

Richard Selzer

Letters to a Best Friend



EDITED AND WITH A PREFACE BY PETER JOSYPH

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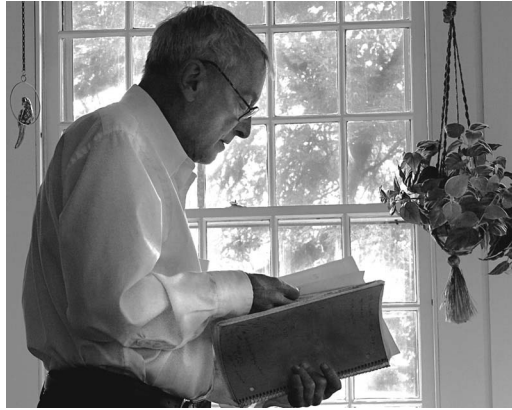
letters to a best friend



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Richard Selzer
edited and with a preface by Peter Josyph

All illustrations by Peter Josyph,
except anonymous photograph of Troy, NY, on page 12

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Sir, more than kisses, letters mingle Soules;

For, thus friends absent speake.

—John Donne

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Preface by Peter Josyph

COME ON UP AND WE'LL HAVE A FINE DAY

When this correspondence was just under way and we were working on the book *What One Man Said to Another*, I had a conversation with Richard Selzer about the art of the letter. We were sitting in the solarium of the three-storied house that has been his residence for over forty years. This narrow white room, which extends the width of the house, relaxes you with a sense of easeful habitation—more so, even, than his spacious livingroom. There is a rattan couch, rattan chairs, a glass-top table littered with letters, tapes, manuscripts, and books. Foliated nicely with a row of hanging plants, the room looks out on a lovely lawn and garden that Richard's wife, Janet, enjoys tending. For a second backyard, the large old house atop St. Ronan Terrace has the outskirts of Yale University where, before he became a full-time writer in 1985, Richard Selzer was both professor and practitioner of surgery.

"It's very odd who becomes your correspondent," he said. "You don't choose your correspondent: your correspondent chooses you."

"It's not necessarily the people one cares most for, is it?"

"Absolutely not," he said. "It's like a target, and you aim your arrows at it. *Our* letters are different, and I have two or three other correspondents, people I'm trying to *reach*—reach their feelings and their minds. But for the most part my correspondence is with people who, if I met them, I would not be particularly thrilled. They are just addresses. There are hundreds and hundreds of these letters. I usually write six to ten letters a day, at the end of the day. The letters I write to you, you can tell that I write them straight out."



The solarium at St. Ronan Terrace, with typed pages of Richard Selzer's diary.

"Do you ever think: 'Wait—this is a good way of saying that,' and copy it into a journal for later use?"

"I don't do that," he said, "but sometimes in the morning, when I'm at the library and I'm having my hot cocoa and my first cigarette, I have my notebook open. It's before I start my day's work. I will, say, think about you, and I'll jot down things that I want to say to you. Then, at the end of the day when I go to write to you, I'll open the page of that notebook and I'll put that in." More recently he indicated that now and then the letters do influence the diary. "Sometimes I write something in a letter to you, and then, when I'm writing in my diary that day, I'll think: 'Hey, that's not bad—I'll put that down here too.' But that's rare."

I asked him to name some of the best letter writers.

"Well, *you* are," he said.

"Be serious now."

“You *are*,” he said. “You are the best letter writer I have ever known, without exception. People don’t write *letters*—people *aren’t* letter writers. *I* am a letter writer: I write *letters*. *You* write letters. I *love* the idea of talking to people in letters. I never take out a sheet of foolscap, say: ‘Dear Peter,’ and think: ‘I’m just going to get this off my chest.’ No! I sit down to make this letter worth it to you when you open it up. They’re all the same length because I only write on two sides of one sheet, but everything in it is exactly designed to entertain you or stimulate you or confirm our friendship. A little bit of it has to do with our work, but what I really want to do is *reach* you. And when I get one of your letters I’m thrilled. At the end of a day of isolation and solitude, it’s my chance to have a conversation. It’s a funny thing, but I think in my letters there is a third persona. The letters are lighthearted, ironic. I’m trying to charm you, make you smile.”

