writing skills. She now lives with her husband and four children beside her parents' house, overlooking Lough Swilly near Rathmullan, which is a relief after all that aircraft and traffic noise. Her work has been broadcast on RTE's *Sunday Miscellany*, and published in *North West Words* magazine.

Dear M ---

It will be our twenty-second wedding anniversary in 14 days, on the exact day Julius Caesar was assassinated 2057 years ago. Did I know when I cheekily set the day – certainly without you really realizing the significance of the phrase, which I thought was hilarious, ‘Beware the Ides of March’ – that there was at its foundation a hint of betrayal even in our relationship – did I know it in my bones? It’s a strange transgression, made sharper by the 22 years it took you to be bold enough to disclose it. And of course it’s dull. And unimportant. You were both drunk. It meant nothing. We weren’t married yet. You were twenty-six and full – to the brim, no doubt – of burbling, yearnful spermatozoa. I know it’s nice for you to have it off your chest, another cliché. I want you to know how big I’m trying to be about it, how rational because I suppose that’s obvious that I should be. I’m sure I asked you over the years if you’d ever cheated – I’m not a really truly trusting person – and now I realize our borders for this thing we’ve shared these long years – since 1988 in my mind – only started for you with a contract, with a legal, bureaucratic, \$52.30 administration fee (at City Hall). You’d never cheated on our marriage. It’s so disorganising to realise how very different we are in this regard.

Yesterday I thought about the fleshiness of the cheat. That it was animal doesn’t surprise me. I’ve always been attracted by your body, the smell and muscle of it, and it occurred to me that our meeting place is bodily, and in the places/moments where the mind and body meet. I was disappointed at first and then yesterday furious – furious enough to consider writing this letter, but today I’m sad. Actually I’m heartbroken. It’s as if every moment – well, every crucial moment – the orgasms, the fights, the tenderness, the morning tea in bed – is in a way a kind of offering in compensation, an appeasement or atonement to this awful shitty thing you admit to having done. It’s easy to forgive, they say. I wish I could not know this thing. It’s brought into question so much. I suppose it’s a kind of love that stopped you from telling me, and I should take solace there. But inside that is your guilt and fear which feels like a violence on our relationship and even toward our children because whatever you say, these things are held in the body, especially in the body.

Anyway, and deeply,

Love,  
Kathryn<sup>1,2</sup>

p.s. I wonder if you say I’m sorry if it will help things. You’ve haven’t said it, you know.

married yet. You were twenty six and full to the brim, no doubt of  
bubbling, yearning spermatoron. I know it's nice for you to have  
it off your chest, another cliché. I want you to know how big I'm trying  
to be about it, how rational because I suppose that's obvious that I  
should be. I'm sure I asked you over the years if you'd ever cheated - I'm  
not a really truly trusting person - and now I realize our borders for this  
thing we've shared these long years - since 1988 in my mind - only stated  
for you with a contract, with a legal, bureaucratic, \$52.30 administrative  
fee (at city hall). I'd never cheated on our marriage. It's so disorganizing  
to realize how very different we are in this regard. Yesterday I thought about  
that it was animal doesn't surprise me. (or it occurred

<sup>1</sup>Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer is the author of two novels, *The Nettle Spinner* and *Perfecting*, and a short story collection, *Way Up*. Her recent short fiction has been published in *Granta*, *The Walrus*, and *Storyville*. *All The Broken Things*, a novel, will be published in early 2014 by Random House Canada. We asked Kathryn whether this letter was a work of fiction or memoir; she replied enigmatically, and we felt sullied by the asking.

