

# Open Letters.

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[The editors write]



*July 23, 2000 (Vol. I, No. 5)*

This week,  
Open Letters features the collected letters of:  
Emily White,  
Craig Taylor,  
Joel Lovell,  
and Ian Brown.

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# Open up.



A LETTER OF GREAT IMPORTANCE  
MAY REACH YOU ANY DAY NOW  
13 25 32 34 37 44

— fortune-cookie fortune received this week  
by Open Letters subscriber Andy Jenkins.



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Dear Readers,

This is the first issue of *Open Letters* to be organized around a theme. It's a stealth theme, though, one that wouldn't necessarily be apparent to the naked eye: Each of this week's letters is written by one of the editors who work on *Open Letters*.

*Open Letters* is an experiment in many ways. It's an attempt to define and refine a new kind of personal writing. The weekly PDF subscription is an attempt to solve the persistent quandary of content distribution over the Internet. And our organizational structure is also somewhat experimental, for me at least: *Open Letters* is an institution that is completely unconstrained by geography. Though there are nine editors (and another dozen editorial advisers) spread across the continent, we have no office, and we have no meetings; some of us have never met at all. Our communications are all conducted over the phone and through the Internet and the postal service. We end up writing a lot of letters back and forth, which feels somehow apt.

It's got its problems, this method of editing a magazine. We can all feel disconnected at times, and water-cooler conversations are harder to have than they'd be if we had a water cooler. The editors are an imaginative and adaptable group, though, and so far, our virtual office is working pretty well. It helps that my fellow editors are, as you'll see from the letters that follow, a talented and insightful group of writers.

The first letter this week is from Emily White, the former editor of *The Stranger*, a Seattle alternative weekly, and the author of a forthcoming book on "sluts," to be called *Fast Girls*, which will be published next year. She writes about her mother's "manic panic" summer, five years ago, and her fears that her mother's mania might still be lurking.

The second is by Craig Taylor, an editor at *Saturday Night* in Toronto, and the editor of the zine *Anonymous Juice*. Craig designed and

maintains the *Open Letters* web site, and did all the weird little drawings that appear on the site and in the weekly. This week he contributes a letter to his younger brother, about an encounter with an Eminem fan.

The third letter comes from Joel Lovell, of Brooklyn, with whom I've worked at both *Saturday Night* and *Harper's Magazine*; his letter is about a fainting spell, but also manages to cover cross-dressing, the New York Knicks, and forgiveness.

The final letter is from Ian Brown, the Toronto writer and radio host, who has been involved with *Open Letters* since he and I first started talking about the idea last winter. His letter is about a moment when he gave up on writing altogether.

These letters are all from *Open Letters* editors, but not all the editors of *Open Letters* are represented here by a letter. The other four editors are Cheryl Wagner, in New Orleans, who interviewed the smoking aficionados in issue #2; Stacy Abramson, a radio producer at Sound Portraits, in New York City; Stephen Sherrill, a writer in New York City; and Deirdre Dolan, in Los Angeles, who conducted the interview with the most popular girl in sixth grade in issue #1.

This is the first week that we've tried connecting the letters together around a common idea. Next week, we're going to try it again, with a theme that's a little more explicit than this week's: we're presenting an entire week of letters on life at work. We have letters on the way from a dishwasher, a substitute teacher, a skateboard-company executive, a physicist, and other modern laborers; though as always, our line-up is subject to change, depending on the mail.

Yours truly,

Paul Tough

# Waiting to Come Undone

A letter from Emily White, on a manic summer.

Seattle, Washington • July 17, 2000

Dear Paul,

It is late afternoon and I have just emerged from finishing a draft of *The Book*. Now I am in limbo, coming down from the terrible and exhilarating hard work of finishing. I fedexed it this morning to my agent and my editor. I do not know if they will like it or hate it or if they will say, Well, this has potential. Well, uh, this is *different*. All I know is I have been wearing the same dirty dress for three days straight, and my cats have gone feral, waiting for me to come out of my office and talk to them.

Out in the light of the world, I look at myself in the mirror and I look crazy. Maybe if I was from a different family I would look at myself in the mirror and see a Writer, worn out from the creation of a masterpiece. But what I see is a girl on the edge. And the edge surrounds me and calls to me like a mother's voice. My mother's voice.

