



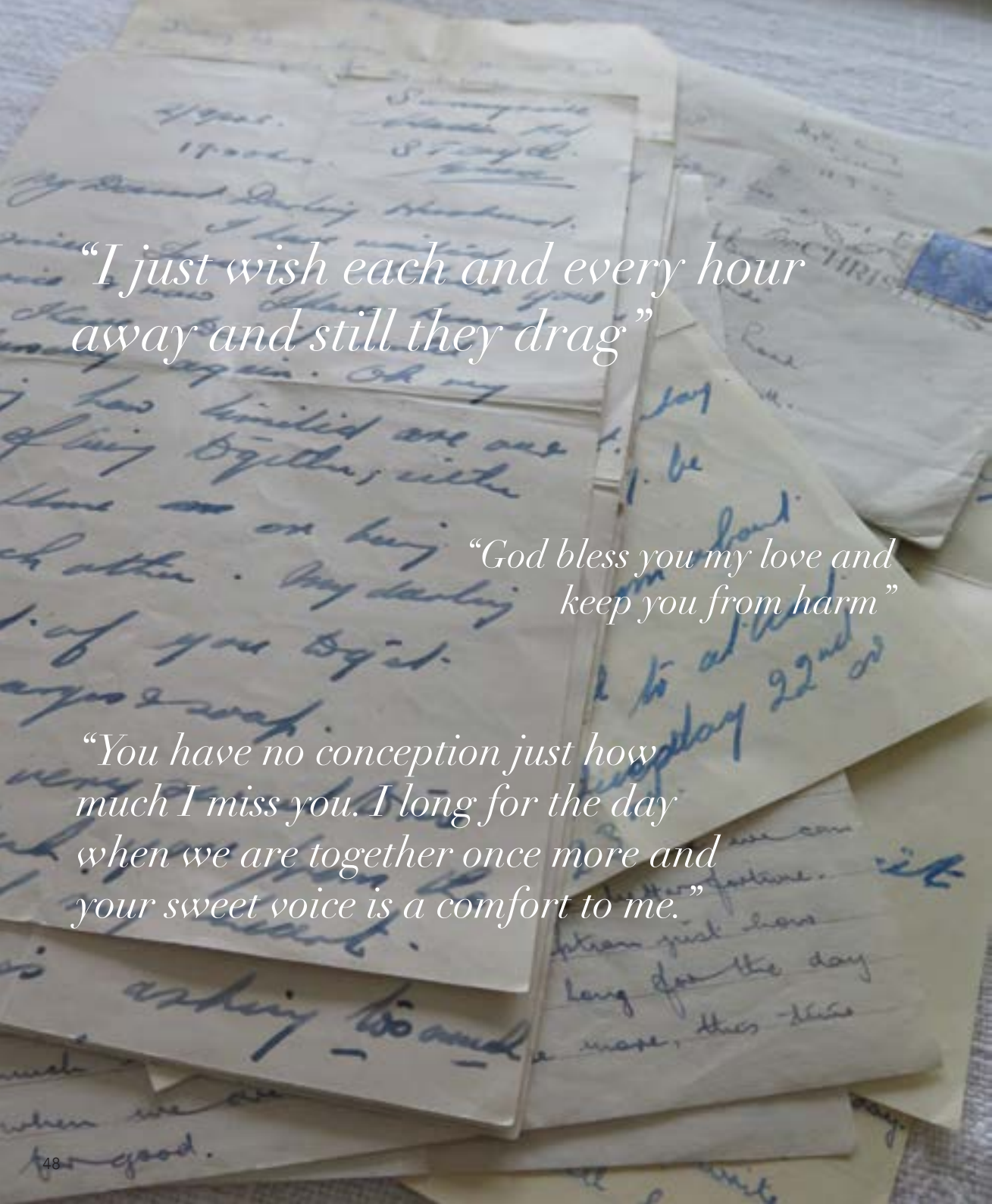
BETWEEN *the* LINES

Karen Kay talks to Scottish textile artist Ali Ferguson about the inspiration she continues to draw from a small bundle of wartime letters

Very early in March 2020 Ali Ferguson attended a large family wedding. Despite the early rumblings of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Scottish textile artist was looking forward to a summer of new workshops and retreats in venues across the UK and France. These had been carefully developed over the preceding winter, working in The Purple Thread Shed, an inspiring creative space in the garden of her home, just outside Edinburgh. Crammed with sketchbooks, stitched samples, swatches and scraps, it also plays host to her popular workshops. Or used to. The first death in Scotland from Covid-19 was reported on 13 March, 2020. Ten days later, lockdown happened. ➡➔

Left: Ali Ferguson in her inspiringly tidy, organised garden studio





“I just wish each and every hour away and still they drag”

“God bless you my love and keep you from harm”

“You have no conception just how much I miss you. I long for the day when we are together once more and your sweet voice is a comfort to me.”