“There is a distinct Selzer that doesn’t exist anywhere else but in the letters,” I said.

“That’s because when I sit down with that piece of paper and my Mont Blanc pen,” he said, “I shuck the cares of the world. I am not trying to write for posterity, I am not dancing on a stage, I am indulging myself in a carefree act of speaking to a friend. The letters flow out. I write them late in the afternoon after a vodka, and so vodka uncorks the wit—up to a point. I never correct them. As you see, nothing is crossed out. These letters are an effusion from a mind sitting there in its pajamas, its bathrobe, and its slippers.”

Yes, but Richard Selzer is every inch a wordsmith. Both his letters and his conversations flow naturally, but he is adept at tempering and structuring them spontaneously. He never forgets himself with words. With a good correspondence, as with the blowing between horn players improvising off of each other’s riffs, it isn’t easy to say whether it’s art or society because it is both of them at once. Richard Selzer is one of the best, most dedicated practitioners of the epistolary art, and in this sampling you will see how committed he is to entertaining his friend long distance, no matter the circumstances or the storms raging around us. Whatever else it is, this is a book about two men who value a friendship balanced upon words; men for whose friendship the phone is a thief; men who are comfortable with the U.S. mail. If Richard wants to tell me something, he can rest assured that I will know it within a day or two. That’s soon enough, unless you savor the delusion that all communication is an emergency. Waiting for a response provides just the right interval between us, and between the present self and the past, enabling us to read a little piece of our own history as told by someone else.

And told in English sentences. This is important for a pair of dedicated writers—one accomplished, the other striving to be—who appreciate a guaranteed readership of one. If a reason to send a letter is to receive one, a reason to read a letter is to write one. If correspondence is a form of literature, its practitioners

needn't choose between the prose poem, the memoir, the short story, the satire, the eulogy, the rhapsode, or outright lying. A letter can be all of these, and all at once. It is also a solitude, an interior monologue that, once it is given a stamp, converts into a civil conversation. If *What One Man Said to Another: Talks with Richard Selzer* is a record of conversations between friends over the course of one year, this correspondence can be viewed as the friendship itself. The title *Letters to a Best Friend* is Richard's idea, and it might be accurate, but it can be misleading.

"It's hard for people to understand," I said to him recently, "that the person to whom you've written all these letters isn't a factor, isn't important, in your life here."

"It is the correspondence which is the life," Richard said. "If we lived in the same city and saw each other frequently, we might not even be friends. That we live apart sets the only condition in which a correspondence is maintained: distance. When the friends are together, there aren't any letters. Madame de Sévigné, whom I admire so much, wrote wonderful letters to her daughter, but when she *visits* her daughter there are no letters and the reader is left out in the cold."

"When Flaubert and Turgenev get together in Paris—"

"There are no letters! And the reader feels insulted that he is being excluded. In our case there is no hiatus because we correspond all the time. Your letters are in my hand, being read, the minute I come home. Sometimes, when you write a particularly good letter, I will reread it a number of times. The letter that you wrote about the two metalsmiths in Virginia, making a cross out of the Trade Center steel, I thought was a wonderful work and I read that a few times. I read it as much for its power as for the information. Now and then you do that, you turn out a little beauty."

Kind of him to say so, but it is solely his doing that I advance in the discipline, learning, by example, its rules, its liabilities, its parameters of caprice and indulgence. Learning, too, that a letter can go forth without brilliance, without drama, even without episode, but it must have a sense of humor, it must have grace, and it must have buoyancy. If there is no *lift* in your letter, don't send it.

If cellphones have shown that apparently polite people were really just awaiting the right instrument of rudeness, email has shown how educated people have been longing for an excuse to be illiterate. Had he lived to see email, Churchill, who wanted schoolboys whipped only for not knowing English, would have had to whip us all. But Richard Selzer *adores* English. An unbroken chain of fine letters full of English, written off the cuff, without revision, is a creditable achievement, and he produces them with such a smooth sense of ease that you feel empowered by it—until you try it for yourself. As email mitigates against such a performance, on the very few occasions I have emailed Richard I have done it with trepidation, lest I truncate one of the most energetic examples of the correspondent art.