It's the five-year anniversary of my mother's manic panic summer. That was the summer I turned twenty-nine, when she found herself in police custody in a fancy hotel in downtown Portland, Oregon, the city where our family has lived forever, the city which haunts us and reclaims us. Before the cops got to her she had been seriously manic for months; changing the locks on the house, staying up all night listening to Sting full blast, kicking my Dad out so he had to go live temporarily on an empty Christmas tree farm; moving into hotels and flooding the bathrooms over and over; calling me in the middle of the night and chastising me for being a selfish little feminist.

One night, calling at 3 AM, she asked my husband, "Do you think I'm crazy?" and he replied, in an attempt to lighten things up, "Well, Jean, you listen to Sting, right?" This bit of music-snob humor was lost on her, but nevertheless my husband successfully defused the situation, one of his many gifts.

My mom had a manic break with reality; it culminated in a party she threw one June night when she believed everyone in the world was her friend and she was on the verge of a religious epiphany. My parents live in the same house where I grew up with my two sisters, a beautiful, sprawling mansion on the hill, a place with too much history in the basement. This manic party took place on the blue front porch, and my younger sister Julia was there playing hostess, being a good girl, trying to figure out what the hell was happening as strangers and friends and my mom's co-workers from her middle-school job commingled. A few of the guests she'd met hours earlier at the supermarket: An old busker playing guitar, two deadheads who could tell they had stumbled across a lady having some kind of bad acid trip. The principal of her school was there, as were old family friends who had no idea what they were in for when my mom called to invite them. Mom almost lost her job after that. Heavy medication and tenure saved her from this fate, which surely would have ruined her, since she loves being a school librarian and is fantastically good at it.

These days, five years after the fact, Claire and I still give Julia extra credit points for actually being there for this surreal party. Like a soldier who has been on the front lines, Julia saw the worst and lived to tell the tale. Claire was in Japan, Dad was out among the Christmas trees, and I was up in Seattle working a high-pressure job, behaving like a Success. Julia was in limbo, between jobs and boyfriends, and so she was sucked directly into the storm of my mom's mental illness. It was the most powerful thing happening in her life at that moment. She didn't have anything to hold her back from it.

She has never quite recovered from that head trip. She still gets spooked. She still thinks when the chips are down, when everyone is

at their worst, she is going to get stuck playing hostess, holding the whole meaningless party together by herself.

There was a moment when my mom thought we were trying to poison her; this was after months of not eating or sleeping, her face like a mask, a thin smooth crust over her angry skull. We had gone downtown to her flooded hotel room to talk to the cops about what to do. I handed her a glass of water and she said, Did you put something in this? These days, she has her old face back, and I am not particularly afraid of her or for her, and we never talk about it. But sometimes the summer itself, the pale Pacific Northwest, people having barbecues and acting too too happy, these things can bring it all back.

Since that time I have learned a lot about mania and about what brought on my mother's attack: too many prescription drugs, a quack psychiatrist, lots of whiskey, and an anger which might run in the blood of the family, which might be part of our tribe.

Like my sister Julia I get spooked; maybe there is something inside me, too, waiting to come undone. While I was trying to finish the book, I drank too much and smoked joints as if they were cigarettes. I marched around the house and terrorized my husband; it was like a long, drawn-out PMS. I was so far inside

my own head, my eyes seemed to be sinking into my face. This strange and regrettable behavior makes me wonder if maybe I am too much like my mother ever really to come into my own. To know what storms will happen in my brain. To predict the weather and prepare for it. I spend a lot of time feeling like I need to be forgiven.

Periodically I hope my mother will talk to me about what happened, address the darkness that opened up in our family, ask to be forgiven. But five years after the fact I have pretty much realized that this will never happen; it cannot happen. From here on out, it is a matter of keeping our heads above the poisoned water. My Dad long ago moved back into the house, Lithium brought things "back to normal," my mother switched from Prozac to Zoloft and whiskey to beer, and now she is "balanced." As a family we are supposed to be over it. We convene at the coast and crack millions of jokes. Mom gets mad if we watch her too closely, if we bust her sipping whiskey, or look slightly alarmed if she starts inviting people over for no reason. "Don't treat me like I'm crazy!" she says. Okay, we say, calm down mom, calm down, calm down, calm down.

