

BOLT FROM THE BLUE

JEREMY COOPER



Fitzcarraldo Editions

18 FEB 04

Mother

You won't be pleased to hear this.

I've refused to be shortlisted for the Turner Prize this year. The invitation, weeks before the public announcement, presumes agreement and my 'no' rocked them back on their stiletto heels. No deal, despite thinly veiled threats over the telephone from the panel Chair.

I'm dead against celebrity-making of artists. Against in general the divisive listing of winners and losers. Prizes one side and zilch the other.

Best bloody British!

Jesus! It's crystal clear. Painters, filmmakers, sculptors, whatever, we compete against ourselves not each other. So obvious that I'm embarrassed writing it.

You won't understand my Turner turn-down.

Understanding is overrated, anyhow!

My guts tied themselves in a knot as I read the letter and I decided then and there to say no. Bridget was supportive. While warning that the art world will take against me for dishing the system.

Let them.

We'll see, we'll see.

I will see!

Love from

Lynn

Dear Lynn

*I think you're mad, but don't take any notice of me, love.
Do what suits you. You've made many more better decisions in
your life than I have in mine.*

Stick to your guns, I say.

Mother xx

[Written on a postcard of Millais' *The Blind Girl*, one of the Pre-Raphaelite paintings in the collection of Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery. Mum may have remembered how jealous I used to be of the girl's red hair.]

8 MAR 04

Thanks, Mum! I like the Yiddisher my-child-can-do-no-wrong line!

Coincidentally, I've been reading a recently published book by an American academic called Ruth Klüger. After years and years of silence, in this book, *Landscapes of Memory*, she writes of her and her mother's deportation from Vienna, in 1942, when she was only eleven, and of their survival, somehow, through the death camps.

Klüger actually says: 'When I ask myself today how and why an unbeliever like me can call herself a Jew, one of several possible answers runs: "It's because of Theresienstadt. That is where I became a Jew".'

Her restraint is so moving.

Must remember that in my work.

I do, mostly.

L XX

Dear Lynn

*Since you fancy me as a pretend Jewish mother, I've a kvetch question to ask. What have you got against kids?
You've been like that since you were small.*

*I can't recall you ever playing properly with your cousins,
Betty's two. And you've never wanted children of your own.*

Why?

A question, not a criticism.

Love

Mother

22 MAR 04

Mother

Don't ask me.

Why's the sky blue?

God knows.

No, God does NOT know. Because HE is a figment of the imagination, the invention of authority.

One of the few things I do know is that God is the creation of man and not the other way round ... On second thoughts, women were pretty early into god-creating too, so I can't blame men alone.

As a matter of fact, there's at least one child I like a lot. Sarah S.'s daughter Evlyn, a totally terrific little girl, with a murderous vocabulary, double dimples, and personal style in dress – costume, really.

I remember the day I stopped for a chat with Sarah in Curtain Road and she told me she was pregnant, worried about the pressure of parenthood on her work as an artist. Essentially happy, though, to be becoming a mum. This happiness has cloaked her little girl, kept her feeling safe. Protected Evlyn's specialness.

Love

Lynn

P.S. In case it doesn't show, and in case I haven't properly told you before: I'm so pleased knowing that you came

to see my exhibitions all those times, without telling me. Everything is different now.

Dear Lynn

You learnt the no-God stuff from me. Don't you remember?

I can understand why people invented a God.

Or Gods, doesn't matter.

Easier to believe there's someone in control. That some genius sees meaning behind the nonsense of human life.

Enough. No need for me to go on about it.

Glad to see you got the message loud and clear.

Atheists unite!

Love, Mother

12 JULY 04

Mother

Weird! I think my father must have registered me as next of kin.

Because I've received an official letter from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office notifying me of his death, in jail. Malaga, this time. Shot point-blank in the temple. By another prisoner, they presume. Nobody expects to find out for certain who it was.

Why should they bother?

Won't have done it to himself, the selfish sod.

They're holding a bit of personal stuff to send on to me.

The FCO enclosed three official-looking letters to sign.

In Spanish, which I can't read. Will get them translated.

Don't worry, I won't bother you with any more of this, just thought you should know that he's gone.

