

Open Letters.

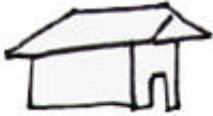
News, weather, sports



July 16, 2000 (Vol. I, No. 4)

This week,
Open Letters features the collected letters of:
Chana Shvonne Williford,
Tabatha Southey,
X.,
Scott Carrier,
and Andrew Wilson.

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Open up.



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Dear Readers,

The time was yesterday. The place was the Mark Taper Auditorium, in the central branch of the Los Angeles Public Library. The thing was Sarah Vowell reading her warm and stirring Fourth of July letter to a sizable and appreciative crowd. She also read a funny essay about going to Disney World, from her recent book, *Take the Cannoli*, and her Tom Landry obituary from *McSweeney's*, but those are works from which people have read aloud before. Not so with *Open Letters*. Not in public, anyway. Sarah Vowell: she is a trailblazer.

If dreams counted as reality though, Sarah would be second, and I would be first. The fact is that last Tuesday morning, I awoke, anxiously, from a dream in which I had been standing in front of a lectern in a mega-bookstore, a Barnes & Noble or a Chapters.

There were, in the dream, about fifty people sitting in front of me, including several little kids. I was holding in my hands a stapled print-out of the *Open Letters* weekly, and I was apparently supposed to read something aloud. But, as happens so often in dreams, when I looked down at the page, I felt as though I was having a stroke. My eyes blurred, the words were in Italian,

nothing parsed. I pressed on, because I had said I would, and read a few sentences, or whatever they were. But it was no use. And so, in the dream, I tossed the stapled magazine away in a flutter of paper, clapped my hands together, and said, cheerily, "So. Anyone here having a *birthday* today?"

A few of the young children, unsmiling, raised their hands.

"Okay!" I said. "Is anyone turning *four*?"

Today's letter, by Chana Shvonne Williford, is the long-awaited sequel to the first-ever *Open Letters* letter. If you haven't read either letter yet, you might want to start with the first one, which you can find in the archives at www.openletters.net. If you have read the first one, then you'll be intrigued to see how things turned out with Tattoo Guy.

I won't go on about Chana. I did that the last time. My admiration for her is unstinting, though, and I'm glad things are looking up down in Dallas. She promises a third letter to Sarah is forthcoming, and that once again, she'll cc *Open Letters*.

A Little Experiment

A letter from Chana Shvonne Williford, on moving in with a new boy.

Dallas, Texas • July 10, 2000

Hey Sarah,

Yes, I'm okay. I know I haven't written in forever...there's been so much crap going on! After I met Steve, which I've already told you all about, things at home, which were hardly bearable in the first place, became completely unbearable. The stress of having to take care of every little detail of Clint's life grew enormously huge. The disgust I felt at seeing the disarray of the drug-house I lived in turned my stomach every time I walked in the door. The constant boom of techno

music from the turntables in the living room, the drama that the other roommates forced me to live through...all of this stuff was pushing me to the edge. I knew I had to get out, but I had no idea where I was going to go.

Then my sister came to visit with all four of her kids for the weekend. She took one look at the apartment and was like, "No WAY are we staying here. Let's go get a hotel." So I told Clint that we

were getting a hotel for the weekend and left. By Sunday, after talking with my sister about it and clearing up some of the stuff that had been rattling around in my head, I knew that the best thing for me would be to move out. So my nephew and I went to the apartment and started packing all my stuff up. I put it all in a U-Haul storage facility nearby and drove to Denton, the town my school is in, to stay at a friend's house.

For the next two weeks I couch-surfed between two friends' places. I was so freaked out about not having a place to live that I was having constant anxiety and panic attacks. I couldn't concentrate and I totally blew my finals. I was taking prescription sleeping pills every night and even missed one of my finals because I had a really bad panic attack in a coffee shop and someone had to drive me to the emergency room.

