

# Open Letters.

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[other people's mail]



*December 17, 2000 (Vol. III, No. 6)*

"Customers responded to my letters the way they might react to a dog suddenly standing up and talking during a small dinner party. We are all so accustomed to computerized form letters from corporations – sterile, polite, unoffensive replies – that no one expected to hear from an actual person on the inside. "

– James Nestor, rogue customer-service agent, p. 9

This week,  
Open Letters features a special collection of found letters  
selected and curated by Abby Bridge,  
editor of *Other People's Mail*,  
including contributions and comments from  
Daniel Arp,  
John Hodgman,  
James Nestor,  
Lisa Thorpe,  
Matt Bear,  
D.C.,  
and Wendy B.

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# Open up.



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Dear Readers,

This week, for the first time in its brief history, *Open Letters* is under the command of a guest editor. The steady hand temporarily at the helm belongs to Abby Bridge, who for two years in the mid-Nineties edited a zine called *Other People's Mail*, which published (with little or no commentary) found letters, journal entries, and notes that had been abandoned or discarded on the street, in restaurants, or in photocopying outlets. Though it had a limited circulation – about a hundred copies of each of its four issues were distributed – it had a profound effect on many of its readers, and it certainly colored my own thinking about writing and journalism.

The contents of this week's issue include six items of found correspondence – some previously published in *Other People's Mail*; some drawn from Abby's own post-*O.P.M.* files of found letters; and some contributed by readers of *Open Letters*. They are as strange and wonderful as the contents of the original *O.P.M.* were. But just as entertaining to me, as a reader, are Abby's editor's letters, in which she explains the history and philosophy behind *Other People's Mail*, and allows some of her nationwide network of spies to speak for themselves about mail – their own and other people's.

While Abby edited and wrote, I spent the week traveling around the blizzardy mid-west with an old-school western-swing band, the Hot Club of Cowtown, who were kind enough to hire me as their merchandise guy for their winter tour with the Squirrel Nut Zippers. (If I didn't have the pleasure along the way of selling you their charming new CD, *Dev'lish Mary*, it's not too late to pick up a copy in your local record store.) Our trip, by Chevy van, gave me a chance to meet (or re-meet) some *Open Letters* contributors face to face, like Paul Maliszewski in Durham, and Dishwasher Pete in Pittsburgh, and to expand my forms of communication beyond the electronic for the first time in a while. It

also gave me some first-hand experience of Abby Bridge's editorial philosophy, which I think can be boiled down to a single tenet: It takes all kinds. As the week wore on, as Georgia became Tennessee and then, considerably later, Ohio, my two professional responsibilities began almost to merge: selling CDs to strangers and helping Abby with the letters in this issue came to seem like two sides of the same coin. (I think I was experiencing something similar to the "brief, often cryptic glimpses of other people's lives" that Abby describes in her first editor's letter.)

An example: I talked to a young woman after Tuesday's show at the House of Blues in Chicago who told me that ever since her husband left her for Los Angeles, she couldn't stand to listen to happy music in the morning, with one exception: *Tall Tales*, the second Hot Club of Cowtown record. (Her drunk friend was so moved by her story that he bought her a second copy. His gesture didn't necessarily make great financial sense, but it made perfect emotional sense, to all three of us; in any case, I pocketed his fifteen dollars, and gave them a free sticker.) Stories like hers, glimpsed in fragments at the Hot Club merch table, all seemed to hint, to me at least, at a nation of untold tales, hidden messages, secret truths written on flowery stationery or scraps of ruled notepaper and then sent off like messages in a bottle: the same notion that Abby was exploring all week with this issue.

So special thanks this week to my temporary employers, the Hot Club of Cowtown, and my temporary colleague, Abby Bridge, for teaming up to make the creation of this issue an unusually educational experience for me. Here at *Open Letters* we'll be taking it easy the next two weeks, for the holidays; our next issue will arrive on December 31.

Yours truly,

Paul Tough

Dear Readers,

The idea for my now-defunct zine, *Other People's Mail*, came to me when I was living in Portland, Oregon, in 1994, working at a bakery, waiting to move, and taking lots of long afternoon walks after work with Lisa, my friend and co-worker. I started to collect some of the amusing, intriguing, and revolting debris we found on the sidewalks.

Working in a bakery and dealing with the public all day, I felt very connected with the rhythm of the day and the rhythm of the city. I spent a good part of each workday observing people in transit, and I was fascinated by the idea that any one of them could become a part of my life at any moment. The writings that I found on those walks – brief, often cryptic glimpses of other people's lives – became souvenirs of the constant intersection and collision I felt all around me.

I began to gather all the puzzling ephemera that people come across in their public lives: lists found in the pockets of thrift-store clothes, notes passed in coffee shops or left on windshields, school work left in textbooks, postcards and photos from junk stores, letters left at bus stops, rants posted on power boxes, writings left in photocopiers, and so on.

Once I moved to Texas I found myself isolated with a lot of free time, so I started *Other People's Mail*. Between the spring of 1995 and the fall of 1996 I published four issues of *O.P.M.* Each was twenty-four pages long and included a very random but hopefully rhythmic collection of anonymous writing, intended to be read in a single sitting. Collecting material for *Other People's Mail* and sending the final product back to those who contributed gave me an opportunity to feel tangibly connected with the day-to-day life of the cities I'd left and the lives of my friends.

