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Doctorate of Philosophy
in Creative Writing
The Origin Stories

And

Contemporary Epistles

in American Prose Poetry

Emma Sedlak

Doctorate of Philosophy
The University of Edinburgh
2015
Declaration Form

This is to certify that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

The following poems have already been published:

‘Let the Day Pass’ has been published in New Writing Scotland 52


‘Doig: Man Dressed as Bat,’ in Quiddity International Literary Journal 8.1


Signed:
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To the whole team at Get Storied, who came in at the eleventh hour to remind me that all of life is *story*, and the depth from which we share it is what matters most: *thank you*.

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And at the heart of it, to Andrew: for your support and unwavering belief that I could get to this point. Thank you for accepting my origin stories, and continuing the journey with me. This is all for you.
Abstract

My poetry portfolio is 75 pages long, and consists of single poems as well as two series. The first series includes the ‘Good Work’ poems, which explore different ideas of ‘good work’ based on characters’ occupations, preoccupations and mental perspectives. The second series is the ‘Makar’ poems, depicting an imagined world in which the poet is a guardian angel or guiding force. The style of my poetry varies from lyric to prose poetry, with a few language-focused abstract poems, and more formal styles, like a villanelle.

Dreaming and waking are two themes that reflect aspects of reality and perception. Much of my portfolio is rooted in reflections of identity: Identity in terms of work, and the story we tell to the world about what we do; identity in terms of inter-personal relationships and how those connections form who we become; identity in terms of memory, and the story of who we have been; and identity in terms of the stories we tell ourselves about who we think we are. And if none of those stories align, what kind of fragmented self-identity does that reveal? The narrative poems often use different characters and personas in order to enact these lenses of identity.

Even with only a few epistles in the collection, my poetry has been influenced by the epistolary ideas of separation and reunion (as critic Altman describes them: ‘bridge’ and ‘distance’). Similarly, the prose poems often riff on the unification and distancing of various themes, in a mediation of together- and apart-ness. I have used letters and diary-entries as addresses to the audience, and also as invitations for the reader to access the poem through different points of entry.

My academic thesis focuses on the utilisation of epistles in contemporary American prose poetry. It is 26,000 words, and is divided into three sections: focused on Epistles: Poems by Mark Jarman; Letters to Kelly Clarkson by Julia Bloch, and The Desires of Letters by Linda Brown; and Dear Editor: Poems by Amy Newman. Why are we still writing poems as letters when we don’t habitually write letters for personal correspondence anymore? The poem-as-letter, or epistle, offers the ability to craft complex relationships within the reader/author, writer/recipient, and open/closed dynamics of intimacy in literature. The criticism is framed within the methodology of reader-response theory, and draws upon examples of epistles in history and literature to connect and establish themes.
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March On Iona

i.

March, on Iona. We live under
a determined sky, rain
that topples down
from shredded clouds.
When the haar descends,
what else can we do but be here?

ii.

The wind whips
through our closed limbs
from all directions.

What is left of our bodies,
trying to stand without legs
against the pressure?

iii.

This is the day-to-day
on an indeterminate island,
mist that walks in

soldiering on past
the cornflower sea
with bruised-green depths.

iv.

The shed in the garden
shudders, but stands
despite the battering
on the corrugated roof,
rain rolling down
an obsidian rosary.

v.

What are the useless words
we break into pieces
and feed to the gods
in the ceiling,
the roof,
the sky?

vi.

In the abbey, breath
is the only insulation
against frozen fingers.

Steeple your hands –
where else can we search
for our fingers to pray?

vii.

After all this
aren’t you
amazed

our hearts
keep growing
back?
Let the Day Pass

Emptiness is a human right. Tattoo the veins
onto your arms; learn how your blood runs without you.
Board a train and stare down the world.
Set your hair alight to know that things still burn.

For a while, let part of you die. Don’t apologize.
Use your soul’s coffin as a soapbox
if the cat ever gives your tongue back.
Your time will come, just wait.

Meanwhile, sleep dormant under sofas
or hide, or hibernate. When friends come,
scrawl Do Not Disturb on a worried face.

Let the day pass. Know most instruments are hollow
which is how and why they sing. Don’t fill the void.
Lie awake with everything and anything.
Good Work/Composition

*I want to do good work* she says, which she later tells you signifies the importance of all the stories. Everywhere she looks come the tales – creeping out of dust and under tables.

*This music sounds just like daffodils* is what she says right before taking the whole thing apart to see how it works.

She lives inside the transitions, most comforted where one song follows another, where a sound opens up to produce another. *Words aren’t the only way to tell stories,* but she uses all of them in new combinations. In the end, the story takes you over as well – she spins out sounds and facts and daffodils until the voice of the tale fills your eyes and ears and veins and pulses its own life inside of the one you thought was only yours.
Sung

After the concert ended, we would abandon our parents who had come to the school auditorium to hear us sing, miles away from anyone’s home except that lucky kid who actually went to school here. We belonged elsewhere.

We clambered into cars, sat on laps and squashed in two to a seat-belt, heads down and hidden to avoid flaunting all the laws we were breaking, and descended into the diner:

the hoard prepared to celebrate, rowdy but good-natured. Self-contained in our corner – floating with music still between our teeth and in our hands and bones. The plates came filled with what we craved,

with what can’t be eaten before singing, restrictions to keep the throat clean, phlegm-less, prepared. We ate with hands and burning fingers, picked it all clean, smothering the knowledge that we would not be here again in the same way, these notes would not resolve except in dreams. The music grew in us with no time left to be fed.

We ate till we felt whole.
What Slight Gaps Remain

_Bonnaroo Music Festival_  
_Manchester, Tennessee._

I.

The sun is too bright  
and I am sure I will die here:  
left to rot in the flat sweep  
of Tennessee farmland.  
I don’t see another ending.  
The music screams like a gale  
through the sweat of bodies,  
each surrounded by its own  
haze of smoke and spirals.  
We are all here but I’m the only one  
who knows where my body is.

II.

I have found Mecca:  
a mushroom fountain,  
relishing close-to-freezing water  
pumped through pipes, slicing the heat.

III.

Skirts hang from the ceilings  
of vendor’s tents  
like Spanish moss in oak trees.  
Chattering women pry apart  
fabric, push through into  
Indonesian jungles overgrown  
with rare Indian marvels  
and Made-In-China plastic.

A small, wrinkled man  
cradles feathers in his lap.  
He croons,  
‘poult, poult, little poult’  
and shows how  
the baby turkey
appeared in the dirt
of this farm we have rented
not to grow food
but to cultivate music.

IV.

After dinners charred by grills
and compact burners
the smoke opens upward
to the deep darkening horizon,
dances kicked up
in the dust-brushed fields.
Not one of us knows why we are here
or where the stars are
or where this music came from
that led us like ducks to water,
like geese to the sky.

V.

Flocking back to the center of it all
speakers spill music out into a sea of faces –
eyes upturned and over-soaked
lights flash neon sound waves wash –
we fight our way towards the stage
slipping through strangers and closing
what slight gaps remain between us.

VI.

It’s easy to get lost
in row upon row of makeshift homes,
transplanted vans shadowed as
the night mutes clarity;
fumbling along the trail together
somehow we come to our lean-to
through blurred boundaries of
car tent car tent car.
The Borrowing

‘People can lose their lives in libraries. They ought to be warned.’

– Saul Bellow

This is a collection, but it is not yours.

You are a welcome guest until your time runs out.

Home is a private room in a private house with more discernable secrets than all of your knowledge.

Don’t imagine these books are branded and coded – you are the foreign element, the thing we keep track of.

When your time has elapsed, please empty your hands.

We’ll keep what remains of your memorized lines.
The Makar – Drifts

When the money dried up,
a new currency grew:
the welcoming community
of similar minds, shared vision.

There is protection in these walls,
and each new member is built
straight into the structure
until every voice on earth is honed.

She is left drifting, the only exception
to keep the sight clear and lifted,
to keep hopes high. The Makar weaves
music through the shadow of days,

reminds us of past times,
of free and forgotten joy.
Tilt and Shift

I have woken up, but you’re gone. I know you’re not really here at all, but the dream feels like you’re just on the other side of something, sitting in the next room with your ear held against the wall, straining to hear my eyelids fluttering. I am the dark depths of morning, before the tilt and shift of a changing world has lit up the streets again. This is the time of exciting things, while we are sleeping.

In my dream, a famous man walks in to your office. Your colleagues face him like sunflowers pressing their face into brightness, but your back is turned, and you miss him. All the rest are drunk with it. You try to retrace it later, but compare the hunt to searching for a piece of glitter on a child’s face. When the light hits it, you can find it – otherwise, without the right angle, it is impossible.

On your way home, a homeless man stops you: “Let your home conspire to keep you.”

This time you see him clearly, his eyes searching for something in the way you stop for him. He prophesies: “Again, your life will explode. But how do you keep it?”

Come home to your woman stained-through with love. Draw maps on your envelopes in place of addresses. Sign my letters with strange phrases like “expound your pronouns” and “let the day pass with less longing.”

Wake me up when you get in.
This Spiritual Life Q&A

Q: When did we stop using reincarnation?
A: When the clocks stopped.

Q: Why do we die?
A: To work with our hands again.

Q: Where will my body go?
A: Back to the storeroom.

Q: Where will my memories go?
A: Submit request under copyright laws.

Q: Where will my mind go?
A: Where is it now?
Escaping Failure

Stumble into any town. Blindly choose.
The components are always the same.
People subsisting, some kind of weather settling in.
Rain, or fog, or something else to feed the dismal.
Two Americans walk into a pub,
drink themselves under, fall off their stools.
They’re neighbors, in fact,
in the company of all those escaping failure.

A house across the square disintegrates
slowly, taking years to crumble.
When the boy’s mother decorates, it is
with whatever the means can manage.
This month, it’s the dining room;
leftover wages buy a few tins of robin’s egg blue.
She streaks it near the windows like the sky
has spilled in as the paint runs out.

It’s a hard enough life to be living, so when
his father sways, his mother tells him:
there’s a chemical in beer that pulls men in,
keeps them there, and drowns them.
There are silences that build their own walls,
tables spanning deserts and ancient cities.
The worst we can do, the boy knows,
is to lose our own voices, to let them be stolen.

One day he sees the sum of what can be salvaged
and leaves the boy he was at home,
does not go back until he is tall and fits a suit.
His father laughs at the stranger returning,
and neither recognizes the heart of the other.
The dog, who is the only loyal one,
expresses his happiness, right there,
on the neatly trimmed cuff.
One Way

Ask me, and I’ll tell you I applied
because too much of my life could be set aside
without a second thought. The mission
sounded more like I had no other choice.

*Leave your family,* the advertisement ran,
*leave your life, your path, your past, if you can
stomach what will be required. Our journey
will take years, but might set your heart alight.*

The taste of salt, small quarters, too many
of us stacked in rows trying to fill our empty
hands with purpose, careening toward
an unknown home with unknown hope.

I will not call, nor write; the distance
is too great for words to bridge.
What is important will be relayed
by how I leave:

quietly
with confidence and fear,
to build another world
for when these limits break.
Source

One morning you may wake
to find our molecules bonding:
shared memories
that make no sense
when split apart.

Even over
four distances, say,
the breadth of an ocean
or famous mountain range,
your presence is in me

like a single falling stone
in a wall of canyons,
like the ripple made by air
skirting the dark
surface of the lake.
Memory Research

*Memory:* You and I walking down Chew Street towards each other. You stopped at my face. The trees are purple, which feels more like a dream or the way the mind remembers shade. You know me, for the briefest of seconds, but you stand back with no hands.

*Research:* You cling to the handle of an old train like a stripper pole. This is a quality your husband loves. You grew up somewhere, but come home to the ocean. Michael likes television, but reads the future in the interwebs.

*Memory:* You sing like a Russian choir is caved in your body, with deep lungs and a sly throat. Your tongue has wit, but anyone could read it in the tilt of your head.

*Research:* You married him in July, and bought an apartment. The standards. Two dogs, two jobs, but everything else inseparable. Still the same wicked eyes.

*Memory:* You want me to write, but my fingers are clumsy. Your eyes follow me, so I take them to class and I feed them dinner. At the end of the day, I eat library books so I have something in my stomach before we talk again.

*Research:* You’ve written less than the words eating at your heels.

*Memory:* You pass me on Chew Street, rushed and wind-swept, which is fine because I see you see me. You turn back, shrug your way into an apology, which starts at the eyes and ends at the shoulders. I watch for that moment when your eyes let go, and your body drags you off.
Bog People

At dinner I sit next to
one of the guests
who came here alone,

not part of a church trip,
just a young lady
with slim wrists.

I wouldn’t have asked
how she spent the day
but she offered it:

how she found
the Hermits’ Cell,
how, then, she stepped

so assuredly into
precisely the wrong place;
how she found herself

first up to her knees,
then waist, then chest-high
in the deepening bog.

I miss her inevitable rescue
by the farmer across the field
because

I think of my son
who pointed at the museum
and asked to see the dead bodies

of the bog people
so perfectly frozen
that their lives barely buckled.
Peripheries

The Seven Sisters huddle close, twist the hems of dresses through their worried fingers, and head to sleep while we wake and wander the earth.

So much of life is indirect: the sudden green flash of light in a sunset, a lost wedding ring that glints as it sinks into sand, sharp movement in the woods, a deer running scared through the railings of trees. You can’t see them if you stare. Look everywhere and nowhere at once. Track the world’s edges.

The Sisters spend their lives hiding to draw out vision. If you can see us, they say, it’s because you opened your eyes expecting to find nothing.
Doig: No Foreign Land

Even the wall
has its own shadow
when the dark
night air spreads
through branches
like oil in pipes.

The horizon is
where we draw
the line
between us
and the unknown.

The boy in white
climbs up to
the heart
of the tree
and climbs

over

and over
until he looks
like a caught moon
stuck in the sky.
Mars, 2023

You will see, if you lift up your eyes,
the grander scheme, the great decision:
The world expands to fifty times its size.

Tick lists, check and double check supplies.
Time slips, fists grip – no one could envision
what you will see when you lift up your eyes.

Liftoff looms large, this ship transcends the skies,
cuts a path, a surgeon’s first incision,
and your world expands to fifty times its size.

Home base sounds out distant frail replies,
tracking your location with precision.
You would see if you lifted up your eyes.

A one-way ticket, little compromise
for what you left; the personal division
means a world expands to fifty times its size.

There is no way to know if this was wise.
Despite the jests and echoes of derision,
you will see, if you lift up your eyes,
the world expand to fifty times its size.
In the Making

This month’s cicada army was born in the branches before they jumped and rained out of the trees. Developed for the ground, they squirmed fluid from roots for those 17 years in the dirt.

At last, they are ready. Billions of eyes the color of blood, bodies the color of coal crawling out of the earth en mass, shivering for miles, a singing chorus of trees.

Rigid plates and clicking wings produce a snapping song, trigger their courtship, emerging in the sun for the next generation.
Summer Nights

Moonlight turned that summer night
like a porch screen door dancing on its hinges.

That night where shadows deepened into
slight bruises on our calves and shins

as we stumbled through the driveway gravel,
and kicked up stones and picked up stories –

filing into bed like weather-worn birds,
breezes flowing with us beneath the sheets

and the low slow shine
of morning between curtains.
A New Taste

The first day I woke up in my body, I remember my legs itching – pricked by short hairs I wasn’t aware I had altered with either wax or blade. Long limbs with a new taste for touch.

Look, I am not a type and these legs don’t fit inside your boxes. This skin gives and it covers enough of my skeletons.

I woke up that morning and found myself wanting. I’ll stay in these shoes with these feet and these soles so I can better praise the full chambers of this body I woke up in.
Open Letter to Selves

If she had become a mother the very first time she wanted to, her son would be 9 years old and wouldn’t know his father because someone watched too much Grey’s Anatomy and liked the idea of secrets pricking holes in places holes should never be. This son would have had a journey all his own, and no one could say he looked like his father because of the absence of a side-by-side comparison – until the facts became undeniable and he grew up just like you.

If she had married the first man she wanted to, they would still live beside the church – or close enough for their parked car to crack when the slate roof fell crashing to the ground. She would have been a consolation, a sense of comfort, would have become reliable and stoic so he could be grounded in his life. A firm footing. And sometimes she regrets that story’s ending because part of it sounds just like love.

If she had given in to all the temptations, she would have been a home-wrecker, would have waltzed into the church and stopped the wedding. She would have been the getaway driver after his divorce, the far-too-young step-mother to his growing children. She would have gotten fired, would have broken things, and ripped apart those childhood wounds at the seams.

If she had been older, she might have made better choices.

If she had been younger, she might have been able to tell you these things herself because the hubris would wax her words or at least her mouth would already be open.

If she had stopped when the first person told her to, she would have become like everyone else.
Layers

Scarf, wrapped twice.
Bag with book, pens, diversions.

Leaving the house is a process.
I build myself in layers, a suit
of armor, to enter the world
with no skin exposed. A list
of precise preparations.

When I come home,
the guard is off-duty.
Only then do I unpeel my
layers like an onion, a skinning
to return to my own skin.
The Man in the Mask

On the wall by the front door
it hangs near coat hooks with no coats.
The coats live elsewhere:
typically slumped like passed-out drunks.

Each morning, the man irons his cuffs,
stacks dishes, steps into shoes
still wet and worn through. At the door
one hand out for his hat, the other – the mask.

On windy days, the gusts cross
his gaunt cheeks and the mask that smiles
at acquaintances, that hides and upholds
the gulfs between them.

The mask smiles, but it curls at the edges
when the wind’s deft fingers
slice his jawline, a precise incision,
peeling the veil from flesh.
Good Work/Seizure

*I want to do good work,* he claims
but by work, he means art
and by good, he means it would be helpful
not to stop dead at the studio door.

I’ve asked about his temperament,
motivation, the blocks he’s up against.
He repeats: *My leg is very tight right now.*

For weeks we work on sitting down,
just showing up. Breathe.

He’s found a sculpture that *crushes my soul,*
as he says, denoting impact and the artist’s skill.
*I could never do that. It could never come from me.*

I try to follow up, but he’s gone,
already staring at his hands like two empty fields.
*Where is the pulse?* he asks, with what sounds
he can still form through his cracking voice.

The shadow sits between us.
The thinking makes him question,
turns his blood to stone.
Knowing

What all experts know but don’t tell
is how easy it can be to isolate specifics
spout facts and thus attract a) attention
and b) the reputation of being someone
knowledgeable on the subject or at least
knowing more than everyone else or even
just being the only one who is sure enough
to provide an attempt at an answer
to the steady slew of nervous questions.

What all experts say the same way
is just the confidence of certainty,
a tone of voice, really, and a nod
in the right direction with appropriate timing
so that the widest demographic of cowed eyes
can feel safe and protected from the truth.
But what the experts don’t always know
is how to appease their own fears
when doubt creeps into their breast pocket and
nestles down to live between pen and flesh.
Storms

Dismantling walls shows cracks in the foundation.
I was afraid at first. Red sky at night, shepherd’s delight.

There is no red warning for the morning we wake up
in this bed with separate angers between us.

A storm system can approach from all sides, land or sea.
We have opened this can of storms ourselves.

Before you, my mantra used to be: Hide
each distant thing. Wipe it clean,
leave it undiscovered so we might see
what forms in the body not yet wrecked.

Hide each distant thing, pitch them to the red
sky at morning and out to sea –
sailors take warning, let the storms claim them
until this distance can be pared and removed.
A Dying Star’s Lament

The few stories this far out
in space are on the surface
repetitious, superficial,
dissolving from the face of it.

Before the chilled exhalations
of last breaths and vindications,
a thaw could be caught between
a film of winter and the
impending hint of spring.
But here we’re given a cold shoulder
and a false hope beamed back
from light years further.

Trajectories of vectors pass us
with rising stars in dissecting sectors.
I can only cry plumes of dry ice
that form a young river with no mouth,
source, or visitors.

At this point, chance encounters are filled
with disbelief, the insignificance of meaning:

precision’s a fault of dreaming.
The Makar – Myths

She knows that old myth
of the man and the starfish,
how he flung them out to sea
in place of himself,
picking up one and another
until his hands
were strong
with the weight of life.

She knows that old story
and the reader’s surprise:
so many
who need to be saved.

She knows the history
in this disbelief –
you can’t save them all.
She knows, too, the man
and his convictions,
knows how they run
through his myth
to her own small hands.

After a day of dreaming,
she picks up the book,
starts on the next page
and sings to the saved.
Lothian Road

An end to this seems too tidy,
too complete for someone rooted
in the ground of waiting.

But finally, it happens.
The traffic opens
in a widening silence.

Step out into this emptied river,
wade through the space
between things.

Consider this carefully:
now is the chance
to change course.

The current washes past,
compels you nowhere,
but carries you here.
Life Map

Four directions: This (now), That (then), There (ahead), and Here (always).

1. Now-Then

Between This and That, the streets seem orderly, pre-planned. Few shifts have happened yet. The streets would be where you expect them, with childhood, Britain, tri-state area, their story, my story, these stories. Distinct roads, sometimes crossing. The difference between family, friends, self. Some dead-ends: dancing, law, chemistry. The renamed streets: Ex-Close, Left Street.

2. Now-Ahead

Between This and There, the streets follow a river. The river is Change. The river changes its name, and is later Being. A path cuts through the park called No Path. The buildings are where you want them to be.

A few things repeat: Music, books, laughter, voice. A graveyard for what has been given up: greed, judgment, immunity, obsession. There are smaller trees in the park, young, new to the light: wait, watch, learn, unlearn. The current house is consistent.

3. Ahead-Always

Between There and Here, things align. But less than half is mapped so far.

4. Then-Always

Between That and Here, a few things are firmly rooted: what I want more than life is to see love in these hands. A garden with small plants. A knowingness. Of how and what to tend.
Good Work/Absence

*I want to do good work*, he claims
knowing all too well
that desire is indicative
of absence, and not much more.
The wanting is tied up
in the not-having –
a kind of twinning
no one can truly tell apart.

Good work can also look like
good enough, the kind that stops
when the body slows, when the clock
interrupts and time seals off
the day from itself,
the kind that closes
when the steady forward
motion wanes.
Letter to My Husband

Walk down to the stream sometime as if it were the ocean: small waves at your feet, a constant traveler. Sit and rest while the tide hurries on – hand it your shoes, socks, build a dam of rocks and know the next eyes to see them will not be your eyes. Apologise: to your feet if you’ve misused them, to your heart and lungs if you’ve bruised them, to your energy for excusing everything that drained it. Displace your stress.

Let it float downstream.

In the office, no one knows where you have been – don’t make up stories. Words aren’t enough for most people and they still think time is boring, or something to rush through until the friction strips years off them. Tell them you think you’ve had a dream of how monotony grows into meaning.