Anyway, Steve, the guy from the tattoo parlor, was telling me the whole time that he wanted to help me out, and he did every once in a while by giving me gas money to come visit him in Dallas and stuff. But he was living with his parents because of a bad roommate/girlfriend situation from before, and waiting on his mom to set him up with an apartment, since his rental history is shot (like mine). Then he called to tell me that he had an apartment. He told me I could get all my stuff out of storage and put it there, and while I was moving it all in he said I was free to stay there if I wanted. Of course I said yes, considering I had nowhere else to go.

Now, we most certainly had not had sex by this point. We did an even more interesting thing. We decided that we wouldn't have sex for a while, even though I had moved in. I don't think either of us felt that we really KNEW one another, you know? We had a discussion and both of us acknowledged the fact that we had NEVER really known anyone the first time we had slept with them...and that was one of the most compelling reasons to go through with this little experiment.

It was agonizing. I've hardly ever had a sexual dream in my entire life, and there I was having them night after night. But I stuck to my guns, and so did Steve. He didn't have quite as hard a time as I did, though. He had been doing Valium for the past three months, and it had completely eradicated his sex drive. When I moved in he quit the pills, but he had at least a week of pretty crappy withdrawal. He wasn't mean or anything, but it made him somewhat moody in his own weird way. Steve, as he puts it, "crawls into a cave"

when he has things on his mind. He wasn't very affectionate and basically just kind of lay around, drank a few beers, and went to sleep every night after work. It hurt, but you don't mess around with people's coping strategies.

After about a week and a half we wound up having sex. Because Steve was still in his cave emotionally, it wasn't exactly fireworks. Although neither of us said anything, we both noticed it and neither of us made a move to repeat the action again for at least three or four days. By this time, though, we were learning more about each other, and Steve had actually begun to make a few affectionate comments and caresses. I was sort of distressed by this at first, because I had become used to him as this iceberg-like character. But I was excited by it nonetheless, and it made me like him all the more.

Apparently I was doing something right: every day he seemed to be more open with me and touch me a little more. The passion came, and boy did the sex get good! Steve told me one day that he likes me more and more every day, that all the guys he works with love me, that I'm the nicest person he's ever met and the best girlfriend he's ever had. He tells me every day that he thinks I'm beautiful, and that his mom desperately wants to meet me because she's never seen him so happy.

One day, as we sat watching TV, he shyly traced little patterns on my knee and asked, "You know how I feel about you, don't you?"

I didn't exactly, but I didn't want to put him on the spot when he was probably doing all he could just to get that far at this point.

"Yeah," I said, and kissed his forehead.

"Okay," he said with a sigh of relief and a hug.

We're moving in the right direction.

Yesterday was his birthday. Thirty-two! (He had lied to me in the beginning about his age, thinking that I wouldn't go out with him if I knew he was twelve years older than me.) I know he hates the fact that he's getting older and didn't really want to "celebrate" the event, so I simply got him a card and wrote on it how much I appreciate him and that he makes me such a happy girl. He read it when I gave it to him and thanked me. Later on, as I was doing my homework, I caught him reading it again. When I was done with my homework, he pulled me close and told me something sweet that I can't remember now.

"You're so sweet! How come you're so nice to me?" I asked.

After mumbling something about there being no reason NOT to be nice to me, he looked at me and said, "I want someone to share my life with...and that's you."

How completely unexpected! I probably blushed until I was purple. "Do you mean that?" I asked. He nodded yes.

So we haven't made it to the big "L" word yet, but it's lurking. I had decided at one point that I wouldn't say it first, but what if he made the

same decision? I think the best strategy is not to make any sort of conscious decision about it, but just to wait until it pops out on its own. When it comes out of one of us without the person even thinking about it, then it will be truly felt and meant, and that's the way it should be.

So that's where we stand now. I haven't talked to Clint in three weeks, and he's been keeping an online diary which lets me know that he thinks this is hell, but I think it would be worse if I were to keep in contact with him. More about that next time.

Chana



Dear Readers,

Yesterday's *Open Letters* field trip to Disneyland, though successful in the immediate, log-flume-and-hot-dog sense, has compelled me towards brevity, here, which is not necessarily a bad thing.

