

Dear PEN Project Writers,

May 2022

I will begin this letter the same way I have always begun my feedback: thank you. Despite being a writer, I am finding it hard to express how much this internship has affected me, both as a student hoping to continue working with writers and as an author myself. So many times over the past several years I have wondered whether my work has made any difference. I've had two of my stories published, won a writing award, and had the opportunity to work with college students as a course grader. Still, I carried with me a fear that it wasn't enough. Reading and responding to your writing has provided me with a chance to give back and apply what I have studied for so many years in a meaningful way. Despite the previous experiences I've had, I will always remember you as my first real students. This internship was a heavy responsibility to take on. Knowing that writers were on the other end eager to learn and read my feedback challenged me to improve my teaching skills and gain the confidence that I so desperately needed. It is because of you that I have grown into a person who for once feels that their voice matters.

The heart of this experience, however, has not been me but *you* and the creativity that you have brought to your work. Many of you wrote about love; others about fear, suffering, and addiction; still others about God, hope, and faith. There were stories, a philosophical essay, and so many beautiful poems. I've never appreciated poetry as much as I do now after reading the way you can wring the honesty from words, bending them to fit your experiences and emotions in astonishing ways. This poetic use of language extends to all of the pieces I read, not just the ones identified as poems. It is remarkable how your work acted like a tuner by sharpening my ability to detect the sound of language, to note literary techniques such as alliteration and anaphora, and to understand how just one word can shape the entire meaning and tone of a sentence. I have read and studied literature for years, but it is in my responses to your writing that I have finally gained a solid understanding of how language works, and how words can be so beautiful, heartbreaking, and empowering. *Thank you*, truly.

All of your writing has so much passion, vigor, urgency, and intensity. In short, your words are overflowing with life and vitality. This has reminded me of the power of shaping life into words and using those words to readjust one's view of the world. Writing is a type of magic that works by conjuring worlds, ideas, and images and placing them in another's mind. Too often do I forget this, but your writing has reminded me again of why I love this craft. And while I know that the process of writing is magic, I also know that it can't last forever, and the weight of real material circumstances will always be lingering in the background. Writing can't literally move walls or remove all hurt. But I believe that words can provide a spark of hope and the sense of purpose and direction that all people need. I know I can't fully understand what you are going through. You have experienced things that I never will, serious things that have changed your life forever, and yet you still write. *You still write*. You still have voices, and you still write, and I hope you all understand how incredible that is.

Occasionally as I sat down to write feedback I was overcome by a sense of dread: How would I be able to match the spirit and power that you convey with your words? How could I possibly do your creativity justice? I don't know if I have been able to, but I have tried, and I hope that seeing your writing through another's eyes has given you the chance to realize that your voices matter and that your words, just by existing and by being read by someone, are changing the world. Many people aim to be writers but never get a single word down on the page. You have all stepped over the greatest, first hurdle of just *writing*, and that alone is

something to be proud of. This is not to say that improving one's craft is easy. There are many stumbling blocks along the way and writing can be, at its core, a lot of hard work. But your efforts show me that the work poured into writing is worth it, because out of it comes something wonderful and transformative.

As my time in the PEN Project internship comes to a close, I have been trying to find a way to summarize my experience. I don't think it will be possible, given the complexity of your writing, but one word that comes to mind is striving. Striving is the opposite of complacency. It means working hard to do the best one can given their circumstances. In your pieces I have read about abuse, death, lost love, internal turmoil, isolation, and sacrifice. In your pieces I have also felt the striving that you possess as you make the best of difficult situations. I hope that writing continues to work as a way for you to process your experiences and change your perspectives, even beyond this project and beyond the act of putting words on the page. Writing affects a person's entire being, and I can see that in your enthusiasm to communicate and improve on your work. Since beginning this internship I have already noticed a change in my own writing as I take inspiration from your words and try to find that same striving within my own self.

I came into this project not knowing what to expect and not knowing what prison or prisoners were like. While I still will never know the full depth of your struggles, I can say that I do know something of who you are: writers. We live different lives, and after this project our paths will diverge, but for this small moment in life we have connected, and I know that I will never be the same. My doubts about who I am and whether or not I have made the right choice to study writing and literature start to fade every time I think about your words and the effort you have made to better yourselves. I know now that we are writers, and that I share that bond with all of you. Each of us understands in some way the capability of words to vent anger, to show love, and to completely change someone's point of view. It may seem like a small thing, but I want you to keep reminding yourself of these words: I am a writer. By being a writer, you are part of an entire community of people who are there to read, and to write, and to make magic. I hope that you never forget to call yourselves writers.

I also hope that this program will be just a beginning for all of you. If you can, I encourage you to keep participating in the PEN Project and finding ways to express yourselves through words. You will likely hear this many times from others, but I must say it myself: please keep writing. Please never forget that the world needs your voices. This project has been, without exaggeration, the opportunity of a lifetime for me, and I hope it has been just as significant for you. I have learned that feedback and instruction work best as a reciprocal process. As much as you may have learned from me, I have learned that much and more from all of you. I also understand that in the formality of my feedback some personality may be lost, but know that I mean every single word that I write and that all of my feedback—all of the suggestions and praise—has been completely genuine.

I know that writing takes courage and vulnerability, but it has only been with this reflection that I realize why. Writing is taking a small part of oneself and placing it out into the world. Sharing one's writing is sharing that small part of oneself with someone else. That is both scary and exhilarating, and I want to thank you all again for sharing a part of yourselves with me. I will now always carry you with me, and that alone has made this experience worth so much.

Respectfully and with all the best wishes,

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the author.