<sup>2</sup>When we asked Kathryn for some background notes about letter-writing in general and this letter in particular, she offered us this:  
'When I lived in Ghent, Belgium between 1988 and 1992, I wrote many letters. I loved going to the impossibly grand post office in the Korenmarkt and, in broken Dutch, choosing the prettiest stamps. There were things I loved about receiving letters in Ghent. The postmen dressed in black great coats, sometimes with oiled capes. They came on bicycles, bearing—in leather satchels—gifts and hope twice a day. I was homesick and half in love with the messenger. Writing and receiving letters was therapeutic, and the postman represented the intermediary—time. In the week or so it took to get a letter home or receive one from home, everything would have changed. You could measure transformation in this way, and also have a trace of it, through the responses your letters elicited. That Post Office is a mall, now. The postmen wear ugly lightweight plastic bomber jackets. And I rarely write a letter. The strange thing about this project is that one gets to read one's own letter again, something one wouldn't normally be able to do with a real letter. In my case, this was especially odd. The letter was much less angry than I had thought it might be. It was more fair, and particular, and, if I may say so, better written. I read it just as anyone might, as a story I had come upon. I was moved by it. And then ashamed to be moved by something I had written. The narcissism!'

Dear Reader –

Knut Hamsun said that in old age we are like a batch of letters. ‘We are no longer in the passing, we have arrived.’ And yet it is in the arrival that we remain. What a joy to write a letter that is everywhere and nowhere at the same time – a piece of virtual intimacy. You have no need to respond. Your response arrives in the act of reading. It’s such a pity that it will not fall gently through the letterbox. How many guitars get tuned before the postman arrives? How many suicides come after the mailman? I love and have loved the art of letters, and yet I have forgotten it too. When I was younger, in Dublin, the postman was the closest thing to a metronome. The letterbox flapped and you could tell the weight of the news by the sound of it against the carpet. Years later, when I lived in Texas, I used to drive a mile and a half to the rural postbox which I opened every day to get a series of rejection slips from New York and London publishers. Those days of hope and [...]<sup>1</sup>

Later still, when I went on a long cycling journey, I would pick up letters from ‘General Delivery’ in Amarillo, Portland, San Francisco. What a wonderful feeling it was to walk into the post office in pure anonymity, to find a letter waiting there.

Letters. When carried they are a permanent news. I miss them.

My father was a great letter writer. I have letters from him that came to me in all parts of the world, so that I truly know where home is. I carried those letters with me. And then of course there’s all those love letters too, the fantastic embarrassments of youth. Great letters, like great novels, remind us where we were. I could patch my life together with old airmail papers. The greatest letter I ever received was from my literary hero, John Berger<sup>2</sup>, a letter that arrived, blue, out of the blue. He is a beautiful letter writer<sup>3</sup>. Sometimes I can hear his pen glide across the page. Jim Harrison, too. Another great letter writer. And Jennifer Johnston. I don’t stack them away in neat little piles, but sometimes I do leave them lying around my office, so that I can open them and let them surprise me. Reading an old letter in the middle of the afternoon, one can forgive himself the weight of whiskey in his hand. (No whiskey yet this evening!)

And what about the terror, the voyeurism, of looking into somebody else’s letters? My father<sup>4</sup> himself has a full crate of letters that he keeps in his old writing shed in Dublin. Many old secrets. He has told me that I can read the letters at any time. I have told him that I will wait until he is gone. And he tells me that, in that box, that crate, those letters, he will never be gone.

For that reason I’m not so sure that I want to keep any of my old letters. Too many secrets and embarrassments. All those ancient longings. My own stupid vanity.

But this is a letter to you, and I don’t know who you are, or where you are. But I do know that our intimacy is real, that the art of reading is the only thing that gives credence and viability to the act of writing. Come closer, we can whisper. And we shall write again. Goodnight –

Le gach dea-ghui<sup>5</sup>,  
Colum McCann<sup>6</sup>

of course in letters we have  
also forgotten the art of editing  
Or at least careful editing

before the postman arrives? How many suicides  
come after the mailman? I love and have  
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The letterbox flapped and you could tell the  
weight of the news by the sound of it against  
the carpet. Years later, when I lived in Texas,  
I used to drive a mile and a half to the rural  
postbox which I opened every day to get a series  
of rejection slips from New York and London  
publishers. ~~With the best wishes of the author~~  
Later still, when I went on a long cycling journey,  
I would pick up letters from "General  
Delivery" in Amarillo, Portland, San Francisco.

