

Dear,

I made a word.

It is a German word, one that didn't exist before. Ok, fine, I didn't make it from scratch ... I took three already existing ones and put them together:

Liebesbrieffreundschaft.

German famously is a language of compound words. Nouns can be strung together almost endlessly, threaded onto metonymic chains to form words in their own right. These new words can grow absurdly ornamental in their specificity, each noun added tapers the previous combination into an even more precise definition. Sometimes though the opposite happens and the new word begins to flicker. Instead of settling into definition its meaning refuses to arrive anywhere (like the blackbirds in Rebecca Tamás contribution to this book). My word is such a word. It is restless. It just won't stand still. Why?

If I break my word down into its parts (carefully taking off the linking consonant to save it for later) I get:

Liebe. Brief. Freundschaft.

Love. Letter. Friendship.

Since the German vocabulary is packed with compounds, the words *Liebesbrief* (love letter) and *Brieffreundschaft* (correspondence with a pen friend) already exist:

Liebesbrief    Freundschaft

Liebe        Brieffreundschaft

My word flickers because it is restlessly shifting weight between two meanings or two literary forms that conventionally are kept apart: The friendly epistolary exchange between pals and the passionate address of the beloved are both established formats but the two never mix. Love letters are for lovers. Friends do not exchange love letters – or do they?

The love letter is a paradoxical format. It bemoans the absence of the other, an absence that at the same time is the precondition for its own existence. The longing of the love letter is always also a longing to undo itself – maybe not *through* but *with* beauty and form. This might explain why the format itself provokes paradoxical responses: according to Roland Barthes the love letter is a lunatic chore while in Jacques Lacan's opinion it is the only thing you can write a bit seriously.

During March 2020 Mary Ramsden began painting a series of abstract portraits. The pandemic had made it impossible to see those closest to her in the flesh – a condition we all shared. Up until then none of us had paid much attention to the fact that the word *close* is used to describe physical as

well as emotional proximity, that *close* too is a word that flickers. The fuel added by the pandemic, however, had turned that gentle flicker of ambiguity into a blaze: those closest to us were so painfully far away. If – as our modern minds tend to think – a portrait is a representation of the other surely painting an abstract portrait is a lunatic chore? Only if by representation we mean figuration and if this understanding stops there. Ramsden's project went further. The materiality and scale of the series was largely informed by Byzantine icons, portraits of saints that were not made to resemble but to serve as mediators between the physical and the spiritual realm. The original icon was not merely admired from a distance but carried, handled, kissed and touched – a splinter was an encounter with the Divine. In Ramsden's longing for the other she wanted to create something that not only made her feel the spirit of a person (which, as she tells me, means that those works are, in fact, representational) but something that also stood in for them, something that *became* them. A lunatic chore, yes, but is there anything that could be done more seriously?

Every encounter speaks of the near and the far. The word itself carries this tension of distance and proximity across languages: *Encounter*. *Rencontre*. *Begegnung*. To be *with* someone also means to be *against* them (the way you lean against a wall). Touching the other - emotionally or physically - means being touched by them, a friction that cannot be sublated in unity. Which is why according to Jean-Luc Nancy every encounter is a mystery. And a mysterious thing happened when Ramsden was working on these portraits. She noticed that with each person she was constructing she would carry herself differently, handle objects differently, as if the other had taken hold of her. Getting close to the her subjects became a matter of embodiment, of mimesis, of presence. Ramsden describes the moment when she knew a portrait was finished as an arrival of sorts. As if the subject announced themselves: *I've arrived! I'm here! I'm finished!* That moment when an artist *knows* a work is finished is rooted in an affective certainty that cannot be broken down by the discursive intellect. The overused term intuition, on the other hand, veils the fact that this certainty is of noetic nature, it is a form of knowledge.

In *Camera Lucida*, his book on photography, Roland Barthes proposes the word *punctum* to describe this entanglement of (re-)cognition, affect and touch. He comes up with this term to mark the moment when one is inexplicably touched by an image – a sensation so intense that language can only fail. Going through the photographs depicting his late mother he feels that none of them captures what he calls her *truth*. Until he finds one photograph showing her as a young girl in a winter garden. *That's her!* he cries, *There she is!* This encounter strikes me as poignant because it proves that what we can know of the other exceeds factual or attributive knowledge. If Barthes recognises his mother in this photograph it is not because he had known her at the time the picture was taken – he wasn't even born then. His encounter with his mother takes place outside of the arithmetics of a lifespan and tellingly it is one that he describes in terms of touch. He cannot put into words what the *punctum* of this image is, why this particular photograph moves him. The strong effect it has on him is felt physically: He knows that this is her with all his body and heart. The *punctum* might be blunt in its mute certainty but it is also pointed in its sensual affliction: it *stings* him.

Ramsden's series shows that when it comes to creation what Barthes calls *punctum* is not only an effect on the viewer, but a back and forth between creator and subject. In this it resembles the dance

of love. Creation and love have in common that there is an element of mutual recognition at work that can take the form of surprise. As Alenka Zupančič states, love doesn't merely say *It's you!* but rather *Is it you? What a surprise!* It might be this structural analogy that makes me read Ramsden's portraits as love letters. In her desire to pin down a subject, she was stung herself. But there is a mystical element at play here, too. For if the longing of the love letter is always also a longing to undo itself it resembles the mystical encounter with the divine. The writings of the 14th century French mystic Marguerite Porete, for example, yearn for the de-creation of her soul and will in God. Porete, too, was a maker of words. Struggling with the shortcomings of language to express the paradoxical nature of the Divine she folded two contradictory meanings into one word. To her God was an oxymoron: the *Near-Far*.

Moved, surprised, *touched* by these encounters that seemed to speak of the mystical, Ramsden began to reach out to writers who were addressing similar themes. Writers to whom she felt a kinship, all of whom happened to be female. Could they relate to the mimesis that had taken hold of Ramsden in her studio? How were they circling a subject or trying to pin down a character in their practice? Had they also noticed a recurrence of occult gestures in our technologically mediated present? And was it a coincidence that none of these writers were male, or could this be traced back to early mystical writings as a mainly female practice? All of the writers Ramsden reached out to responded and a lively and generative correspondence began. As these conversations grew they became more than an exchange of ideas, they became collaborative. Ramsden felt that whatever this was (I would call these correspondences *Liebesbriefreundschaften*) needed to be held in one place. She invited all of the writers to develop a piece of writing born out of these exchanges in whatever form they felt appropriate.

So here we are, dear. The book you are holding in your hands is that place Ramsden had envisioned. (Am I being overbearing in wanting you to be aware of your own physicality holding this object?) You will encounter makeshift words, carved letters, rough edges, and bolts sticking out. This crude materiality is held together by the body as a medium of creation, worship and tenderness but also of receptive vulnerability and synaesthetic foreboding: Lips curl and swear like grass stains, restless legs shift weight and walk tight ropes, hands dig sand, carve wood, form cups, fetch chalk, unpack sanitary packs and roll balls across floorboards ...

You might catch a splinter handling all this. Touch wood.

Marie von Heyl