I have never met Tabatha Southey, author of today's letter. I have, however, admired her as a writer and a mother ever since she published a mean and funny article (in the form of a letter, no less) in the *National Post* about how much her young sons loved, and she despised, the Swiss

Family Robinson. And so when Ian Brown and I first began casting around for open-letter-writers, we tried to track her down, but found the task unexpectedly difficult. She became a talisman, a grail, an unreachable—and then she just wandered into Ian's living room one night, and that seemed like a good sign.

I love the way she writes about her family, and life in Toronto. I hope she'll do more of it for *Open Letters*. And I trust she'll take these sentiments entirely the wrong way.



Under Siege

A letter from Tabatha Southey, on an alleged character flaw.

Toronto, Ontario • July 11, 2000

To the Committee of Adjustment,

The other day someone suggested to me that I might be defensive.

"Me?" I said. "I am not. I really don't think so. What gives you the right to make that judgement?"

"Well," she said, "I am your therapist."

"Oh," I said, "and that somehow gives you insights into my personal life?"

"I've been your therapist for two years," she replied.

"Big deal," I responded, wittily.

"Twice a week."

"Oh yeah, right, 'doctor.' That's impressive."

"It's simply been my observation that you may be somewhat defensive in your personal relationships."

What an idiot. She knows nothing about me, I thought. But later on I started wondering about it. What if she's right? What if I *am* defensive? That's not a good thing to be, "defensive," is it? That's not an attractive personality trait. Actually it's pretty much a fault. I felt vulnerable. It was just possible that I could legitimately be criticized for my defensive posturing. Damn it. Something had to be done. I must, I reasoned, become less defensive, *today*, before someone else figured it out and so cruelly blindsided me.

This was a breakthrough.

Strategically, I knew that until I had this minor personality flaw ironed out, it would be best if I retreated to a more defensible position. My house is tall, and when under siege, I occupy the upper floors. As a last resort I have determined that the third-floor shower, with me armed with a bottle of wine, a good (though wet) book, and a razor, is by far the most defensible position in my house. "I can't talk now," I can say if anyone calls. "I'm in the shower, at the end of a really good

book, and I have to shave my legs, and you can't take any of this seriously because I'm drunk."

Once a week my therapist and I get together and examine that core question of modern psychoanalysis, "What the fuck is wrong with Tabatha?" And when I think of the progress I've made I'm, well, I'm defensive, but still: progress, it's there, okay?

Consider this: about a year after we separated, my ex-husband took me out for a lovely dinner by the ocean, at one of our favorite restaurants. After the main course, he looked up at me from the dessert menu and asked, knowingly, "So, are you going to order the crème brûlée?" That bastard. I was very upset but I couldn't figure out exactly why, until my therapist suggested to me that the level of intimacy the question implied bothered me. After eleven years of marriage, that man had the nerve to assume that he knew what my favorite dessert was.

That was another breakthrough.

My therapist and I talked it through for a while, and I was able to use my new self-awareness to arrive at a solution. Next time I'm in a long-term relationship with a man, I'm always going to

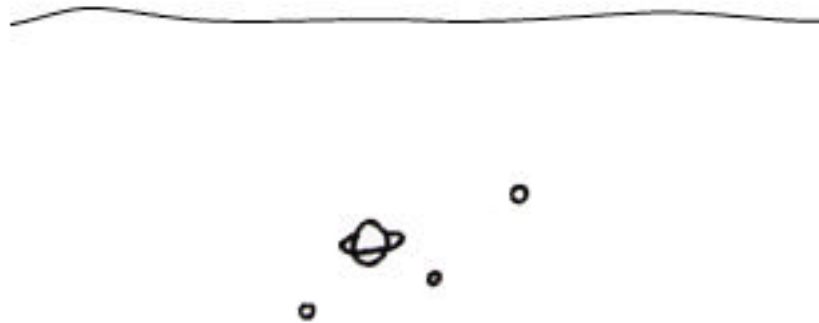
order the almond torte with orange sherbet. That way, when we split up after eleven years and he takes me out for dinner and says, "So, are you going to order the almond torte with orange sherbet?" I can say, "No, I hate almond torte. I don't like orange sherbet. You know nothing about me." My therapist asked whether eleven years of bad dessert and self-denial would be worth this "small victory." Sometimes I wonder if she's even listening.