I've been an avid reader of *Open Letters* for a while now. I'd talked with Paul Tough a little in '96. He had come across *Other People's Mail*

through mutual friends and had kind words to say about the zine and the concept. He later invited me to contribute something to the mail-themed episode of *This American Life*. I ended up not participating, mostly because I'm not a fan of my recorded voice, and have since regretted it.

When I finally subscribed to *Open Letters* a few weeks ago, I wrote Paul a note to say hello and let him know that I'd been thinking about resurrecting *O.P.M.* He replied with the following:

I'm happy to hear you're considering resuscitating the zine, but if you're not quite ready to take that step, how about this idea: maybe you could guest-edit a week's worth of *Open Letters*, and publish four or five selections from the (I'm sure vast) piles of mail that you've been saving. I think it could be a cool departure for us, and I hope fun for you.

We could even distribute the resulting weekly as a co-branded (yes I said co-branded) *Open Letters/OPM* issue.

What do you think? Do you have some good stuff saved up? Does that kind of collaboration interest you?

I was thrilled to have an opportunity to collaborate with *Open Letters* and a chance to explore how *O.P.M.* might work on the web. In the process of moving again, I'd become reacquainted with my vast stores of unused material and decided that if I was still committed to saving and collecting these scraps, I ought to be committed to doing something with them.

This week's first letter/poem, addressed to Tiger Woods, came to me by way of my friend Wendy B., who obtained it from a worker at a copy store in NYC. Wendy B. is an *Other People's Mail* all-star. Even though the zine has been defunct for more than four years, she has continued to send me gems from across town and across the country. She sent me this one a couple years ago with a

note saying, "Abby – I'm starting to feel a little wacko cuz I've been sending you so much intra-city mail...but I keep finding such bad-ass stuff that you need to have." And I must confess, I've sometimes felt a little imbalanced for needing to have it, for cherishing

all this debris, stashing it, and shuffling it through three interstate moves.

Sincerely,

Abby Bridge



## All I Can Think About

A found letter to Tiger Woods.

(Abandoned in a photocopying store in New York City in 1997.)

Dear Tiger Woods,

How are you? I hope that you are in good health.

I am fine. I am writing this letter to you in reference to the letter that I wrote to Barbara Walters in reference to The May 21, 1997 TV interview with you.

Included in this letter is a copy of The May 25, 1997 letter.

In The May 25, 1997 letter that I wrote to Barbara Walters I mentioned Ebony Magazine.

Since I mentioned Ebony Magazine I thought that I would write a letter to The Publisher of Ebony Magazine.

Dear Tiger, on the same day, May 25, 1997 I wrote a letter to The Sports Editor of The New York Daily News.

The May 25, 1997 letter that I wrote to The New York Daily News is all about you, Tiger Woods.

So included in this letter is a copy of The May 25, 1997 letter that I wrote to The Daily News.

I hope that you find it to be easy reading.

Dear Tiger let's be honest for a moment.

Dear Tiger ever since I wrote that letter to you all I can think about is you.

All I can think about is what it would be like to be with you.

Dear Tiger I was wondering what it would be like to be with you.

Dear Tiger, you are all that I want.

You are all that I need.

Dear Tiger I want to meet you right away.

Dear Tiger I need to meet you right away.

Dear Tiger before I proceed to write to any of the other celebrities, sports announcers, and TV personalities

I would like to meet you so that I can get a field for you so

I will know what it is all about.

So that when I write to these people I will know what I am talking about because

I will have already talked about it with you.

Before I write to anymore sports announcers and TV personalities

I need to talk to you.

I need to talk to you, Tiger.

I want to meet you, Tiger.

I want to meet you, Tiger before I write to

anymore sports announcers and TV personalities.

I need to meet you, Tiger before I write to anymore sports announcers and TV personalities about you.

\*\*\*\*\*

You know Tiger ever since I wrote that letter to you all I can think about is you.

Tiger, you are all that I want.

Tiger, you are all that I need.

And Tiger I want to meet you right away.

And Tiger I need to meet you right away.

Please make an arrangement for me to meet you right away.

Or at least, send me something to let me know if you care about me

the way that I care about you.

Tiger if you care about me send me something that I can hold on to that will tell me that you care about me.

Or better yet.

Tiger please make an arrangement for me to meet you so that

I can hold on to you.

They say that you are 6'2".

Well I'm 5'5".

It would be mighty nice to meet you so that

I can get a field for you so that I will know what I'm doing.

I need to know what it would be like to talk to Tiger Woods.

And walk with Tiger Woods.

I need to know what it would be like to touch Tiger Woods.

Because I really do cherish you

and I want to hold you close to my heart.

I want to meet you right away.

I need to meet you right away.

Please make an arrangement for me to meet you right away.

I look forward to the pleasure of your company.

Respectfully,

C.J.F.

Legal Aid Society Advocate

Association of Bridal Consultants, Inc.