It must have been around 1994, when Richard was sorting through a shipment to an archive in Texas—the Institute for Medical Humanities—that he gestured toward the drifting mounds and boxes of notebooks, pamphlets, mailers, tapes, postcards, and letters on the floor of his small study, saying: “Feel free to rummage around. If there’s anything there that interests you. . . . Of course, all your old letters to me are there too. Would you ever have thought they’d make their way to a library in Galveston?” Kneeling on the carpet of this cluttered room on the second floor—“my scriptorium,” Richard has called it, although most of his writing is done in the Yale Sterling Library, to which he walks every morning and where he spends the bulk of his day—I separated out all of my letters and took them back. When we met again in the kitchen, I said: “Two pages, three—my letters are too much. Henceforth no letter longer than a page.”

“Thank you,” he said.

This was a hard lesson: the correspondential quality—and the courtesy—of withholding. It is not that there are any inherent restrictions as to subject. In the way that comedians can tackle any issue they can manage to make amusing, correspondents can do the same if they can make it interesting, *and*—and this is the point—brief, for a ramble is something more and something less than a good letter. As you will see, there are few topics on which Richard Selzer cannot be interesting, and as for brevity, the short form has always been his expertise. Like Henry David Thoreau, Richard Selzer is a born diarist—I have never seen him without a notebook in his case—and most of his published work is composed by the selection, expansion, arrangement, and refinement of journal entries. However soon they outgrow it and need to be transplanted, even his short stories start as seedlings in his diary. He has never tried to conceal this dependency on his diaries. “In writing my diary I find myself at the top of my form,” he has told me. “And it’s worth talking to yourself. It’s a kind of *folie à deux*, a schizophrenia, in which the writer and the reader are the same person.”

These letters, too, constitute a kind of diary, and those that are completed over the course of several days are diaristically dated by him accordingly. Letters that chart the course of a single day accrue the geography, the architecture, the *dramatis personae* of Richard’s rounds. But when I mentioned that his letters float *above* the days on which they report, he said: “That’s because I *don’t* want to tell you the story of my life every day: I want to make art. These are what I *do*. It’s a form of my work. Letters are definitely a genre—and I think it’s one of the best.”

A letter, however personal, is full of information, gazetting a world of one for a sole subscriber. It is also a forum in which queries will be answered, suggestions considered, preferences affirmed or rejected—even chastised or ridiculed. But good correspondents have too much to offer to let your last letter shape the

course of their pen. The surest sign of a dull correspondent is the dutiful ticking off of everything you wrote to them, as if your letter were an assignment. The notion of response, in its literal sense, is almost incidental to these letters, most of which carry the unspoken imprecation stated openly in one of Charles Lamb's letters to Coleridge: "Write, when convenient—not as a task, for here is nothing in this letter to *answer*."

Also critical to the health of a correspondence is the degree to which its practitioners take each other seriously, an x-factor as indefinable as it is indispensable. Too fine a regard can be as disruptive as too little, or none at all. Even Richard's most overt solitudes should not be abstracted from that dimension between the literal and the rhetorical that can only exist in the correspondential moment. You will learn to take with a grain of salt the protestations and promises with which this book abounds, not because they are likely to prove false, but because they are meant to be true the way music is meant to be true.

That experience of seeing my own letters in Richard's scriptorium also made me wonder why a man of such a wide range of cultural connections had continued to write to me, for writing to me meant, of course, reading me—and I never, for a moment, believed that my letters were the best of his experience. There had to be something else at play, but I refrained from asking about it until a recent conversation, also in the sunroom at St. Ronan Terrace (which hasn't aged or altered at all), also devoted exclusively to letters, only the correspondence was now a dozen years older. The talk told me as much about what had remained the same as it did about the little that had changed, and it confirmed my suspicion that, excluding emails, and with the exception of one woman, Pirkko, with whom Richard has corresponded for over twenty years, I had effectively become his only regular correspondent.