With love, Lynn

22 SEPT 04

Mother

Can't you start to write to me again? Has mention of Dad silenced you? Let's not give him the power, please. Anyway ... Always 'anyway'. Bad habit. A tic ... Anyhow ... Anyroads ... Ugh!

The art world's gearing up again after the summer break. Susan is back from Florida and I called for a catch-up tea. With a present for her, a beautiful little book newly published by an artist still in his twenties, Ryan Gander, titled *The Boy Who Always Looked Up*. The main character is a boy called Tom, who lives with his mum in a fictional version of Ernő Goldfinger's Trellick Tower, which I pass close to in the train a couple of minutes out of Paddington Station on the way West.

Goldfinger appears as himself in the book, which concludes with a conversation between the architect and the boy on the roof of the building:

'Why do you look up, Tom?' he asked, pushing his small round spectacles back up his nose.

'I think it's because it seems better up there than down there,' he said, wiping his nose on the sleeve of his jumper. 'Because it's empty up here in the sky, and when I look up I feel like I can do anything, like anything's possible.'

Ernő smiled back at him.

'Now don't be sad, Tom. Do you know what grown-ups call that?' he said.

'No,' Tom said, shaking his head wildly and wiping the tears from his cheeks, which were now streaming from his eyes.

'Aspiration,' he replied

I thought of Susan for this book because of the modernist

estate around the corner from her studio, where construction began the year Goldfinger's Trellick Tower was completed. Beautiful rarities, both buildings. In Britain, that is. Common on the Continent.

I bet Gander comes from a ridiculously happy family, with loyal, non-golfing, socialist, hetero parents!

Susan told me she's signed up with a smart Mayfair dealer, Timothy Taylor. Not for the money. For museums. For Taylor to place her stuff in public collections.

Her first show begins there in the spring, *The J Street Project*, which she's been working on for three years, chasing down all the streets and alleyways in Germany which still bear the word 'Jude'. Ended up with photographs and information on three hundred and three sites, documented in still images, video, and a book

I'm not sure about Taylor.

Inaccurate.

I *am* sure about him. Sure that I despise the place people like him occupy in the art world, peddling West End privilege and prestige. To clients with gigantically too much money and nil conscience.

I'm afraid Susan will hate being part of the Taylor entourage, hate them speaking for her: the misrepresentations, the currency deals, the flattery and fiddles. The smooth-talking hypocrisy.

She'll survive. If any living artist has the strength to skittle the establishment it's Susan Hiller!

With love

from

Lynn xx

Dear Lynn

*I've been thinking. Isn't it high time you learnt to drive?
I know getting knocked off your bike that time set you back.
You went on about the driver, a nurse on the way to work, how
terrible she must have felt. Swore you never ever wanted to put
yourself in her position.*

*That's years ago now. You need to be able to drive. For your
work. To get to out-of-the-way places for filming.*

Nobody's going to make you bash into bicyclists!

You're so pig-headed. Why cut off your nose to spite your face?

Mother x

22 OCT 04

Mother

For the umpteenth time: I have no desire to drive a car.

Lynn

[A perfect card for the occasion. One of Jacky Fleming's
postcards of her tousle-haired little girl with red bow
and fierce frown, writing on the blackboard: *yes means
YES and no means NO ... I expect you'll want that repeating.*]

21 JAN 05

Mother

You're odd, like me. About shopping, for instance.
Both of us put off buying things for as long as we can.
Especially clothes.

Yesterday I couldn't delay any more the purchase of a
new batch of lightweight shirts and trousers, sweaters
and windcheaters and things for my travels, the old ones
in tatters. To save time, I always go to the same shop,
Rohan in Covent Garden. Though not cheap, their

clothes are great for me, in pastel greys and browns. Dry
in an hour from sudden rain, or after washing overnight
on the trail.

Why am I telling you this? Such a bore, your daughter!
What is interesting, I think, is that from Rohan I walked
up to Endell Street for fish and chips and a mug of tea at
The Rock & Sole Plaiice. And the walls were covered in
postcards! Stuck to the white tiles in patterned blocks
of beetles and shells and shoes and pop stars and men at
work and the Lake District and pub signs and fruit.

A kind of artwork. Tasty.

The food too!

Then on to the Barbican for Théâtre de Complicité's
new show, *The Elephant Vanishes*. Somewhat confusing as
the company is English, run by Simon McBurney, who
is the son of an American archaeologist, presenting a
play adapted from three Murakami short stories, per-
formed in Japanese by an all-Japanese cast, with endless
technical invention.