Although I rely on geographic isolation, living as I do at the top of a fully detached late-Victorian alp, I am still capable of strategic advances. It's another Saturday night, and I've not only maintained my position, I also opened last week's mail. Greenpeace is asking if I want to renew my support. What the hell is that supposed to mean? My Clinique bonus is waiting for me at Holt Renfrew. I knew that. And you, the Committee of Adjustment, have turned down my application for a portcullis at the front door. It's against the stupid building code.

Idiots.

Love,

Tabatha



Dear Readers,

Today's letter is the third in an ongoing series by X., an anonymous *Open Letters* correspondent in Winnipeg, Manitoba. For those just joining us: X. has been writing to Mike, the disappeared father of her thirteen-year-old son, giving him news about O., their joint creation. In the process, she's telling the story of her relationship with the father, and with the son, one letter at a time.

If you haven't already read the first two letters from X., may I recommend them? They're in the archives, at www.openletters.net.

And if you have, then you know what I mean.

From day one, I've been hoping that *Open Letters* would eventually be able to take on something of a serial, episodic quality. This is the first week that that feels like it's starting to happen. There's X., of course, and also Monday's letter, from Chana Shvonne Williford, which was a sequel to her first letter. My hope is that in future weeks, *Open Letters* will include more and more episodic letters, from writers telling an ongoing story – of a love affair, a presidential campaign, a nervous breakdown, an IPO.

So please let me know, at editor@openletters.net, if you happen to be in the middle of an episode.



A Secret Life

A third letter from X., on her son and his father.

Winnipeg, Manitoba • July 12, 2000

Dear Mike,

I just picked O. up from his friend's place where he was sleeping over, and I wish I hadn't been wearing my Hole T-shirt with Courtney Love half-naked on the front of it, and the words Shut up! on the back. His friend's mom is at least fifty, very neat, refined, greying bob and wire-framed glasses, wears smart/casual outfits, and I didn't want to embarrass O. with the Hole shirt so I kind of moved around a lot while talking to her at her front door, pointing at her flowers and the shrubs and hoping that while doing so my shirt would wrinkle up and become indecipherable. Then, when O. was ready to leave, I kind of backed away while continuing to talk stupidly about her flowers so she wouldn't see the words Shut up. Just trying to spare the kid. If he doesn't get invited back to this boy's house, I'll know it was my fault. Although when I said to him, later, sorry

about the Hole shirt, he said, meh. Which means the same as fffftt or enh. Which means he doesn't care. The game they played for hours was hit the puck in the net and see how high the empty plastic Coke bottle flies in the air. The Coke bottle rests on top of the net. Then they ate pizza subs. If they did other stuff, he didn't talk about it.

So, how are you? You know I was thinking about this letter thing, and it occurred to me that if you're ever gonna respond, you'd need kind of an amnesty deal, like libraries have to return way overdue books. Which means you don't have to go over the last ten years pointing out all the stuff that happened that made you leave and not maintain contact and all that, or blame yourself, or seek redemption. We could just start again as of now. Because if we have to dredge up all the old shit

just to get to a place where we can talk normally again, or whatever, it may never happen. Too overwhelming. So, if you want to leave the old shit alone and just start now, that's okay, that's perfect. It's just a thought. If you're even out there. If you're even alive.

In the meantime, more news of O. Lemme think. He's pissed off that the Lakers beat Portland because he's a fan of Portland and a fan of scrappy underdogs in general. He wishes he was taller than 5' 8" and fears he'll never be noticed by basketball scouts if he doesn't go to an American high school. He's really in love with the States these days and can't believe how much Canada sucks by comparison. Do you live in the States? Or are you still floating around the Pacific Rim? Because if you live in the States, close to an American high school, and are interested in checking out your son, who knows....