(Student Member)

Graduate of New York Real Estate School

Tiger Woods, Mi Amouro



Dear Readers,

My friend Lisa discovered these next items under one of the bridges in Portland, Oregon, on a late night walk. First she came across a poem titled "Square Deal" (it was folded up with a couple of palindromes written on the reverse: "NEVER ODD OR EVEN / AMAN APLAN A CANAL PANAMA"). Then, scattered over the next fifty yards, she recovered Brandi's callous brush-off of Danny, Danny's tragic journal entry, and finally his job application for McDonald's. They were all clearly recently discarded, and we both felt Danny's anguish. For a moment after I received them in the mail from Lisa, I even considered calling Danny to tell him Brandi was just not worth it, Bobby Brown should be laughed at, not cried at, McDonald's has nothing to offer such a sensitive young soul, and life after high school, or even next week, would surely be loads better. Instead I published the series as the centerfold of the third issue of *Other People's Mail*.

There's something slightly sinister, maybe even deviant about keeping the contemporary correspondence of anonymous living people and sharing it with others. I've occasionally had ethical misgivings about this, especially when the only question readers bring away from *O.P.M.* is "Can you believe how amusingly crazy / illiterate / dumb / pathetic the person who wrote this is?"

Yes, I think a lot of what I've published in *Other People's Mail* is absurdly funny, but I also think the zine offers something more than a condescending laugh. I find most of the writers in *O.P.M.* sympathetic, and much of the writing, however inarticulate, is genuinely moving to me. But still, I can't deny that my hobby is voyeuristic and potentially invasive. My roommate in Austin, a good friend and trusty contributor to *O.P.M.*, once had a nightmare that I was trying to convince her to let me publish pages from her journal in the zine. On some level she was disturbed by the project, and by extension me. I felt like a creep.

At the time Lisa sent the Danny saga to me, I was studying to be an archivist and working at the Center for American History in Austin. I was surprised by the personal nature of a lot of the collections there, and I was drawn to the immediacy and intimacy of working with primary sources. I think most people accept the practice of keeping personal material in libraries and archives as an essential part of preserving cultural memory and promoting historical understanding. I wonder, though, how many people actually recognize or have stopped to consider what sorts of things we archivists maintain for posterity. Lots of personal letters on every topic imaginable, notes, personal records, ephemera of all sorts, hair, clothes, and just about anything else.

Last week, a man came in to the historical society where I now work, in San Francisco, to help us identify some of the photographs and other items that the society had received as the result of a legal case. One of the boxes he sifted through contained a suicide note he had written as a teenager twenty years ago. Certainly this note has some historical significance – it helps to document the events out of which the collection arose – but it is also an undeniably, painfully private piece of writing. This collection, and others like it, are not only historic artifacts, they can be resources for people close to the events to use in trying to make sense of their own lives.

Just as old letters in historical archives can illuminate the past, more recent letters, even anonymous, inarticulate ones, have something to say about contemporary social experience. So I take pride in my sometimes voyeuristic profession, and I defend my own little personal archives of the unknown.

Sincerely,

Abby Bridge

# A Curveball

A collection of letters and notes by Danny and Brandi.

(Found under a bridge in Portland, Oregon, in 1995.)

*Item #1: A note to Danny from Brandi.*

3/4/95

Danny,

You know what you need? A good friend.  
A really good friend!

You are an absolutely fantastic and terrific  
person inside + out, and you only deserve  
the very best in life.

So, please always remember that I will  
always be here for you. Whenever you need  
anything!

O.K.?

You're a very special person + never let  
anyone tell you otherwise!

O.K.?

You're a great friend, and I'm glad we met.  
(Even if it was through Kevin)

Always a friend,  
Brandi

*Item #2: A journal entry by Danny. He received  
Brandi's note in the middle of writing this entry.*

3-4-95

I missed work today. I can feel depression  
setting in, I'm scared. I have no one to turn  
to, jealousy has turned me into a monster.  
All I want is everything, too much, too little,  
it's falling apart. How long must I suffer. I've  
decided to act happy but inside I'm dying.  
Brandi just gave me a letter as I was writ-  
ing. She sees me as a "good friend." Maybe  
it's for the best, I still love her, oh well we  
can't all have what we need or even want.

Life has thrown me a curveball, either I  
can hit a homerun or strike out.

I just cried through a song. I just cried  
through a second song. All that's left is to  
cry. Brandy used to be in love with Bobby  
Brown.

I'm so young, I need to pull myself togeth-  
er. It's over, it's really over.

*Item #3: A poem found near the other two items.  
The author is unknown.*

## Square Deal

The thoughts have always been here.  
Channeling throughout neutrons and crazy  
lust dripping from my nostrils in a brim  
stone blaze. Madness filling my cup which  
no one dares to sip. Fear?

Loathsome clippings say I. Dancing on the  
graves of the melancholy.

Laugh, laugh damn you all. Puppeteers  
snickering at the lonely ghosts in your closets.

End your search! For the soulless savior  
you seek is within yourself.

So deep it's madding.

Prod it all, poke into your mind with tear  
stained hands and pull all that's left to show  
no one but yourself.