I loved every moment.

Video screens whizzed across the stage, projecting im-
ages which imitate cars and trains without looking or
sounding quite like them. Actors relax on vertical beds
over which the sleeper's other self hovers like a restless
angel.

That's theatre!

With love

Lynn

4 AUG 05

Dear Mother

Wanted to thank you for staying calm when we packed
up your flat last week.

It was pretty traumatic, for me, returning to Sparkhill after so long. At least you'd moved from our house, saving me those sights. Though I did recognise your new street. Was it Pete and Jenny who lived there?

Very little in general has changed about the place. Dingier. It's good you've gone to the Costa Brava. Are things OK?

I admire your realism. You never hope for too much. You were well prepared, with your list of tasks, the furniture labelled, plenty of cardboard boxes and packing paper. It's from you that I must have inherited my mania for order.

I'm glad too that you'd kept some of my children's books in the move to the flat from home. They feel right here now in Dalston. Interesting how they were considered boys books at the time.

Tarka the Otter was both, I suppose. And the girl in *Swallows and Amazons* has always been seen as the boss, essentially.

Gender confusion? Gender war? Gender indifference? When I went down to St Martin's, didn't I leave in my room dozens of pop records? Not knowing at the time that I'd never be back. When, I wonder, did you clear my bedroom? To rent to one of your men?

Never mind.

Thanks Mum, you're a brick.

L XXX

Dear Lynn

I meant to say, there's no point trying to make me stop dyeing my hair black. You may think it looks 'false', I don't care, I like it. Going to the hairdresser is one of the few pleasures left to a

single woman of my age. Especially in Spain.

While I remember: I've put my mother's amethyst brooch in the back of the cutlery drawer here in my kitchenette, for safe keeping. I know you'll never wear it. Never have myself. Not my taste. Or shall I give it to Betty? She liked Mum. God knows how.

I think I'm going to be all right here. The sun eats up the day. Gone before it begins. Time flies by.

Love

Mother

3 SEPT 05

Mother

Shifting things around in the house the other day, I found the corpse of a mouse in a large empty vase.

Poor thing, probably jumped in to escape Absalom. Months ago, it must have been. The dried body odourless, feather-light.

Slightly surprised Abbie didn't knock the vase over to get at the mouse!

You asked why I've never put cats in a film. I think it's because I know too much about them. Anyway, who wants more soppy pics of cats.

On what floor is your flat? Is the view OK?

Love

Lynn

20 OCT 05

You're a Peter Sellers fan aren't you, Mum?

Saw at the BFI this week a restored print of *Dr Strangelove*. Sellers so funny and clever in all three of his parts. 1964 it was made and still feels radical. The time for change

sure is overdue!
Little DOES change.
Too easy to bury unpleasant truths and totter along in
the usual way.
Love, me

[This card was made by Leeds Postcards for CND,
printed on a black ground with the sky-blue words, in
sloping letters: *Clouseau fans against the beumb*, referring
to another of Peter Sellers' classic roles.]

18 JAN 06

Mother

I have never started a conversation with anyone on the
tube. Nobody. Ever.

With one exception. Yesterday!

On the Northern Line between Euston and Waterloo the
pale dark-haired girl sitting beside me was reading my
Camden Arts Centre brochure!

And I couldn't resist introducing myself. She blushed.
So did I.

Lovely girl, graduated last summer from Wimbledon
College of Art. She's Portuguese, a nurse by profession,
who paid her way first to England and then through art
school by night-watching rich old private patients.

Anna-Clara's her name.

I wonder how her work looks? Nothing like mine, she
assured me. The stitching and painting of canvas collag-
es, I think she said.

'I'm sorry I didn't catch your show,' she told me, shortly
before leaving the train. 'At least I have the catalogue.'

Quite something to happen.

With love, Lynn

Dear Lynn

How's gay Richard, still around?

*You say he isn't but I guarantee he is, basically. Hollow-chested.
Winks. Unless he's got eye problems. Which wouldn't be great for
an artist. Won't be content to live off your success forever. I warn
you. Not without punishing you somehow.*

Explains why you don't have a baby, him being gay.