Pour a glass of water. But treat it like the stream.
Time is the opposite of an anchor

time is an illusive marker
along the route
an unreliable scale
at the bottom of the map

time is the opposite of an anchor

a waterfall recycling
down Escher’s stairs
an eternal return
and departure

time is when my father drowned me
for a brief moment in a deluge
of memory I never
wanted to own

time the moment in the nightmare
plummeting to what seems like death
when you are snapped back
by your waking body

time is running out of the door
and into the ocean
and into the sky
Pruning the Roses

I take out scissors with regret
to tailor the ends
of long rose-stems.

Stand tall, such varied faces
clustering together.

I try to doctor you with
brief kindness.
Here, gather together.
These glass walls are cold
but they’ll hold you.

I know how to take care
of flowers from memory,
from past bouquets
I held in my arms
like swaddling and child.

I am each of these small faces
with a child’s heart
inside a skin
of removable thorns.
Seeing Stars

‘You exist as the stars exist.’

– Louise Glück

1.

The girl
was given a packet
of glow-in-the-dark stars
like an envelope of seeds
for planting.

She kept them
in a drawer, deep
in the darkness
to let the roots reach down.

She hadn’t heard
they needed light
to glow.

2.

That was when she thought
the door to heaven
was just past the ceiling,
and filled the bunk-bed

with the silent words of songs.
After school she bought gelt
from the corner store –
with little fingers, pried

chocolate from gold
and let the tinfoil fall
down the cracks
between bed and wall,

offerings building up
like bank deposits,
the glint of falling stars
burning out,

guilt offset
by small indulgences.
She took the packet of stars
and stuck them to the ceiling

with the clumsiness
of young patience
creating
makeshift constellations.

3.

She slept as a sentinel
in her bunk-bed, which is to say
she never fully slept
until all were safely home.

The car cocooned in the garage,
the bicycles covered,
even the cat crept in.

Everyone accounted for
except her dad,
wandering the streets
back from the pub,
seeing stars in his eyelids,
the mortar, the gutters,
everywhere but the sky.

4.

On the night a meteor shower
should have fallen
no one watched them –
thin silver threads
on a black backdrop.

Everyone’s eyes were glued
to the streetlight reflected back
from fragments of the motorcycle,
shattered, broken, a baseball bat
in the hand of some drunken man.

From behind the window,
the stars in her eyes went supernova
defining the outline of a father
now revised.

5.

One day when I was seven
my dad came into my room
and found haphazard stars strewn
across the ceiling wallpaper.

_I would have helped you_
he said, _if you had waited,
if you had told me._

As though any of these difficulties
could be told.
Questioning

Why can’t you write
what I need to hear
so that I can see
plain truths for once
for godssake
so that I don’t waste
any more of this energy
rooting around in the earth
coming up dirty
and begging for garlic bulbs
to grow mouths and speak?

Why can’t you leave
something for me
so that the dark won’t matter
and we won’t need the light
for chrissake
so that I can stop
knocking into tables
and carving craters
into shinbones
that should be used
for standing up instead
of buckling down?

Why can’t you bring
me closer to myself
so that this all could stop
being so damn complicated
I mean jesus
don’t you even know
how to teach me
anything I could use
instead of sending me back
to live with myself
and calling that a future?
The Makar – Dreams About Trains

The train runs deep
through the valley
and steam layers clouds
with its own excess.

In all the dreams
she is a passenger
who has yet to arrive.

The tracks are nimble
and constant and we ride
on them like a tightrope
netted with water-fields-air.

She dreams in trains.
Missing trains, lost for days,
trains there and back.

Catching the train, losing luggage.
Reclaimed bags, losing children.
Taking the children safely
to the other side of journeys.

Funny how life can catch
on a certain theme
that ebbs and dips, but still runs.

We plan so many things
that never happen.
So many things happen
we never planned.

The tracks run deep and carve
up the mountain, threading
right on through the other side.
Silent Letter

X. –

The silence says more
than anything else speaking.

The silence says I’m not
comfortable with what happened,

but I’ve walked myself onto a ledge now.
I can’t fly and neither of us can afford to jump.

The silence says take care of yourself
in that passive-aggressive way
denyng involvement. A washing of hands.
The tone of release, a tossing-back to sea.

The silence says things
we’ve been afraid to tell ourselves.

The silence says it isn’t my fault
but it isn’t your fault –

the fault line is volatile
and it shouldn’t be crossed or even addressed.

The silence says all it can outside of language.
The silence speaks fluently.

The silence says this is temporary.
Everything is temporary.

The silence changes so fast
and we can’t keep up.

I’m getting off of this train.
The silence says All Trains Cancelled.

The silence says more than you and me.
More than apologies stuck in the throat.

The silence doesn’t hold resentment. 
It can shrug and let things go.

The silence says don’t use me 
for your own purposes.

But in this mute state, 
we hammer it into boxes
and pretend to own it 
for a while. Remake it 
into our own marked 
failure to respond.

The silence says this is enough, 
evén if that’s not what it looks like.

Even if what it looks like
is a lot less.

Yours, 
M.
Psalm of Postcards

I.
We stand at the card displays
for what seems like hours
and pick up everything
and touch all corners
and run fingers over
waterfalls, castles,
old museum art
and artifacts, a
few familiar
scenes,
scenes
you’ll always
compare straight
to our photographs.
Why don’t you just send
us the photos you have, the
ones you’ve taken? And we think
of that. We consider it. But the cards –
there are racks of them. There are fields
of them. More than whatever else grows here.

II.
Let there be images of sun, sand, buttercups, of nicer things than we have seen.
Let there be postal stations filled with hands, burlap sacks, frayed conveyor belts.
Let there be words of comfort to wrap like blankets around shoulders.
Let there be travels so we may miss desks papered high, tired socks, mad voices.
Let us also be missed.
III.
For they are sold on every street corner.
For they fly and sail on wings and oars.
For no handwriting is as sentimental, as memorialized.
For brevity is sweeter.
For they are two-sided.
For they immortalize landscapes replaced by parking lots.
For they have been crafted by the hand of God to defy geography.
I saw the words on the blank postcard and I wrote until I set them free.

IV.
They were at the bottom
of the final unpacked box:
a sleeve of cards
in onion-skin paper.

Three I kept on a wall
held up by thin circles
of blue tac that crusts
in the corners now.

Six are from Italy
and the holiday sun
I was embarrassed
I didn’t see much of.

Four have been collected
from all the free places;
smoky cafes, book stalls,
small tokens shared and given.

I never sent them –
just a collection of
thirteen places forgotten
without history.
Wait

For days I
wait
more dormant
than dust
or these cycles
of shadows.
I could carry on
with just one
word
from your direction
but

Nothing

I slip, and flip back
through skin-
thin memories
knowing – even when
I saw you last –
the weight
of an intimate doubt.
Good Work/Performance

I want to do good work, he claims but work is the place that takes more than he can give.
The work is the play,
and all the play is cues and lines and each man exits in his parts.

The actor is a shell
with corpses decaying
at the core, bodies to pull out
and shake in front of them,
a warmth to wrap around at night when the house’s heating stops.

Even the woman has never slept without his characters in the air between them.
She has fifty ways to share herself and he has fifty faces – always different, always smiling.
The Acrobat

The guestbook: an incantation
of indented memory
loosed in ink
between dated pages

so we can lay claim
to the Australian acrobat
who stopped by –
a brief pause

that lit up
our imagined muscles,
the subtle tilt
of common ground.

We are made of the same
blood and sinew,
bone and air.
We enlist

the floor’s support,
drink poured tea
and spit cherry pits,
calling out shared tales.

Too soon, our flat is emptied
of your life and limb
and no one could say
you had been here at all

but then, in the third row
of your audience, slightly
sat to the side, we flash smiles
at the presence of your skeleton

that has stretched on our floors
and shared our sofa.
Your placement so definite,
it is easy to find you

amid other foreign bodies,
lifted and calm,
to show us what forms
we all could make

if we knew our own arms
as truly as yours – your
presence its own mark
more than any notation.
Olive Juice

I don’t know anything about olives,
only pretend to like them (when offered
at dinner parties, I hide them half-
eaten in napkins). Once, when I said

“I love you,” you thought I’d said
“olive juice,” and I imagined the dark
globes tucked inside each cheek, their density
doing salt, the tough, short lives of their flesh.
Motives

Because the meat was too tough,
because the rice was too raw,
because she knows too well
he’s afraid of softness.
Because when she left him
for New Hampshire, she hid
the TV remotes.

Because the carrots were organic
and he swears he can taste dirt.
Because he didn’t know
how to ask her please stay.

Because as long as he’s been here,
she has known his favorites.
Because he doesn’t know, himself.
Because our homes won’t always have us.

Because the heart is more than tissue.
Because a muscle has its limits.
Because the GPS has eyes and ears.

Because children have more faith
than us, blind to motives.

Because it’s too harsh
to love this deep, to stay.
Because it’s more
than he can take or keep,
or ask, or say.
Back in the Day Café

When you die
it will be
a folding and unfolding,
how emotions pass and fade
and drain from the face.

The waitress brings two cups
but ignores the empty chair.

Without all the stories,
we are sensually simple.

When you die, no one will know
how we bear each other.

I’ll stay until
the tea turns cold,
slowly pour it
into my cupped hand,
the dull amber finding
all the cracks to settle –

I’ll lift it to my mouth,
a prayer and toast,
let what is left spill
through my fingers.

You were the cup,
the warmth that moved
in these raw bones.
Silent Meal

*Good Friday, Iona*

It is a day to sit with silence,
so while we eat, we do not speak –
the closeness of human presence
re-enclosed in single worlds.

We do not speak, but the table speaks
its own speech of movement,
resigning creaks with shifts of weight,
the croak and groan of working oak.

We do not speak, but the plates speak
an unavoidable clatter of use
in their unstacking and filling and
habitual emptying.

The door speaks. Our bodies speak,
a gesturing of need, the waves of hands
passing and being passed until we touch
everything here for a guess at what is wanted.

We do not speak, but the room speaks.
The silence speaks, despite our presence.
The day speaks. The hours speak.
What isn’t being said still lives.
Mourning

We discuss nostalgia
like a dead-end job:

*what do we need it for –
*just torn calendar pages

*mapping out
*how we lived those hours.*

The crags are high
there’s always risk

but wind is a balance
for the wisp of you.

The first real thing
I think I ate this week

was yesterday. It’s not
that I’m short of cash

but my body is short
of a living hunger.

Years compress –
you saw me then

and I look
back now.

I laugh at a story
and choke it back

and I want to stop
regretting

this happiness
being here at all.

When I knew you,
you wore a mask

but
it didn’t hide you.
Early Morning

We swim through
early morning,
limbless
like fish in bedsheets: a
scramble away from the surface,
the public murmur of stories.

No freedom except
the unshuddered windows.
Wind shepherds
an example – how
light provides
one way
we can see,

and can be moved.

We can see
one way
light provides
an example: how
wind shepherds
the unshuddered windows.

No freedom except
the public murmur of stories.

Scramble away from the surface
like fish. In bedsheets, a
limbless
early morning
we swim through.
Doig: Man Dressed As Bat

At first, he was supposed to be ominous – ripped from the page and hammered into real life with dark wings too big for his body.

This is no hero for young boys, no villain for proud men.

* 

A bat in the house is an omen in the curtains. A bat in the air is a migration of light. A bat in the trees is the hunt and the hunter. A bat in the crowd is the last chance, lost.

* 

Leave the window open long enough and anything can find its way in – the residual light of lived-in houses, the restless stars and dragged-out waves.
Salt carries
through the curtains,
up here where
sight is a kind of flight
and not a sodden sense
of streets and stones.

*

Crawling over the pane
rain sleeps on the canvas,
running colors and
smudging forms
into the shape
of dreams.

What once was fear
is no threat now.
Paint it through
with light and air.
And let the rain
come again
to warp the picture
from where it started
to where it grew.
Good Work/Repairs

*I want to do good work,* she says
which is sometimes the slow road,
beginning mistakes and starting again
with raw hands, bloody, sores weeping.

A history of experts

and there are so many things to learn –
words and codes like heddle, skein,
swift, dents. The context is in the fingers,
how the hand holds on to being shown.

A strict sentence: in and out, this is a business

of order, pattern – drawn and over-drawn.
Production. Foundation. A stitch
is the basic repair, hastily basting
these marks to hold everything in place.

Her hands have helped with sheering

fleeces still body-warmed, piled
and pulled. The soft stock –
but her machines are cold steel,
worn wood, grease and oil.

She is a vessel watching rows rise

in this sea, formed and reformed
fabric becoming whole.
Thread abounds: a ball,
skein, spindle. Feel for tension.

Her fingers are running always running

and the work drives her –
tasks unfinished, bolts to roll.
Few looms and fewer hands,
she climbs up to the leather straps,
pulls down on the hemp strings

straight back and around, finding
a backbone, spine, binding, to hinge
and to hold. The day cuts off like
cotton fed through cold sharp scissors.
Release

When weighted, don’t wait: write down your holdings, your walls and restrictions, the chains at your feet. Write down what you want to leave, retract, release. Climb a mountain to the apex until the wind comes from all directions including from beneath you. Lifting: what could be flight. Feel the mountain rocks as they form a seat at your back, a harsh, other-worldly cradling, a nomadic return to rootedness, to the sleeping giants that form craggy terrain and skyline topography. Take out your lighter: set flame to the fire. Know that man has come so far, and remember what he still carries even now.

Set it alight from below, like the wind beneath you lifting you towards wings and the sky. Let the flame curl upward, let it envelope what you want to abandon, what you don’t want to follow you home. Loose the page to the shrinking form, the ashes of butterfly wings on a funeral pyre, and drop it down between the rocks to the ground beneath you where it writhes and dies and comes to peace. Let it release. It becomes ash, and nothingness… and then air. Which you desperately invite to fill your lungs, the expanse between your ribs.

Let the space widen. Let the sky lighten. Let the ground keep you.

Let the fire move you.
A word is a hand holding ice –

A word is a hand holding ice –
as it melts, it forms veins.
A word is a vein within stone,
a small seam of something
that glitters with all its might.
A word is a broken star that still shines.

A word is a thought committed to air,
a wondering aloud,
a tireless seeking
without any answers.
A word is your word, your bond,
your mark and your reference.
A word is what hums when
the iron is hot and struck.

A word is my face, twisting and careless.
A word reveals sides,
reveals many sides,
reveals facets
and water with gem-stone clarity.
A word is the water that cuts
through dead stone and old earth.

A word is a hand holding ice as it melts.
A word is the vein of thought on my face.
A word is what hums, and what holds
and still shines.
Good Work/Control

*I want to do good work,* he claims
which is easy enough to say
from the desk in the corner
when no one sees him.

It’s another thing entirely
in the boardroom.
Two thoughts attract:
to flee or to fight, but he can’t move
without indication of a verdict.

*I’m not finished,* he would cry at them
if only the syllables could be choked out;
if only he could stop diagramming
all the holes where his courage should be.
Not Written

The letters are not written because it’s easier to lie through the voice than in the honesty of ink.

The letters that are not written don’t say we’re all fine here.

The letters are not written because even words clot up quickly in the chaos of our lives.

They don’t say I am lost in all the choices.

The letters are not written because where words are concerned there is a thin line between a sign and a stain.

They don’t say happiness is enough.
After September

‘If I were able to forget you, or find you, I might learn to enter the cup I am washing, door I am closing, word I am opening with careful incision.’

– Margaret Gibson

Remember me in doing things.
Write a letter.
Pick up the phone.

Make the memories mean something.

Somewhere, a conversation occurs in a lot of space and air, but it’s not ours.

What are we doing? Retelling stories.

You could take me to the ruins and paint me a picture of what had lived.

I have a new definition for what love does.

It’s surprising to belong here, the way home is something that happens to a place after a while.

The self is the message we leave on the tape.

Towards the end, I accepted the bad connection. I hung up and let you go.
My Pilgrim Soul

I am not local, am not foreign, am not a stranger except to myself on the dark days with no sunlight seeping around the edges. I travel far, when I can, with what I have.

My words have dissimilated until not even I can understand the syllables that form inside my tongue and teeth and lungs and breath and if you ask me to repeat myself, I won’t know if I’ll say what I’ve said before or that the days are shorter now and no one will acknowledge the winter was long. Heavy. Ripping at the seams with the weight of myself being left to myself. Let me out to roam. Put me out to pasture and leave me there under the deep bright strokes of night sky.

The rushed star struck the atmosphere, but I could only feel my chest shake its shiver from when the cold damp feeling of grief had been allowed to sit and settle. Any other day, my pilgrim soul would have run toward the flare of the meteor meeting our sky for the first time, to offer myself up with the hope of thawing in the fallen fire of its shattered heart.
I Want to Be Carried

Today, my third floor flat
has become an Everest:
an unrepentant ascent.
So much of living
in a foreign country
is about swimming upstream.

The gulls are tethered
to the winds, buoyed
in the air like puppets.
Below, withdrawn
and lonely houseboats
struggle against their moorings,
sink back steadily into the drift.

Not everything is difficult;
moments of ease wash
over like headlights.
I sit backwards on buses
because I want to be carried.
Out on the sleeping streets,
breezes lift the leaves,
help them fall.
Insomnia

Sleepy warmth begins to fill the room
in which life wants to live
and fire wants to burn, the room
which light abandons slowly
when the sense of afternoon
drifts into the night sky.

Human nature to sleep by fire,
and human nature
to be sleepless by it too,
wired into insomnia
lit by stars like fairy lights
strung against a black curtain.

Lack of sleep hangs
off our bodies
like a worn garment,
slides down us
and pools on the floor
beneath our careful feet.

It is a cold blue flame
that freezes our eyes open,
our bodies in the upright position,
unseated, unsettled
until the mind curls up exhausted,
spent in smoke and ash.
Aubade

I want to have lived
with courage

a burning couple
levying the sunrise

summoned together among linens
mirrored and steaming.

The opposite is clear:
We have not survived our wearing out.
Pull

When the target screams
through the sky from the left,
the impulse is to follow it –
track its foreign flight
curved and strong
like the path of a meteor
or star shot across
some astral hunter’s gaze.

When the target is pitched overhead
there is less patience.
Shoot the damn thing down –
the shock that it came from above you,
behind you,
with as little warning as if it had formed
within you and flown out,
ripped through
the top of your skull.

Lucky that your arm is sure and long,
lucky that your finger holds sway,
lucky that the shot struck,
that your center held,
that the devil can’t catch you
off-guard or unprepared,
that surprise can fade
when the pieces
of the body break
dissipate
shatter
before cascading
death by fire
but no flame.
Flying

I never knew the birds
in August were the same
as the birds that moved into
the March trees like a promise.

Back then, the year was too young
for change, tethered to the edge
of a softening too subtle to grow.

June takes over and sets the birds free.
We pin no hopes to their wings.

Still, the birds filed in until
the woods came alive with flight
and air enough for sunlight to make
a feathered substitute for leaves.

The birds in August know what comes.
Time winds through their hollow bones,
turns the year on its hinges without flying.
The Makar – Prayers

The Makar
is the only one
who still sings.

Gone are the storefronts.
abandoned to rust
and vines that climb

and crack the bricks.
No one buys
that anymore.

The new social order
is the life of the spirit.
Lost in prayer,

the whole place hums,
so many parts
of a worshipping world.
Take Up Life

The roses are trying to die:
not because I forgot to water them,
but because this winter has made us
into people of mourning, afraid in the darkness.

My apocalypse would be waking up to death
but still not able to die – water and power
drawn out of me in slow, dismantling strokes.
I rush us both to the window,

spend the morning in the sun
where we start to remember
life when the thaw
has done its work,

when our cells are breached
and fall open into light.
Simple, slow,
that’s how we take up life again.
Before September

i.

Love is beginnings and endings. And where the ending begins, the last stopping point.

Love is *take me with you*.

Love is throwing the black baseball cap onto the bonfire after time has worn it through to its frayed blue threads.

Love is the reality next to this.

Love is two parallel lines that never touch.

Love is leaving, as soon as it arrives.

ii.

There is a possible moment
where things go right.
And another moment
where gravity exists.

As far as I’m concerned
there’s nothing wrong
with having company.

I don’t want you
to say no
to something
that makes you happy.

iii.

Love is a pattern we all repeat until the record wears out.

Love is a new record, which we steal when they’re not looking. Because love is also a new obsession.
Love is you know me better than I know me in the mirror.

Love is the heart putting words in the mouth.

Love is a better way to break apart.

Love is a meditation on risking reality.

Let me walk you home. Love is out there, waiting.

iii.

September came and went
without a fanfare,
so fast
I can’t remember
the nights
I looked out alone
at that one moon.
Section B:

Contemporary Epistles

in American Prose Poetry
Introduction

The literary epistle is a type of writing directed or sent to a person or a group of people, within the framework of an elegant and formal letter. To look at the broader literary tradition, the poetic epistle differs from a letter of personal correspondence by a few points: it does not require a date; it can exist without an addressee to begin the letter (Dear X), although an address needs to be made apparent within the body of the poem; it is not signed, as the by-line replaces a signature as acknowledgment of author; and finally, it often addresses a wider audience than merely the specific recipient who may be indicated. The epistle is often characterised by meditative reflection, contemplation, and an intimate presentation of these things with the intention to exchange ideas – though, unlike personal correspondence, the epistle is one-directional. It does not typically receive a reply.

While all poetry is a public address to an audience, authors of epistles often use that relationship to determine how the correspondence unfolds. Some epistles have a focused recipient, and the poem’s meaning is shaped by its address to that one person; while others use the letter frame to create an intimate dialogue with an open-ended audience. My interest in contemporary epistles stemmed from an extensive knowledge of epistles in traditional poetry, as well as an exploration of letters in my own writing.

As a society that largely doesn’t write letters anymore, I was interested to see how the epistle translated into contemporary literature. I found that topics of the contemporary letters encompass: meditative and reflective poems, poems that discuss spirituality and self-reflection, and even political writing that highlights social issues,
and aspects of personal identity. Because I write about identity in my own poetry, I was interested to explore how epistles play with the interaction between writer and reader to develop unique perspectives on identity, roles, and the performance of meaning.

Many strong examples of contemporary epistles I found were prose poems, so I focused my discussion on contemporary American prose poetry. The epistle-as-prose-poem looks indistinguishable from a real letter, which removes a layer of separation between the author and reader. When the poem looks like a letter, it reflects the tone of personal correspondence: intimate, private, casual, specific. The prose poem format allows for free movement and association between thoughts and ideas in a non-linear fashion, in the same way a letter does. Both letters and prose poems allow for jumps, leaps, stream-of-consciousness, and evolutions of topic/subject/recipient.