486%

*Item #3 (reverse): The palindromes written on the  
back of the poem.*

NEVER ODD OR EVEN  
A MAN A PLAN A CANAL PANAMA

Dear Readers:

This next exchange was instigated by Daniel Arp in 1998. Daniel is now a twenty-five-year-old high school writing teacher in Pittsburgh. It was passed on to me and *Open Letters* by Dominique Ritter, who works at *Adbusters* magazine.

I think Daniel's impulse to mess with corporations – in this case Amazon.com – to call them on the absurdity of their language, is a very natural and humane response to pseudo-intimate niche advertising. Some advertising is unnervingly well-targeted, but a lot of it, despite the enormous marketing effort behind it, is laughably off-base. Like the Gap flyer I received a couple months ago that read, "We know you're expecting, so come by soon and check out our maternity selection!" (Did they know something I didn't?) Whether or not the marketers have their niches straight, lots of us have the urge to tell them they don't have us figured out; a desire to respond to their false dialogue with a real dialogue, or at least an entertaining exchange, where we are in control.

But as I read Daniel's exchange with Amazon, I found myself scouring the corporate side for certain nuances. Most of Amazon's responses are boilerplate, standard form-letter fare, but there are moments where I see glimmers of an actual person on the other end, calculating how to respond, deciding whether to run with it or play it straight. From the outside it's easy to imagine corporations as monolithic entities with absolute control over their corporate identities and public relations, but I doubt whether this is ever really the case.

I've described *Other People's Mail* as a compilation of found mail, but to be honest a good portion of the contents were not found, they were snuck. Snuck to me by folks like Jenna L. and Michael L., the customer-service representatives on the other side of Daniel Arp's exchange with Amazon. My friend James

Nestor supplied some of the best business correspondence that I've hoarded for *O.P.M.* James and I have been friends for almost fifteen years now and he's hands-down the most persistent, inventive smart-ass I've ever known. I think this character trait is overwhelmingly apparent from the moment you meet him, but mystifyingly, it eluded the H.R. people who hired him for a string of customer-service jobs – as a diapering consultant, a rare-toy service agent, and an envelope estimator – in his first couple years after college.

He thinks he might have been hired because he had a fresh college degree, spoke somewhat clearly and wore a tie to every interview. Then again, he says, maybe it was for what he didn't have: a felony, a tattooed tear under an eye, a bad amphetamine habit, jittery eyes or clammy palms. I asked James to share some of his adventures in customer service with *Open Letters*. Here's what he wrote:

All these jobs paid next to nothing, but they had other merits: they were easy and stress-free; they required little physical movement and even less thinking. At that time in my life it was exactly what I wanted. I later found out that customer-service jobs could also be a whole lot of fun. By the third week on the job, you somehow find yourself as an unsupervised representative for the entire corporation, given free access to a warehouse of goods. With complete trust, your boss leaves it to you to contact that angry mother in Pennsylvania who is complaining because the largest sized "tummy topper" does not fit her "extra husky" kid. You are the one who writes back to the psychotic aunt who, in a three-page plea, "prays" that you can find just one more discontinued action figure for Johnny (who is handicapped, and gets little pleasure from anything but collecting Micro Machines, especially the rare ones). When you find yourself at a desk, half asleep, surrounded by all this potential, you start cooking up some strange recipes. And before you know it you start trying them out.

At a job for a large toy company, I was in charge of answering customers' letters, pack-

ing toys and sending out special requests for rare or discontinued toys. I had been there about a month, long enough to be weary of the daily jog trot, when I started experimenting with "creative" responses. I wrote one reply to an old guy (I could tell he was old because the paper on which his letter was written was yellow on the sides and every inch of it reeked of pipe tobacco) entirely in iambic pentameter, all 700 words. I wrote another, also about two pages long, in one sentence without punctuation, no spaces between the words – "Thankyouforyourinterestinourcompanysir" – and another that had each new sentence start with the next letter in the alphabet: "Always a pleasure to assist you! But I should mention that your request can't be processed at this time. Could you find another item you might be interested in? Dare I say the newer Robot Racers are really exciting. Everyone loves 'em! From young boys to old girls..." Ending a letter abruptly with "Zoinks!" looks stranger than it sounds.

Because the work was easy, I could come in late, nobody bothered me, and I was too lazy to get another job, I actually wanted to stay there for a while, so I felt I had to include some sort of "hush money" to balance things out. Otherwise someone might get offended and decide to forward the letters to some vice president or my boss or something. One guy, an "avid collector," got a letter written backward – *sa ni nettirw drawkcab* – but he also got the toy he asked for, and about thirty other rare figures. Another looking for a small doll's dress outfit was rewarded with a 4' x 4' box full of footballs, frisbees, a talking bear, some T-shirts, and a fifty-page letter that had one word written on each page, all sent FedEx Priority Overnight.

But my letters and boxes of plenty were nothing compared to the thank-you letters I received in return. The responses ranged from confused, terse and restrained (maybe even a

little scared) – "Thanks for the figures and all the extras. Bill"; "Appreciate it. Carolyn" – to extremely verbose and sycophantic. I became "a saint," "blessed," "amazing," "a gentle, gentle man." One flirty housemom actually found my number and called me. With the sound of screaming kids and a blaring TV in the background, she spoke in a whispery, low voice and asked me if she could "do anything, *any - thing*, in return."