Yours truly,

Emily



# The Boy on the Bus

A letter from Craig Taylor, on an Eminem encounter

Toronto, Ontario • July 18, 2000

Hello, Scott, you wily old man, with your high-lighted hair and your little digital files. I finally received those audio clips, after about an hour of pacing around the attic watching my computer slowly download, waiting for the whole thing to crash. But yes, they all made it through, even the Eminem tracks, which is what I was most worried about. The only time I'm ever going to hear his album is on my computer. There's no way I can actually walk into an HMV and buy it without feeling extremely dirty. But what would you know? You're the one who wanted to send me that song where he's killing his ex-wife. I can't get past that. I'll listen, but I won't listen to track sixteen.

I feel like I've crossed some sort of Eminem threshold, though. When the first album was breaking out I had no idea who he was except for the posters on the walls of construction sites downtown. I heard the "Hi My Name Is" single at Cora's Pizza over on Spadina once while I was ordering, but that was it. Now I'm talking about him all the time – to Sean and Bill, and even to J., who admitted she didn't know too much about the guy and was more worried about the violence in Cypress Hill albums. I'm not holding it against her, but those guys were mild pot-heads with a couple bad samples, cartoony like Hammer. Any violence there was incidental. There's something different about Em.

Did you read that little blurb about him by Ben Greenman in the *New Yorker*? He said that Eminem's raps retain "a certain charm in part because of his indisputable poetic abilities and in part because his horrific imaginations seems so patently fictional." Which is fine to say if you're Ben Greenman, but I don't think all of Eminem's fan base agrees that it's fiction. Not to say that I'm scared of everyone who listens to the disc. Greenman will probably be fine. I'm more worried about the white kid who doesn't give a fuck, who isn't aware of Slim Shady's poetic meter or his place in a canon that goes back, way

back, past Kool Moe Dee even. I'm not pulling a Tipper Gore and getting scared of an entire genre, but I am feeling a little wary.

The other day there was a kid on the bus that I take to work. When I got on, he was squatting down low inside his Ecko pants – the kind with the white reflective strips down the side. His headphones were like yours: those sleek, well-designed flashes of purple plastic, bent around the back of his head. To go over the top like headphones used to would mean he'd have to take off the Yankees hat. Not a black cap like the ones the clean-living pros wear, but light blue, identical to the real Slim Shady's. He was on the bus with a friend he liked well enough to let her stand near his squat. ("Shut up, bitch" was the first thing I heard him say to her, and at that point it was so outrageously misplaced that I laughed to myself). One of his hands was holding onto the chrome bus pole while the other was busy pulling and pushing on the crotch of his pants in that loose-limbed, bored style that someone's always using in the background of hip-hop videos.

The bus was packed. The racial breakdown was all over the map. Lots of dark skin, dark eyes. The Ecko kid and I were about the whitest: I'm pastier than usual now from working indoors all the time, and I was wearing an unfortunate blue dress shirt, untucked, and wet hair. We were all on our way to Don Mills, over the viaduct and out beyond the Jack Astor's restaurant.

All of a sudden, as we're passing over the Don Valley bridge, the crouching kid said, loudly, "People always trying to fuck me around," ostensibly to the girl beside him. But he was staring at me while he said it, and then at the man next to me, and then the man next to him. "Motherfuckers always trying to fuck me around." Someone turned the page of a paper, but no one else made a move. He lifted his face toward the two older black men who were sitting in the back seat.

They both had high cheekbones and short buzz cuts, and were dressed in golf shirts, and were staring at their hands. "A nigga like me can't get any respect," he called out. "Ain't nobody giving it up." There was an absolute silence in the bus. I could hear the hydraulics of the wheels, and then the light "ting" of someone pulling the Next Stop cord, but nothing else. The two black men kept staring at their fingernails.

I have been trained, since becoming a Torontonians, to do what everyone else does in a situation like this: keep reading the free newspaper in my hands. I tried to catch a reaction from my fellow riders, especially from the other black man beside me, who was engrossed in his Sheridan College textbook. Nothing.