<sup>1</sup>'Of course in letters we have also forgotten  
the art of editing! Or at least careful editing.'  
[Side-note by author].

<sup>2</sup>John often writes notes in his letters, along  
the side. I always think: 'Never again will  
a single story be told as if it were the only  
one.' [Side-note by the author. The quotation  
is from *G*, the 1972 Booker Prize-winning  
novel by John Berger.]

<sup>3</sup>I still have it here in my office. [Side-note  
by the author.]

<sup>4</sup>Colum McCann's father worked for many  
years as a journalist and literary editor with  
the *Irish Press*.

<sup>5</sup>'With all best wishes.'

<sup>6</sup>Colum McCann is an Irish writer of  
novels and short stories. Originally from  
Dublin, he now lives in New York, where  
he teaches writing at Hunter College.  
His first collection of stories, *Fishing The  
Sloe-Black River*, was published in 1994; in  
2011 he won the IMPAC Dublin award  
for his novel, *Let The Great World Spin*.  
McCann's latest novel, *TransAtlantic*, opens  
with the first trans-Atlantic flight in 1919,  
which carried the first bag of trans-Atlantic  
airmail. One of those letters goes on to play  
a key role in the novel, and indeed when we  
first asked Colum McCann to contribute  
to *The Letters Page* he said he would write  
about this fictional letter. Perhaps he forgot,  
or perhaps he changed his mind. We made  
the bold editorial decision to accept what he  
offered us instead, and we thank him for it.

*nulla in mundo pax sincera*<sup>1</sup>

I've never even thought about Vivaldi composing the piece. Mozart's Requiem, yes, the piece shouts out the man, and in my mind I see old Wolfgang, straining late at night, his wine glass empty, pressing at his eyes before scratching another string of notes out with his quill and then continuing with another, and another, and knowing how those first bars will affect people, so slow, so quiet as they well. But the Vivaldi, I don't think of the man. The music just lifts, teeters on a plateau too high for associations or imaginations to come into it. I like it most in the early mornings, when the sun is shining, loud, so loud on my stereo or my Walkman, and when it's finished I play it back again.

I listened over it once as I waited for the tram this morning, smiling helplessly in the sunlight as Škodas flew past on the grey tarmac, and I'd just about rewound it, gone a stop or two on the tram, and started over again when a man with a child entered the tram and the sturdy Czech woman opposite rose to hand her seat over to them. The man set the child on the red plastic seat and stood beside it. From this point I'm at a loss how to continue. This child, there was something extraordinary about him, a serene and beautiful profundity evident in his being. He was tiny, maybe two, maybe not that old, very fragile with limbs like sticks. His face was so curious looking, he had small eyes, eyes with the quality of having either shrunk or perhaps only opened for the first time, for they were creased around the edges, with irises so large you could hardly see the whites. They were blue his eyes, but like pale glass only half catching the light. A large forehead and skin so pale you could see the veins through it. His hair was dark blond, cropped short and tufty. He had a small, pale mouth, half open to reveal a rim of teeth half grown in. Can you imagine him, toto? He appeared otherworldly. Oh and his hands, they were so tiny, but exquisitely formed with comparatively long, thin fingers. Really, I couldn't take my eyes off him. I thought him terribly beautiful but at the same time I could imagine others might look at him and be frightened, his features, their proportions, were so unusual. I could imagine his parents, catching themselves off guard, questioning within their minds whether their child was ugly, wondering if it was only their love which made him so beautiful in their eyes (later, remembering these thoughts, perhaps as they watched their child sleeping, they would feel a pang of guilt).

As he sat on the red seat, his feet just reaching over the edge, I watched him. The music was still playing loud, filling my ears so I couldn't hear anything else on the tram, and as we sped down the hill he began to cry. That sounds wrong, like I mean self-pitying childish tears, it was nothing like that, it was much baser, a welling of those glassy eyes, the corners of his mouth pulled back with fear, and I dare say he was hardly making a sound. His strange eyes were fixed on the city rushing past in the window. One hand was clutching round his father's thumb, the other

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gripping the edge of the seat, so tight and strained the knuckles looked as though they could pierce the skin. I can't express how the sight moved me.