"It's completely a mystery," Richard said, "who becomes the correspondent of one's life. It's a person who is, somehow, *the perfect receptacle*. You see this when you read the marvelous letters of Byron and Lamb. It's inexplicable why their letters poured out in those directions, but it's the whole secret of the epistolary art. As Emily Dickinson would have said: 'It's just a happen.' And it has become very important to me, this correspondence. Sometimes, when I've spent a fruitless day at the desk, I'll write to you and I'll feel: 'Well, I did something.'"

"It's *never* a chore?"

"Heavens no, it's no effort at all."

"That's not an illusion you create from hard work, as you would with a piece of fiction?"

"I could sit there and write six a day, it would be fine. To set about writing a short story—to have the architecture, the layers of meaning, the characters, the setting, all come together—*that's* work. Writing a letter—to you—is a pleasure because I know you're going to read every word and you'll enjoy whatever I say,

no matter if it's stupid or not, and I have the absolute freedom to say whatever I want. I don't think about it ahead of time: I just go. When the page is full, I stop."

"But do you still write to me in the afternoon?"

"Yes," he said. "In the morning I still have hopes of writing something more formal. After I've come back from lunch, in the library, I'll write a letter to you, or perhaps, when I've gotten home and had a vodka, I'll write another. The other letters that I write are nothing like the ones to you. I calibrate myself at a certain level, for a certain state, and when I'm in that condition that I wasn't in before and won't be in after, I don't talk like that to anyone else. I have your face in front of me—I have you in my thrall—and I aim my letters *at* you. I've no idea what's in them. Do I tell stories? Certainly they've nothing to do with current events. You could read these letters and think that we lived in the seventeenth century, because I have turned my back on the world, in a sense."

Richard has made the same point about his diaries.

"When one reads the diaries of Samuel Pepys," he has told me, "one has a view of the era in which he lives. Anyone reading my own diaries a hundred years from now would hardly be treated to a vision of our time. It is all an attempt to play with the language and my own personal thoughts. It has none of the greatness of diaries that are major historical documents." When I protested that for me it was often the most intimate of diaries—Kafka's, for instance, or Delacroix's—that bodied forth the time and place in which they were set, he said: "That is not the case with me. I wish it were."

"But Selzer's times," I said, "are no less the times than the *New York Times's* times."

"Then why don't I write about the war in Afghanistan?" he said. "Or the Rushdie business? I don't. It may be true that if someone, years from now, read all of my work, including the memoirs, the diaries, the letters, the book of talks, they would have a certain narrow vision of the time. They would see how a boy grew up in Depression Troy and went to Yale, became a surgeon, served in Korea, came back and made a life in New Haven, and then started, eventually, to write—they would see that small story, with all that involves. But they wouldn't have a grand view of society."

Rummaging one day through boxes in Richard's solarium that were bound for the archive, I happened upon a sheet of what appeared to be discarded notations from his diary that had been typed, for some reason, all in capital letters. One of these is worth recording, partly because a version of it appears in his letter to me of December 10, 1989; partly because it's an interesting—if debatable—description of his life. "For fifty-eight years," he wrote, "I lived with the intensity of a puppet, every movement exaggerated, jerky, predictable, and dictated from above. At fifty-eight I reached up to snip the strings, and ever since have sprawled, floppy and contented, in an overstuffed chair."

Well, not exactly. As these letters will show, the insularity of Richard's world—"my little ancient life," he has called it, or "the lovely quietude that attracts no attention"—is not as narrow as he suggests, and his resignation to it is far from complete. Richard's response to disappointment, for instance, is often a display of acceptance or indifference that is grounded as much in psychic self-protection as it is in true contentment. Even if that contentment is real, it is never more than a step away from protest and outrage (when Richard writes to me "So, fiercely, to go on is all," the *fiercely* is important), as if the shadow of a Selzer-who-might-have-been always hovers over the man who'd rather walk every day to his library than anywhere else in the hemisphere. This is stated with delightful clarity in his essay "Going No Place," and it comes across in a recent letter about that very thing—walking to the library—in this case through a blizzard while the Bush administration was gearing up to invade Iraq.