"What are you talking about?" said the girl standing beside Eminem. She was dressed in a light blue pull-over that matched the colour of his cap. And here's where it got truly scary for me. He acknowledged her in a way, nodding his head as if to say, "Shut the fuck up," and then put his two fingers together to form a gun, which he pointed at each of the passengers in the back. First at me, then at the Sheridan College man, until he had gone down the entire row. He started singing and moving to his song. It was a strange, menacing squat dance. "You don't. Want to fuck. With Shady. Cause Shady. Will fuckin' kill you. And you. And you."

I didn't know whether he was singing along to his walkman or if it was just a fitting lyric for the situation. I was probably the only one on the bus who recognized that it was Eminem – maybe not, who can say? – but it didn't matter. The words were his, and whatever fictional context they might have had on the album had been dropped. "I'll fucking kill you," he continued. "You don't. Want to fuck with Shady. Cause Shady. Will fucking kill you. And you, nigga." The man with the Sheridan textbook closed it and rang the Next Stop bell.

I read in *Spin* where Eminem described his triple-threat persona. Eminem is the rapper, Marshall Mathers is the man himself, and Slim Shady is the attitude that he assumes. It's an attitude that could just as easily be grafted on to boys in identical blue Yankees caps.

The boy and his girl spotted a McDonald's on Pape Avenue, and that was that. He pulled out of his squat, hitched his pants up, and said to her, "Ring the fucking ringer." She did. And when the bus stopped at the intersection and the doors swung open, the two of them stepped off.

Your brother,  
in Toronto,  
in the attic,

Craig



# Wild Throws

A letter from Joel Lovell, on a fainting spell.

Brooklyn, New York • July 19, 2000

Hey Paul,

I fainted on the subway again. I was standing there holding onto the pole and looking down at a mother and her son. He was staring at himself in the scratched window, trying out a bunch of smiles and frowns all the way from 96th Street to 23rd Street, while she played with his Game Boy.

The *Post* was lying on the seat next to him. There was a headline about how Chuck Knoblauch keeps throwing balls into the bleachers. The photo of Knoblauch's anguished face made me start worrying again about something I needed to tell Kate, something I knew she wouldn't want to hear, and then my legs went rubbery and sweat exploded from all of my pores, even my shins, and I went down.

I know it wasn't having to face up to something that made me faint (I'd played basketball and was dehydrated and hadn't really eaten all day) but it felt like that. Like maybe my mind/body wall was made by Ikea, and as soon as it had a little psychic pressure put on it it crumbled, and I swooned like a Victorian lady.

This guy with incredibly hairy wrists, like soot on his pale skin, picked me up and helped me out at Union Square, and I sat there on a bench for almost an hour. At one point I pulled out a dollar and asked a kid if he'd mind buying me a water at the newsstand at the top of the stairs. I explained to him that I'd just fainted, and that if I stood up I thought I'd faint again. He took my dollar and walked up the stairs and then bolted, and for a while after that I sunk into some real self-pity. I knew if I could just get a bottle of water or a Coke or, even better, a V-8 Splash, everything would seem okay, but instead I just sat there with my head on the wooden armrest, listening to the trains coming and going and to the announcement telling passengers to step back from the edge.

Eventually I felt well enough to stand up, and I came home. I stopped to get a Coke at the place on the corner – the Carriage House Sports Lounge – a bad-smelling bar, full of local drunks and home on Saturday nights to "Brooklyn's best karaoke." There are six TV sets, and for big games they pull down this huge screen behind the pool table. (I thought about you when I was there watching the Raptors/Knicks series. This one Caribbean guy kept bad-mouthing the Knicks really loudly – "All-on Use-ton, you suck dick" – and when they finally won the series this group of drunken Knicks fans lifted him off the ground by his belt and rushed him head-first out the door. After about five minutes he came back in smiling and conceding that perhaps the Knicks were the better team this year, and then he bought the guys a round of drinks, and they all laughed their heads off while they toasted him.)

So I walked in there on the fainting night, and Jimmy, who's always there, night and day, and who looks like Captain Kangaroo on an awful bender, smiled crazily at me and lurched forward on his stool and said, "She's he-e-e-re."