Just kidding, I guess. Anyway, what else. He's got a picture of a girl named Katy crammed in behind his June bus pass. She uses hearts to dot her I's, and has written on the back, "Why don't you just talk to me? Of course you can have a picture of me, you don't have to ask Justin to ask me. Can I have one of you too?" But O. never speaks of Katy, never speaks of any girl.

Sometimes he says to C., God you're an idiot, which doesn't thrill C., who's doing a great job of parenting. We're trying to get him not to say that. When G. sings her choir songs in the living room, he makes trombone sounds to accompany her, which drown her out. We're trying to get him to stop doing that. When K. says she's going to another punk show at the Optimists Club, he'll mutter the word jailbait, which is something he's just learned the meaning of and thinks is funny. K.'s fifteen now and is rather sophisticated in a certain way. We're trying to get him to stop saying jailbait. He stole some limestone at the stonewall quarry on a recent field trip, which they weren't supposed to do. Do not remove the limestone from the quarry. When I asked him why he did it, he said he didn't know, it was fun. Remember when you took that East German money through Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin when you definitely were not supposed to? All those armed soldiers, and dogs and machine guns, wire, etc.? Was it fun or what? If the guy becomes a pro thief, it's your fault. Then he said the rest of the field trip was spent touring the town seeing the new wheelchair ramp they'd built at the post office, and the place where their tour guide learned how to parallel park. Okay, I said, very interesting. You think

American high schools have more exciting field trips? I *know* they do, he said earnestly.

But here's a story of O.'s blossoming maturity. He's playing baseball for the Sabres, and he's pitching in the third inning. He does well, three up, three down. So, next inning, two out, he's up to bat, and bam he hits a home run. He's flying around the bases and makes it home and sits down on the bench while his teammates hit him on the back and high-fives, all that. But wait, something's up. The ump comes over and calls him out on second, because apparently he didn't touch the base. So that's the third out, which means he goes to pitch immediately. He's looking okay, cool. But he's rattled, obviously, as he starts throwing wild balls all over, except not over, home plate. His coach pulls him and puts him on third. New pitcher. So, that's the thing, maturity. Not that he became rattled, that's normal, but that he tried not to show it. It was only evident in his pitching, not in his language, body language, that stuff. But his pitching couldn't hide it. I was very proud of him, that's what sports is all about in my mind. Accepting the call, and shaking it off. At least outwardly. Last year he would have been swearing, probably, throwing his glove on the ground, that sort of thing. Not this year. And then, on top of it all, at the end of the game I went over to him and said tough call, I bet you did touch second. And he said, no, actually, he hadn't. He said the ump was right. Unbelievable. That's your kid, you know. That's the story of O.'s blossoming maturity. So he steals a little limestone from the quarry, so what.

Oh yeah, I wanted to say he's had stitches in his head and a broken leg and once he had a corneal abrasion. Abungee cord snapped in his eye, the hook part, and his eyeball bled just like Frankenstein's. He had to have different colors of dye injected into his eye, and then he had to wear a patch for a few days. He's okay now, though, his eyes are good, beautiful and blue. One more thing: the other day there were nine of us, our family, my sister, her partner, my mom, etc. playing the game Therapy and one of the questions was: Who, of all the people playing, is most likely to have a secret life. Then we each write our answer on a piece of paper. Every one of us said O., including O. Hands down. The cool thing was nobody asked him, even in jest, what it might be.

Gotta go. Remember the overdue library book deal, no questions asked. But I'm not holding my breath.

X.

Dear Readers,

Today's letter is by Scott Carrier, a writer and radio reporter in Salt Lake City, Utah. He is a curious man, in the literal sense of the word, driven by a need to experiment and discover and to answer questions that others might not even think to ask. An example: he and his brother have spent many years testing out a theory they came up with when they were boys: that it's possible for two men, in peak physical condition, given enough time, to outrun an antelope. They have yet to succeed in this quest, but along the way Scott created an informative and inspiring and, again, curious radio story about it for the public-radio program *This American Life*. Another example: today's letter, a less arduous investigation, into crickets and Toyota pick-ups and true love.