In the first chapter of To the Letter: A Curious History of Correspondence, Simon Garfield discusses the impact of letters within a cultural context. They are ‘the lubricant of human interaction,’ he claims, addressing all kinds of moments, both ‘the worthy and the incidental.’ More than merely vessels of content, they are also character studies:

Letters have the power to grant us a larger life. They reveal motivation and deepen understanding. They are evidential. They change lives, and they rewire history... It must have seemed impossible that their worth would ever be taken for granted or swept aside. A world without letters would surely be a world without oxygen. (19)

From here, he describes exactly what is lost within this new world: a world without letters, or more specifically, a world where new technology is swiftly replacing the traditional letter:
[This] is a book about what we have lost by replacing letters with email – the post, the envelope, a pen, a slower cerebral whirring, the use of the whole of our hands and not just the tips of our fingers. It is a celebration of what has gone before, and the value we place on literacy, good thinking and thinking ahead. (19)

Garfield’s book already seems to have two different themes, as seen by the use of separate subtitles. In a phone call on the 3rd of March 2015, an editor at Canongate Books confirmed that *To the Letter* has two subtitles; the hard-cover edition is subtitled ‘A Journey Through a Vanishing World,’ while the paperback is ‘A Curious History of Correspondence,’ as well as the alternate subtitle: ‘A Journey Through a Vanishing World.’ This was a marketing decision, she explained, as they wanted the paperback to reflect more of an idea of the weird and wonderful stories of correspondence. But the hardcover’s original subtitle reveals the cultural belief: that technology is irrevocably reshaping the field of correspondence.

But if this landscape is shifting so drastically, why are contemporary poets still using the epistle, denoting relationships of reader and writer, author and audience, letter-writer and recipient? As writer Hannah Brooks-Motl points out in her article “Learning the Epistolary Poem:”

> Since we’re reading a poem not initially intended for “us,” one thing letter-poems ask is that we consider how we are, and are not, like the real people they’re addressed to. Poets who use epistolary address also attempt to figure out not just who “you” is – whether it’s a close friend or all posterity, but what, and how to meaningfully communicate with them. (Poetry Foundation, 2013)

The vessel of the letter in poetry raises many questions, including why and how we are allowed – as readers in a larger audience – to enter into these supposedly intimate exchanges.

The history of the literary epistle is rich, and growing richer – even in spite of the dwindling use of personal correspondence on paper. The current cultural interest
in letters is evident across the board, from artistic artifacts, to new services that design letters as intimate gifts and experiences.1

Collections like *Dear Editor: Poems* by Amy Newman and *Epistles: Poems* by Mark Jarman are examples of the requisition of epistles in a contemporary context to draw attention to ideas of audience, speaker, recipient, and identity. This thesis focuses on contemporary American prose poems written as epistles, because these were the strongest examples of epistolary collections. From Jarman’s public contemporary sermons to Newman’s grand evolution of audience/recipient, the letter is finding new utilisation in literature despite its dwindling numbers in terms of personal use.

The heritage of epistles is extensive, from the historical genre of letter writing in ancient Egypt, to the religious epistles in the New Testament. The style of traditional epistles was often a formal address or entreaty with a few anecdotal elements to foster a friendly relationship between writer and reader. Contemporary examples of epistles often drop the formal tone, using the framework of a letter to focus on the interplay between speaker and audience. Many current writers use the epistle as an extension of the journal poem – as we will see with Julia Bloch and Lydia Browne’s collections – or as a way to interpret relationships between writer and reader, sender and recipient, author and other.

The earliest appearances of epistles in literature were by Pliny the Younger, Ovid, Horace and Seneca. As Roland Greene outlines in the *Princeton Encyclopedia*

1 A few examples: writer Stephen Elliot’s club for correspondence entitled *Letters In the Mail*; Craig Oldman’s *The Hand-Written Letter Project*; Shaun Usher’s book *Letters of Note*; a worldwide community art project called ‘Snail Mail My Email’, spearheaded by Ivan Cash; and ‘Letters Home,’ a theatre commission at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. Some of these will be discussed further, but it is important to note that there is a current pattern to the re-emergence of letter-writing within different artistic fields.
of Poetry and Poetics, two types of verse epistles exist: the one on moral and philosophical subjects, which stems from Horace’s Epistles, and the other on romantic and sentimental subjects, which stems from Ovid’s Heroides (“Verse Epistles,” 1513). In Horace’s Epistles, few are actually written in the form of letters. But of the ones that are, Horace often uses the epistle as a piece of playful banter, with a close link to satirical writing, and as a philosophical, ethical meditation. In the article “Poetry, Philosophy, Politics and Play: Epistles,” scholar John Moles notes: ‘No one still believes that the Epistles are ‘real letters,’ and many stress the presence of motifs from the Satires, a linkage strengthened by their common status as sermones’ (144). Horace wrote the epistles in two books, published in 20 BC and 14 BC. Verse epistles following the tradition of Horace – the most popular form since the Renaissance – use the letter form to address moral and philosophical themes. Alexander Pope is a prime example of following in the tradition of Horace, making epistles familiar in his Moral Essays. In Pope’s time, epistles were often paired with satire: a way to dance around what one was trying to say, and to be entertaining while saying it. An epistle generally stood as a public denouncement of or pronouncement for some topic or cause.

Alternatively, Ovid’s Heroides is a collection of epistolary poems, composed in Latin elegiac couplets. In the introduction to Ovid: Heroides: Select Epistles, editor Peter E. Knox writes:

They comprise fourteen fictional epistles from heroines of Greek and Roman mythology to the men they loved, one further such epistle by the early Greek lyric poet Sappho, and three pairs of letters by famous couples of myth and literature: Paris and Helen, Leander and Hero, Acontius and Cydippe. (5)
The dates of Ovid’s *Heroides* are unclear and often debated, but the entire work seems to have been written in the span from c. 25 to 16 BC. These epistles established the alternate branch of the verse letter as an address to romantic and sentimental subjects. This influence was most popular in the European Middle Ages, inspiring Samuel Daniel (“Letter from Octavia to Marcus Antonius”) and providing a source for John Donne’s vast body of verse epistles.

When considering the impact of verse epistles, it is important to highlight the letter as an emotional object. Ben Jonson and John Donne famously wrote epistles to their patrons and to each other, reflecting the function of letters to entreat and entertain patrons as well as to engage a relatively personal correspondence in the public sphere. The *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* describes the country house poem as: ‘a type of complimentary poem which extolled the good qualities of a patron and also the fruitfulness, sound management, and beauties of his house and estate’ (162). Additionally, the pastoral epistles were also directed to patrons in satirical ways; an example of this is Thomas Carew’s “To Saxham,” which uses inverted imagery to gently mock Jonson’s more earnestly sentimental country-house poem “To Penshurst.” As William McClung describes in *The Country House in English Renaissance Poetry*: ‘Carew is more detached from his subject than Jonson; he does not praise his hosts as individuals, nor does he place himself very precisely within the poems. His poems are faithful to the conventions of the genre and make no attempt at a Jonsonian immediacy of expression’ (141).

Letters have also featured in literature as a commentary on the publicizing of private lives; many famous figures – whether authors, actors, artists or otherwise – have published collections of correspondence. In the current day, many of these instances are voluntary collections put out by the authors themselves, but there are
Abigail Williams examines this in the case of Jonathan Swift’s letters in her article “Epistolary Forms”: ‘An examination of Swift’s letters in print has a lot to tell us about Swift’s textual afterlives, and about the role of public and private documents in a rapidly commercializing literary marketplace’ (119). Williams notes the differences between public and private in terms of the use of letters. Swift was not interested in an authorized collection of his correspondences during his lifetime, and often asked his companions to burn his letters. However, he frequently shared the contents of letters with people other than their recipients, and ‘there are numerous references throughout Swift’s correspondence to the wider readership of individual letters, or the use of letters as vehicle for news and as cover for enclosures for a wider circle of friends.’ (121).

W. H. Auden wrote multiple epistles, including ‘New Year Letter,’ which writer Adam Gopnik described as ‘an abstract philosophical poem in Swiftian couplets’ (2002). In 1937, Auden published Letters from Iceland, a travel book in prose and verse with Louis MacNeice. These letters and travel notes were written during their trip to Iceland in 1936. From personal stories to political broadcasts, the collection played with the idea of personal experiences displayed in a public space, a concept which will be explored further in conjunction with the idea of ‘open letters.’

Not as straightforward as the history of the epistle, the nature and definition of prose poetry is more widely debated in literary theory. The earliest examples of prose poetry – including works by Charles Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe – were poems written in prose rather than verse, while still retaining poetic qualities of
imagery, with an extensive focus on language, delivery, and parataxis.

Prose poetry is often claimed to have originated in early nineteenth-century France and Germany as a reaction against traditional uses of line in verse. The first German influences included Novalis (pseudonym of Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg), Friedrich Hölderlin, Heinrich Heine, and Johann Paul Friedrich Richter (Jean Paul), while French prose poetry has been influenced by Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Arthur Rimbaud. In the United States, Walt Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’ was constructed of long lines of free verse that focused on syntactic parallelism, repetition, and cataloguing as features of a new type of verse. While Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’ was written in lined verse, ‘the format of the printing was intended to make the book fit easily into a coat pocket, so the long lines often look like blocks of prose.’ (Kummings, 383). Edgar Allan Poe also created hybrid forms of epic poems with long lines, and short fiction pieces.

Because of its difficult categorization and continual mixed reception in literary theory, the prose poem form is still utilised as an experiment that bends and breaks the rules. As Carl Phillips writes in his essay “A Brief Stop on the Trail of the Prose Poem”: ‘what makes the prose poem different from our more established, traditional forms is that it resists, again, definition at the level of craft’ (113).

And Robert Bly argues that the boundaries of lineated verse quite often proved to be restrictive. In “Looking for Dragon Smoke,” he writes:

The loss of associative freedom [in poetry by the eighteenth century] showed itself in form as well as in content. In content the poet’s thought plodded through the poem, line after line, like a man being escorted through a prison. The “form” was a corridor, full of opening and closing doors. The rhymed lines opened at just the right moment, and closed again behind the visitors. (5)

Instead, he advocates ‘leaps:’
Thought of in terms of language, then, leaping is the ability to associate fast. In a great ancient or modern poem, the considerable distance between the associations, the distance the spark has to leap, gives the lines their bottomless feeling, their space, and the speed of the association increases the excitement of the poetry. (4)

In the preface to *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry*, Abigail Beckel and Kathleen Rooney note: ‘Prose poems frequently pay heed to subject matter that larger forms might consider too minor to trifle with, or might overlook completely’ (xi). The smaller things are not overlooked in this form, they explain:

Prose poetry is not just poetry without line breaks. It can and does borrow from forms outside the world of poetry, [including]: questionnaires, conversations, dream narratives, and art installations like the boxes of Joseph Cornell. Blocks, patches, scraps, chunks, fragments. Prose poems are little boxes that can contain big things. Or small things that mean big things. Or small things that mean small things. (xiii)

Prose poetry generally comes under two categories: narrative and language-oriented.

Within those two categories, however, there are almost as many sub-categories as there are prose poems: the fable, the parable, the dream narrative, the journal entry, the object poem, the abstract language poem, and so on. In “A Long Course in Miracles,” Charles Simic writes that the prose poem is:

[a] literary hybrid, an impossible amalgamation of lyric poetry, anecdote, fairy tale, allegory, joke, journal entry, and many other kinds of prose. Prose poems are the culinary equivalent of peasant dishes, like paella and gumbo, which bring together a great variety of ingredients and flavors, and which in the end, thanks to the art of the cook, somehow blend. Except, the parallel is not exact. Prose poetry does not follow a recipe. The dishes it concocts are unpredictable and often vary from poem to poem. (15)

Prose poetry may not follow a recipe, but this does not mean it is without rules. Rather, it is a form that builds its own rules as it is constructed, the evolving definitions shifting alongside the prose poem’s use and practice. In an essay in
**American Poetry Review** titled “The Prose Poem: An Alternative to Verse,” David Lehman notes the distinct form of prose poetry:

The form of a prose poem is not an absence of form. It is just that the sentence and the paragraph must act the part of the line and the stanza, and there are fewer rules and governing traditions to observe, or different ones, because the prose poem has a relatively short history and has enjoyed outsider status for most of that time. Writing a prose poem can therefore seem like accepting a dare to be unconventional. It is a form that invites the practitioner to reinvent it. (14)

If free verse, to Robert Frost, is playing tennis without a net, it becomes clear that prose poetry is like playing a different game on a different court altogether. The terrain changes constantly, Lehman explains: ‘Sooner or later in the discussion it will be said that the prose poem, born in rebellion against tradition, has itself become a tradition. It will be noted approvingly that the prose poem *blurs boundaries*.’ (13)

In an introduction to *The Best of the Prose Poem: An International Journal*, Peter Johnson shares his own perspective about the selection process for the journal, in addition to his own doubts about the ‘rules’ of prose poetry:

Since the publication of *Volume 1* in 1992, I have read just about everything written on the prose poem in English. Has that made me a better editor, or has it encouraged me to look at submissions through a distorted critical lens, trying to pigeonhole poems into generally accepted categories? What a terrible failure, what a laughingstock, is the editor who is unable to recognize and to reward the rare visionary poet who succeeds in breaking all the rules—if indeed there are any rules. (10)

And there are critical elements of prose poetry that provide a kind of framework: rhythm, attention to language, image, the impact of the paragraph or sentence instead of stanzas or line breaks. These factors connect different types of prose poems, and place them proximally to present a relative timeline or history for this poetic form. In his book *Poet’s Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*, Stephen Fredman details this
lineage from its roots in French and German poetry to contemporary working
definitions, by critics such as Peter Johnson and Michael Benedikt. Johnson defends
his deconstruction of the genre of prose poetry by saying: ‘I want to argue that so
much critical literature on the prose poem may itself suggest that prose poetry is not
only a "real" genre, but that it also has a tradition.’ And Michael Benedikt gives a
working outline of prose poetry in *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology*,
calling it:

> a genre of poetry, self-consciously written in prose, and characterized
> by the intense use of virtually all the devices of poetry, which includes
> the intense use of devices of verse. The sole exception to access to the
> possibilities, rather than the set priorities of verse is, we would say,
> the line break. (47)

He also lists the prose poem’s ‘special properties’: its ‘attention to the unconscious,
and to its particular logic’; ‘an accelerated use of colloquial and everyday speech
patterns’; ‘a visionary thrust’; a reliance on humor and wit; and an ‘enlightened
doubtfulness, or hopeful skepticism’ (47).

Like its use of everyday speech patterns, the prose poem has often appropriated
impressions of intimate subjects: journals, conversations, personal lists, information
that is usually hidden or carefully measured out to be shared with a very specific
audience. Lehman also notes:

> The prose poem is, you might say, poetry that disguises its true nature.
> In the prose poem the poet can appropriate such unlikely models as
> the newspaper article, the memo, the list, the parable, the speech, the
dialogue. It is a form that sets store by its use of the demotic, its
willingness to locate the sources of poetry defiantly far from the
spring on Mount Helicon sacred to the muses. It is an insistently
modern form. (13)

So, when prose poetry focuses on ‘small things that mean big things,’ or acts as ‘little
boxes that can contain big things,’ as Beckell and Rooney have mentioned, how
these things are presented becomes significant.

The prose poem on the page resembles a box itself, a block of text whose form does not yet have as much theory and pedagogy as verse poetry. Instead, the block form is functioning in a different way, inviting the reader to ask a new question: in this framed box of content, what is being gestured to outside of the frame?

In the case of epistolary prose poetry, the contemporary epistle utilises that central question of prose poetry in order to draw attention to the interplay between reader and writer, author and audience, the drafter of the letter, and its recipient – in terms of both direct recipient and extended audience. A letter is already an object of content and information; epistles, as both poems and letters, differentiate themselves from other poems because of the multiple layers of audience and intended directions of attention. Like the current trend of ‘open letters’ – letters written and posted online between celebrities, ordinary people expressing opinions or positions, and even columns like ‘A Letter To...’ published in the Guardian – letters in prose poetry are a way of drawing attention, a way of making a statement, and a way to ensure that everyone wants to listen. When Sinead O’Connor wrote an open letter to Miley Cyrus, it was not important whether Cyrus ever read it or responded. What was more important was the directed attention of everyone else: because we want to hear what she has to say to her, because we forget – in the presumed directionality of Subject X writing to Subject Y – that we are also being spoken to.

Celebrities are not the only people writing open letters. Nor is the open letter a new convention. In 1525, Martin Luther penned “An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants,” which stood as a formal and public explanation to
‘criticize the princes’ bloodthirsty suppression of the peasant uprising’ in Germany (Whiting, 97). Indeed, organised religion has long utilised the frame of the open letter; for example, many biblical epistles are written with an intended public audience, such as the Pauline epistles. These, in turn, influenced the Pope’s encyclical, which was: ‘a circular letter, that is, a pastoral letter intended for circulation throughout the Christian community’ (Spinello, 56).

But Luther’s open letter during the German peasant uprising indicates another use of public proclamation besides religious communication. Historically, open letters have also been appropriated for political means. They are the perfect medium for inciting public awareness, as well as attempting to entice a wider dialogue surrounding provocative issues. A few famous examples are Bishop Samuel Seabury’s Farmer’s letters in 1774, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s letter to Martin Van Buren in 1836, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

Bishop Samuel Seabury was the first Episcopal bishop of Connecticut and Rhode Island in 1783, and wrote the “Farmer’s Letters.” As Gregory Fremont-Barnes described in the Encyclopedia of the Age of Political Revolutions and New Ideologies:

[Seabury’s] three Farmer’s Letters arguing against American independence were authored under the pseudonym of A. W. Farmer (i.e., a Westchester farmer). The 17-year-old Alexander Hamilton answered the second pamphlet with his own, entitled A Full Vindication of the Measures of the Congress, from the Calumnies of Their Enemies: In Answer to a Letter under the Signature of A. W. Farmer. (666)

Despite Seabury’s protestations, the United States became independent, with Alexander Hamilton as one of its founding fathers, and who later founded the nation’s
financial system and the Federalist Party.

When Martin Van Buren became president in 1836, he found himself in the midst of a national debate about the prospect of removing Native Americans, specifically the Cherokees in the Southeast, from their territory due to a demand for arable land. Ralph Waldo Emerson lent his voice to the debate by writing an open letter to Van Buren. As literary critic Annette Kolodny describes: ‘As the date for removal approached, even Ralph Waldo Emerson, who generally shied away from direct political engagement, felt compelled to compose an open letter to Van Buren, citing a great flaw “in the moral character of the government”’ (129).

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also added to the political movement of penning open letters during his arrest and time in Birmingham Jail. In his book *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, S. Jonathan Bass describes the lasting significance of this epistle:

The “Letter from Birmingham Jail” emerged as the most important written document of the civil rights protest era and a widely read modern literary classic. Personally addressed to eight white Birmingham clergy, the letter captures the essence of the struggle for racial equality and provided a blistering critique of the gradualist approach to racial justice (1).

Each of these examples – beginning with the Pauline epistles and ending with King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” – illustrates the awareness and inclusion of the public audience as an important component in addressing personal, political, and religious issues. The effect of having someone to speak to has shaped many literary, political, and contemporary works of art by providing a frame.² This is true whether

² An example is John Steinbeck, who wrote multiple articles and editorials as epistolary pieces. One significant instance is ‘Then My Arm Glassed Up,’ written as a letter addressed to *Sports Illustrated* senior editor Ray Cave. In *Of Men and Their Making: The Selected Non-Fiction of John Steinbeck*, editors Susan Shillinglaw and Jackson J Benson describe Steinbeck as: ‘[a] passionate correspondent, keeper of journals, Steinbeck loved to address his prose to a particular audience — usually a friend — whether he was composing a book, a play, or, quite
the intended audience is a group of people, one recipient, or a national general public.

And the Internet has broadened the potential audience even further, producing a
global general public who are reachable with the click of a few buttons and keys.

In addition to the rise in open letters, there has also been a rise in the recent
scholarship of letters, opening a wider array of criticism for correspondence as an art
form as well as biography. The Princeton Classics Professor Denis Feeney speculates
about this in “Caesar’s Body Shook,” an article for the London Review of Books about

*Cicero in Letters: Epistolary Relations of the Late Republic* by Peter White:

Even if we resist the temptation [of the Petrarchan air of immediacy],
the appeal of the correspondence remains something to be accounted
for. Cicero’s letters have always been popular, but it is intriguing that
the last decade and a half in particular has seen such a revival of
scholarly interest, going back to G.O. Hutchinson’s *Cicero’s
Correspondence: A Literary Study* (1998). It is as if our own scurrying
e-communications have created a nostalgia for a time when busy
people could write pages of well-turned prose as part of their regular
intercourse. (2011)

This speculation about the nostalgia for letters adds to the mounting cultural
evidence that the idea of letter-writing has become a topic of interest again. But more
than just missing having the time, habit and inclination to draft letters in the
afternoon, epistles and correspondence are gaining a new language of criticism in the
literary community.

While letters-as-biography have been researched, collected, and curated for
thousands of years, there is a new perspective arising that blurs the distinctions
between ‘life’ and ‘art’, where letters and correspondences have the capacity to
become art-pieces and poetry as well as being factual, historical artifacts. One of the

often, an essay. A letter gave him free rein to range from idea to idea, as here, where the
writer begins with a memory from Salinas days; cites a definition from *the Oxford English
Dictionary* and notes the sports habits of hunters and fishermen and baseball players...” (118).
main writers this scholarship focuses on is Emily Dickinson. *Reading Emily Dickinson’s Letters*, the 2009 collection of critical essays published by the University of Massachusetts Press, is an example of the new exploration of letters as literature.

Dickinson was a prolific poet, if very private, but it has emerged that her personal correspondences were widespread, with many recipients and much circulation of her letters. In the foreword to *Reading Emily Dickinson’s Letters*, critic Marietta Messmer describes the patterns and formats of Dickinson’s letters: ‘Frequently, poems were not only included as letters in separate texts that then entered into an intergeneric dialogic exchange with their prose context, but many poems consistently merged with their prose context, thus forming letter-poems or poem-letters that resist easy generic classification’ (ix).

In the introduction, editors Jane Donahue Eberwein and Cindy MacKenzie explain: ‘today’s critical climate opens new possibilities for appreciating Emily Dickinson’s letters and thinking of them in fresh ways. Among the forces influencing current scholarship on the letters are manuscript study, genre theory, rhetorical and reader-response theories, and new approaches to historical contextualization’ (2). Conceiving criticism of the letters in new ways only seems appropriate, as Dickinson used letters and correspondence to challenge traditional conventions. MacKenzie explains: ‘scholars of the correspondence have concluded that Dickinson was experimenting with her poetic techniques within the form of the familiar letter, even as she consistently transgressed its conventions’ (13).

In *Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline*, critical theorist Dianne Donnelly characterizes ‘the four major pedagogical theories in the creative writing classroom as New Critical, Expressive, Mimetic and Reader-
Response’ (3). Based on M.H. Abrams’ triangle of artistic transaction\(^3\) and the writings of Jane P. Tompkins, Terry Eagleton, and Stanley Fish, Donnelly defines the pragmatic theory of reader-response as ‘aimed at the audience,’ and ‘one of three stages that marks the period of modern literature,’ and ‘an attitude that the text welcomes a reader’s perspective’ (61). This thesis employs the reader-response pedagogical theory as the main methodology for examining epistles in contemporary American prose poetry.