A few weeks before he'd come up to me while I was watching a Knicks game and told me that he was friends with World B Free (formerly Lloyd Free, the ex-76ers guard who never saw a shot he didn't like). "And next time I see him," Jimmy said, "I'll tell him, 'Listen, you'll always be Lloyd to me. Lloyd Free, not World B.'" Then he smiled at his rhyme, put his hand on my shoulder, and said, "There's someone here you gotta meet."

He led me to this table where a very big woman in a pantsuit was sitting by herself drinking rum and Coke. Jimmy bowed with fake courtliness in front of her and said, "This...is Barbara." I shook her hand and said it was nice to meet her, and when she made

it clear she didn't want to be bothered I went back to my table.

"If you're ever putting together a football team, you want her on your front line," Jimmy whispered to me. "You know what I mean?" I nodded and tried to watch the Knicks and hoped he'd go away. "I mean, seriously, you want her on your team." And then he started cackling and said, "You wouldn't even need another locker room, you know?"

"Okay."

"I mean, she could dress with the guys, you see?"

"All right."

"You following me here? She could dress with the guys, *because she is a guy*." He stepped back from the table to make sure I was really taking it in. "Years she comes in here and she's Bob, and then one day she's Barbara. And that's that. Just tells us it's what she wants to do and we should understand." He held his hands unsteadily out in front of him, the way you do when you're walking in the pitch dark, then sort of framed them around my face. "And you know what we did? We understood. Right? What the hell else can you do? People gotta be happy. This makes her happy. Who knows? Someday I might just wake up and say fuck it and ask her to marry me."

So this night, the fainting night, Barbara was down the bar, drinking something clear and tonic and smoking Carltons. She was talking and laughing with a huge guy sitting next to her, and I drank my Coke and watched her for a while, because I couldn't help it. She had clogs on and tremendously thick calves, but her hair was perfect, and she'd painted on a nice, kind of pouty smile.

ESPN was on above the bar, and when they got to the Yankees coverage Chuck Knoblauch's face appeared on the screen. You couldn't hear the TV over the jukebox, but they were showing clip after clip of Knoblauch's wild throws, and of fans in

Fenway Park holding up signs saying "Chuck, throw one here."

After the last clip, I put my empty glass on the bar and asked Jimmy what he thought about Knoblauch; what, in his opinion, was behind all those terrible throws. "How the hell should I know?" Jimmy said. "Do I look like a shrink? The guy's a major-league ballplayer and he's throwing like a girl." But then the guys next to him talked about how you couldn't deny that Knobby was still among the best leadoff hitters in baseball, and while it was true that Jimmy's sister would probably be more useful at second base, who can say what's going on in a guy's mind to suddenly make him so scared of something he's done his entire life, something he could do in his sleep? "Like one of us suddenly being afraid to come in here and order a drink," Jimmy said, and then he sighed. "You can't help but feel for the guy."

I left and walked down the block toward home. It was late, and Kate was probably already asleep, and I sat on the couch and debated between waking her up and talking to her tonight or waiting until morning. The first time I fainted in New York was when I'd just moved into this apartment. Kate was still in Michigan, and I was living here alone, with no furniture except the futon. She called one morning, and I jumped up and ran into the kitchen to answer the phone, and seconds later I passed out.

I remember lying on our kitchen floor, before I'd completely come to, and looking at the receiver a few feet away. I could hear Kate asking over and over what happened, but I couldn't put it together that her voice was coming from the phone. It was just nice to hear her and think that she was lying on the floor, too. Our apartment looked gigantic from down there; the floorboards were endless and gleaming. And I remember thinking, man, it sure is amazing we ended up down here at the same time. How else could we ever explain it to each other?