Scott used to record his stories for *This American Life* in his backyard; if you listen to one of his early pieces, you'll hear him out there in the Salt Lake City night, telling stories about football and haiku. In the background, if you listen carefully, you can hear a train. You can also hear crickets.

David Handelman, a columnist for *Mediaweek*, wrote a generous story about *Open Letters* that was posted yesterday. (You can read it on the web at <http://www.mediaweek.com/buzz/columnists/archive/hanratty20000711-174503.asp>.) It's nice to have someone other than myself interpreting the magazine publicly, and I like and mostly concur with the way David describes things. Except: I do copy edit. I must have told him that I didn't in an attempt to impress him by seeming "beat."

One Pure Thing

A letter from Scott Carrier, on a scientific investigation.

Salt Lake City, Utah • July 13, 2000

Dear Paul,

Have you ever been watching television and heard a phone ring and been uncertain whether the ring was coming from the television or from your own phone? Have you ever had a hard time finding your cordless phone when it's ringing? Have you ever heard a cricket chirp and not been able to determine its location? I've had these experiences a bunch of times, and it's interesting to me, because I think I have a rather refined sense of hearing and usually have no problem with knowing the location of most sounds. I think it's odd that certain sounds seem to camouflage their location.

Last summer I used the world-wide web to track down some scientists who study animal sounds. I

called five or six of them and finally found one who was familiar with what I was talking about. He said we, meaning human beings, have trouble locating sounds that have a single frequency and are also short in duration. I said, "But a cricket chirp is not short in duration."

He said, "Yes, it is."

I said, "No, it's not."

He said, "Yes, it is."

I said, "No, it's not."

I kind of liked having that kind of argument

with a scientist, but he didn't seem amused. We decided to move on and just discuss the frequency issue. He said that most sounds are rather complex in terms of overtones and undertones and resonances, but a cricket chirp or a telephone ring comes as one pure thing. He didn't know why this was difficult for our brains to decipher, but I thought it was rather fascinating. Perhaps we have trouble with other pure things, like for instance this may be why we have difficulty understanding a pure thought, or recognizing a pure love. I told him this and he didn't think much of it, and I said, "Okay, well, thanks anyway."

After that phone call, last summer, I made a point of trying to locate crickets. It was hard, but I could do it. The first thing I've noticed is that I can't just immediately walk in the correct direction. I have to sit and wait and listen and make an extra effort at paying attention. Then I went through a process of trial and error – walking in one direction, listening for a change in volume, then walking in a perpendicular direction, listening, sort of zeroing in on the thing slowly by going back and forth. It would stop chirping when I got close to it, and I had to stand still and wait until it started up again. The bottom line of this rough research is that I could succeed, eventually, if I just stayed with it.

So maybe this method will work with finding a pure thought. I'll start by assuming that most, if not all, of my thoughts come as bundles or com-

plexes, and the pure thought will be difficult to recognize. Let's say that the thought I'm trying to locate is "I am happy." This seems like a good one, because even when I do feel happy there is always a "but" or a complex or rationalization associated with it that makes it seem less poignant or justified. Like, for instance, I could say that right now I am happy but that I would be happier still if I had some money to buy a new Toyota pick-up, which I think I actually need and deserve to have, and so maybe I am really not so very happy after all. By using the cricket method I might be able to eliminate this complication by first admitting that even if I had a new Toyota pick-up I would still want something else – that my desire is endless. I don't want to eliminate my desires, because then I would have no motivation. What I want to do is just avoid associating happiness with desire, because otherwise I'll never actually be happy. I want to walk around my desire, so to speak, or maybe walk through it – back and forth, slowly approaching pure happiness.

For the Chinese the cricket is a symbol of enlightenment. I think this is because of the paradoxical nature of the chirp – it seems to fill space, and yet it seems to have no location – a natural koan.

It's summer now, and so far I haven't heard any crickets. I wait, wondering when they will start, wondering if everything, and nothing, is somehow locked within their sound.