First, I examine *Epistles: Poems* by Mark Jarman, a collection of thirty epistles styled after Paul’s epistles in the Bible. I explore Jarman’s move from a New Formalist in the 1980’s (a crusader for traditional rhymes and meters) to a collection of epistolary prose poems. In this examination, I consider whether these letters are intended as short essays for the audience about the Christian faith, or whether they have a larger literary and poetic reach. Exploring the elements of humour and specific contemporary imagery highlights the evolution from and juxtaposition with the larger Biblical context of the content. I also raise the question of the multiple speakers narrating the poems, and how that is used to draw attention to the way Jarman’s messages evolve in the collection.

In the second chapter, I turn to collections by Julia Bloch and Lydia Browne, who use letters to describe the fluid and malleable nature of identity and perception. Bloch’s collection *Letters to Kelly Clarkson* frames a conversation in letters written to the pop musician Kelly Clarkson. Bloch’s narrator becomes a bit neurotic, writing to a famous celebrity as though they were best friends, but her message runs deeper

\(^3\) In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M. H. Abrams uses a triangular relationship to analyze literature, with the three apexes of the triangle indicating ‘artist,’ ‘reader,’ and ‘universe,’ with ‘work’ in the centre of the triangle, and thus the keystone of all relationships.
than this conceit: through the letters, she uses a non-linear approach to highlight discrepancies between identity in real life and the performance of identity in media and society. Browne’s collection *The Desires of Letters* uses letters like diary entries. She writes to poets with whom she is friends in real life, employing sincerity to further a discussion of gender roles and motherhood.

And finally, I discuss Amy Newman’s collection *Dear Editor: Poems*, a sequence of 35 epistolary prose poems written as cover letters to an unidentified ‘Editor.’ Her work explores the character of ‘Amy Newman,’ and her identity as a young, evolving poet, with attention to themes of self-worth, rendering, and – invoking M. H. Abrams’ triangle of artistic transaction – the work versus the world. As her cover letters become less professional, she engages the audience in a narrative of her family. I identify the characters of ‘Grandfather’ and ‘Grandmother,’ and how these symbols colour ‘Amy’s’ narrative. This culminates with a discussion of Newman’s theme of the Editor as God, tracking the evolution of these letters as they oscillate between various stages of public/private spheres of discourse.
Mark Jarman

Before morning, the sparrows came down
To the body of Saint Francis.
Now he is upholstered in oak leaves
Like a living room chair.
This morning we are preparing a crucifixion.
I am thinking of you now.

– from “Letters to a Stranger” by Thomas James

*Epistles: Poems* by Mark Jarman is a collection of thirty epistolary prose poems, loosely fashioned after Paul’s epistles in the Bible. The book is divided into six numbered sections, and the majority of the poems are between one and two pages long. Jarman employs different personas to narrate these epistles, in tones ranging from elevated and evangelical to humble and plainspoken. The poems have swift transitions, which connects to the varied voices of the speakers. There is no uniform style, but some pieces are more straightforward while others evoke the journey of a winding metaphor. Jarman’s use of the epistolary prose poem highlights the transposition of historical epistles into a contemporary context; he updates the language and content, while retaining a translation of the biblical themes.

The Pauline epistles are letters that Paul wrote to the communities of believers he had established, including the Corinthians, Galatians, Thessalonians, and Phillipians. The letters were ‘occasional’ letters, directed to specific congregations with specific contexts. Yet they embody different conversational tones, and issues of authority and voice are very much part of the heritage of the letters. In fact, a number of the epistles are widely judged to be written by other authors under Paul’s name. In *Eerdman’s Commentary on the Bible*, scholar James D. G. Dunn explains: ‘There is
general scholarly agreement that seven of the thirteen letters bearing Paul's name are authentic, but his authorship of the other six cannot be taken for granted' (1274). Jarman mirrors the speculation about Paul’s authorship by using different speakers to narrate his epistles. One narrator speaks a language of mathematics, while others are rooted in descriptions of the physical body, or holding doubts and uncertainties about belief.

Other similarities between Paul’s and Jarman’s epistles are stylistic. In his introduction to the Pauline Corpus in The Pauline Epistles, Terence L. Donaldson describes: ‘One cannot read through Paul’s letters without being struck by the dazzling array of images, metaphors, terms, concepts, and typologies that he uses to describe the human situation and the work of Christ and its consequences’ (49). Some of these themes include sin, redemption, judgment, flesh, Spirit, the body, faith, and grace. In fact, Donaldson explains: ‘The list [of themes] is a testimony to the vigour and vitality of Paul’s mind. His was an active intellect, throwing off metaphors and ideas as a grindstone throws off sparks’ (50). Jarman approaches his epistles similarly: often making contextual leaps in the dissemination of content, but with close attention to language and the execution of metaphors.

In Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form, Janet Gurkin Altman examines the genre of epistolary novels, and how letters provide a new perspective in the execution and style of these novels. Even though she primarily discusses novels, these qualities can be extended to any epistolary literature; the poetic epistle does similar work to the epistolary novel in terms of narrative, metaphors, and complications of perspective. For example, Altman is very interested in the ambiguity of the letter as a vessel for information, in terms that could be extended to any epistolary literature:
The letter’s mediatory role in epistolary narrative derives precisely from its position as a halfway point, as an “either-or,” “neither-nor” phenomenon. As an instrument of communication between sender and receiver, the letter straddles the gulf between presence and absence; the two persons who “meet” through the letter are neither totally separated nor totally united. The letter lies halfway between the possibility of total communication and the risk of no communication at all. (42-43)

This is especially true of letters to a wide-reaching audience (like the Pauline epistles), as well as epistles that act as prayers, like Jarman’s meditations do. Both of these examples are always mediating between the individual experience and a spiritual context. Altman argues that this flexibility allows for the inclusion of juxtaposed elements within the epistle:

Because of its “both-and,” “either-or” nature, the letter is an extremely flexible tool in the hands of the epistolary author. Since the letter contains within itself its own negation, epistolary narrators regularly make it emphasize alternately, or even simultaneously, presence and absence, candor and dissimulation, mania and cure, bridge and barrier. (43)

Jarman focuses his epistles on three threads of meditative perspectives: logic (or, the mind), physicality (or, the body), and phenomenology (or, the spirit and the search for meaning). Many of the epistles refer to more than one of these threads within the same letter, and by the end of the collection the three are inter-woven, addressing combinations of mind, body, and spirit simultaneously.

The Poetry Foundation describes Jarman as ‘a key figure in both New Narrative and New Formalism,’ movements in American poetry that arose in the 20th century (poetryfoundation.org). These movements focused on experiments with narrative, and the resurgence of meter and rhyme in contemporary poetry, respectively. *Epistles: Poems* consists of thirty prose poems, but Jarman’s dedication to narrative, meter, and sound is undeniably evident.
The Biblical epistles often rely on repetition and parallel structure. For example, Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians repeats the phrase ‘to another’ in the list of spiritual gifts:

To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of languages and to still another the interpretation of languages (New International Version 1 Cor. 12.8-10).

In 1 Corinthians, Paul uses repetition to describe love’s actions: ‘It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres’ (1 Cor. 13.7). And a few verses later, this literary device is employed again to highlight the shift between childhood and maturity: ‘When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me’ (1 Cor. 13.11).

Jarman likewise utilises repetition in his epistles as a method of carrying information through evolutions of thought and contemplation. In the opening poem, “If I were Paul,” he leans on the Pauline epistles to contextualise his collection. The poem is a list of imperatives, using ‘consider’ as the repetitive refrain:

Consider how you were made.

Consider the loving geometry that sketched your bones, the passionate symmetry that sewed flesh to your skeleton, and the cloudy zenith whence your soul descended in shimmering rivulets across pure granite... (3)

In Poem 11, titled “One wants, the other wants,” these phrases mirror Paul’s phrases ‘to one there is given,’ and ‘to another.’ The poem begins with ‘one’ and ‘the other’ experiencing the same feeling of desire, before diverging into individual experiences:
One wants, the other wants.

One wants to describe the plots of novels, the other wants to eat dinner. One wants to list the steps for assembly, the other shouts at the racket outside. One wants to pray, the other plans this week’s menu. One says just a minute. One says you haven’t heard a single thing I’ve said. (31)

Here, even with the tone of a domestic dispute about to happen, the pattern unifies into statements of ‘one’ and ‘one,’ instead of ‘one’ and ‘the other’: ‘One gives thanks for the accident, for letting things fall as they fall, for life on life’s terms. One has a party, one has a funeral’ (31).

The ambiguity of naming the same subjects (‘one’ and ‘one’ rather than ‘one’ and ‘the other’) means that the narrator can list characteristics of two different individuals, and also mean that one individual could have both qualities simultaneously:

One loves another, one loves himself. One strides through the color wheel naked with arms outstretched, one crouches drawing diagrams on the bottom of the ocean floor. One worries that his heart is going off, like a week-old carton of milk. One that love is leaking away through some hairfine crack. (32-33)

Jarman takes advantage of the “both-and,” “either-or” nature of letters that Altman highlights. Whether this ‘one’ refers to distinct people or the same person, Jarman allows for both possibilities to exist in the reader’s mind.

The use of the third person singular here is quite formal, almost reminiscent of the Biblical language of ‘thou’. But the benefit of the third person singular is its open-endedness: it can be used to refer to the speaker, or any person. Where Paul’s list refers to what these unknown groups of people receive, Jarman creates an active list of wants, desires, inclinations, habits, worries, and actions.

writes about Paul’s letters in the context of epistolary composition: ‘When an author decides to write a letter, he or she creates a persona. The conventions that exist for writing letters – beginning the letter with an address, closing with some parting words – help establish the intended roles of sender and receiver’ (55). The address can be quite informal (a letter doesn’t have to begin: ‘Dear’ anyone), and the valediction is often more of a closing thought or reflection in Jarman’s epistles. But the evidence of a persona, indeed multiple personas, is very clear. Keefer notes this similarity in Paul’s epistles:

I dwell on the dynamics of epistolary composition because too often scholars and readers talk about “Paul” as if they could map his personality directly from his letters. Every time Paul (or any letter writer) constructs a letter, however, he fictionalizes himself. This is not to say that Paul is dishonest or cynically manipulative; rather that he can control and bend the aspects of his personality he decides to reveal to his audiences. We should always remember that the Paul of the letters, just like Paul in Acts, is a literary character’ (55).

All poems negotiate along the public-private divide: they are often intimate meditations of some sort, circulated to a wide readership by a form of publication. But epistolary poetry dances on the public-private divide and it plays with this idea of separation through the self-awareness of its own performance. The epistle is always a performance, because – in this literary context – the letter is no longer just private thoughts shared between two people. And if the content of the epistle is intimate, it is only pretending to be.

Anna De Pretis comments on the link between performance and epistles in Epistolarity in the First Book of Horace’s Epistles. In the chapter titled “Epistolary and Self-Representation, De Pretis highlights:

Many scholars have noticed the affinity between theatre and letter novels... But that affinity is peculiar, in my opinion, not only to the novel, but to any kind of letter writing. In fact, it seems difficult to
talk of an epistolary mode without employing theatrical metaphors. The comparison with theatre underlines another feature of epistolary writing, that is to say the frequency with which correspondents and scholars refer to epistolary utterance as “speaking” and such. (64)

And it’s not just the language of ‘speaking’ in letters that draws the comparison to theater. The epistle has at least two characters, and the presence of these characters creates a connection between epistles and theater. De Prentis explains: ‘In every letter the interaction of two characters operates, although only one is speaking: the weight of the addressee, as we have seen is great and peculiar to the letter form’ (65). The two characters are the speaker and the audience, or the author of the letter and its recipient. But because epistles are poems as well as letters, the recipient is not the only person who will read it. The communal field of public readers – combined with the performative and theatrical qualities of the epistle – creates an audience of readers and recipients, characters and personas. In fact, the term ‘audience’ best encapsulates the multiplicity of intended readers, including the recipient as well as an extended public readership.

Jarman’s narrators often refer directly to the audience in these letters. In ‘If I were Paul,’ the speaker says: ‘I send you this not knowing if you will receive it, or if having received it, you will read it, or if you have read it, you will know it contains my blessing’ (4). Here, the narrator is utterly reliant on the reader’s interaction to bring meaning to what is provided. Without a reader’s response, these are just words on a page with no sub-text. Altman discusses the significance of the reader (or recipient of the letters) in epistolary literature, regardless of whether or not the reader actively responds within the text:

I insist upon the fact that the reader is “called upon” to respond. Whether the novel is actually a Briefwechselroman (multicorrespondent novel) obviously matters little, although the
German noun (literally, “letter exchange novel”) alerts us to that fundamental impulse behind all epistolary writing; if there is no desire for exchange, the writing does not differ significantly from a journal, even if it assumes the outer form of the letter. To a great extent, this is the epistolary pact – the call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent’s world. (89)

Jarman’s epistles do not contain any responses from a recipient, reader, or audience, but they are still referred to explicitly.

In the poem “My travels in Abyssinia,” Jarman writes: ‘Before I board the ferry, I want to see a courier pressing through the crowd, who will reach me as I put my foot on the bow and hand me... But how can you respond as I would have you respond?’ (12). Here, the narrator is trying to craft a scene, which includes almost writing the reader’s response. But the pause and re-evaluation is evidence of the reader’s autonomy: one can’t learn other people’s lessons, nor write their replies for them.

Instead, these epistles are meditations about bridging the distance between the banal, lived world, and the joyful, spiritual world. Altman explains: ‘Given the letter’s function as a connector between two distant points, as a bridge between sender and receiver, the epistolary author can choose to emphasize either the distance or the bridge’ (13). Jarman oscillates between both of these approaches. In the opening poems, his narrators highlight the separation between logic and the body, with almost no reference to the spiritual world. But even the letters at the end of the collection acknowledge this distance: ‘If your call and response first thing in the morning make us hold hands and smile in the dark, as we lie in bed, it’s because we’re not alone in the world. And when letters like this one are written, it is because we are’ (84).

In poem 6, ‘I have lost my explanation,’ the narrator relies on mathematics as a grounding source of meaning and significance:
I have lost my explanation for the divine plan.

The vehicle for my metaphor was either the depths of π or it was the trajectory of DNA. I think something about the existence of numbers going on infinitely backwards reassured me. But how from that do I extrapolate love?

Mathematics calls across distances. The angels are sines and cosines. And so on. But can heaven choose between one and many? There is no warmth in knowing God’s guts are a string of irrational numbers. (17)

Here, the premise is quite humorous: the narrator has ‘lost my explanation for the divine plan’ as though these plans were blueprints or calculus notes. But beneath the humour, Jarman draws attention to mathematics as a divine pattern. The field of mathematics holds the history of a tradition. And in its practical application, it is also expressed as dynamic equations that can be constructed according to rules, and mined for clear, definitive answers. How much easier would ‘the divine plan’ be to understand if we did indeed have a mathematical model for it?

Jarman is drawing attention to the mathematical mind’s ability to pose problems and solve them, to recognise patterns, and to infer meaning by applying rules, constraints, and other organising principles to given information. This is the first time in the collection that Jarman celebrates the mind’s ability to glean logical material out of raw data, and the tone sticks out as coming from a distinct speaker. Even the ‘angels’ become trigonometric functions, usually reserved for the linguistic echo: ‘angles’. Sine and cosine are rules used to find unknown lengths and angles, and Jarman gives angels the gift of these same systematic solutions. Apply an angel to the problem, he seems to be saying, endorsing the power of prayer and divine guidance to reveal unknown information.

This speaker continues to use mathematical phrases in other poems. The poem “God said your name” uses X as an unknown variable:
God said your name today. He said, “Tell me about X.” And everybody had a lie you’d like. The solutions for X were all X + 1. X is charming as a firefly, and knows a formula for cold fusion. X’s good will is equal to the radius of earth; the fall of the meteorite, the passage of the gritty asteroid, the comet’s lonely visit: X notes them all. The biological children of X adore their parent almost as much as the many adopted ones, and all of them are making money close to home. X will donate any duplicate organ for a loved one, and X loves everybody: ask for an eye, a kidney, a lung, a lobe of cerebellum.

And so God, boasting to the devil, said, “Consider my servant X.” (24)

Equations are used to determine the possible value(s) of unknown quantities based on a set of rules determined by the equation. Here, X stands for any individual name, and so the poem could be about any person, and also all people. In the essay “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes explains:

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted (148).

Indeed, by speaking directly to the reader, and offering equations in which the reader could be anyone (‘God said your name today. He said, “Tell me about X.”’), Jarman has mathematically succeeded in creating an open-ended audience for these epistles.

What insights are Jarman’s personas imparting to this audience? Along with reflections on devotion and spirituality, Jarman’s epistles follow Paul’s examples of providing moral discussions and guidance. An example from the first poem is: ‘Consider the first time you conceived of justice, engendered mercy, brought parity into being... Consider the first knowledge of otherness. How it felt’ (3). This creates an examination of moral ideas such as justice, mercy, and an awareness of how these are applied or practiced in relation to others.
But the poem “When the thief comes” does not open with an address to the reader, which is unusual for Jarman’s epistles. This is a new speaker, telling a new type of parable or story. The poem’s first point is about the logistics and implications of theft: ‘When the thief comes in at night, it is mid-afternoon on a sunny day, with everybody at work. The door waits to be smashed open, the drawers to be pulled and left gaping. The things – whatever things he chooses – wait to be taken’ (38). The combination of ‘night,’ ‘mid-afternoon,’ and ‘a sunny day’ is a form of dream logic, giving this poem a surrealist tone that the others don’t typically embody. But by identifying the thief’s schedule, the narrator lends a kind of authenticity to the profession of theft. Indeed, the poem opens by noting complicity between the objects and their kidnapper: ‘the things... wait to be taken. They are always ready to be released from our care, from their obligations to us’ (38).

The narrator maps how these actions progress. The things, he says, ‘are transfigured, given new meaning, as if they joined orders, took vows.’ By giving authenticity to the thief, the narrator gives him spiritual legitimacy: ‘The thief is a communicant in a country where his practices are condemned. He worships in secret, on the run. He improvises elements of his ritual at every ceremony.’ And while the narrator does not judge the thief, the other characters in the epistle do:

Theologians spring up among our friends. Our visitor, they say, had been watching us, studying us, there was some plan. We join them in speculating on the location of our possessions, the new plane they occupy, and their miraculous return (39).

Despite the sympathy and comfort ‘our friends’ provide, there is a definite element of judgment and blame. This is heightened even further when the ‘theologians’ become like philosophers:
The man spraying to check for fingerprints says this scrotebag will not be back... His severity and solemnity are like John Knox’s, if Knox lit up after church and complained bitterly about sin moving into the better neighborhoods, because of the mayor’s new policies (39).

But throughout this narrative, the speaker does not partake in judgment. In fact, his next insight is to show the connection between the objects and our own physical bodies: ‘We attached ourselves to things, and now we feel like amputees. The wrist of the watch, severed. The fingers snapped from the neck of the violin. The eye of the camcorder plucked out.’ This is not punishment for our attachment. Jarman uses personification to underscore how we are dismembered when we value objects and lose them. It is a visceral kind of sympathy, embodied in a spiritual lesson.

And the lesson continues with a kind of bargaining gratitude to explain away the loss: ‘He could have burned down the house. He could have kidnapped the children. Here, safe in its drawer, he didn’t take this. There, in plain sight on the desk, he didn’t take that’ (40). With ‘here,’ ‘this,’ ‘there,’ and ‘that,’ Jarman uses language that is just abstract enough to apply to anyone.

The process of grieving the loss continues: ‘Now anyone we pass is a felon or an upstanding citizen. We listen to the gospel of electronic security.’ The narrator explains that when faith falters, we are willing to supplant it with belief in another kind of judgment. We are momentarily swayed and convinced by the patterns of atrocities in the world, almost wishing there were a mathematical formula to be able to distinguish the good from evil. The ‘gospel of electronic security’ is a safety measure, a spiritual risk assessment.

But the close of the epistle shows how much meaning is always buried in subtext. Despite the narrative of grievances, this poem is a series of stories and parables to impart universal truths: ‘This letter goes out with a list of things encoded
that we still possess.’ (40)

The poet Thomas James died in 1974 after publishing his first book *Letters to a Stranger*. In an article about James called “The Rebirth of a Suicidal Genius” for the Poetry Foundation, writer Lucie Block-Broido explains: ‘But he had left a book, and this book is a long embellishing of suicide itself. There is a Thou throughout this text, singular and other, religious and erotic – these “letters” are addressed, of course, to “a stranger.” And it is you; it is I; it is the beloved, the Master; it is God; he is strange, and stranger too’ (Poetryfoundation.org). This is true of *Epistles* as well, but Jarman’s poems address the idea of life as a stranger. While Jarman’s epistles are directed towards the reader, he is also speaking to the logical, physical, and emotional aspects of human experience as a whole.

Jarman addresses the immediacy of the physical human experience in two ways: first, by detailing how we each navigate through the banalities of the everyday – and second, by referring directly to the body, its movements, parts, and functions.

The poem “Listening to you” is a strong example of the banalities of everyday pursuits. It opens as the narrator sympathises with the plight of an on-air radio show caller:

> Listening to the call-in show yesterday, I knew that you were not happy. You asked about weight loss. You asked about aphrodisiacs. You asked about your children and their contempt for your way of life. You asked about travel to other worlds.

> I drove to my next appointment, and as I listened to each of your voices, with its muffled desire, I wanted to stop at the nearest phone and call in a response (5).

This is not a topic one might expect in a devotional poem. Does God even listen to radio talk shows? But as soon as the reader wonders what the speaker’s answer would be, Jarman reveals it: ‘What you call yourself, these hands, this torso and buttocks,
folded legs and damp feet, is no more than the light that lets you see it’ (6). Jarman sets the scene with an ordinary radio show, and then widens the perspective to a spiritual consideration:

Sit at your kitchen table with the phone in your hand, the radio on as you listen to others penetrate the house of fame, their voices entering the cloud of the elect, shedding anonymity like a sunburn, and consider that the energy speaking from your radio which will connect you with the universe is already shaped as you. (6)

Using almost biblical language (‘the house of fame,’ ‘the cloud of the elect’), the narrator manages to marry the religious tones to a 21st century human experience. Jarman has a knack for echoing scripture, by referring to the shaping of things in the universe (‘Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness,”’ Genesis 1:26), in the same sentence as he evokes quantum mechanics (‘the energy speaking from your radio’).

A similar experience occurs in the community centre, in the poem ‘If we drive to the meeting with the speakers blasting,’ where the narrator details addiction, ‘which loves us like a personal God’ (36). The speaker uses the first person collective personal pronoun ‘we’ to open his story:

and if comfort and consolation take us in their body, the clear and glassy corpus that they share, full of laughter and knowing sighs that we can see through, and if suddenly we feel how space starts everywhere, everywhere there is skin, and heads out in all directions, yelling “Glory!”... (36)

The epiphany of feeling connected to everything, ‘how space starts everywhere, everywhere there is skin,’ is tempered and limited when the destination arrives: ‘Still, at the meeting, the assembly of the lost where we are heading, our heaven will be desert distance, dunes of self-denial’ (36).