These reactions to my letters – fascinated, frightened, dumbfounded, happy, nervous, confused – showed me how completely disarming my behavior was. The customers responded the way they might react to a dog suddenly standing up and talking during a small dinner party. We are so accustomed to computerized responses, form letters, sterile, polite, unoffensive, safe and faceless replies, that no one really expected to contact another person on the inside. Subverting the standard customer-service model, however slightly, seemed to allow an open field of play between the "agent" and the "customer." There were no rules. Anything was possible. The letters I received – with all their jittery cursive language, their open confessions, their declarations of love, their enclosures of personal pictures – were a warm hand stretched out to the heart behind the cold doors of a corporation. They were also often far more strange, creative and amusing than my own pranks.

James no longer works in customer service, but I still think of him when I send out my own business letters, with a small hope for a completely individual and unexpected response.

Sincerely,

Abby Bridge



# The Delivery of a Lifetime

An email exchange on love between man and corporation.

(Correspondence between Daniel Arp and Amazon.com in 1998.)

## EMAIL # 1

From: lawn-news1@amazon.com

Dear Amazon Customer,

I have an extreme case of spring fever. And Amazon.com's new Lawn & Patio and Kitchen stores have a lot to do with it.

Our Lawn & Patio store has everything you need to spruce up your yard. Weber grills, Black & Decker mulching mowers, Fiskars tree pruners – the selection is amazing. And if it's information you're looking for, we've got buying guides and articles that will turn brown thumbs green and green thumbs greener. Come explore:

<http://www.amazon.com/lawnandpatio>

Does spring bring out the chef in you? Then try our new Kitchen store. It's brimming with thousands of culinary essentials for novices and gourmets alike. Calphalon, Cuisinart, Henckels, KitchenAid – we've got all the top brands. Go to:

<http://www.amazon.com/kitchen>

So stop by Amazon.com today. And get the things you need to make the most of the season.

Sincerely,

David Risher  
Senior VP and Avid Amazon.com Shopper

## EMAIL # 2

To: lawn-news1@amazon.com  
Subject: Amazon dot me faster

Dear Amazon.com,

I've got the fever too. For you, Amazon. You feel the spring in the air? I feel it in my step.

Your new Lawn & Patio and Kitchen stores have a lot to do with it, but then there's also the tremendous savings on books and music and toys and ideas. Webers and Deckers and pruners – I can feel the surge in my blood, the ache and the longing of this crush.

You ask me, "Does spring bring out the chef in you?" You are such a tease, Amazon. That's what I admire about you. I say "admire," because that is truly what I feel toward you: admiration and respect. This is more than consumer lust – the impulsive desire to buy, buy, buy you out till we're both dry and empty, panting for breath and mouthing the words "supply," "demand," "supply," "demand," with each in-breath and out-breath.

No, Amazon. Though this physical desire resides within me, my feelings toward you as a corporation are infinitely more complex. This is about more than consumption, Amazon. It is even about more than obsession. It is about love. There, I said it: L-O-V-E.

Sincerely,

Daniel Arp  
Rabid Amazon.com shopper

## EMAIL # 3

From: orders@amazon.com  
Subject: Your Amazon.com Inquiry

Dear Daniel,

Greetings from Amazon.com.

What a refreshing message! I so enjoyed your accolades, and am very glad to know that we have such a devoted customer. It is so nice to hear that you enjoy shopping with us, and you are not afraid to tell us! Thank you so much for taking the time to write in.

I do hope that you will continue your adoration, and that we continue to show you the best service, prices, and selection that you could ever find. Please let us know if there is ever anything we may do for you. I hope that you are able to find a treasure or two soon, as to quench your thirst for Amazon.com.

Thank you so much, Daniel, for your kind and heartfelt words. I look forward to your next visit. I hope that you have a pleasant day!

Best regards,

Jenna L.  
Earth's Biggest Selection

EMAIL # 4

To: orders@amazon.com  
Subject: Re: Your Amazon.com Inquiry

Dear Amazon,

Oh wow. Wow wow wow. Wow wow wow wow. You're so turning me on right now to savings. I want to gobble 'em up like candy.

I hope you don't consider it too forward of me that I sent you an e-card, Amazon. (It's a little note with a picture of the suicidal virgins. Hope you like it!) I just wanted to repay you for your warm, affectionate reply to my message. It meant a lot to me, as has the witty back-and-forth I've enjoyed with you while surfing your web site. "Click here, Daniel Arp." "Click there, Daniel Arp." You big tease. I'll click anywhere you want, Amazon.

I just had an impulse: Could you give me an address to send you flowers?

I'm usually not this forward with corporations, but I really think there's something special about you, Amazon.

Whoa, I just thought of something: Do you *sell* flowers? Cause if you do I could just

order them from you to send to you. Hold on, let me check your web site. Back in a sec...

Damn, no flowers. I guess I'll have to get them elsewhere. But I don't want to go anywhere else. This is where I want to be: right here with you. I feel so close to you right now, Amazon.