*That café the two of you go to down the road, Tina We Salute
You, that's a gay haunt, you can tell. The paintings of nude wom-
en look like men with boobs. Sweet dark boys from Brazil cooking
cupcakes in the kitchen.*

He's helped you make a nice home, I grant you. Eye for colour.

Unless that's you?

*Four floors, for two people and two cats. Ridley Market round
the corner and that delicious Turkish restaurant a short walk.
Not bad.*

Mind you, what would I know, you've only let me visit once.

I'm lonely. Very.

What's the point?

Mother

20 MAR 06

Mother

Don't suppose you keep a copy of your letters to me.

A pity. Because if you reread your last one, I reckon not
even you could fail to see how self-indulgent you are.
Emotionally ill-disciplined, to put it mildly.

Speaking to me like that, as you have done off and on
since I was a child, no longer hurts. In fact, it's quite
helpful, because it's so blatantly wrong and therefore re-
assures me, finally, after years of guilt and doubt, that I

was right to leave home, right to cut free from you, right to keep you at a distance.

When I was a teenager your mood swings terrified me, they came without warning or explanation. I'm shaking my head at my desk. Because I know you'll have no idea what I'm trying to say. And that's why. Why I didn't want to see you. Won't any longer tear the quick of my fingers to shreds, hurl my bag against the bedroom door. Against your selfishness.

A particular incident, which happened to me here in London, about six years after I left art school, has helped me take better care of myself in this respect. A friend, sort of friend, colleague let's say, had had a baby by another young artist. The two have remained together ever since, a proper couple. She was troubled, though, quite troublingly troubled, still is confused in her head, about almost everything. From the window of the small studio I shared then in Wapping, I saw this girl – with a pushchair in which sat, strapped tight, her two-year-old son – stop by the warehouse wall in the narrow street and bash her forehead repeatedly against the bricks, screaming. There was blood and tears. She walked on pushing her child down the pavement.

What an earth could this have meant to him?
He must have been frightened. I certainly was, watching from above.

To me it meant: stay away from your mother.

Sorry, I shouldn't be writing this to you.

Sorry.

Love

Lynn

Lynn

It's so irritating that you won't have a mobile phone, to text and chat. You being difficult, as per usual. Eccentric, Betty used to say, to be polite. Bloody-minded spite more like.

And Skype? Why won't you sign us up for Skype? You could Skype me in Spain.

Don't tell me. You value your privacy.

I'm your MOTHER!

[Written on a Spanish-published postcard of the pin-up Bettie Page photographed on a beach, captioned in large red and yellow sloping letters: *Fun In The Sun.*]

Dear Lynn

You've gone silent on me again. Which isn't fair, you're all I've got.

The money comes in, appears in the bank every month as usual, and I'm grateful for that. Money's not everything, though, Money's nothing, in the end. 'Can't buy me love, love, money can't buy me lo-o-ove'. Great song. Came out the year before you were born, as far as I remember. Those were the days.

Good calamares and papas fritas here. Different from Margate. Better, now I'm used to them.

Much better. No comparison, really.

I wish you'd write.

Love

Mother

Dear Lynn

How long are you going to keep this up?

*Silence is a form of torture, according to the Geneva Convention.
It said so on British TV last night.
You're impossible, you really are.
Love, all the same
Mother*

[Sent on the publicity postcard from a Spanish vineyard, the colour photo of two bronzed couples drinking wine at either side of a rustic table, beneath overhanging ruby grapes.]

03 JUNE 06

Mother

Would you please try see things from my point of view? You don't have to agree, you simply have to try and accept that it's how I feel.

Of course this isn't at all 'simple', that's a silly thing for me to write. It may be that it's impossible for a mother to tolerate a daughter's differences. Especially when as fundamental as me with you.

One more good reason for me not to have a child. What kind of monster might I give birth to, blood-related to us two!

Mobile phone. OK, I'll have another go at explaining. I don't have a mobile phone in order to be free, so nobody can presume right of access to me.

I can't be got at, disturbed, distracted, made to feel guilty for not replying.

Side benefits: not getting knocked down by a car when absent-mindedly checking messages while crossing the road; look at art rather than photograph it; read on the tube instead of playing stupid games; no last-minute change of arrangements for meeting a friend for tea.

Doesn't bother me if people don't turn up, I read, have lunch or whatever and get on with my day.