He continues into an individual perspective, when his companion leaves:
But at the meeting, we are separated. She goes with a boy who takes her arm. And I am put with the choir director, a woman old enough to be my aunt, if not my mother. I ache to see my darling kneel, facing the boy, who kneels. Then I kneel, too, and face the woman I am with, and she kneels, facing me (37).

This set-up seems tedious with the insistent repetition of kneeling, and who is kneeling, but it makes sense as the next few sentences bring the pay-off:

It’s like those group things in the ‘60s. And knowing my partner is old enough to remember, I open my mouth. But she is praying. Her eyes tell me. They are open and focused in the act of prayer. And I can see what she is praying to, and stop. She is praying to the God in me (37)

The final phrase evokes the Buddhist phrase ‘namaste;’ namely, ‘the divine in me recognises the divine in you.’ Jarman describes this event like an intimate narrative unfolding in a private correspondence. These are the moments when the public epistle is simultaneously deeply personal: an intimate performance.

Referencing the body is Jarman’s second way of rooting a spiritual narrative in physical experience (the first method is by including details of everyday duties). In the Pauline epistles, a key theological theme is the contrast between the spirit and the flesh. Paul encourages his congregations to live in the spirit, and to crucify the flesh in order to accomplish that. In the poem ‘We want the operation,’ Jarman’s narrator describes the extensive process of what seems to be a physical surgery:

We want the operation because we want the cure.

We are naked and open unto his eyes, though draped in sterile cloth. He is quick and powerful, piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, though both choose amnesia. He separates them, even as he divides the joints and marrow, discerning the thoughts and intents of the heart in a small, vestigial, rooted, and determined thing. (9)

But this is no ordinary doctor. Instead, Jarman is narrating how much physical pain and vulnerability can be endured with a spiritual cure. The soul and spirit are seen,
divided, and known by God as easily as the physical body can be identified.

Later in the poem, Jarman’s narrator jumps back to the origin of the supposed illness. What caused this pain or unease?:

First the morning that we woke with a new unease that did not fade by lunchtime. First the night we could not sleep, as sleep kept cracking underfoot. First the hand of a companion, asking, “Are you all right?” First our own voice answering, saying, “I don’t know.” And the voice that stated frankly, “No, you’re not.”

Thus God performs his surgery, closing and opening simultaneously, always with new reasons to go in (10).

God may be the one performing the surgery, but Jarman’s persona is an intermediary, translating the experience. The narrator can hear the voice of the first companion, the voice of the self, and the ‘voice that stated frankly,’ but this seemingly physical procedure is a metaphor for a spiritual shift that, in reality, is not physical at all.

Almost all of the physical passages in the epistles have the same kind of interceding narrator, as “If I were Paul” initiates:

Do the impossible. Restore life to those you have killed, wholeness to those you have maimed, goodness to what you have poisoned, trust to those you have betrayed.

Bless each other with the heart and soul, the hand and eye, the head and foot, the lips, tongue, and teeth, the inner ear and the outer ear, the flesh and spirit, the brain and bowels, the blood and lymph, the hell and toe, the muscle and bone, the waist and hips, the chest and shoulders, the whole body, clothed and naked, young and old, aging and growing up. (4)

Here, the speaker names all the parts in the body. There is a broad perspective in terms of moral guidance, but a very specific, almost medical repetition to the list of the body. Jarman speaks in an almost-omnipresent tone, but the presence of lists, specifics, details, and even his own doubts saves the narrator from grandiosity.

In the poem “There is no formula,” Jarman leans away from the logical and
the physical perspective. He begins: ‘There is no formula for bliss, yet why not pretend there is?’ It would be much easier to have an equation to follow, or to be able to identify bliss in the body, as he explains later: ‘Formula, little form, principle, equation, successful convention, repeated successfully. Inside the body, happiness tells its good news to every cell. So many small epiphanies in a promised land’ (19). But it doesn’t take long for Jarman to show his doubt, his skepticism at the effectiveness of the five senses:

Explain bliss as music, to someone who can’t hear it. Explain it as sex, to someone who can’t feel it. Explain it as spectacle, to someone who can’t see it. Explain it as the aroma of mother’s milk, to someone who can’t smell it. Explain it as the salt sweetness of a lover’s skin, to someone who can’t taste it. (21)

Here, Jarman’s narrator is listing the senses and where they fail. This is a challenge for the reader to spread the news, even knowing that sensory comparisons may not hit the mark to communicate meaning effectively.

With this in mind, the narrator provides a script to follow:

Verbo caro factum est. The word is made flesh. That is bliss. But for those to whom the body is pain, to themselves and others, bliss comes when flesh is made into words. Say, “Now you are released.” Say, “Now you are pure spirit.” Say, “Now all the pleasure you have been denied is turned into poetry.” Say, “God has committed you to memory.” (21)

Here, the directive is very clearly towards the reader, but it is instrumentally intended to be liberating to the focus of the poetry. Like Paul, the narrator is giving an instruction to proclaim a type of gospel, which is taken as a privilege: a joyous moment in which they are invited to participate. The focus is not on the command, but on the effectiveness of what is being commanded, showing how language can reach what the body cannot illustrate, and how the body can give evidence to what the mind
cannot understand.

Whenever Jarman’s personas seem to lean towards preaching, he offsets potential detachment with humour. There are poems like “Each of us at the community service center,” where Jarman combines Mark (‘love your neighbour as yourself,’ 12.31) with other skills like cosmetology and accounting: ‘In the community service center, razor wire, TV, the smoke of cigarettes joined in a single hovering body – these unite us. We have learned to love one another as ourselves. We have learned cookery, cosmetology, creative writing, and accounting’ (22). And when faced with the problem of how God manages to love all people simultaneously, one of Jarman’s personas voices the epistle “If God were not promiscuous”:

   It is pointless to accuse and make him suffer, plot against and think of destroying him. To bring God down, while locked in love with someone else, some galaxy cruising the outskirts of his thighs, would provide a taste of ashes.

   There is nothing to be done but to enjoy vicariously the fact that, at every moment, God is with a lover, throwing his head back, wailing like a woman giving birth. (74)

The visceral, bawdy language paired with a science fiction vision of God ‘locked in love,’ completely eliminates any potential pomposity. It is impossible to be too serious when faced with the image of a promiscuous God.

And yet Jarman’s epistles are also too sincere to be considered sacrilegious. In the poem “I have always thought,” Jarman poses a serious phenomenological question: ‘What are we living for? Isn’t it finally to make a rhythm we can live with daily, that will stress pleasures like bars of melody, strike and hold the note of our contentment as claims about the real and the unreal pass through it, thick thread through the eye of the whole truth?’ (25-26). His narrator is not providing clear and certain answers; all of the language in this poem is of contemplation and a discussion
of possible solutions. In bringing up the large question ‘what are we living for?’, he opens the discourse to his audience, and ruminates in front of them.

In the same poem, his speaker also expresses the possibility that someone else might be able to explain this better than he can:

And you ask me if I mean to provide counsel and consolation? Someone else could embody all I am saying in a horse. He would see it through the animal’s coffee clear eye, as it stood between traces on cobblestones, pained by a growth above its right fetlock ... The life funneled through the horse’s eye is one of motion and rest, pain and less pain, cut by rocking figures of gulls, diluted by rain or a gift pressed up against the lips, in the damp palm of a girl. (26-27)

This narrator is questioning his own job description, and then planting doubt about whether he is actually the one who could articulate the meaning most effectively.

In an article for the literary publication *Blackbird*, Jarman presents an argument he raised in a craft lecture at the 2011 Sewanee Writer’s Conference on contemporary devotional poetry. Titled, “American Devotions,” he looks at the history of John Donne’s “Holy Sonnets” and George Herbert’s poems from *The Temple*, while comparing them with contemporary writers. In a discussion of John Berryman’s poem “Eleven Addresses to the Lord,” Jarman writes:

Berryman’s skepticism is offered, retracted, then offered again with qualifications, but without it the poem would be merely pious and not personal at all, and certainly not a poem that anyone would care to read. It would most likely be, as Eliot noted in the aforementioned essay, “propaganda.” [This refers to Eliot’s 1935 essay “Religion in Literature”]. (Blackbird.vcu.edu)

The benefit of skepticism, or of voicing one’s questions aloud to the audience, is something Jarman demonstrates often in *Epistles* (as mentioned above specifically in relation to the poem ‘There is no formula’), and the poems toward the end of the collection move even further into that open dialogue.
Though the themes of mind, body, and spirit become merged in sections 5 and 6 of *Epistles*, the letters themselves seem to grow more abstract and unwieldy. The average poem length is three pages in these sections, while the beginning sections include more one- and two-page poems on average. And the focus of these later poems turns more to nature and God than relaying personal narratives or experiences.

The poems in Section Six are titled in a progression of prepositions: “In the Clouds,” “For the Birds,” “To the Trees,” “On the Street,” and “Through the Waves.” These are also the only poems to have distinct titles with consistent capital letters; each of the poems in Sections One through Five are titled by the first line of the poem, and not all the words in the titles are capitalized. The final five poems are framed by their own titles to present five new lenses of panentheism – a doctrine that literally means ‘All in God’. Jarman presents the final poems as ways in which God communicates directly with the world. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* describes panentheism as: ‘considering God and the world to be inter-related with the world being in God and God being in the world’ (plato.stanford.edu).

As much as these epistles are each poems in their own right, the entire collection also functions as a letter. The epistles towards the beginning are introductory. Jarman starts out by saying: ‘If I were Paul,’ and sets the scene of factors as if that statement were true. It is an introduction, and a setting of identity. But Jarman is not Paul, and his narrators have many opinions on the topics of logic, the physical world, and spirituality – thoughts that are often expressed in personal examples, conversations, and narrative. Only at the end of the collection do these concepts integrate and come together through the lenses of the natural world, and with the persona of God as the ultimate author.

The final poem in Section Five is the lynchpin to this transition. In “Forgive
me, Lord,” the recipient of the epistle is noticeably absent. Jarman is not addressing anyone directly. Even God is referred to as ‘he’ without capitalisation. Where the poem begins in humour (‘Recently I learned that God no longer delighted in my existence. He had grown homesick for the child I was, and regarded the balding, graying, overweight, five-nine middleaged man with some disenchantment’), this is the first poem to depart from the pattern of using the first line as the title. The only other poems to do this are in Section Six, which immediately designates “Forgive me, Lord,” as a shift. Indeed, nothing that the reader has come to expect from the preceding epistles happens as it usually would.

As noted, there is no recipient. The only ‘you’ in the poem is spoken between ‘one’ individual and ‘the dogwood where he was nailed’ (76). The rest of the poem is a narrative between ‘I’ and ‘he,’ or the self and God. And where some of the language seems borrowed from a petulant teen’s frustration and vitriol, it does not carry as much humour as the reader has come to expect from Jarman’s more lighthearted poems:

I understood the words repeated to me, but found it hard to choke down the question: “Who needs him?” He must have heard the prayer I made to the windstorm that sheared oaks one block over. He must have seen me refuse to answer the phone when Mother called. Read what I wrote about his favorite poet, the one who copied verses verbatim from the Bible. (75)

These are the complaints of a child toward their parent, which can understandably be applied to God. But here, God is made human by the narrative. Jarman’s narrator is still asking for forgiveness, but not all of the exchange is in alignment with traditional religious thought or practice. The narrator explains, ‘he stored my grudges, riffling through them, looking for the one that carried his name’ (76).

This is a public story: the kind of narrative confessed onto paper in a letter
because it’s easier to write it than to explain face to face. Jarman has dropped the direct address to his audience, but he is speaking to them by not speaking to them, by trying to cover his conversation with humour, and by leading them into the real crux of his message. At the end of the poem, the speaker writes: ‘A curse alters only the one who utters it. But something passes between the forgiver and the forgiven that changes them both. One opens the injured eyelid and sees the wound has healed. And the other feels lighter, as when the pod unlocks and the plumed seed learns it flies’ (76). This conversation between self and God is performed in a letter, in a narrative, in a parable, and in all of the same methods as the Bible uses to tell stories.

Jarman has already forged a relationship with his audience by this point in the collection, and now he can afford to speak past them, as though telling them the story without looking at them directly. This demonstration of humility is not just about his powers as poet. Rather, it is also about the inadequacies of language and articulation, both when applied to shame (in the poem’s explicit theme of forgiveness) and awe (as demonstrated in this collection’s orientation toward the divine). Many emotions and experiences render language inadequate; for a poet, the challenge is to find words for what resists articulation. But in “Forgive Me, Lord,” among other places in the collection, Jarman embraces the reality of powerful emotions that seem to occur outwith direct language.

If the entire collection of *Epistles* follows the arc of a single letter, then Section Six is the conclusion. It is the final thought before the valediction. Altman highlights the possible endings of epistles:

Epistolary endings move between two contradictory possibilities: (1) the potential finality of any letter – given its conventional mechanism for closing, for “signing off,” and (2) the open-endedness of the form – in which the letter writer is always in dialogue with a possible respondent, and in which any letter appears as part of a potentially
ongoing sequence. (148)

Jarman’s Epistles follow the second possibility: that of open-endedness, a continued dialogue, and a potentially ongoing sequence.

The shift in the final poems is from an inter-personal correspondence to an organic relationship with questions, searching, and the combination of mind, body, and spirit. “In the Clouds” begins: ‘Simply by thinking I stood among the clouds.’ Thought has brought him here, but this is not a physically embodied place. It is a place of spirit, imagination, and impossible potential. Jarman’s narrator is not asserting that it is physically possible to stand among the clouds, but the metaphor extends into a parable of optimism and inspiration: ‘How did I get up there? I was thinking about changing my life and wanted to talk to a cloud, since clouds are always changing’ (79).

The clouds speak back to Jarman with instructions: ‘Surrender your skin, your bones. But we will not hold you up. We are as ineffectual as cattle... Placid as the love of God.’ These qualifications reveal the true nature of clouds: ‘We are the embodiment of detachment. You know us best when we are most distant and you are least afraid, when we are most moving and you are unmoved’ (80). There is a neutral sense of inspiration here. It is not head-in-the-clouds dreaminess, but it is a place to let things go. Here, Jarman alludes to the detachment of Eastern religions, and the grounded sense of when other things are ‘moving,’ and the self is ‘unmoved.’

When the clouds have finished speaking, Jarman’s narrator addresses the audience again. Not as ‘you’, or ‘we’, but as ‘Brothers and sisters.’ The narrator asserts: ‘Consider the flocculent muscle of the cumulus... Consider how the clouds predict one another and how they break up, pulling a new body behind them. The farmer’s wide open perspective... I have read that even in an empty sky there exists
water vapor enough to make a cloud. Belief enough to make a God’ (80). The repetition of ‘consider’ echoes back to Jarman’s first poem in the collection, “If I were Paul”. But the content has changed. The focus is no longer on human experience, but on the ineffable nature of belief and existence.

In the poem “To the Trees” the trees are being addressed directly. They are the speaker’s alternate recipients, and they are the metaphor for the rest of the audience. The trees are strong: ‘You have held back the body of the wind. You have held back the onslaught of the heat. You have given me the idea of depth. You have revealed the nesting of microcosms, all while staying in one place’ (85). They endure hardship: ‘It’s what’s inside and outside that counts. As granite, you can stand deadgray for decades. You bleed, you break, you rot... You rot, you break, you bleed. You go up in smoke, sideways in fire, down and down and down’ (86). And they inspire the narrator to become a part of the system: ‘Let me be neither branch nor leaf but one facet of your bark, deeply incised on all sides, gray in dry sunny weather, and in rain, showing a face of turquoise’ (87). The tree parable in this poem is another story we are being told; it is a story all about involvement, the intricate nature of how things connect to each other, and the need for different perspectives in difficult situations.

But it is also a validation of the strength and resolve of the human spirit.

“On the Street” roots the biblical language in this section. Jarman writes: ‘What’s the word on the street? The word is made flesh on the street. The word is made person, place, and thing. The word is steel, concrete, fiber-optic cable, ceramic and saliva, aluminum and blood, axle grease and fingernails, hair and glass’ (88). The word here is a gritty gospel of the people, of the street, and of the immediate context. It is not a word in a passed-down bible. Jarman is locating his audience in the harsh solidity of daily life. And the poem ends with: ‘There is too much on the street. All
you can do is know the smallest portion’ (90). Each of these epistles holds ‘the smallest portion’ of Jarman’s individual perspective on spirituality.

The final poem, “Through the Waves,” is the culmination of the epistles, the integration of mind-body-spirit, and narration through the natural world. The speaker begins: ‘If I spoke to you through the waves, which one would catch your attention, the ripple that wet your knee or the beach-pounder shaking your bed? If I spoke to you through the waves, would you remember what I said as a series of glittering, nostalgic video images, far from the ocean, each as harmless as cotton floss?’ (91). The narrator is more than an intermediary voice now; instead, he has become a voice for God, a voice for the ocean and the waves, and a voice for how spiritual meaning is carried in everyday experiences. The narrator recalls his own intimate memories of waves: ‘To quiet myself I used to remember being lifted and carried by them, buoyed as they broke around me, and standing up in the shallows among the frothy rubble of their collapse, then wading back out, swimming out to meet them as they continued coming to shore’ (92). But these memories turn into dreams, and the speaker continues: ‘A time came when I no longer dreamt of them and they ceased altogether to have any reality for me. They had been lifted and shaped by homesickness. They had emerged composed of dreamstuff for reasons I could never fathom. Now they are a single idea: the image of body and soul together as one.’ (92)

This is the idea Jarman has been trying to express throughout Epistles, and it appears in the sixth section, a message finally arriving at its destination. Of all the characters and personas Jarman inhabits, this one seems most authentic and transparent, repeating the question ‘if I spoke to you through waves’:

If I spoke to you through the waves, would you see that I mean more than the moon and less, more than the wind and less, more than the
sea floor and less, more than more, less than less? If I spoke to you through the waves, how many times would I have to repeat myself?

Out of chaos, beyond theory, into a life that peaks and breaks, the wave emerges. The shore where it dies lies ahead and waits, unseen. A life must peak as it rides up the shallow approach, steepen, and break. I want you to think of yourself like that, of your body and soul like that, one flesh traveling to shore, to collapse, all that way to end by darkening the sand and evaporating. Where do you go? You repeat in other waves, repeat and repeat. Each bears a message. Each has a meaning.

If I spoke to you through the waves, I would continue to bring them to life until, looking at how they laid themselves at your feet, at how even the greatest ended as film on sand, you said, “Someone is trying to tell me something.” And I would not stop. (93)

This is how the collection ends, how the poem ends, and how the correspondence ends – a leading tone hanging in the air with a promise for more correspondence and connection. Through *Epistles*, Jarman uses many narrators to communicate prayers, thoughts, doubts and reflections through different lenses. At the end Jarman wants the audience to know: nothing is not sending messages.
This message we smuggle out in its plain cover, to be opened quietly: Friends everywhere—we are alive! Those moon rockets have missed millions of secret places! Best wishes.

Burn this.

– from “An Oregon Message”
by William Stafford

In her collection *Letters to Kelly Clarkson*, poet Julia Bloch builds upon the trend of celebrity open letters by exploring the ‘I’ who is writing. In the collection, she presents a narrator penning a series of letters to Kelly Clarkson. Her epistles take advantage of the fact that letter writing has become a trend in popular culture, catching a reader’s awareness because of the desire to be involved in the public availability of something normally private. But Bloch highlights the consumption of intimate exchanges in her letters by presenting a counter-point to the relationship we might expect; she offers details of the speaker’s life as they map onto Kelly’s life (or the perception of Kelly). This differs from the typical open letter format, which usually directs an argument toward a public figure. Instead, Bloch uses a fictional friendship with Kelly as a frame to make lyric poems about personal identity public in a clever, distinct way.

*Letters to Kelly Clarkson* consists of 81 poems, and they unfold without a consistent narrative. Bloch’s exploration of identity evolves as the collection develops, but otherwise each letter depicts individual reflections, situations or
anecdotes. The poems have no titles, unlike Jarman’s. Instead, the prose poem format makes them indistinguishable from actual letters. Most of them are short; the longest poems span three paragraphs, but the epistles are commonly only one or two paragraphs long and take up less than half a page. They feel like fleeting thoughts, and are conversational as well as witty. Bloch plants song lyrics as pieces of conversation within the letters, with three examples in the first three poems: ‘it’s don’t you want me baby’ (1), from a song of the same title by The Human League; ‘a moment like this’ (3) is from Kelly Clarkson herself; and ‘Love isn’t always on time’ (3) as a lyric from “Hold the Line” by the rock group Toto. These letters are a performance, jumping off the page with a spoken vernacular and lyrics that float around, interwoven into the conversation like songs stuck in one’s head.

The book begins with two quotes as an epigraph. One is from Susan Howe’s book *My Emily Dickinson*: ‘What is the communal vision of poetry if you are curved, odd, indefinite, irregular, feminine. I go in disguise.’ The second is from Kelly Clarkson’s song “Since U Been Gone”: ‘It was cool, but it was all pretend.’ Paired with the mental state of the narrator that emerges by the second poem, it becomes clear that the structure and voice of these letters are quite unstable. The author’s instability and neuroses are part of Bloch’s aesthetic, and these erratic jumps often disorient the reader. The speaker does not display specific neuroses, but these one-sided conversations have an element of some kind of craziness: ‘Let me explain: the feeling there’s something else you’re supposed to be doing is terrible as a flock of birds. I tried to up the antecedent. I was fit to burst with words. Honey, I wanted the hit’ (2). The phrase ‘I tried to up the antecedent’ holds an echo of multiple phrases, like: ‘up the ante,’ and the decision to increase one’s dosage of antidepressants. When phrases like these are slurred with other connotations or connections, it belies Bloch’s
careful presentation of language. These poems, and their speaker, are being posed very deliberately.

Kelly Clarkson is a singer and recording artist, who rose to fame in 2002 when she won the first season of the US television show American Idol. Her music is typically classified as pop, but she explores other genres such as pop-rock, urban, and country. After American Idol she became an international icon, and has broken records on the Billboard Hot 100 chart twice with the largest jump to No. 1 for her songs “A Moment Like This” (52-1), and “My Life Would Suck Without You” (97-1) (Billboard.com).

In her collection, Bloch directs the letters towards Clarkson as a conceptual recipient. Because they are poems, they are also still speaking to the larger audience of readers. But, as the addressee of the letters, Kelly is crucial to the central concept. Kelly-as-the-person seems to be quite different from Kelly-as-the-artist. She has been molded into an artist; her image, sound, and appearance have evolved since her success with American Idol, and many people in the industry around her have been involved with those changes. But as a person, her biographical context suggests she is drawn to anthems that are about empowerment, and overcoming challenges, all things that Bloch’s poems are also rooted in. These two sides exist simultaneously in Kelly in a very public and identifiable way. So it makes sense that Bloch is directing her own explorations of identity towards Kelly, and that her poems circle around the questions of Who am I meant to be? What is normal? and What is right? The poems ride the line between joking and seriousness. Framing poems as letters to Kelly Clarkson is a funny and novel way for Bloch to ask these questions in her work. But the questions themselves, and the reflections they lead to – about identity, the physicality of emotions, and relationships between music and poetry – are far more
serious.