Seeing his fear, the father picked up the boy and sat down with him on his lap. The child seemed to fit himself perfectly against the man's shape, like he was more malleable than ordinary flesh and bone. All the while his tiny hands were clutching at his father's sweater, reaching and clutching like you see baby monkeys do. I couldn't help myself staring. When they reached their stop and rose to get off I strained in my seat to watch to the last moment that tiny head bobbing over its father's shoulders. I can't really explain why this incident had such an effect on me. It will sound silly to you I know. But it was really quite special, verging on the religious, and I can't get that tiny face from my mind. I just wanted to tell you about it.

Love Clara<sup>2</sup> xxx

<sup>1</sup>'*In this world there is no honest peace*' – the first line of a motet by Vivaldi (which, incidentally and we think delightfully, concludes with the line, 'a man maddened by love will often kiss as if licking honey'). If you were reading this in an enhanced e-book edition, we would probably have included a recording of the motet to accompany Clare's letter. As it is, you may wish to source your own recording and play it at an appropriately encompassing volume, perhaps through headphones, while you read.

<sup>2</sup>Clare Wigfall's debut collection of stories, *The Loudest Sound and Nothing*, was published by Faber in 2007. In 2008 she won the BBC National Short Story Award. We're not sure why she signed this letter from 'Clara'; a pseudonym, perhaps. She lives in Berlin, and wrote us this letter to explain the letter that she sent:  
'Being asked for a letter set me thinking about all the letters I used to write. I'm not sure when I stopped. Somewhere in my mid-twenties, I guess.'

Only recently, moving boxes I'd long had in storage in Prague, I came across the letters I'd received in the years after I first moved to the city. So many of them! Thick bundles of correspondence tied up with string. Postmarks from cities far away – Oxford, Long Beach, Iquitos. Handwriting that was still instantly recognisable. Letters from family, others from my now-husband, but by far the largest bundles from a few close friends I used to correspond with regularly. What struck me reading through them again was the intimacy of those friendships, the evident affection. And also our youth! We hadn't yet written books, or had children, we'd not yet married (or divorced!), I'm not sure we even had bank accounts – we knew we weren't grown-ups yet and there was a kind of euphoria in the way we embraced that knowledge!  
So I'm giving you one now – a bonus letter if you will. It's one that I can remember writing very clearly. A bright spring morning in early 1999. I was 22. Working for a Czech art gallery. As soon as I arrived that day I sat down and wrote this letter to my friend Tod, typing it up on the computer so it would look like I was working (that's the only reason I still have a copy now). I posted it the same day, but for some reason I can't recall now it never arrived with my friend. I assumed it lost until one day, months afterwards, it landed back in my postbox in Prague. I later gave it to him in person.'

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

Editor: Jon McGregor

Assistants to the Editor: Kat Dixon, Jordan Hallam, Jacob Sebastian Jones

Additional assistance: Liam Knight, Kate Butcher

Administrative Support: Rebecca Peck, Tracey Stead, Mari Hughes

Technical Support: Erin Snyder, Helen Frost

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Honourable Mention: Although he's already listed as a member of the Editorial Board, we'd like to thank Craig Taylor for providing the inspirational models of the magazines *Open Letters* and *Five Dials*. As well as being showcases for excellent writing, these are (or were, in the case of *Open Letters*) distributed as downloadable PDFs to be printed in the home or office; a model which, you may notice, we have chosen to follow. Whilst not a patented distribution model, we are happy to acknowledge and appreciate the example set by Mr Taylor and his colleagues.

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

One Last Thing: Submissions are now open for our second issue, loosely themed around the notion of penpals. Letters should be handwritten and posted to us at the address above. Closing date is October 16th; 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.

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[www.theletterspage.ac.uk](http://www.theletterspage.ac.uk)

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