This morning I trudged to the library. The unsullied snow muffles the drums of war, so I didn't mind the trek; I relished it. When I think of all the appointments broken, the meetings postponed, the flights cancelled, my heart leaps up. A blizzard serves to humble the arrogant. You and I never did matter to the government, the economy, the culture, so we aren't in the least discommoded. We hadn't made any appointments; nor were we to attend a meeting; and certainly we weren't planning to go anywhere. So let us dance a jig and sing tra-la-la.

Another undated fragment, also recounting a walk to the library, typifies how it is often the smallest moments, the whispered thoughts, that inspire the most interesting passages in his work.

Just today, at the corner of Sachem and Prospect on the walk to the library, I felt a kiss come right out of the air and press itself to my lips. A moment later a pretty young woman came jogging by. Had it belonged to her? Did she want it back? I was about to run after her and ask, but just then she turned up Grove Street and into the cemetery, which I took as a message from the dead to act my age.

Thus it does not much matter to the vitality of the letters, or the diaries, whether Richard is in his garden or at the end of the world. But the reader will easily see that he is hardly a recluse. When you walk the streets of New Haven with him, it seems as if everybody knows him from some incarnation of his life. And the breadwinning he does at the lectern—as "a strange migratory bird that roosts on podia"—has taken him all over the world, a world of which he has long since seen quite enough—at least in the life of a public speaker. Here is another fragment:

I used to like to travel. "The stranger is a guest sent by the gods." So spoke Homer. If the usage I have received on my travels is any measure, I have been under divine protection, for I have been made so welcome at the Abbey of San

Giorgio Maggiore in Venice; at Annecy; on the island of Kauai; in Halifax; in Galveston; and in a hundred other oases. Time was, when I found it easy and even intoxicating to fling myself in any direction. Light of heart and light of hand, I went abroad with no more luggage than one of the Apostles. Now, if forced to go away somewhere, I prepare with all the solemnity of one preparing to depart this life.

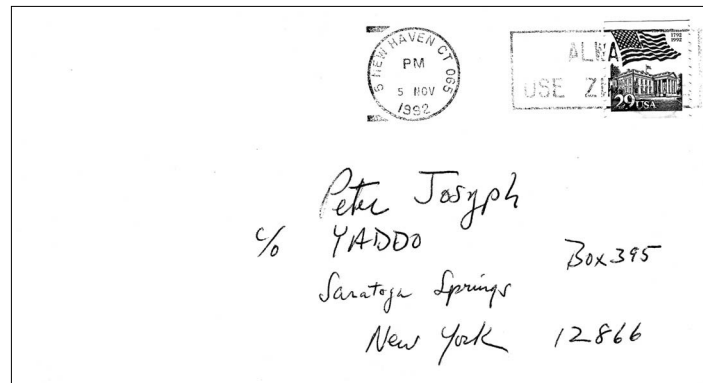


Of course reading good letters in a book is not the same as finding them in the mail. Many's the morning I have stood in the bright sun of a parkinglot, leaning against the door of my car, reading a letter from Richard Selzer before I resume the day. Then it operates within me as a read thing, forming into an answer, which I might half-compose before reaching my destination. When I lived at the edge of a cliff on the North Shore of Long Island, I drove winding roads inland to my studio in St. James, reading Richard's letters as I went. I knew Richard's hand as well as I knew the turns in the road, so I negotiated them equally. Or I would simply stash the letter, unopened; but as an unopened letter isn't an unimagined one, I would absorb it as an unread thing until enjoying it during lunch or at the far end of the day.

I have pursued an exchange of letters with a fair range of people, but such letters have never become a way of living, only a way of communicating. It is easy to think of correspondence as once-removed from life, whereas it is really a distinctive way of *being in the world*, so that even on a day when no letter is exchanged, a day on which you haven't even bothered to go for the post, you are aware of your attachment, your interdependency. Wondering whether a letter is waiting for you, there is the flow of mindwriting as your thoughts and adventures tend toward communication: *I have to tell Richard*. But there are deeper dimensions to being a man of letters that are harder to describe. A married man who doesn't think of his wife all day will not forget that he is married. This subconscious sense of connectedness is more than a life-enhancer: it has been a life-saver. When all else fails—all else will often do that—there will always be a letter to be written and received.