The first poem opens with informality: ‘Dear Kelly, Lately I’m having that dream again, where there’s an extra room I didn’t know I had. It’s a woman’s dream, D. says. Last night my apartment unfolded an extra bedroom and an extra kitchen, and A. reclined on a futon in a Yankees baseball cap, glowering at me inexplicably’ (1). With the assertion that this dream is ‘a woman’s dream,’ the speaker’s identity is immediately complicated. The speaker could be male, and the comment could have a pejorative tone. Or the speaker could be female, and the comment could still be sarcastic. In the next poem, the reader discovers that the speaker is a woman, in a relationship with another woman: ‘I feel it’s time to wear more skirts, it’s time to change brains, it’s time to up my dose, it’s time for less empathy. I don’t have any appetite for this appetite. I tell my lover she’s my little Hamlet when she cries and cries’ (2). But within the first poem, the only thing the audience knows for certain is that there are other characters in the speaker’s life, and they will be denoted by capital letters.

The effect of this anonymity deepens the speaker’s relationship to Kelly, because she is the only full-named person in the letters. The speaker doesn’t even sign the letters with a name. From the very first poem, the familiarity with Kelly is clear: ‘Kelly I believed I could make it into something fine, make it fantastic. What will we do with these boys, these pretty tongues. Kelly you know how it is. You streak your hair & still it’s the same morning every morning, and you’re going for the eternal afterspank. It’s nothing and sugar-colored coffee, it’s don’t you want me baby’ (1). This letter drops into the middle of an on-going dialogue, like Amy Newman’s letters to the editor in the next chapter. But Bloch isn’t yearning for stability. She doesn’t want reassurance that she will be okay. Instead, her poems use letters to Kelly as a
celebration of flux and the fluidity of identity.

Bloch achieves a conversational tone in many of her poems by playing with syntax. In the poem beginning ‘Love isn’t always on time,’ she utilises short sentences to break up the information, and her phrases mimic real speech:

Dear Kelly,

Love isn’t always on time. Tonight you are more than automatic, you are full-bodied as treason, you are kiss-rated. Yeah. The strangest thing happening in Minnesota. I walked into the greenhouse I’d dreamt about. I swear. Messianic tile floor, alabaster fountain, abandoned card table. Right? You understand form, you shut down the bar. It’s time to go global w/ this apocalyptic wish, a moment like this.

(3)

Here, short phrases like ‘Yeah,’ ‘I swear,’ and ‘Right?’ become acknowledgments to Kelly’s potential response, acting like one half of an overheard phone conversation. The abbreviation of ‘with’ as ‘w/’ also underscores the familiarity, as though this could be a text message or an email.

But there is no evidence that the speaker is real-life friends with Kelly Clarkson, which raises some flags about the speaker’s frame of mind. Another of the first few poems positions the speaker in a very separate world to Kelly’s experience:

Dear Kelly,

Your lips are a caption, translating your perilous, wrecked face. Before the sparkly stage disappears you, you reverse the natural order. In which art + money = love. Your eyes are like flight; you can’t get through a whole verse without crying over your dumb luck. I try to dignify myself on the pale couch, writing these notes down, but inside I abandon myself to the next huge dream. In a moment you’ll know who your idol is. Girl you sure were swell up there, backlit and startling.

(7)

Here, the narrator is watching American Idol, which Kelly is about to win. But the narrator speaks to her as though she is a friend, whose journey to fame and stardom the world is watching. Bloch positions the narrator ‘on the pale couch, writing these notes down,’ but that physical location indicates a Freudian dream-like state, that
easily supports integration into Kelly’s world: ‘inside I abandon myself to the next huge dream.’ These are not fan letters. They are written by a woman who thinks she knows Kelly Clarkson. And yet, Kelly Clarkson is almost an empty signifier. Not only could Bloch be writing to any public figure and achieve the same effect, but Kelly herself is not a stable addressee. Of course you don’t know a celebrity; they are constantly changing and evolving, taking on roles and removing costumes. The letters are actually directed to the elasticity of who someone is – like the catch of a tune on a radio, or a memory of a song.

In the article “The Link between Identity and Role Performance” in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Peter J. Burke and Donald C. Reitzes posit three characteristics of an identity:

First, identities are social products. Identities are formed and maintained through the social processes of (a) naming, that is, locating the self in socially recognizable categories; (b) interaction with others entailing the processes of identification and exchange; and (c) the confirmation and validation of self-concepts by means of self-presentation and altercasting.

Second, identities are self meanings that are formed in particular situations and organized hierarchically to produce the self.

Third, identities are symbolic and reflexive in character. It is through interaction with others that these self meanings come to be known and understood by the individual. (84)

In alignment with the concept that identity is reflexive, interactive, and based on ‘confirmation and validation’ through ‘self-presentation,’ Bloch uses the speaker’s correspondence with Kelly to explore how personal identity is reflected, manipulated and altered by the public performances of television and the concept of celebrity. And as the first epigraph reflects, it is necessary to adopt a disguise when one’s ‘curved,’ ‘odd,’ ‘indefinite,’ or ‘irregular’ identity does not align with ‘the communal vision of poetry,’ or the presented performance of mainstream culture. These letters to Kelly
Clarkson allow Bloch to present serious opinions and possibly contradicting positions about identity, fame, and relationships, without committing to a linear narrative.

Bloch’s poems centre around the difference between reality and television, or fame. Television is described as ‘a land of light gels and leg doubles,’ reflecting the lack of reality in the publicity of fame (38). And earlier, she writes: ‘Television is an event, too, but other times it’s a curtain call, or it’s fact masquerading as dream.

What’s it like, to be tiny? Does it hurt when I turn up the volume?’ (25). The concept of a tiny Kelly Clarkson is funny to consider, but the idea shows how reality and fame can blur. Neither are stable experiences. Where Kelly is obviously a full-sized person in real life, Bloch describes her as she appears to the rest of the world: a tiny, miniature form on a screen. There is no stability in the boundaries of fame and reality, and there is not stability in normality either. Bloch uses Kelly as a springboard to reflect on the flux and evolution of identity. The erratic jumps and juxtapositions in the poems are like the constant cutting of a camera from one thing to another, mirroring the experience of filming or translating a performing artist from television into the world.

Another aspect of Bloch’s poems is specifically about sexuality and gender. Burke and Reitzes reflect on the relationship between performance and identity in terms of social and gendered constructs:

In order to be (some identity), one must act like (some identity). In order to not be (some other identity), one must not act like (that other identity). If being feminine, for example, means being tender and one defines oneself as being feminine, then one must act in ways that will be interpreted by oneself as well as by others as acting “tender” and not acting “tough.” (90-91)

From the opening of the collection, Bloch has been exploring misidentification. What happens when there is no box or category for one’s experience? What if the social
definition of ‘feminine’ does not correlate with an individual’s experience of femininity? Burke and Reitzes portray identity as something acted and enacted in relationship to others, and Bloch carefully creates the speaker and recipient of these letters to draw attention to this performance. But Bloch is not mourning the loss of traditional definitions of gender roles. When these definitions are turned on their heads or abolished completely, it leads to a more interesting investigation into reality, current society, and what being human really means.

Identity and gender performance has a lot to do with the physical body. The body is influenced by media, Bloch explains: ‘The body is really just another regular animal, like the way a running bra has handles. It’s the angle, then the next angle, then the next throat. Little FOR RENT signs pinned up all over the city like prayer flags’ (37). Her discussion of ‘angles’ alludes to the technical aspects of television and film; angles are distorted or manipulated, which changes how the body is presented. The body, specifically the female body, is ‘for rent’ in this industry, and is being borrowed to send messages through the media to viewers.

Television and music are ingrained in culture, but Bloch’s epistles toe the line between what is real and unreal in those mediums. Her letters to Kelly describe an ordinary daily life, posed against a polished star-studded experience of fame. She reflects on what Kelly is doing, how her appearance and behaviors are changing, and what fame looks like from the outside. Amidst the speaker’s peculiarities, Bloch highlights objective statements on what the performance of fame requires: ‘The anthems of a generation too saturated to absorb any natural light, one-note, high-note, brassy as a green lemon. Welcome to the desert of the real, as they say, begging silently for someone to take their fucking breath away.’ (42). Here, ‘anthems’ do not just refer to the music. An anthem is also an expression of patriotic identity in the
unnatural world of television. The ‘generation too saturated to absorb any natural light’ is committed to the contrived experience that celebrities provide. And Bloch writes from within this perspective, as her epistles become part fan letter, part mad delusion, and part sociological statement.

The phrase ‘desert of the real’ in Bloch’s poem comes from Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulation and Simulacra*:

> Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal... It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself. (1)

Baudrillard is describing the breakdown of meaning in copies: how the meaning of what is real becomes replaced by the existence of symbols. It’s unsurprising that Bloch borrows this phrase to describe how addictively a generation responds to television and music. The symbols of television and created characters of celebrities are quickly replacing reality.

The speaker often describes herself amidst an unreal experience:

**Dear Kelly**

Clutched in femininity’s dystopic embrace as if it were a big clammy hand from the deep, I watch the bright box, forgetting to blink, I know I should be turning to the book and reading and writing but the images keep coming, trafficking my sense of the real and the room. The screen is sometimes described as an eye or a tube filled with celebrity jelly. I can’t see any of your pores; I know I shouldn’t but I want you to be a real girl, muscular, with a hair shade that doesn’t make a sound. (43)

Everything real or organic is superseded by artificiality in this poem. The experience of ‘femininity’s dystopic embrace’ becomes a ‘big clammy hand,’ the screen is ‘sometimes described as an eye,’ and ‘I can’t see any of your pores.’ The speaker tries
to root herself in the experience of reading a book and writing, but both of these actions are forms of escapism, and the media literally transforms her ability to interact with the sensible world, ‘trafficking my sense of the real and the room.’

This perspective progresses and Bloch ends up distinguishing between who we are inside, and what we are shown in terms of external images:

Dear Kelly,

In one letter, M. writes, *when inside is outside every organ is a messy eclipse,* and I feel that to be true, except on television. No visible organs, no pumping oxygenated red or blue. Just various colored waxes to affix to skin and I did not wear high heels until the age of twenty-seven. Because the battle isn’t outside, I realized, as a thousand windows were shutting across the city. (45)

This letter describes what consumers are asked to become, and the performance they are encouraged to enact by the music and television industries, based on what is promoted and advertised: ‘just various colored waxes to affix to skin.’ Bloch knows that this issue is not skin-deep: ‘the battle isn’t outside.’ It is not just about what a person looks like, aspires to look like, or the physical comparisons they draw between themselves and celebrities. Instead, Bloch’s epistles are a statement on identity, and how personal identity is challenged when the television culture curates and choreographs performances to sell as a celebrity identity.

Where Jarman has created multiple personas to narrate his poems, Bloch’s main speaker complicates the ideas of identity and performance: ‘K. in a dress the color of jaundice, rushing from the Oakland parking lot, her flat sandals going slap slap slap like a wronged wife, her gangly hands made to flinch in the late spring light. We’re all just dodging cars on our way to the play’ (27). Bloch is not just creating a speaker’s identity in these epistles; the speaker is reflecting another level of performance by scripting the actions of other people in her life. The main character in
this collection (the author of the letters) is also creating characters. She describes
clothes like a costume (‘a dress the color of jaundice’) and choreographs movements
that imply meaning (‘her flat sandals going slap slap slap like a wronged wife’). Even
the physical descriptions sound like they’ve been positioned: ‘her gangly hands made
to flinch.’ But it is also worth noting that the person being choreographed is a woman,
and that each of the descriptions are unflattering: a jaundice dress could easily be
described by another colour, the slapping sandals don’t have to reflect a ‘wronged
wife,’ and the gangly hands are flinching here. This character is unhappy being
choreographed. And Bloch’s speaker is purposefully arranging negative perspectives
to highlight the limitations that other people inflict upon women. These limitations
come from the media, but they also come from the performance of female identity
that society expects to see.

Bloch uses the performance of identity to show the permeability of perception;
her poems express that reality is not there until someone frames it for you. One of the
poems demonstrates this in relation to how socio-political perspectives are framed:

Dear Kelly,

Nothing’s neutral, not the atmosphere’s power to cool and soften, not
skyscrapers, not the glitter embedded in sidewalks, not the violin’s
swell, the tug of the piano, that lush At last – it’s a system and you are
its fabulous, winged drone. I wanted a fashionable new tilt at the heel,
an excuse to part my knees and let the black fabric dip. You wanted it
too, but then, I believe you’re wholesome in the same way I believe
the United States is a democracy, which is to say in a manner
innocently misled. (23)

The speaker describes her own beliefs as ‘in a manner innocently misled,’ which
applies to something as minor as whether Kelly is wholesome, and something as
significant as whether the United States is a democracy. Indeed, ‘nothing is neutral;’
all things take sides, all things have perspectives, and are either swayed (as in
influenced), or might sway others (as in influencing). The ‘swell’ and ‘tug’ of music is a choreographed emotional manipulation. Bloch plants these indications from the beginning of the collection: ‘You unfold like well-oiled myth. No regrets for Kelly. You’re dancing as fast as you can, turning analog into meta, and I can’t do anything but count clockwise’ (11). Kelly is a myth as many celebrities are myths, held apart and above the reality of everyday experience. But in ‘the system’ of media and public perception, she is ‘its fabulous, winged drone.’ In these epistles, Bloch has found a simple way to crack open how identity depends on context: in the media, in music and television, in poetry, and in real life.

Bloch consistently demonstrates how life can be scripted. Jarman’s collection has provided an example of the concept of performance in letters: that as a letter, the epistle is always a performance. Bloch’s epistles are enacting a performance of identity in order to demonstrate that identity is always a performance. And if identity is never stable, if it is always something in flux, then what is there to hang onto? Bloch’s solution is to root her speaker in the present tense. There is no bigger picture, she says; there are only details that can be brought to life and illuminated. In Epistles, Jarman’s speakers vocalize messages from external things, like clouds or mathematics. Bloch describes a similar experience, but Bloch’s speaker is on the receiving end of the messages:

Dear Kelly,

Sitting here today in a rainy café, waiting for my pocket to vibrate, I write to you in consideration of subjectivity. At the party I threw for myself I went from room to room clutching a plastic cup of red wine, worrying about my little sister trapped on the porch with an undesirable guest and watching my wrists move, clouded in black gauze. H. held me just a little too tightly as we danced but I guess that’s not so bad, to be felt up at your own birthday party. It’s hard not to take things personally, such as a hot wind or a tow truck’s resemblance to a crucifix. Sound in movement; space in sound; a
connection to music that seems to be something acutely neurological.

Her speaker finds it ‘hard not to take things personally,’ and perhaps this engagement with music is also the connection that has given her a sense of familiarity with Kelly: ‘Sound in movement; space in sound; a connection to music that seems to be something acutely neurological.’

This is not the only place where Bloch describes sound as evocative, and as something that carries meaning. In the beginning of the collection, she writes: ‘You know what gets me every time? The part where the piano jams at the chest. Where things go all lushy’ (5). The piano that ‘jams at the chest’ is a prime example of how Bloch translates these senses through the physical body. Music often facilitates emotional experiences, but Bloch’s focus is on the physicality of one’s emotional life. A later poem describes this well:

Dear Kelly,

It was unseasonably warm in the bedroom this morning when I re-read that good old poem about quite unnoticed Icarus falling through the corner of the painting. I am mixing up with you in an indexy way. Background music playing wetly in the foreground as I received a phone call from the Temperance River in northern Minnesota. Turn up the volume: there’s a wonderful sound hidden at the back of your voice, at the entrance to your throat. (36)

The speaker creates confusion between poetry she has read, her relationship with Kelly, and the music in her environment. The final sentence is the best summary of how these elements intermingle: ‘Turn up the volume: there’s a wonderful sound hidden at the back of your voice, at the entrance to your throat.’ This poem speaks to the power of sound, articulation, and music to convey emotional impact – which is to say that music and poetry are similar processes with similar goals. Meaning is in the throat. And whichever way that meaning is expressed, the driving force pushing that
meaning forward into sound is – in both the case of music and poetry – one’s
relentless need to express and share: to be in relationship with the surrounding world,
and with the self.

The penultimate poem begins with a comparison between costume and
personality, juxtaposing physical items with emotional qualities:

Dear Kelly,

Sweater instead of fear. Eyeliner instead of reassurance. Cocktail as
cough suppressant, real men in a real bar, I mean a bar cut like a man,
I mean a bar cut like a piano, cut to fit around a piano, I mean a bar
cut like a Yamaha baby grand, and a glossy drink, and your lacquered
face, and instead of anaphora I said anathema, and the piano lodged
under plexiglass like a big sideways fish and beneath the mirror is my
coat check, is the cusp of your hand, is a mouth moving across the T-
shirt. Long lines of the sun instead of the wrong side of the bed, in the
bed instead of on the floor, I mean, in the bed but not in the bed, at the
corner of the mouth, mouth across the T-shirt, and there is no narrow
sleep before the portrait of your imaginary wife, so I moved to the
other side of the bed and then the other side of the apartment and then
from the second floor to the ground floor, I mean the ground, I mean
the sidewalk where no one was wearing any costumes and the cab
filled quickly with smoke. (79)

When the poem gets moving, it is carried by the repetition of words, and the evolution
of language in a stream of run-on connections. This letter reflects on how things are
shaped, and how that construction impacts their “realness”: ‘real men in a real bar, I
mean a bar cut like a man, I mean a bar cut like a piano, cut to fit around a piano, I
mean a bar cut like a Yamaha baby grand’. There are so many substitutions that Bloch
is doing a lot of linguistic back-pedaling, using commas to cut up the long journey of
the thought like panning to different camera shots: ‘Long lines of sun instead of the
wrong side of the bed, in the bed instead of on the floor, I mean, in the bed but not in
the bed’ and ‘I mean the ground, I mean the sidewalk’. And, as always, the physical
body is in the foreground of thought: ‘at the corner of the mouth, mouth across the T-
shirt.’ But this time the speaker explains: ‘I mean the sidewalk where no one was
wearing any costumes,’ which marks a departure from the many identity performances that have occurred in this correspondence.

In *Letters to Kelly Clarkson*, Bloch explores identity through various physical and psychological perspectives of an individual narrator. This narrator acts as the main character and mediating perspective of the poems, who becomes unhinged as she writes letters to a famous celebrity. These moments of instability are punctuated by deep and insightful inquiries into the nature of social pressures, influences, and role models on the individual mind. These personal psychological perceptions vary distinctly from the next collection, *The Desires of Letters* by Laynie Browne. While both of these collections use epistles to openly discuss the idea of personal identity, Browne examines identity in the context of local and global communities, and society as a whole.

Neither Bloch nor Browne are yearning for some version of normality. Instead, the flexibility of their poems highlight perspectives of gender identity, and insist on a present-tense malleability of reality. They use the letter form to make a patterned order of thoughts that allows for leaps and jump-cuts. Browne’s collection is not entirely comprised of epistles, as Bloch’s is. Instead, it is a collection of different entries: journals, and letters. Although there are two types of entries in the book, they often blur together. The journal-like entries end up addressing specific people, while the letters are reminiscent of the reason Steinbeck loved letters: because of the ability of the letter’s conversational undercurrent to carry multiple lines of thought simultaneously.

The prose poem works well with the epistle to achieve this free-flowing current of thought, because neither form has an explicit expectation of pattern. In the article “A Sexy New Animal: The DNA of the Prose Poem,” Natasha Sajé writes:
‘Because of the formal restrictions of verse, by comparison prose tends to seem more informal and closer to conversation... The prose poem allows the writer to “get lost,” while a poem in verse requires a certain degree of retrieval’ (147, 155). There is certainly no adherence to retrieval in either of these collections. The authors walk through a journey of identity, which becomes a dance, a song, and a circular turning of thoughts. A linear narrative wouldn’t serve either writer’s purpose.

On the title page of The Desires of Letters, Browne includes a list of alternate titles, based on all the books that influenced her while writing the collection. The full version on the title page and within the copyright page is:

_The Desires of Letters: or, my letters, the reproductions of the letters, the letters that changed everything, some other kind of mothers, Bebel’s letters, my pillow letters, tender letters, portrait of a letter, letters solitary apparition, the letter without qualities, letters: a epic [sic], the garden of letters, letter found on the rings of Saturn, the hour of the letter, within a budding letter, letter Lavransdatter, close to you & closer to letters, night letters, a feather on the breath of letters, animal letters, the human letters, the four year old letters, o my companion, all I see are letters._

The book is dedicated to Bernadette Mayer, author of the 1994 collection _The Desire of Mothers to Please Others in Letters_. Browne references this text very early; as the resonance of her title suggests, it was one of her main influences. In fact, the echo of Mayer’s collection is in the title that survived all the other options.

Browne notes how different it is to come back to Mayer’s book as a mother:

To reread this book as a mother is a revelation. It doesn’t only seem athletic, but it is athletic every minute and sometimes I think that is the most confusing aspect, being responsible for three physical bodies

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4 The entire list of Laynie Browne’s influences are listed in a note at the end of the collection, with the statement: ‘The alternate titles for this book are in reference to the following titles and authors, to whom I am grateful...’
Browne’s letters are meditations on this specific theme: self-reflection on ‘trying to retrieve one’s trail’ – while knowing that it often can’t be found. She also puts words to the ‘invisible enterprise’ of motherhood, and what that means for a woman engaging in the world.

Like Mayer’s collection, Browne’s letters straddle the genres between correspondence, open letters, and the diary form. Each of her poems is a public contemplation from within a deeply private sphere of thought. Browne discusses perceptions of gender, roles and responsibility, the relationship between self and other, and obligations of care for the world (‘being responsible for three physical bodies at once and trying also to be cognizant of those others passing, when in public, and then the body of the Earth...’). She oscillates between personal anecdotes and sweeping statements about war, action, and community. In the poem “Little List of ISBN Fears,” she refers to the overarching format of the book:

I’m not writing this book in the sense of thoughts prepared, arranged, revealed, rather I’m writing a book that is not bookish, preordained or orchestrated. I’m allowing this little list of ISBN fears. I’ve borrowed this letterish form as a means of distraction, penetration, obliteration.

Letters are for a purpose, Browne is saying. This is a method of revealing thoughts, ‘forcing my consciousness to mediate,’ instead of a book that is ‘preordained or orchestrated.’

Browne embodies many different tones in this collection, and the overall effect feels manic and ever-changing. At times personal, and at times impassioned,
her subjects sometimes follow a logical train of thought or they could just as easily arise as a random connection. At the beginning of the collection, she writes about those who seem to ‘think of children as personal inconveniences’ in a poem called “You Love Me, And I Simply Don’t Want To Be Excluded From That”:

‘Didn’t they forget that they were once children? Schools for instance need the support not only of parents but all persons who were once children, so that includes everyone – even those... believing themselves to be living in some isolated box that contains neither the past, nor the future’ (7).