I would like very much if you gave me a call, Amazon. You could tell me some of your special offers. I could provide you with some special offers of my own. It wouldn't have to be a big deal, Amazon, we could just talk about whatever came to mind. I could tell you my idea for a tattoo.

Enticed?

Daniel Arp  
Earth's Biggest Predilection...for you, Amazon

EMAIL # 5

From: orders@amazon.com  
Subject: Your Amazon.com Order

Dear Mr. Arp:

Greetings from Amazon.com!

Thanks you for you kind words and your card. While we appreciate your offer to send us flowers, it certainly is not necessary. Your kind words are more than good enough for us.

It is because of customer comments like yours that we strive to be the very best. I would like to extend our thanks to you for your loyalty and very kind feedback. Without such customers as you, we could not continue to provide the service and selection you've come to expect from our store. Your comments are greatly appreciated, and I sincerely thank you for choosing Amazon.com!

Best regards,

Michael L.  
Earth's Biggest Selection

EMAIL # 6

To: orders@amazon.com  
Subject: Re: Your Amazon.com Order

Dear Amazon:

I am death, and you are life, Amazon. I count the hours between each rendezvous as though counting the drip drip drip from that sad old rooftop, a Chinese water torture of waiting, waiting for the next check, the next mouse click and impulse-buy, my leg jerking as though from electric shock waiting to buy and purchase and own. If I could only own *you*, Amazon. I see the smiling face of your founder, Jeff Bezos, inside a shipping box on the cover of *Time* magazine, and I think, "If only...." How much is Jeff Bezos's smiling Man of the Year face worth? Alas, too much for my meager means. Shipping alone would be a nightmare of cost and consequence. They would have to sedate him and send him in a cage, like a circus animal. To subdue him they'd have to shock him repeatedly with a cattle prod. I don't want that. Especially since they'd have to do the same for me, while I waited in my lonely afternoon corner for the delivery of a lifetime, the delivery of you, Amazon, to my vacant residential doorstep.

I have entered the Amazone. I see you everywhere, wherever I walk, your zippy logo imprinted on the leaves of trees and blades of grass, the ground I tread sprinkled with the rose petals of your name: Amazon, Amazon, Amazon, the aching wounded primitive call.

I know I can help you. Why did you never call when I asked? Why did you refuse my offer of flowers? I want only to make you happy, Amazon, to hear your voice. My idea for a tattoo? Your logo across my forehead. Your logo on my back. Your logo running like racing stripes down my legs. I am willing to become a human billboard to please you! How can you refuse my offer? There has never been a more devoted customer, for customers treat corporations like dust or rocks, treat them only like they are there, not like the living, breathing, sweating presences they are, teeming with life and desire. So sweat on me Amazon. Bleed out your icons, your slogans, your mergers and acquisitions, and make sure all those drip-drip-drips fall on me, your devoted servant, the one below you on bended knee.

Your panting devoted slave-monkey,

Daniel Arp

Earth's Biggest Genuflection



Dear Readers,

This next artifact was sent to us by the man who received it, John Hodgman, the author of two open letters about late summer on the Jersey shore. (In September John wrote about his bad memory; in October, about being shot into space.)

Lady Stardust's entreaty, like the many scam letters I've collected for *Other People's Mail*, inhabits the opposite end of the spectrum from the intensely personal letters I've published. It's everybody's very own mail. We asked John to tell the story of how Lady Stardust found him, and why he was tempted to believe she had something to offer. Here's what he wrote:

In early 1993, I opened a letter saying that I was a winner. I know you won't believe me on this. Surely there was fine print I had missed, some gymnastic conditional phrasing I might have noted ("If 'John Hodgman' is the name we select in two months after receiving the correctly formatted entry form, then it is possible that the next letter you receive from us will read JOHN KELLOGG HODGMAN IS THE WINNER!"). But the fact is, I read the letter very carefully. It was very plain and very clear and entirely a lie. I had won money, it said, no bones about it, and I would only need to call to claim my prize.

The credit-card debt was already mounting in those days, and I was younger and still believed in fortune's smile. So even though it was a 900 number (\$1.99 per minute), I still called. A recorded message asked me to be patient, and after listening to the endless canned hold music for a while, I came to my senses and hung up. But it was too late. As I would soon learn, the "call our 900 number to claim your prize" routine is one of the most common tricks of the scam sweepstakes trade. And even though I didn't stay on the line that long, simply calling the number was an announcement to the shadowy fleece-by-mail underground: here, at 16 Edgewood Avenue in New Haven, lived a rube.

Whatever you may have heard about the manipulative senior-baiting of the Publisher's Clearinghouse and *Reader's Digest* sweepstakes programs, these organizations are angelic com-

pared to the blatant thievery of the smaller con artists who, with a mailing list and a stamp machine, thrived in the pre-internet bust-times of the early 90s. At least my aunt Yolanda, a *Reader's Digest* addict, has roomfuls of magazines and almanacs to show for her naive faith that someday she'll open her door to a giant-check-wielding quasi-celebrity and a bunch of balloons. All I got was a two-dollar swindle and the pleasure of receiving up to five "important" "personal" "priority" "certified" "registered" "winner's notification" letters a day, for about two months.