A correspondence is a place, but it's a place of paradox: you inhabit it all the time, and yet it's a world to which you go, and it is not like other habitations. You can work all day on a novel and yet you must still write a letter. You can read until your eyes ache and yet you need to know what's enfolded in that envelope. It is not news of illness at St. Ronan Terrace that prompts me, occasionally, to want to mail out two words only: *Don't die*. It is a way of saying: *I need you in the world*. More exactly: *I need you, Sir, to talk to me*.

Given that anyone can duplicate typing, whereas only a specialist can impersonate script, it might be said that a handwritten letter, like the handwork of an



Envelope of a letter from Richard Selzer to Peter Josyph, November 1992.

artisan or artist, is the body renovating and extending itself outward. If art gets the best of us, then through the art of the letter some of the best of Richard Selzer has been folded into an envelope and shipped to my address. When I open my postal box and see the familiar handwriting, I do not think merely: “There’s a letter,” I think: “Richard’s here,” for I am, in a way, seeing him in the flesh, but it’s the body transubstantiated as ink. And if you are living in a world of unsolicited ads, unpayable bills, slides and manuscripts returning in self-stamped packages that look as if they have gone through a war, what a mercy it is to see that small white envelope addressed to you in pen by a warm familiar hand that isn’t your own. The unopened envelope alone is a lift, a message in the bottle reaffirming that the remotest islands of self are not wholly disconnected. A letter arrives, proving once again that your friendship is real; proving that you, too, are real. A man breathes better if he is worth writing to. A letter remembers you, therefore you exist. With two such letters in one post, you feel as if you own half the world.

Unless it were from a mistress or an officer of the day, the adventure for a writer represented by an envelope cannot occasion the boasting associated with roustabouts like Hemingway, Cendrars, Casanova, Kerouac. But I see it as an adventure, and there is a touch of pride in playing the roles of recipient and reciprocator, roles that can lead to a bragging of their own.

“Richard Selzer and I have corresponded for close to twenty years, sometimes twice a week.”

“Twice a *week*?”

“Sometimes twice a day.”

It is as if you were keeping a T.-rex in your den. Regular correspondence: does such a creature exist? And what manner of man would keep it? Perhaps correspondents are, in fact, remnants of a vanished world, but for all the talk of email and

cellphones closing the continuum of letters, it is no less convenient for people to write to each other now than a hundred years ago. If letters aren't written because people can't be bothered, we shouldn't exaggerate the bother. Machiavelli, who wrote charming, sometimes Selzer-like letters from his farm in Sant Andrea outside of Florence, had to send them in duplicate by two different messengers to double the slender hope that they would reach their destination. In our correspondence not one letter has gone astray—unless in Richard Selzer's home. Occasionally a letter that is interrupted, lost, and then completed months later will conclude in another season, another year even, or else it is paired with a new one. "Just found this under a rug." "Fragments, these are. I have a drawer full of them." "I keep starting letters to you, then falling into a trance and they don't get mailed at all." "Here's one that I wrote but have been using as a bookmark for ten days. Since you don't get any other mail, here it is." In September 1992, a letter arrived dated July 24. At the halfway mark it reads: "Cut to September 18. A recent archeological dig in the ruins of my study turned up this fragment of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Should I toss it, or lateral it to the only human being remotely interested?"



To enjoy these letters it is not necessary to have read *Mortal Lessons*, *Taking the World in for Repairs*, or *Down from Troy*. As he has stated, Richard is not quite the same writer here as he is in the short stories, essays, and memoirs that have made his reputation as one of the finest prose stylists of his day. But readers of Richard Selzer will, I believe, find in these letters many of the qualities that inform his published works, and they offer glimpses into the process by which—and the chaos in which—those works were composed, published, adapted, and performed; or, in the case of Richard's play *The Black Swan*, almost-but-not-quite-performed for many years. The letters will also tell you much—never *too much*—about the character and the day-to-day life behind the pen that opened up a new way of writing about the body, about the act of entering into it, and about what it means for us to own a corporeal form. I say *not too much* because the writer who never forgets himself with words never forgets himself with himself either. Relaxed as he is in the letters, I doubt that Richard has ever written to me without protection. "I am a person who is on guard, secretive," he has told me. "For all my apparent openness, much remains held captive and unspoken. That is the way I have learned to survive. So even in moments when I am moved to extend myself passionately, it is never complete, and always there's an element of selectiveness. I don't believe I'm unusual in that. Nobody tells everything."