Scott Carrier



Dear Readers,

Today's letter is by Andrew Wilson, the guy who handles the on-line books orders at Dawson's Books, an antiquarian bookstore here in L.A. Andrew sent me an email back on Canada Day (July 1); he'd read Cheryl Wagner's interview with Sam and Zak, the voracious smokers, and had liked it, and he had a story he wanted to tell me about some kids in Plano, Texas, who broke into a mortuary trying to score some embalming fluid to smoke, and ended up smoking a human finger.

I noticed from the little signature thing at the bottom of his email that the bookstore where he works is only a few blocks from where I'm living, temporarily. I asked him what it was like where he worked, and he wrote back:

I worked at a machine shop before this, so the quiet is a relief, and the manager here, Francis, is running for mayor of L.A. If elected, he will be monitored constantly by video cameras streaming live to the web, to eliminate the possibility of secret backroom deals.

Which sounded like a good platform to me. And then the next thing Andrew did was send me today's letter, about a morning in his neighborhood, which is also my neighborhood. He's right, by the way, about calling Larchmont Village "the Quaintness."

I haven't had too many in-depth encounters with L. A. people in the month that I've been here. But yesterday brought two compelling ones: a late-night conversation with Andrew, the first time we'd spoken; and also an email I received in the afternoon from a reader named Alivia, who moved here recently from Chicago. I've been thinking about her letter ever since it arrived.

At first, she wrote, she thought *Open Letters* was a good read. But now, she said, she and her friends "feel it is too inbred, and the letters are beginning to have the appeal of a column in a newspaper....Lately, the letters published are hardly revealing, nor do they instill the voyeuristic thrill of reading what was meant for another." She continued:

The best one to date is Chana Shvonne Williford's letter on moving in with a new boyfriend. Now *there's* a letter: personal, containing details I may not get, considering I

do not know those involved. It is not concerned with the judgment of strange outside readers.

I will still subscribe to the site, because some of the letters are worth reading. I don't want to sound negative, but I want to give you a heads-up. This is a good idea, maybe this is what you need to concentrate on keeping pure.

I don't really agree with Alivia on the specifics – I think our correspondents all reveal themselves differently, and I like honest and engaging writing that is meant for publication as much as honest and engaging writing that is meant for the flames. I also tend to think the whole "keeping pure" idea can be a perilous road.

But Alivia's letter stuck with me all day because it connects to a central dilemma that I've been thinking about with regards to *Open Letters*. I believe that our readers divide into two groups. There are some readers who think of the site as a collection of first-person writing, done in many different styles, which just happen to appear in the form of letters. And then there are other readers who think of it as a site of *letters*, first and foremost, a voyeuristic idyll, a place to look over people's shoulders and into their hearts.

I am, depending on the day, a member of both groups.

It's an issue that comes up all the time. Just yesterday, in fact, I was registering *Open Letters* with Yahoo! They'd put *Open Letters* in the "correspondence" section of their Social Science directory, next to a site on letter-folding (you should check out the Florentine Letterfold) and a quite remarkable organization called Ghostletters, a mailing list where participants write one another letters in a variety of historical personae (already taken: P.T. Barnum, Wayne Gretzky, Winnie the Pooh, Harry Chapin, Baron Konrad the Larger, and Caterwampus, a demon).

That's extremely heady company, and I appreciate Yahoo! putting us anywhere. But that's not what the "change form" that I submitted yesterday afternoon said. It said, "No, no, we're a *magazine*. Put us with the big boys. Right there, next to the *New Yorker*."

Alivia, I imagine, would not have been proud.

There is no easy answer to the question that her letter raises. It is part of the dilemma that compels many editors: whether it is nobler to publish the polished prose of an established writer, or the raw and honest writing of an undiscovered talent.

It's a problem that is a pleasure for an editor to

face, of course. And the pages of *Open Letters* seem as good a place as any for that question to work itself out.

I'm grateful to Alivia for making me think again about all this. If the rest of you have any thoughts on the matter, please write me at editor@openletters.net; though I can't guarantee that I'll go on for this long in response to your letter.



A Lot of Bad Things

A letter from Andrew Wilson, on crimes and punishment.