Lady Stardust's letter was one of the last and strangest I received, and the only one I kept. It was the least bombastic and mercenary-seeming, though it was clearly designed to prey upon the lonely, the failing, the miserable, the self-pitying (not an exclusive club, I realize, though at the time it spelled me, me, me, and me). I liked it because it made absolutely no promises: it was superbly, unassailably vague. For years I misremembered and thought that the Lady had ambiguously claimed to be in league with "a friend in the U.S. government." But upon re-reading it today, I realize that she cites only "an associate in the United States," which is even more wonderfully fuzzy. Lady Stardust had perfected the discourse of flattering, comforting, sympathetic deception that is the lingua franca of the sweepstakes industry, and too often, sadly, is the same language in which we speak to our friends and ourselves.

I never did get my lucky numbers, nor the prosperity Lady Stardust coyly promised. Instead, I moved to New York City and went into publishing. This was not the best-paying job in the world. The credit-card debt mounted further, and during the greatest sustained economic boom in history, I rarely made more than twenty grand, and often much less. I quit my job this past summer, just in time for the dot-com-fattened market to wither suddenly, and a new recession dawns with a bleak blue light on the horizon. Email has given new life to the sweepstakes con game, and my in-box has just now started to be flooded by new promises of unearned wealth.

Sincerely,

Abby Bridge

# Your Lucky Moment

A letter from Lady Stardust, on extraordinary sums of money.

(Received by John Hodgman in 1993.)

Dear John,

My name is Lady Stardust. An associate in the United States has provided me with your name. He's deeply concerned with your future and would like to see you happy and successful.

You're not alone, John, everyone is having money problems. Sure you're proud, but don't be too proud to share your problems with your friends. John, there are all types of people in this world, and I happen to know that you are a worthwhile and deserving person. You deserve much more than you are receiving right now. John, don't give up, you may be on the verge of winning a major lottery or sweepstakes or receiving an inheritance.

John, you may be tempted to take this letter and throw it away. You may feel that smart people don't need the help of anyone especially unsolicited advice, right? Wrong! Some of the advice that you have been receiving from your friends may not be the best advice for you right now, in fact some of the people you think are your friends may actually be your Judas. All I can say is beware.

My associate in the United States asked me to help make your life easier. John, after making this request of me, I envisioned a series of numbers, I do not know what those numbers represent, for all I know they may be the numbers that appear on a loved one's Social Security Card or they may be the numbers that will win you a lottery or sweepstakes. Many of the numbers I have selected have

won extraordinary sums of money for my friends. John, it may be that your lucky moment in life is approaching and your less fortunate days may be in the past.

If you would like to receive your lucky numbers call the number shown below. Please do not delay. The numbers selected have a special importance for the period of March 19 to March 31. If you would like to receive your special lucky numbers you can call 1-900-680-8667 (cost of call \$3.99 per minute, you must be over 18. Service by Infotrax, Mt. Laurel, NJ, average call 3-4 minutes). I will give you the lucky numbers that I have personally selected for you at that time. The telephone number is 1-900-680-8667 (\$3.99 per minute, you must be over 18, average call 3 to 4 minutes), please call if you would like to receive your special lucky numbers. I have assigned you a personal case number 690-3020-372, please have your number handy when you call.

These numbers are of no use to anyone else and will be destroyed if we do not hear from you by March 31. I have already informed my friend that I have provided you with the opportunity to change your life.

Blessed be.

Lady Stardust

PS: If I do not hear from you I can only hope things are going well for you.

Dear Readers,

The next found letter was one of the first I collected for *Other People's Mail*. It was given to me by my friend D.C., who has provided me with enough material over the years to start his own franchise of the zine. I asked D.C. to make some comments about how he came by this letter, and about serving time at Kinko's. Here's what he wrote:

This came to me through a fellow employee of Kinko's when I was working there in college. Apparently a big bodybuilder walked in around four or five o'clock one morning and laboriously pecked it out on the public typewriter. When he brought it up to have it copied (about an hour later), my co-worker automatically ran off a couple of extra copies for himself, and passed one on to me later.

Documents like this are a welcome antidote to the crushing volume of corporate reports and meaningless Powerpoint presentations that comprise the bulk of Kinko's work. The copy-

ing drone is surrounded by the clunking of car-sized production copiers emitting two copies per second. Breathing in their exhaust, he or she exists only to service these machines with paper and toner and to collate and bind their product for hours through the night. Such a drone naturally welcomes the eccentrics who populate the store in the small hours of the night. While the desperate, obsessed, and insane may comprise but a tiny percentage of Kinko's revenue, they feed a thriving economy of found documents, an endless traffic among employees in copies of gory evidence photos, tragic résumés, breakup letters, arcane pyramid schemes, advertisements for sex furniture. Over the years, I funneled some of these to *Other People's Mail*. Others, yet undiscovered, are sitting in the recycling bin at your local Kinko's right now.

Sincerely,

Abby Bridge



## Stuck

A found letter about a bad day.

(Purloined in 1992 by an employee of the Kinko's where it was copied.)