Through my friendship with Richard Selzer I have been privileged to have, at arm's reach, a living example of what it is to be a professional writer. If, as Hemingway said, being a writer means finishing things, for Richard it means

never not having something to finish. It is said that after he blotted the last page of a novel, Balzac would take a clean sheet, dip his pen, and begin another. This is Richard Selzer, for in the years I have known him I have never once seen him *in between*. Despite what he says about putting his work aside in order to visit with his family, there is no time off. He is full of writing all the time.

As an editor I have tried to place these letters in context, but only to facilitate enjoyment. This is in keeping with my correspondent's one stated preference for this volume: "It should be entertaining." The number of letters necessitates a shortening of some, exclusion of others. Occasionally I have excerpted a sequence of letters and presented them unsalutated, heightening the impression of a journal writ for another and enabling the chronicle to briefly accelerate without losing its principle threads. In discussing the free hand with which he punctuates the titles of his works or works-in-progress—with underlinings, all caps, quotation marks, acronyms—Richard and I have agreed that it was a shorthand for rules with which he is perfectly conversant, and those rules will be applied to the printed letters. But when a title isn't punctuated at all, it often signifies something interesting.

Take the short story "Luis," which was published in *Imagine a Woman and Other Tales* and was adapted into a piece for dancers and voice by the Cleveland-based VERB Ballets in November 2006. Until this tale has been completed, the title is printed here the way Richard wrote it to me: Luis. With this name, Richard is referring to both a poor Brazilian boy who lives in a São Paulo dump, and the work of fiction in which the boy appears. But in his letters to me, Luis is a form of artistic possession of which Richard will not be free until, at an uncertain date of deliverance, "Luis" begins life as a story, the character Luis dwells squarely within it, and the author escapes to other concerns. Meanwhile, Luis is practically everywhere in Richard's life. When he reports: "Spoke only to Luis, did everything but blow into his ear until finally he spoke back to me," he is talking about a fragile figure in formation, its outlines shifting, its voice indistinct, its course uncharted. Every day Luis is both an order and a chaos. Half-creating a character brings the power and the existential pressure of forming a life. Luis: there he is—there he *may* be—*now* what? "This morning saw another millimeter of progress in the tale of Luis." "Poor Luis, who is lying on the dump while I race about the barnyard clucking out of my amputated head." "Ah Luis! You ask after him. There is nothing to report, as I have jilted him for the arms of West Point. No chance of a reconciliation until October 1." When Richard is uneasy about his brother's surgery in a Baltimore hospital—perhaps too distractedly to focus on Luis—it's as if he is disappointed to not be able to fly to Brazil and to Baltimore simultaneously. And when he does get to Brazil, Luis might have vanished. In a letter that arrived only yesterday, a passage concerning a new, as yet untitled story encapsulates this symbiosis,

demonstrating that Richard's approach to writing—or writing's approach to him—has not essentially changed.

"The story?" he writes. "It desperately needs to be done with, as it has become detrimental to my health, peace of mind, physical and mental equilibrium, and whatever else can be disrupted by the terrible act of creativity."

When a letter includes passages from one of these works-in-progress, a punctuational challenge arises for which there is no solution. Richard is not, properly speaking, quoting from his work. For one thing, he knows his sentences well enough to render them from memory and he is, in a sense, writing, or rewriting, *in* the letters. Sending me Luis is a way of testing and proofing Luis. For another, the inclusion of these sentences is, to me, part of the chronicle of Richard's daily adventure—Luis is one of a number of things that happened to him today—and the distinction between reporting on something written and reporting on something that happened is nicely blurred. This is most evident when a story is told, by turns, in the voice of the narrator and the voice of the correspondent.