Yours,

Joel

# That's That

A letter from Ian Brown, on a moment of clarity

Toronto, Ontario • July 21, 2000

Old pal,

I write to you from the point of view of the depressed but clear-eyed, from the not-so-distinctive but at least plain, unvarnished, Ikea-like point of view of a man who has suddenly understood that his various addictions are all symptoms of and defences against his self-hatred. The kind of man who drinks and drugs and marries and wanders and possibly even fathers mainly to escape the anxiety of being his own flawed self, a being he despises and can never please. The sort of man who gets up in the morning and makes breakfast and feeds his kids – having worked until one the night before on some asinine charity essay he has said he will write (and which is bloated, swollen with the bad water of self-indulgence, and which he hates, but will not change, because he isn't being paid for it, and because it's good enough, which is only cause for more self-hatred, as anything he wrote would be) – only to find that by ten he is longing for drugs. This is the kind of man we're talking about, okay? Not a creep, not even really an asshole (there's a difference), but not your favorite neighbour by any distance.

He'd like cocaine, preferably, or speed, but grass would do. Anything to take his consciousness away, anything to relieve his self-loathing. He knows it is self-defeating. Still. He wants drugs. He doesn't get drugs, and will not get drugs, but he wants drugs.

That's all we need to say about the self-hatred and the drugs, thank Jesus in his cradle. Because it doesn't matter anymore. Because, you see, something has happened.

The crack appeared, to be honest, quite some time ago. It was an afternoon in April. The man was hung over, and instead of doing his job, which entailed convincing people to do something they didn't want to do, he reread a short story he had written a year earlier. The story was about a man who stages a sur-

prise party for his wife's birthday, against her wishes, and in so doing drives her into the arms of his best friend. For a year the man had believed it was a pretty good story, even though he had never submitted it for publication (he feared having work he liked rejected). But that April afternoon when he looked at his work, something new happened. He looked at the story, and then he thought: gee, where's my drink? For the first time ever he really did care more about the whereabouts of the drink than he did about the story. Others had said it better. He was bored by his own words. Not depressed or made angry, just...fatigued.

Surprising as it sounds, this was a new experience for him. Before, no matter how much he hated what he wrote, he always felt there was a point in carrying on as a writer. Though he had always talked the loser talk, walked the loser walk, tugged the self-deprecating loser forelock – which he now, thanks to (gack) therapy, understood was simply a form of psychological pre-planning, a way out of his mistakes, a habit to pre-empt any criticism that might have made him hate himself more than he did on his own – this, this new sense of quietude and resignation, was something different.

This very morning, for instance, he reread yet another story he had written not long before, and an unfamiliar and frosty certainty of judgment descended upon him. It was as if he was looking at someone else's words, someone else's mind. He had no emotional connection to what he was reading, though it was nothing less than the child of his own brain. He should have cared, would have cared in the past, but he didn't care now. The writing was perfectly okay; perfectly serviceable; it did the job. It was not shite. It did not, however, reverberate with the sound of music in the distant hills, as Chandler once put it; it did not hold his interest, stylistically,

contextually, for what it said or for how he said it.

And yet none of this troubled him. He simply thought: well: where's my drink? That's that. It's done. The Word is gone and done with me. Whatever Tongue I had to speak it has fallen from my Head. (This was the way his mind spoke to him, always in a cadence that aped the Biblical.) Nor – and this was the strange thing, the new thing, the for-the-first-time fantastic thing, the cataclysmically original development in his thinking – nor, he thought, is it my fault.

Not only the ability to speak in the tongue had left him; so had the desire. And now that the desire was gone, a lovely peace spread through him, and he imagined himself in deeper pleasures, such raptures of mere being as he had never known before. Skiing, for instance, but not thinking about skiing, with the bright snow up in the black branches of the fir trees, and the sun on the snow in the trees, and no sound except the hiss of his skis through the light snow. Or swimming in truly cold water, the kind that you think

could snap your bones, and then stepping out on the rocks, the sun on his upper arms, on the outside of his upper arms, where the shoulder rounded; this had always been one of his favorite sensations, the hot sun on his arms, and now he could enjoy it, instead of saving it for – what? Not for some story any more, that was for sure. He did not feel the need to write this down. Even when the sun on his arms made him remember someone from years before who made him feel that way, he thought: nothing. She was gone, had lifted off and left him alone, to himself, to be calm, to simply be. She was no longer necessary to his peace of mind. Neither was the storage of the details. All that mattered now was the sensation, and maybe, once in a while, a few thoughts about the sensation. But nothing more.

He sat very still. He no longer had to do anything.

But here's my question to you. How long do you think it will last?

Ian Brown