Dear Judge,

I will try to brief, but please read this entire letter on my behalf, this is my only form of defense.

On the twenty-fourth of November, ninety-two, I was at my gym (XXXX Fitness on 41st Ave. in XXXXXXX, Ca.).

I just started bodybuilding on a competitive

level. Anyway, I was working out really hard on the day mentioned above in which I was at the gym for over seven hours. My whole workout was isolated on only one muscle, the latissimus dorsi, which is located on the inner, and outer sides of the back, the nick name for this muscle is the "wings." I worked this area really hard, in fact, too hard. I continued to workout til the gym

began to close, I meant to save enough time to sit in the hot tub because I knew I would need to after this workout, so I would not be too sore in the morning, but I failed to leave the time needed for that comfort. Well anyway I got in my van, and prepared to drive home. As I began to back up and turn out of my parking space, I was not able to turn my steering wheel, I was simply too sore to make my van turn. Great, I really did it this time, I am too sore to drive home. So I decided to wait a while and try it again. I waited two hours before I started my van to try it again, and again I was too sore to turn that steering wheel. All the money I could find in my gym bag was \$3.77 which was not enough for today's taxi rates. So I was simply stuck, I just moved here in which I have no friends or relatives within 400 miles, so as I mentioned, I was stuck there til my muscle was less sore, or even enough to drive in pain.

So I stretched out in the back of my ice cold cargo van (ice cold as in only metal and no insulation). I do not know how I fell asleep in that igloo, but I did til a police officer woke me up, only to say "sign here." I tried to explain, but he said save it for the judge, so I did.

My courtdate is not til the sixth of April, in which I planned to contest that officer in court; but now I have a serious problem. My parents live in Phoenix, AZ and just bought a almost new house in Tuscon AZ for half of the regular price. Well because they saved huge amounts of money, and now own a extra bedroom, they invited me to live with them for less than I have to pay out here. The escrow on the new house closes on the seventh of Jan. in which they can start moving in on the 7th. So my parents are driving a moving truck here to pick up me and my van; then I can help them move.

This is my request of you, your honor:

Can I please work off my crime with community service, and have it finished with by Jan. 6th. So I can move to Arizona, and not have to come back for court?

Please let me work it off and be done with it, I am a very hard worker, I simply do not have the money to pay the fine, or I would, so I could be done with it.

Sincerely,

XXXXXX XXXXX XXXXXX

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Dear Readers,

My friend Matt Bear discovered this final prize among the letters sent to a woodworking magazine where he used to work, a job where he couldn't resist designing sleek architectonic furniture with secret drawers instead of the birdhouse patterns the readers actually wanted.

With this letter my guest-editorship of *Open Letters* concludes. I've enjoyed preparing this issue very much. I've had a chance to remember how these letters were collected and to reflect on why the zine still means more to me than a post-adolescent joke. In the process of gathering comments from some of the people who helped create *O.P.M.*, and in sharing a few found letters with people who've never come across the zine before, I've realized why that extra file cabinet full of debris is still worth keeping.

My friend James has promised to help reinvent *Other People's Mail* as a web project with a site of its own, and we're both eager to get issue #5 out soon. I don't have any back issues, and I'm not sure I'll distribute a print version of any future issues, but I am

planning to run off a small batch of this next issue for *Open Letters* readers in celebration of this week of collaboration. If you would like a copy of *O.P.M.* #5, email me at [otherpeoplesmail@lycos.com](mailto:otherpeoplesmail@lycos.com) within the next week. In return for the zine, you must send me some piece of anonymous writing for my collection, something interesting, not just someone else's gum wrapper or an abandoned ATM receipt. Three dollars would also be okay, but not as good. James and I should be able to send copies out by the beginning of January, if not earlier. Oh, and don't forget, an address would help nicely.

Loads of thanks to Wendy B., Lisa Thorpe, Daniel Arp, James Nestor, John Hodgman, D.C., and Matt Bear for providing found letters and their own insights; to Todd Ledford for co-producing the zine in years past; and to *Open Letters* for offering to crossbreed with *Other People's Mail*.

Sincerely,

Abby Bridge



# All Sizes

A found letter, in search of specialized knowledge.

(Received in 1994 by the editorial department of a woodworking magazine.)

Dear Sirs,

I would be interested in how to do pull out pattern books in woodwork shop on wood bending, wood turning and woodcraft on different things such as flowers patterns, leaves patterns, wooden bowl patterns, wooden plate patterns, toys and toy parts, different animals all sizes.

And different birds all sizes even how to make a casket, some people calls them coffins, what ever toy and parts can be made out of wood, send your price list, if theres any books to be free, mark free on them, on the book.

Books on how to make axe handles, hammer handles, broom handles, and other different makes of handles, pick handles, mop han-

dles, handles of all sizes, fork handles, and shovel handles, even farm plough handles, wagon poles, wagon shaves, wagon wheels, wagon wheel spokes.

These kind of books with pull out patterns is my favorite, books on how to make coffins, some people calls them caskets, and wood bending and turning is my best book that i want, would you know where i can get these books, an address would help nicely.

Sincerely,

ELDON C.  
NEW BRUNSWICK  
CANADA