"Did I tell you about the wooden whistle he's found?" Richard asks about Luis. "After clearing out the muck that clogged the holes, he blew into it and was startled at the lovely, low sounds which seemed to come from someplace distant, yet be very near. Each time he blows into the whistle, his mind is set to dreaming. He sees pictures which fade as soon as he stops, return when he blows again. Show me the artist who wouldn't die for one of those."

As not one phrase of this paragraph appears in the published story, this is my own Luis, different from the pages called "Luis" in *Imagine a Woman*. With such a passage I am privy to a story in the works, but I am, after all, reading a letter, not a book: an intimate report from the artistic interior. My Luis lacks the certainty, the certification of print. My Luis can run for cover, change his name, or perish of creative malnutrition on the dump in which he is fated, allegedly, to die of radiation. Any day a letter could come in which Luis has been scrapped, so this story about the death of Luis is inseparable, for me, from the story of his *borning*.



As long ago as 1989, when I first contemplated this series of selections, I wanted it to end on an upbeat note for both Richard and the reader. My own success, I supposed, would be just the right development on which to conclude. Having been forced to fret, for so long, about the diversified life of a correspondent who had rarely, and fleetingly, achieved self-support, Richard would, in the end, receive a piece of heartening news and the Maestro (as I call him) would write to me in tones of celebration and relief. I decided I would probably have to scratch this idea until a letter from Richard arrived, dated December 5, 2002. Simple as

it is, the last line of this letter made me see what it meant that I, for all my faults and failures, was still a buddy of his, and that this was success enough on which to close a volume. Or, better, on which to open it.

RICHARD SELZER TO PETER JOSYPH

Caro

NOON.

It has been snowing for hours. There are several inches on the ground, with the certainty of more to come. To be snug, warm, and dry in my library, surrounded by books, makes me happy. Outside, it is silent, with few vehicles. The city has the look, the texture of a city of a hundred years ago. Walking to the hospital for lunch quite refreshed me. Now, back in the library, I read; I sleep; I get up and walk around a bit, now and then I write a few words. O keep your Paris, your Bangkok, your Santiago de Compostela—all I want is right here.

4 P.M.

We are securely tucked under the snow, as I'm sure you are too. The noble shuttle bus driver saw to it that I got within 100 yards of home, then waited to make sure I did not slip and fall. I still retain some of the fun of snow—not the sledding or snowball fights, but the lesser joys of purity, cleanliness, the sense of deposition. It is no small pleasure to feel the flakes upon your eyelashes, wear them for a minute or two like opera glasses, then move on.

DECEMBER 6.

The pneumonia has taken its toll, as the mirror declares. I have aged a year in a month. Why not? I have walked for a long, long while hand in hand with Time.

EVENING.

I light the candle I keep on the desk to tempt the muse. I'm one of those who feel that electricity has come at a great cost to the senses. The electric light does not exist that can fill a room with a soft pulsatile glow and moving shadows. Electric light is raw, glassy: it gilds everything with the same savage brilliance. No crevice is safe from it. A flick of the switch and poof! out goes any mystery.

DECEMBER 9.

Slowly emerging from the pneumonia. I could use a balloonful of Alpine air every once in a while, but otherwise I am on the mend. This illness has solidified my feel-

ing (long held) that I do not (never did) need a wife. I need a valet and a rickshaw. He would do everything—cook, clean, transport (he would alternate as the runner between the shafts), draw my bath, launder, massage, encourage, buck up, and otherwise mend the carcass and its spirits. It would help if he could play the guitar.

DECEMBER 11.

Your letters make me sad. To me, you are not a failure but a fully realized human being. What can be done to stir up the sediment and allow it to settle in a new and different pattern? If *you* are a “failure,” so was Edgar Allan Poe. Success, failure, anyway—it doesn’t matter much. Now and then, when I have managed to write something I like, I am “happy” for a bit, but then I realize it doesn’t matter all that much. Only my rapture for literature remains. I continue to read the plays of Shakespeare at the rate of one scene a day—like vitamin pills.

Come on up and we’ll have a fine day.

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letters

1988–1992