The reminder that everyone was once a child is also a reminder that everyone is included in this conversation. No one is exempt. And the poem “Dear So and So Who Smarts Like an Unripe Persimmon,” is also directed to ‘Dear robber of our block and the block behind us who has broken into the kitchen nook windows. I’m sorry about the economy’ (13). It’s a sweet, unusual sentiment; you don’t normally get to speak to the person who robbed your house. This compassion echoes Jarman’s humanisation of the thief in his poem “When the thief comes.” And in this letter, Browne is extremely compassionate: ‘Your understanding is limited to your situation’ (14).

Her acknowledgment of this is the transition into a deeper reader-response theory, almost becoming a challenge to adopt new perspectives, to understand, and to empathise with other people’s scenarios and situations. While the letter poem “You Love Me...”discusses some of Browne’s opinions like a logical conversation, “Dear So and So...” is one example of her poems that are built on surreal connections. The outrageous poem titles in this book are also reminiscent of the speaker writing to Kelly Clarkson in Bloch’s collection. No thoughts are off-limits. The letter is a place that allows for impulsive ideas.

In the poem “For No Reason Should This Chain Be Broken,” Browne writes a
chain letter, which is a sequence of letters in which each recipient is asked to pass the letter on to a specific number of people. Juvenile chain letters are often passed around with a caveat: that something terrible will happen to whomever breaks the chain. Browne adopts this early in her chain letter: ‘This letter desires that you trust in the Lord with all your heart, kiss someone, pass this letter on within four days or you may lose your wife, life, strife, or bike’ (101). But more than playing off the superstition and cultural currency of chain letters, she highlights the way that news, opinions and perspectives are passed on by a circulation of awareness: ‘The identity of the letter is hidden by its route or effect. This is nonsense but no joke... An R.A.F. officer received $470 dollars. The Air Force received $4,755. A.R.F. received seventy-five cents. A raft received $7’. She also uses the repetition of language to draw attention to connections and associations:

A ram received $777 and lost it because it broke the chain. As did the General, George, and one department of Gender Studies... Please send twenty copies and see what happens in twenty days. The chain comes from Venezuela and was written by a missionary from South Africa, named Babbit, Brandt, Brent, Craduit, Dabbit, or Davitt. This is true even if you are not superstitious. (101)

But as much as the chain letter can be sent to a large audience with little effort, Browne also demonstrates how the message can be distorted. Even while she references many different organisations and geographic locations, she plays with the idea of a name as a signifier. She creates the context for a person (a missionary from South Africa), but provides multiple possible names. A single name would refer to a single person. But by cycling through multiple names instead, she is eliciting a responsibility of care from the reader towards a person who could be anyone, not just a specific someone. By creating a satirical riff on the superstition of chain letters, Browne is issuing a joke and a challenge simultaneously. The delivery of the letter
may be leveraged as a joke, but will you, as the reader, take the content seriously?

The final line in the poem cements this call to caring: ‘This is true even if you are not superstitious.’ Browne is telling her reader: There is a reality outside of your reality. There are things that go on independently of your experience, that don’t depend on your belief to be true. In the poem “If a Corporate Slug Were Willing to Work Invisibly For a Moment,” Browne calls attention to the specific social issue at the heart of her perspective: ‘I do such invisible daily work, which is mothering. It’s a radical notion that of course I did not invent’ (25). This was the legacy of Mayer’s collection, so it’s not surprising that Browne adopts it as the central issue in hers. She carries on to say: ‘Please give less invisibility somewhere and more somewhere else. But to whom am I speaking? To the automatic self whose legs continue to carry one. Election results alarming. Grocery bill also’ (26). But is the cost of awareness that something else becomes invisible? In the poem ‘Mist Netting,’ Browne again states the purpose of these letters, or at least their desires:

The desires of letters is to impress upon the reader a purpose or sentiment, to convey information, to draw a picture, to persuade. She was in bed scrawling by the light of a dim moon; her letters appeared to be animals, unruly and untamed, they disobeyed her again and again until she had to chain them to her hand, until they meant nothing. Letters tied with string, hidden, carried, buried in a park, burned in a cast iron pan while reciting resolutions... but in letters she grew bold and gained manners she could not perform in person. Are you comfortable, the letters asked one another, standing lined along a fence? (89)

These letters impress the sentiment of the malleability of identity: how one person can become invisible to others, and how society frames and influences the reality we see. Browne draws a picture of multiple identities, and how roles and appearances change based on the situation. But at the heart of it, these letters are hoping to persuade people to care for causes beyond themselves. And in the previous poem the
persuasion is directed toward the ‘corporate slug’ who should become humble enough
to adopt the invisibility of other disenfranchised people. But it is equally directed to
the wider audience in general: ‘Are you comfortable, the letters asked one another,
standing lined along a fence?’ Browne is asking directly, hoping to persuade the
audience to rethink their perspectives: are you comfortable with what is happening?

Burke and Reitzes discuss this in their second characteristic of identity:

Second, identities are self meanings that are formed in particular
situations and organized hierarchically to produce the self. (The
meanings of an identity are, in part, the products of the particular
opportunities and demand characteristics of the social situation, and
are based on the similarities and differences of a role with related,
complementary, or counter-roles.) (84)

This is indicative of Browne’s central theme: using conversation, diaries, and intimate
discussions to draw attention to the various roles, identities, and constructs
surrounding the idea of motherhood in society. Towards the end of her collection, she
writes:

Maybe I should write my modern novel about the new mother. I call it
“Snow White Had a Baby” (and how the world responded invisibly).
Her first name was Snow. Nobody took to her kindly. Her invisible
sleep was motherhood. Not to say that I believe this, but it’s an
analogy for: the apple, life, and leaving the garden. And she wasn’t
asleep but people saw her as if she were not in one world, but the
other world rushing by her feet as if she were unreal. (189)

This collection is almost Browne’s ‘modern novel about the new mother,’ except that
it is not a work of fiction, and it isn’t just about the mother. Through these open
letters, she brings voice and recognition to the world of the individual, the private
sphere, the public sphere, and the intersection between all three. She uses the epistle
to explore, but also free up, identity in relationship to a social context or the culture
within which one lives.
In a letter to Rosemarie and Keith Waldrop (‘To Rosemarie and Keith’), Browne writes about the effect of their poetry as a space or transmission in which to explore new possibilities:

It seems to me also a form of spelunking, the opening of this space between expectation and naming. A space that is continually opened in the poetic endeavor... This is to say that person animates the already animated poem. And something distinct about poetry as a living transmission, not a one-way dictation or codifiable process. The text may appear static but that is only supposing there is one limited text, as opposed to a life’s work of text in constant communication with many other lives of texts. (75)

Browne partakes in this type of spelunking herself, and her letters are always in conversation: with the reader, with the recipient, with the ideas and the environment of those ideas. This collection is also in conversation with the texts of others, which was acknowledged on her title page. She is enacting these connections, demonstrating how words influence words, how thoughts can influence other thoughts.

She demonstrates this in the poem “We Eat Wooden Food on April-Patrick’s Day”: ‘Sentences thrown into the river. But we have enough water here. It’s not that I don’t believe thoughts and words alter reality. They alter things here. But there is here, there is a distant here’ (82-83). There is only a further here. In the letter to Rosemarie and Keith, she speaks of this kind of distance, and the distinction (or lack of distinction) between public and private space:

I need not remind you that these are simply thoughts of persons living in places and bear no resemblance to fact or fiction. I dare to venture now to say that the desert has no public or private space. Only uncategorizable space. Insides are outsides and so on. The landscape is vast and unremitting, unrelenting. The people are moving slowly and thinking something but not saying anything yet, at least not to me. The desert is also the past tense of the ocean. At least if you’ve spent your life living on coasts. (78)
These two sections possess inter-related dichotomies. In each of them, Browne is creating a conversation about proximity, the ownership of place, the ownership of words, and that the ability of language to impact and change things is dependent on where we perceive the limits of our sphere of influence to be.

Poet Chase Twichell has three poems directly addressed “To the Reader,” one of which addresses a similar idea to Browne’s collection. Twichell’s poem “To the Reader: Twilight” compares the reader to ‘the spirits/ the children invent’ for their toys:

Whenever I look
out at the snowy
mountains at this hour
and speak directly
into the ear of the sky,
it’s you I’m thinking of.
You’re like the spirits
the children invent
to inhabit the stuffed horse
and the doll.
I don’t know who hears me.
I don’t know who speaks
when the horse speaks.

(Poetry Foundation)

This resonates with Browne’s manifesto about her own collection, as we’ve seen earlier: ‘I’ve borrowed this letterish form as a means of distraction, penetration, obliteration. Forcing my consciousness to mediate between being a cow, while crawling, one on my back, the other pulling my hair, to be the horse or the crocodile completely’ (80). Both of these acts require imagination: to imagine the reader, and to imagine ‘who speaks/ when the horse speaks’. In fact, this connects back to Jarman’s poem “I have always thought,” where Jarman’s narrator questions whether someone else might be able to express meaning more clearly than he can (‘Someone else could
embody all I am saying in a horse. He would see it through the animal’s coffee clear eye, as it stood between traces on cobblestones, pained by a growth above its right fetlock’

). The resonance between Jarman, Browne and Twichell demonstrates Jarman’s point exactly: that different poets are better at saying different things. Each poet expresses sentiments that – at any given point – may or may not ring true with the reader; but when they resonate they hit the target directly, precisely because of their individual perspectives.

In an interview with Superstition Review at Arizona State University, Twichell describes what was appealing about addressing poems directly to the reader: ‘I’ve always been fascinated by the intimacy that a reader can feel with a writer... Every poem has an imaginary audience, whether the poet knows it or not. It’s useful to ask who that is. The direct address allowed me to imagine the reader in a more intimate way than usual.’ (superstitionreview.asu.edu)

Browne is very aware of the audience, the reader, and the ‘multi-present you,’ and she speaks to this directly in “I Love You Into Pluto”:

But the you in the sentence is the multipresent you, the you drinking or sitting, the you sleeping, the you in the newspapers, the you idiotic, yelling, the you stomping away, the you lifting boxes in the garage searching for something at my request, the you planting seeds, scrubbing floors, the you distant, invisible, everpresent, the you ringing the telephone far too often, the you crying, walking into the walls, the you irritated at that time of night, the you searching for remedies, the you allergic to wheat and the you allergic to cats and the you preferring an aisle seat, the you not helping but running, the you leaving drawers open and dishes dirty, the you walking across the kitchen counter, the you missing or deliberately absent, the you of no image, the you of divine image, the you you disagree with, the you in any one continuous sentence, the you in debt, the you inverted, reading something trivial, repeating untrue words, the you listening, the you into all of the planets. (92)
The multiple readers are multiple selves. And this applies to the author as much as it applies to the infinite faces of potential readers. Browne writes in “We Stand Still Because We Are Toys”: ‘Does diversity include me? I’m a different person than I was’ (96). In “Welcome 67946, Looting,” she asks: ‘Is there a copy of you reading this article? When I’m reading me I could be reading you... You will probably never see your other selves’ (97).

Browne is not just aware of the many perspectives of her readers (as well as her own shifting and evolving perspectives); she also knows how much each individual encapsulates: ‘See, you make everything work... How to do this parental stuff in tune with being a writer, daughter, sibling, granddaughter, citizen, wife (though not to a house), devotee, bhakti, tzadik in training, community weaver, domestic everything, yogi, herbalist, confidante, friend, reverse insular portrait of rain’ (175). She does not claim to have the answers, and she does not prescribe any solution for how to be all of these roles at the same time. Rather, she poses the right questions. She highlights complexities and contradictions. Her letters discuss personal woes, global fears, celebrations, curiosities, and many, many unknowns.

“I Love You Into Pluto” resonates with Bloch’s final list of Joycean observations. Both poems contain the open-endedness of the present moment, and the ability to jump through all kinds of possibilities with a stream of consciousness delivery. As we’ll see in the next chapter, Newman carries this fluid tone into a more concrete narrative; but Bloch and Browne celebrate that their thoughts don’t need narrative in order to be communicated.
Amy Newman

I like to think of your silence as the love letters you will not write me...

I like to think of you as a god
to whom I no longer pray, as a god I aspire to.

– from “A Bronze God, or a Letter on Demand” by Clifton Gachagua

*Dear Editor: Poems* by Amy Newman is exactly what it is advertised to be: a collection of cover letter poems that accompany submissions of the manuscript, *X = Pawn Capture* by ‘Amy Newman’. Each of the letters is written to an unidentified ‘Editor’, and includes an introduction to the Amy’s submitted manuscript. However, these letters differ from conventional casual correspondence, and even official cover letters: Newman has woven threads of many different narratives into the letters, making each one an expression of memory, work, family, and the self-doubt of a young author. As much as Amy is a character who possesses a self, an identity, beliefs, and a voice, Newman crafts her persona in a way that makes significant statements on the philosophical and experiential nature of each of these qualities. By the end of her collection, the letters evolve – from speaking to the editor, to taking on a spiritual supplication. She replaces the recipient of the editor with that of God, invoking letters as personal prayers.

Newman is following in the footsteps of Lucie Brock-Broido’s collection *The

5 Within this essay the character of ‘Amy Newman’ as the persona in the book will be referred to as ‘Amy,’ while the author of the collection *Dear Editor: Poems* will be referred to as ‘Newman.’
Master Letters (1997), poems written in response to Emily Dickinson’s letters to someone she called ‘master’. Dickinson’s master letters were written between 1858 and 1862, with no evidence that they were ever sent. Brock-Broido’s book derives from Dickinson’s letters and echoes devices Dickinson used in her work. Yet Newman’s Dear Editor is more of a direct translation into the current cultural context, bringing Dickinson’s idea of the self-other relationship into a contemporary lens.

The poems in Dear Editor are untitled, but are signified by individual dates. The book does not have a table of contents delineating each poem, but the body of poems is separated into three seasons: Fall, Winter, and Spring. Summer is not represented in this collection, which adds to the tone of incompleteness Newman constructs; the audience is similarly kept from a complete view of the manuscript Amy is trying to submit in these cover letters. We never read a poem from her collection \( X = \text{Pawn Capture} \), though we are told much about them, and all of her letters remain unanswered with no indication as to either acceptance or rejection.

Where many people strive to write cover letters with a tone of professionalism, Amy’s letters do the opposite. Her stories are casual and personal, but often married to observations about writing, life, and morality. They are certainly not generic. Rather, they are emotive, enthusiastic, and at times going so far as to be too deeply personal.

In a cover letter, the second paragraph is usually the meat of the content, explains Phyllis Korkii in an article in the New York Times, where she provides some conventional advice for cover letters:

In the middle paragraphs, explain why you are a good candidate, and show that you are knowledgeable about the company. Then convey a clear story about your career, and highlight specific past achievements. (“A Cover Letter,” February 2009).
In the middle paragraphs, the author should describe his or her background and skills in relation to the prospective job (in Amy’s case: publication in the editor’s magazine). Newman follows convention in the opening and closing remarks of her cover letters, but deviates into poetry and extended narrative in the middle of each letter.

In an interview with the publication *The Rumpus*, Newman explains the motivations that first drew her to create this collection:

I was thinking about what makes a poem a poem – it's not just line breaks. There's this human thinking and wondering, a different energy and tension – and one day I thought – what if, when she goes to compose the cover letter, the poet doesn't or can't turn off that part of the mind that is actively involved in writing poems? (January, 2011).

The cover letters are poetic manifestos because of the integration of a professional structure and personal ruminations from a young poet. Additionally, an explanation of Amy’s career and past achievements becomes inextricable from her personal history and her writing process. She interweaves a discussion of her work with the context of her family and the experience of being a young, amateur writer; and what is most effective is that these narratives are enacted during the letters. Memory, personal history, professional hopes, and reflections on the craft of writing meet in the same field of discourse. Often, the reader is carried and rushed back and forth between all of these topics, in the stream of consciousness style that is so particular to personal correspondence.

This work centres on a single subject, a single correspondence, which functions as a poetic sequence rather than a collection of individual poems. When read this way, Newman’s oscillating narrative themes unfold based on how the formal structure evolves. The poems would never begin and end in the same place if not for
the editor, and Amy’s focus on her submission for publication. As author Brian Spears writes in a review of Dear Editor for The Rumpus: ‘The form is a stutter-step, an ankle breaking juke that leaves the reader spun and wondering where in the hell the poem went and how it got there’ (December, 2011). The anecdotes in the middle of the letters could go anywhere at all, and often do.

Newman sets up an outline for the letters: she opens with a salutation, moves to a personal anecdote, and closes with the same final remarks (‘Thank you for your consideration, and for reading. I have enclosed an SASE, and look forward to hearing from you’). The development and evolution of the narrator is indicated by the formal patterns: when they are consistent, and when they are altered.

All but six of the letters open with the same introduction, the same way each chess game begins with a particular configuration (chess being a central theme for Newman):

Please consider the enclosed poems for publication. They are from my manuscript, \( X = \text{Pawn Capture} \ldots \)

Her first letter, dated “3 October,” introduces the subject of her manuscript:

Please consider the enclosed poems for publication. They are from my manuscript, \( X = \text{Pawn Capture} \), a lyrical study of a particular kind of chess game played within my family: the first move has to be made by someone who doesn’t understand the basic rules. (5)

The reader learns much about Amy and this elusive manuscript through the constant redefinition of her work; she creates a new definition for her manuscript in almost every letter she sends. Most of the definitions classify it as ‘a lyrical study of chess’, but the tone of the definitions has a subtle evolution of focus, varying from:

A lyrical exploration of chess moves and the desire to know the world’s inner workings in a language unencumbered by doubts. (20)
A lyrical study of the history of chess as my grandfather misrepresented it to me because he loved to tell his stories. (28)

A lyrical study of chess as it was played in my family: the first move is not an advantage, but a disadvantage, so no one begins, which makes for a darkening of the afternoon as the light through trees withdraws and the grandfather’s cigar dominates, and the child believes: I should never have come here. (70)

to an extensive descriptive passage later in the collection that explains the work as:

poems I’m trying to write about how, when a family prays together with bowed heads, there might be a granddaughter noticing how the dust motes in the afternoon sun rays drift in a kind of suspension through the stained yellow windows, hover weightless, like the little bronze flecks of proteins and irons that float on the surface of the pond water… (78)

The definition of her work changes as the stories change; the reader learns more about her manuscript as well as collecting information about her personal life. In each poem, the game of chess evolves to something deeper and darker by gradient.

In the six letters that do not include an introduction to her work, Amy appears to be distracted, and begins the letter more directly, often in the middle of a story:

I can remember in high school, when a boy I knew only slightly would take me for a walk and put an awkward arm in a hug position on my waist, and pull me in, tug at what I was. As I moved past the constellations in the outer part of my eye, I would see the face of the boy and think of how in Mitchell’s translation of Rilke, every angel is terrifying. (24)

This suggests consistent contact within the correspondence, and also an element of impatience; her information is too important to wait for formalities. Simon Garfield notes this pattern of exclusion in biographical letters as well: ‘There is the regular opening – ‘From A to B, greetings’ – that we have seen employed by the Romans at Vindolanda, frequently extended according to circumstance… Only those in the highest positions tended to ignore these pleasantries, a public declaration that they had
more important things on their mind’ (45). Towards the end of the collection, in the poem “29 March”, Amy goes as far as to say: ‘They are from my manuscript, \( X = \textit{Pawn Capture} \), and you know all about it’ (68). In addition to confirming that these letters are being sent to a single editor, and not a variety of different editors, it is Amy’s admission of familiarity. The editor knows all about it, and we the readers know it as well – because she has already explained so much.

The poems are formatted as prose, which again blurs the distinction between the letters as poems, or as real letters. But even without the conventional verse format, the language incorporates strong metaphors, dynamic end stop lines, and allusions to larger questions beyond the frame of the individual texts. Newman uses repetitious themes, gesturing to how these questions and larger issues come up again and again. The thought process of the poems has a stream of consciousness quality, but the prosody of what is written feels like music. Newman’s poems are like jazz songs: played with endless variations on a central theme.

Additionally, these poems benefit from being written in prose. Epistolary prose poems are more easily disguised as genuine letters. But as Robert Bly notes in his essay, “What the Prose Poem Carries”, the prose poem can also be used as a privatised vessel. ‘In a prose poem,’ Bly writes ‘we often feel a man or woman talking not before a crowd but in a low voice to someone he is sure is listening’ (44). This is also true of the open letter phenomenon, which invites individual identification with the presented ideas, as much as it focuses on speaking to a crowd. Similarly, Amy consistently relays her stories to the general audience of her poems as much as she writes to the unknown Editor:

The one thing you have to understand is how my grandmother’s hand felt against my neck as she discussed the merits of each individual saint on those afternoons and evenings when the light on the windows
hesitated across the aspects of our house… What is it about this moment that compels me to write you? I wanted to tell you about the intersection between her mortal warmth and the stories of what she admired. (36)

Here, the ‘you’ is ambiguous. In an immediate context she means the editor. Amy even comes to rely on the editor’s silence later in her letters: ‘That is a weakness I confess only to you, in response to the promise of privacy I observe in your absolute silence’ (54). But it becomes apparent that these letter poems are also performances to a global readership. The poems evolve from formal letters to an act of confession through the course of this collection, and her readers are her witnesses.

The anecdotes included in the body of her cover letters describe a young writer struggling with her writing, as well as trying to navigate her family dynamics. Amy lives with her grandparents, though we are given no back-story. Instead, she writes about her grandparents’ emotional distance, and what they use to distract themselves. Her grandfather is preoccupied with chess: ‘the dry and silent intellectual play of the board acts as the absence of my grandfather’s desire’ (26). Her grandmother is described through her devotion to Catholic martyrs:

If my grandmother gets to have a metaphor, I choose the calendar that hung against the cellar door, and also, her regarding it… She would share with me her saints, who were splayed across the calendar in fabulous stories. (26)

Both of these examples are reminiscent of Jarman’s Epistles, engaging with the question: what concrete things can we hold onto to firmly cement our belief? Chess is methodical, logical, and deeply rooted in mathematics, and the saints are a more direct link to the devotional aspect of Jarman’s poetry. Amy’s grandparents also feature in her redefinitions of the manuscript:
\[X = \text{Pawn Capture},\] an exploration of how my grandfather used chess as a way to divert a child’s attention from the absence of love between her grandparents and my attempts to capture in language their magnificent silences, which could have been visitations from ethereal beings for all they told me. (33)

In the descriptions of her family, Newman’s narrative persona seems very childlike, with a blunt sense of humour despite the serious nature of the scenes she is depicting. Even though it comes many decades after the emergence of other poets in The New York School of poetry, much of Newman’s work is reminiscent of this style: heavily influenced by surrealism and modernism, and often both serious and ironic. Amy describes humorous scenarios in a surface-level perspective, while alluding to points of contention and disharmony lurking in the personal perspectives that she does not expand upon, as seen in the poem “15 December”:

The pawns on the chessboard are workers, hard workers who get no thanks in this life, as my grandfather would explain. That’s why there are more pawns than any other pieces, because life is hard and tiring, and they suffer, and are sacrificed, so that the community can continue and the game can be played. I would like to see the knight protect a pawn once in a while, especially a girl pawn, who has let her hair down the long side of a castle and allowed him to climb up its vermillion border. But my grandfather tells me that a girl pawn would be run out of town on a rail because she would be nothing but trouble, a bee in the bonnet of the community with her frills and her soft skins and the hiding of the special areas, and the Queen, of all pieces, would see to it that any young lady who came calling even to remark *What a cold day we have!* or *How are you doing kind sir?* would not last long, he might say while watching my grandmother peel from an eternal mound of onions one large and stubborn skin that unrolled only in bits and flakes. (34)

Like childhood (and, often poetry), letters are built on stories and a question of truth: What percentage or ratio of the information is truth versus fiction? Letters reveal a story in very fine layers, especially when all of those letters are positioned together, allowing the audience to read the overarching narrative and continuity between them. The fact that this is a constructed narrative of a created persona means that Newman
is doing double the work. Not only is she constructing a narrative through letters, but she also gradually reveals layers of self-identity, questions of worth, acceptance, and the creative capacity of the persona of Amy.