And I don't want to feel you in my pocket, jabbing me in the ribs!

Will that do you?

The sort of silence which I abhor is the withholding of information which people have a right to know: like why a father abandoned his daughter before she was three!

Love

Lynn

13 JUNE 06

Mum

What fun! You've gone silent now!

Lynn xxx

[One of the few things I remember hearing about my father at the time was that he had once been in the merchant navy, 'sailing the high seas' as Mum put it. With the result that ships and freight have periodically attracted me. On this 1970s postcard, titled on the reverse *Sea Trips, Wells*, I painted in acrylic onto the bows of two beached fishing boats a red and a green rectangular steel shipping container.]

Dear Lynn

Everyone has secrets, hides things dangerous to reveal.

I think the American tell-all talk which came in after the war is rubbish, worse than us po-faced British. In the fifties, when I was a teenager, there were American airmen all over the place, flush with money and themselves and I detested it. There was

my dad, working his butt off for them in the repair shed at Mildenhall Airbase, and they swanned around town happy as Larry, patting young girls on the bum.

And more.

Who could I tell?

No one except Dad. Who I knew couldn't afford to believe me.

So didn't bother, kept it to myself.

You knuckle down, bury your own shit.

Truth is it never bothered me.

Telling is overdone, big time. Give it a rest about silence, love, please. We've both got better things to think about.

Your cats. How're the cats? Has the big ginger's paw healed?

That time I visited he sat on my lap when you were off working in your studio. Lovely cat. Shy. Undemanding.

Let's try to be friends.

Your mother

19 JUNE 06

Mother

You can't hide forever.

By now it doesn't matter to me. You're the one who suffers. Why do you imagine every man you've ever slept with has done the dirty? Disappeared without trace at the first opportunity?

Except the parasites, that is. The leeches.

Because they discover that you don't exist, that behind the sexy make-up is a mask. A blank. Nothing.

It's never too late, people say. In your case, I'm not so sure.

I'm sad for you.

Your daughter xx

[On this National Gallery postcard, *Portrait of a Woman*

by Robert Campin. I had scraped the surface away to white undercard, leaving only the cream cloth headgear. A no-person. Empty. I prefer to open-send postcards, stamped and addressed on the back, but this card I did post in an envelope, to avoid damage, and to allow my writing to spread over onto the address side. Glad she kept it, pleased to have it back.]

27 JUNE 06

Mother

I've stopped jogging.

Caught sight of myself the other day reflected in a shop window, red in the face, lycra-tight crotch and bum.

No, Sir!

Such a relief!

Love

Lynn

[Wrote this on the back of a unique postcard by the mail-artist Anna Banana, which I must have bought sometime on eBay, signed and dated by her October 1979, collaging a giant yellow banana into the arms of a postcard starlet, adding the triple speech bubbles: *I like bananas because they have no bones!*]

28 SEPT 06

Dear Mother

I've decided that you influenced my artistic taste rather more than I'd imagined.

Seriously.

I'll never forget the way you became a different person on our visits to the Playhouse pantomime when I was

young. You laughed and laughed. Threw your arms around, sang along, shouted. I loved you being so alive, and extra-adored the performances for doing this to you. Didn't last. Back to normal by the time we reached home on the bus.

This brief annual sight of how you could be was heart-breaking. Literally.

What I wanted to say is that some of the art-videos which I like best today sort of meld with those joyful evenings back then.

My favourite at the moment is *Sleeper*, by a Londoner, Mark Wallinger.

Dressed head-to-toe in a realistic bear costume, he was videoed spending nine consecutive nights locked behind the plate glass foyer walls of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. Wandering around in bewilderment, pressing himself up against the glass to inveigle visitors, and lying flat out on the hall floor to rest. Towards the end of his run of nightly performances a stranger turned up outside dressed in an identical brown bear costume. To Wallinger's surprise and evident glee, they pranced around together either side of the glass.

It's not *Puss in Boots*, I know. It is pantomime, though. Don't you think? Maybe you'd have to see it to say.

People call this kind of thing 'videoed performance art', whereas I make film. I do love the directness, though, of video.

Ah well!

Love, Lynn

P.S. I'm always afraid that the images I create are too fragile to be noticed. My still photos as well as the films. Afraid they'll fall unseen through cracks in the floorboards.