Los Angeles, California • July 14, 2000

Dear Angelica,

I thought I'd tell you about my morning cuz it was funny, even thought it involves the DMV. I was scheduled to take the behind-the-wheel test to get my California driver's license. I had a license in Illinois, but it was suspended when I was 17, after I was pulled over for smoking underage, which resulted in a ticket for driving without insurance, and my license was eventually revoked after I didn't show up for a court date. Now there's a warrant out for my arrest in DuPage County, where my parents live, but they don't really check that sort of thing state to state. I have a permit here (which is embarrassing if you're over the age of 15), which I was hoping upgrade to a license today.

I had tried to take the behind-the-wheel test, which you have to schedule weeks in advance, once before: A friend, who I'll call the Squire, had agreed to drive me to the DMV in his car, and then lend it to me to use for the test. Unfortunately, he did not bring his insurance card, as his younger sister had thrown it out the window in an attempt to kill a bug. Of course I was flatly refused at the window – the fat lady told me I had just wasted my time.

So this time the Squire assured me he had all the paperwork. I talked to him last night, and he assured me he would pick me up at 8:30, so we'd

have plenty of time to make my 9:30 appointment at the L.A. DMV, somewhere on Hope St. I stupidly trusted the Squire, and went outside to wait around 8:30. I sat on the steps, smoking and reading, looking up every time I heard a car turn onto Romaine.

Around 9, a little beige hatchback pulled up in front of the building. The two dudes in front looked my way and gestured, I assumed at the misleading For Rent sign hanging from the fire escape. The passenger, wearing flannel and a hairnet, got out and walked toward me as the driver turned around and pattered toward Wilton. The guy walked up to me and got right in my face and said in a confidential tone "I want you to give me your wallet." I looked back at him, into his eyes, and said "I don't even have a wallet," which is true, and when he said "You got some money?" I said "No, no money either," which was almost true. I had \$2, and I figured that wouldn't help his needs, whatever they were. And I figured he'd either find out for sure that I had some money, by emptying my pockets himself, or he'd accept my answer and walk away. He shrugged, walked away and got back into the car, which had turned around and pulled up as our interaction ended. The driver, puffy-faced with big, messed-up hair, leaned out his window and said, "I've committed a lot of sins, and I'm repent-

ing, because I'm that kind of Christian. I think I'll be forgiven. I've done a lot of bad things, a lot of sins, in the past couple days, and I've repented for some of them, and I'm pretty sure I'll be forgiven, but I don't think I could ever be forgiven for what I'm going to do right now." He nodded and sped toward Western, and I thought, fuck, that can't be a good sign.

The Squire arrived at 9:15, and I told him what had happened. They may have just been fucking with me, but who knows? I felt floaty and light, but that was eaten away by irritation at my impending lateness at the DMV. We meandered through downtown's maze, zigzagging back and forth, tracking Hope's southbound jogs. I got there close to ten, and as I waited in line noticed a crude sign in red marker stating "No Lates." I realized that I was a "late." And the fat lady said, "No lates. We have over one hundred drivers today. No lates." The Squire was apologetic; I was numb. We drove toward my work and I forced myself to tell him about the minidisc player I want, to keep from strangling him. I had him drop me off in the Quaintness, the strip of Larchmont between Beverly and 3rd. I considered donating blood at

the mobile unit outside the Bank of America, but just got some coffee and walked up the street.

I was intercepted in front of the newsstand right before Beverly by a woman with a mike and a little video display who asked in a pitiful voice if I'd provide some reaction shots for Extra TV. "All you've got to do is watch a fashion show and tell me what you think." I agreed, because the lady had a retainer and was wearing beige. So she played this footage, clips of runway shows, on the tiny monitor, as the cameraman shot me. The first bit had a model wearing a sort of bloated conquistador helmet, and the rest was in that vein. She asked if I thought it was "fashion or disaster." I said they're pretty much the same thing, but I mean that in a good way, and walked off to work.

I'm at work now, and though I still can't drive, I might be on TV, and if you hear about any crimes even Christ can't forgive, I heard it first.

Yours,

Andrew