In the poem “15 December,” we are being told a story of family discord, a narrative that often features in Amy’s letters: ‘In the kitchen, my grandmother tore at the spice leaves, and in the main room my grandfather remained, forever irritated at chess’ (35). However, Newman spins the story into a fable. Her grandfather communicates his control in moral parables that Amy translates through a mix of chess and fairy tales. From this foundation, her mind wanders, trying to uncover alternative endings to this fairy tale about girl pawns stuck in castles, and the knights who might save them. The boundaries of reality and fantasy dissolve, and Amy’s surroundings seem to support the reveal of a happy ending later in the poem: ‘I think then even the chokeberries that the birds devoured outside our windows on these cold days might instead stay in their first, pure, flowery blooms, so impressed the space outside our house would be by the atmosphere of real high school love…’ (34).

Newman also employs personification and anthropomorphism as the scene around her literally springs to life: ‘lips entirely embarrassed and neck dismayed at his scratchy growth that assaulted’ (34). Even her clothing absorbs emotion, such as shame at her supposed immoral and sinful romantic behaviour with a peer: ‘though when I got home and undressed in my room, my blouse would refuse to crumple in a heap that didn’t look compromising’ (34). Amy dreams of an escape from her strict, chess-playing, frustrated grandfather, and her gruff, religious grandmother. Her poems and letters allow her to glimpse brief openings through which she could emerge into a world of independence and unbridled potential. Newman’s control over how the letters open up through Amy’s experience is a testament to the attention and
craft of the accomplished writer – a role Amy herself is aspiring towards.

Writing the letters is always a central focus of Amy’s experience. Amy compares the Editor’s silence to her grandfather’s, in “17 March”:

his silence may be compared unfavourably to that silence which is the proper response to my submissions. For I only have to exercise my faith to know grace in our intercourse, whereas with my grandfather it’s a little harder to observe the strength of the faithful and to believe in familial love. (59)

Again, we see Newman’s adeptness at creative descriptions – poetic highlights amidst the narrative – as she explains: ‘Still, I cared for him amongst his tobaccos and his soft clothing, tick-tocking his starry and wilful avoidance of me all over the dining room’ (59). We also see a shift in how Newman depicts her grandmother; suddenly, Amy is not the only one turning to art, creativity and narratives to make sense of what is mostly insensible: ‘Sometimes my grandmother filled in the blanks in the kitchen, sweet pies accompanying her narratives about the martyr’s plush red hearts still beating fresh waves of blood after death…” (59-60)

Amy must feel split between her grandparents, as she struggles to forge a bridge between the logical structure of writing and the ethereal quality of the moments she wants to depict. Explaining this divide in “21 March,” by saying, ‘the evening became something more than what letters arranged to make sound blocks can achieve,’ she is focused once again on where and how words fail:

The sound of her chopping is hard to put down in words, but I have tried: restless, resigned, determined. The workshop says those are all clichés, and I needn’t revisit with you why we should not use clichés. But where is the word that says the knife understood her weariness and expressed her will in its repetitive rush to the wood beneath the carrots? How to say it rang my grandmother’s acuity in a pattern of messages while my grandfather either didn’t notice or made no response to her alarms and cries, her information telegraphed through the carrot’s core in an obsolescence of her heart’s dot dot dashes? … the evening became something more than what letters arranged to
make sound blocks can achieve. The shaped dark that gathers beneath my window has a way of making me dream the oddest pictures in my head when my eyes are closed, in forms and manipulations and sounds. Where is the Morse code for something like that? (61-62)

Newman still remains distinct from the narrator of Amy within the poems; while Amy regards words as ‘letters arranged to make sound blocks’ and instances of ‘Morse code,’ Newman the author skilfully uses all words to her advantage, even when the poems reflect language’s inherent failures and limitations to accurately depict. Newman pays distinct attention to how her poems scan in this collection, never sacrificing prosody even though she employs both prose poem and epistolary forms.

The question of poetic craft is one that Newman shares with her persona Amy. Amy’s letters often focus on reflections about writing and creating, though those reflections are more commonly framed as insecurities: ‘How am I supposed to know enough to make something happen on a page that will convince me of anything?’ (14). This thread continues throughout the majority of the letters, and the insecurity frequently surfaces when introducing her manuscript $X = \text{Pawn Capture}$, ‘an in-depth study of something I pretend to lyricize,’ (18) and ‘a lyrical exploration of chess moves and the desire to know the world’s inner workings in a language unencumbered by doubts’ (16). Even while Amy tries to prove her own proficiency, her tone belies her insecurity (she pretends to lyricize, and her manuscript enacts a language unencumbered by doubts). We have read too many of her letters to believe her faux confidence.

We know this, because Amy refers to her ‘workshop,’ where it is assumed she is learning about writing. But even this education makes her nervous and full of doubt, as in “1 January:”
Beautiful is a word that my workshop class says is ineffective, that it doesn’t contain how this sight captures my attention and convinces me, absorbs and converts me away from the yard, so that the closest kin might be diverting, which the class might find archaic, and if that’s true, then I don’t know how to say that everything in the backyard might be pretending to be lovely in order that we can all get up in the morning. (41)

And this simultaneous desire and frustration with language is mirrored in the next poem, “2 January”: ‘I would like to know passion, to know it in the same way the saints know the world, which is to say in the most pure and untouched version as it hovers and penetrates, before it is reduced to dry ink in a single file of letters’ (42).

But on some level, Amy is not afraid of failing. Rather, she fears the ways language will fail her. In February, she writes: ‘These are the details I try to support with the blank unholy annoyance of a dictionary, a glum book disguised as enough language’ (56).

While Dear Editor: Poems shares a lot of characteristics with contemporary American poetry, its larger sphere of influence comes from poets such as Frank O’Hara. In a New York Times Article titled “The New York School of Poets: The Serious at Play”, Stephen Koch writes the follow description of Frank O’Hara’s poetry:

But when it comes to the poems, one finds not a sensory circus but plain melancholy, a kind of persistent tender violence and the repeated effort to jump over some kind of emotional abyss on the springs of his wit, his sudden flashes of optimism, his sentimentalism, and what is perhaps most impressive about his work, the extraordinary delicacy and sharpness of his response to sights and sounds and smells… (February, 1968)

The same observation that Koch makes of O’Hara’s work could be applied almost exactly to describe the qualities of Newman’s poetry in this collection. A prime example is the poem “12 November”: 
But what if it had been the 15th of October? That’s the day of Theresa of Avila, the pretty girl with all the troubles who ran away to see the lord in the first show of fast-frame shots we now know as the quick cuts of MTV: arm, heart, lung, cornea, arm bone and digestive tract, oh holy saint of grace who like my aunt understood only in pieces; she would have watched you for hours on that Sunday afternoon as the men puffed ash and moved plastic ideas around in circles. Whatever gestures that you made by coming into the heart of the suffering I imagine was patterning in the white and partial bits of tree and lake that gave itself up through the snow. The family hung on until we twisted out the evening light… (23)

Here, Newman spirals into long sentences that resemble a stream of consciousness, following the strands that come through associations: from her Aunt’s calendar, to the saints, to MTV, to body parts, to the external landscape of winter. These transitions are very reminiscent of Bloch’s imagistic observations in her letters to Kelly. However, these passing references are knitted together by Newman’s adeptness at internal rhyme and the flow of her language. ‘Day’, ‘away’, ‘first show’, ‘we now know’ are all examples of internal rhyme moments that slow down the reader and create a seam to draw these random associations together. Additionally, Newman uses alliterative phrases like ‘fast-frame shots’, and ‘quick cuts’: sharp consonants that slice through the ethereal reflections with the sense of concrete substance. The men ‘puffed ash and moved plastic’ are examples of assonance that Newman adds to alliteration and rhyme to maintain the reader’s focus during the long sentence that travels through three independent clauses from ‘That’s the day…’ to ‘… moved plastic ideas around in circles.’

With other literary influences besides the New York School, Newman’s comparisons to Dickinson’s ‘master’ letters are significant. Writer Nicholas Rombes reflects on the master letters in an article for The Rumpus, highlighting how important the context of the term ‘master’ was in Dickinson’s time. It held direct correlations and echoes of unequal relationships: those of masters and servants, or masters and
slaves. As *Dear Editor* progresses, the direction of Newman’s epistles evolve drastically. By two-thirds of the way through the collection – even before the Spring section hits – Amy is addressing the editor in spiritual language, as a god.

The first instance seems innocuous enough. In “1 February,” Amy quips: ‘I swear, on a stack of dull dictionaries’ instead of the bible (51). She transitions into a discussion of her own beliefs two pages later, in “4 February”: ‘That would be doubly stressful if you believe that God is watching as you are trying to perceive Him enough to believe in Him. It’s 24/7 stress, even on the day of rest. I don’t know about you, but my God sleeps with One Eye Open’ (53). Here, her belief is similar to her earlier discussions of rendering: it is all about use and utility, about proof and evidence.

But the language quickly becomes contractual in the poem “18 February”: ‘That is a weakness I confess only to you, in response to the promise of privacy I observe in your absolute silence.’ The conventional reciprocity of writing letters, of submitting artistic material, or even simply of conversation, has been replaced by a pattern of confession and silence.

Where Dickinson’s ‘master’ letters had an important relational resonance in the context of her time, so also does the evolution of Newman’s audience from editor to god. By framing the recipient of these letters as a spiritual figure, Newman is drawing correlations between submission and acceptance. These terms apply to the literary context of submitting manuscripts, but they also resonate in a specifically spiritual vocabulary. Newman’s metaphor of the editor as god in our contemporary environment demonstrates that when Amy submits her work, she is humbled, anxious, and wants acceptance. And it is more than just professional acceptance; from her constant narration of craft and ‘rendering,’ it is clear that professional acceptance is inextricable from Amy’s sense of personal worth. This is all the more underscored by
the context of our internet culture – how social media publicizes our lives in a way that is set up to either receive acceptance and praise, or to become unseen and irrelevant.

These manuscript submissions are not a conventional relationship between a writer and an editor, and this becomes most clear in “29 March,” when Amy reveals what is actually happening in the exchange of correspondence:

The tree branch is weighed down from the thaws, nodding and moving the wet dirt, and I am here, writing to you, while my grandmother stands in her boots and coat, burning another stack of mail. I recognize the stamps on the envelopes, of course... But about the burning and the smoke of the metal bin where your replies are smoldering is the kind of shining face of Teresa, reading the ash, and a stunning bundle of pale green petals, and many, many, patterning birds. I wish you could see this. (69)

There is a reason she recognizes the stamps; she has been sending self-addressed, stamped envelopes with her submissions. The letters her grandmother is burning are from the editor, a plot twist that Newman throws in to disrupt the conventional narrative. But even more important than the change in narrative is the way Amy reacts to the actions: she notes them, writes them down, and continues her supplication with little to no emotional reaction, and certainly no interference.

This lack of reaction must make the reader pause. All along, it has been possible to doubt or question the sequence of letters. For example, it is initially possible that these are all redrafts of a single cover letter. The repetition and slight variation of how she opens letters, addresses the editor, and describes her manuscript, could support this idea. And following from this question, the audience has read two-thirds of the letters without any proof that the letters themselves were ever sent. She asks for replies, and mentions SASEs, but until her grandmother is shown burning the responses in 29 March there has been no prior definitive proof.
At this point in the collection, it is clear that Amy writes the remaining letters as journal entries, or – more specifically – as prayers that may be received by another person but will never elicit responses that can reach her. Even after the editor is revealed to be sending replies (and so assumedly is a real person or persons), the identity of the recipient is still not concrete. This again mirrors Dickinson’s ‘master’ letters, which were very reliant on the abstraction of their recipient. In her book *Correspondence and American Literature*, Elizabeth Hewitt describes the anonymity: ‘Here not only do we not know the identity of the “Master,” but there may have been no recipient at all – either because Dickinson did not actually send the letters or because there was no single person whom she imagined as “Master”’ (146). Newman reproduces these conditions perfectly, because any details about the editor always fall short of proving his existence, or his participation in the correspondence. Hewitt goes on to highlight: ‘What is remarkable about the Master Letters, however, is not that they do not name the identity of the recipient, but that they reveal precisely the ways in which not knowing another is an essential aspect of any correspondence. The Master Letters detail the ways in which guessing is an essential aspect of corresponding’ (146).

Newman has even translated the central idea of guesswork and abstraction into the *Dear Editor* letters. The reader learns about the characters in Amy’s life by hearing peripheral information about them in letters, which includes multiple layers of displacement. Because of this, the reader is asked to actively fill in the pieces, to pick up the threads of the narrative, and to decide what information is relevant in order to fully perceive Amy’s story. In introducing the critical essays on Dickinson’s correspondence, editors Eberwein and MacKenzie write: ‘A volume devoted to new thought about reading Emily Dickinson’s correspondence appropriately directs
attention to the idea of “correspondence” itself – to the concept of co-respondence or responsive reading’ (4). This is exactly what Newman has been inviting her readers to enter from the beginning of her collection: a participation, a guessing and uncovering of narrative, identity, relationship and craft.

From this point on, Amy’s language opens up substantially. Newman utilises the second-person perspective to refer to both the editor (at this point, the editor-as-god), and the general readership of her poetry collection. While this may have always been the case practically, Newman now involves and directly includes her readers in her narrative. For example, in 30 March, Amy pens a supplication to the all-knowing editor, asking for reassurance:

Am I right, sir? Is this how I should represent myself on paper? I know you won’t respond, preferring the justice of silence, the instruction of meditative thought, and I have to agree. You know this and this and this, for you have the instructor’s edition, and are the maker of this earth encompassed by strings of road like a ball of yarn. Such is our doing and our undoing, our hemming up and our disentangling. It is a kitten’s story you made from your delight that unravels in a weariness of flaw. I will write again, though. All roads lead to you. (71)

At the same time, the use of ‘we’ in this passage underscores the audience’s inclusion. This is a prayer of worthiness, an attempt to locate herself in a spiritual relationship, and to determine who else is witnessing or experiencing the same creative journey.

Her language remains meditative, ritualistic, offering prayers and penitence:

3 April: Yet I seek Your Substance in the mailman’s scuff and trumpery of his walk away without leaving a sheet of paper bearing your response to my queries, that bit of flesh I would so gratefully receive for I am not worthy to, but only say the word and I shall know. But I trust you hear me; that is my faith. Please consider my poems for publication. (73)
In the poem “17 April,” Newman parallels the structure of the biblical Psalm 19:14
(‘Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your
sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer’): ‘Let my words be acceptable to you, to
magnify and be magnified, in order that we may one day be fully aware of whatever
gift has been sent our way, even though it’s obvious to me there isn’t anything there
to see, to actually see. The dimension is private’ (80). In many churches, a minister or
reverend invokes this psalm before beginning a sermon, and the word ‘my’ is
frequently rephrased as ‘our’. This transformation of self-other in relation to
invocation is resonant in Newman’s passage above, as she includes her general
audience within Amy’s prayer.

When describing about Dickinson’s ‘master’ letters, Rombes writes:

She has injected mystery into mystery with those words. Because it is
finally the odd cadences, the tense changes, the weird ghosts and
fragments of thoughts and ideas that make the Master letters fresh and
unsettling and radical in ways that, thank goodness, cannot be tamed.
They escape all sorts of boundaries. Are they letters, or poems
disguised as letters? If words could be gears, the Masters letters would
be a machine. It’s hard to tell when sentences end and begin, the
words interlocking briefly and then falling away from each other.
(January, 2011)

And the same is true of Newman’s supplications. More than professional cover
letters, with a wider context than personal journals, this correspondence
simultaneously creates a narrative and invites participation from its readers. Hewitt
reflects on the reciprocal nature of letters, in that each single letter automatically
demands a reply: ‘when the letter concludes there is a transfer of responsibility for
perpetuating the sequence to another person... If the letter is a compact between the
writer and the reader, then the space that emerges between the sending and the receipt
of a letter opens up a gap that can only be settled by another letter’ (150, Hewitt). But

Amy knows the letters will never be replied to:

    All proposals whatever the crest, should seem to remain ever buoyant. Here is mine, as the earth shifts its properties to fit inside my head, and the heavens flutter and everything should be trumpeting glorious, and we’ll all have a good cry: please consider these poems for publication.
    This petition is a good example of what I mean. Belief requires my sending a postage stamp crest and white vanes, those agitations of my heart’s velocity, forcefully into the unseen, and there it all levitates, and nothing coming back. (82)

In the absence of a received response from the editor, the audience shares responsibility in completing the expectation of the correspondence (indeed, they are included as the ‘we all’ in the poem above). While this duty is not literal, it is enacted in the act of reading each of the letters as a sequence. Newman lines them up in seasons, presents them as open letters, and invites the reader to respond by continuing through the correspondence in order. As she evolves the structure, framework and content of the letters, they become shifting perspectives – almost like the world moving beneath one’s feet.

    In “April 24,” at the end of the collection, Amy reiterates that these letters were never interested in physical responses, which is exactly why her grandmother’s burning of the letters becomes part of the landscape of the experience:

    This is my confession. The saints aren’t metaphors, and visions aren’t avoidable. I don’t mind. Teresa wanders the halls in the breeze sometimes, in this mansion of being where I try to put into these words my attempts of knowing. Like my grandfather’s cigars, you either like them or you don’t, and if you don’t, you can always go outside by the ash can where grandmother is burning the letters. In the rising grays of smoke and carbons, and above the familiar pages, are images, ideas, doves, blessings, bits whirling, char, fibers, patterns, visions among the broken tree limbs when I look up, and clouds, dirt, rain, air, fire: the ends and beginnings of thought. I wish you could see this.
    Thank you for your consideration, and for reading. Forgive my
trespasses. (84)

Here, she merges the characters of her narrative (her grandmother and grandfather, the saints and cigars) as the ‘familiar pages,’ while she is writing instead to the editor (and Newman writes to her readers), as ‘the ends and beginnings of thought,’ and the ‘visions among the broken tree limbs when I look up’ past the familiar page. These letters are a routine and a ritual. They are a type of prayer to a kind of God: both the all-knowing Editor, and the audience with a million faces.
Conclusion

While Amy Newman, Mark Jarman, Julia Bloch, and Lydia Browne are undeniably writing poetry first and foremost, their poems-as-letters draw upon a wide historical and literary context of what the epistle can accomplish, or experiment with. Like the opening observations about Dickinson, they are widening the focus, scope, and engagement of epistles, creating new contexts and perspectives within the letter-poem presentation. Where Jarman explores context, audience and delivery, Newman engages new perspectives of identity and relationship. Where some of Bloch’s poems have political themes – drawing attention to contemporary issues of the body, sociology, and government – others forge a new interaction with identity, perspective, and the emotive power of music and poetry.

The epistle uses the letter as a container for different kinds of conversations. All poems are containers, but when a conversation happens in public and includes the frame of a letter, the parameters change. There is also some borrowing and merging of genres: Newman utilises the relatively modern epistle form of the professional cover letter to an editor accompanying her fictional manuscript of poems, while Jarman recycles the Biblical epistles into an immediate context.

Jarman’s collection updates the language of Paul’s epistles, but retains the tone and intention of sharing stories and creating a spiritual culture relevant to his audience. Without necessarily changing the delivery, his epistles have evolved in context and content. Jarman’s epistolary approach is systematic, humourous, personal and profound; and the letter allows him to root his narrators in a conversation with Paul’s authorship. Bloch and Browne use the letters as streams of consciousness, connecting thoughts through pseudo-diary entries; but they are real and heartfelt.
Browne’s collection embodies many styles, and some of her letters are incredibly surrealist in tone. But behind the surrealism, Browne is always looking to actively engage her audience. She exemplifies this in her ‘open letter’ poems. The open letter in poetry is a transformative example of contemporary poetry engaging in intensive socio-political discussions, and encouraging its readers to do the same. Because the open letter is also still prevalent in the areas of politics and journalism, a poem written as an open letter creates a contemporary, politicised literary epistle. Browne achieves this seriously and ironically; while her poems bend and fluctuate from sarcastic to wholehearted, they are always sincere in message and content.

Conversely, Newman solidly bases her epistles in narrative. Newman’s letters are a personal reflection of the narrator’s life, but they also cycle through different uses of audience, evolving the literal recipient of the letters from a fictional Editor to God. She is always telling a story in this one-sided serialised correspondence. Letters as personal correspondence usually have either a specific recipient, or a general audience. Epistolary letters always have both. But Newman’s work addresses these audiences in addition to evolving her relationship with each of them simultaneously, through narrative, address, and invocation.

Indeed, the deeper the reader enters her narrative, the more room Newman has to evolve the epistolary structure. Her letters become journals and meditations, and the act of writing becomes comparable to the act of prayer. Compared to Browne’s collection, Newman is less serious and also less surreal.

All of this occurs within Newman’s adept considerations of audience: how the narrator (Amy) and author (Newman) are each aware of the reader, and how Newman presents narrative plot and/or information in asides to the audience. She walks a careful line of self-reflection and exploration, and the styles of her epistles evolve so
incrementally within the collection that they almost seem consistent with one another, until they’re not.

Newman is looking for authority when she writes to the editor (though she simultaneously challenges the concept of authority), and Jarman plays with the authority behind the knowledge he presents in *Epistles* by employing multiple narrators. But Bloch and Browne purposefully reject any sense of external authority or universal standard throughout their poetry. While their observations may not always function cohesively, or create a clear narrative arc, Bloch and Browne are more interested in celebrating the flux and malleability of identity, perspective, and experience.

The contemporary use of the literary epistle draws much attention to these questions of identity, engagement, and narrative, while inviting a renewal of the historical socio-political application of open letters. All four of these authors have chosen the epistle as a vessel to suit their specific aims and focuses with incredibly rich and effective results. At the very least, they are utilising the disappearance of personal correspondence for its niche appeal; because of the way the letter is now being treated as artifact, art piece, and creative nostalgia, the resurgence of letters in literature directs attention in an intimate and unusual way. The old becomes new again.
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