“As for many people, it was such a shock; it just left me reeling,” she recounts in her gentle Scottish lilt – the sort of voice that would offer reassurance and calm amidst uncertainty and chaos. “I knew I was lucky to have enjoyed this family celebration, but I was worried about my mum, who is 87, so I was calling her regularly. On every call she would talk of resilience and refer to the [Second World] War, reminding us that we should count our blessings that we didn’t have bombs dropping around us. Other people were saying this was the closest our generation has come to that kind of global situation. If you didn’t have a sense of awe for how people lived through six years of the War, you would now.”

Ali’s conversations with her elderly mother invoked thoughts of a small bundle of vintage, handwritten letters she had bought on eBay some time previously. Spanning three years during the latter part of the War, they are intimate letters, often stretching to eight pages, between Jimmy and Peggy, a young husband and wife. They reveal a couple separated for prolonged periods during the early days of their marriage, and detail some of the challenges they face as they long to start a family. Ferguson knows nothing more about the couple. “I am removed from them – it feels less intrusive to work with material

with which you have no personal connection.” This did not prevent a sense of guilt arising from taking words from the correspondence of others, even strangers from another time, and setting them in her own, more dramatic context for the purposes of artistic invention. Ferguson explored this sense of guilt in an earlier, mixed-media piece using words from the letters, called *Stolen Stories*.

Re-reading the letters during lockdown, different words leapt from the page: words expressing the importance of being with loved ones and how separation often amplifies worry; words which resonated deeply. This time, Ferguson decided to set the words in the letters in their true context, that of two young people expressing intensely personal feelings and emotions during a difficult and upsetting period in their lives.

Like many, Ali dealt with the impact of lockdown by immersing herself in therapeutic activities that kept her hands busy. She moved instinctively to the comfort of her living room to stitch, leaving her large-scale works in progress, some of which are also inspired by the letters, in her studio. Finding her attention span compromised, she focused on making small ‘tokens’ from fragments of frayed fabric from old grain sacks and quilts that had accrued in her studio. ➤➤



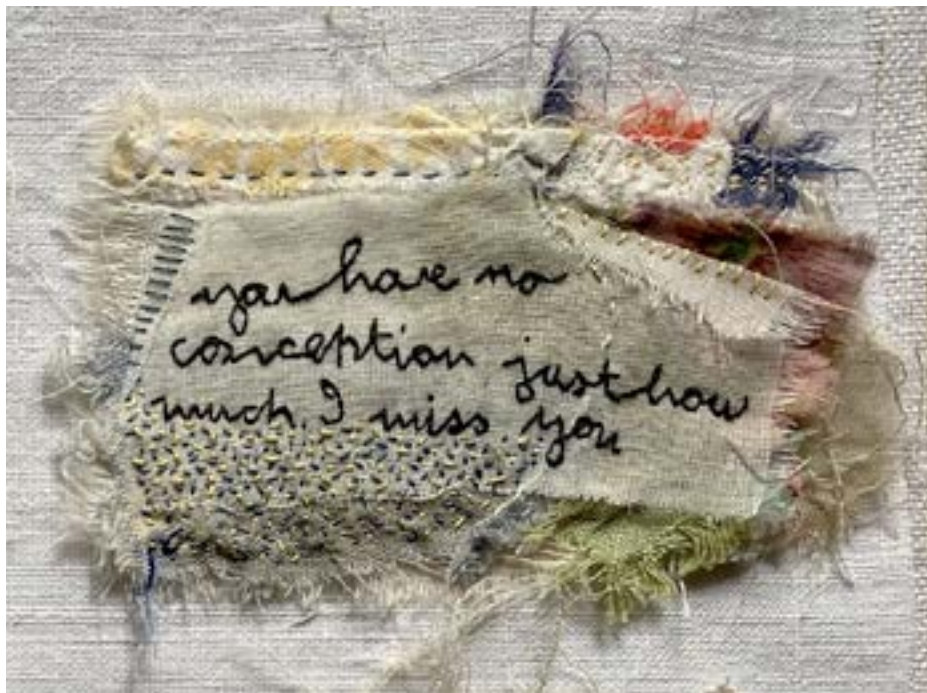
“I went to the Threads of Feeling exhibition at the Foundling Museum a few years back, which gave me a sense of the enormous emotion held in tiny little scraps of fabric...”

"I would just layer scruffy scraps together and start sewing, without the methodical planning and design I put into most of my work. It was without purpose, just a reaction to my feelings about what was happening in the world. Doing something repetitive is a very useful way to get through challenging times."

"I found myself working seed stitches on a tiny area of fabric, for weeks on end. It was comforting and, in my head, seed stitch became known as worry stitch. It wasn't about finishing something, but about the process of doing it."

As each token took shape, it would be embellished with an embroidered excerpt from one of Jimmy's and Peggy's letters. The inky script of the wartime letters was replicated in minute backstitches, a technique Ali has perfected over many years. "I do a lot of stitching of words, and have experimented with many different methods to recreate different handwriting styles; but I always revert to tiny backstitches, which allows me to have control over the letter forms."

"I use vintage threads, often classic Turkey Red Sylko [D45] or old silk threads, and the fragility of them is part of the appeal for me. If they disin-



Above: Another view of Ferguson's studio, with work in various stages of completion.

Left: Examined close-up, the tokens reveal layer upon layer of fragile fabrics held together by tiny stitches, leaving feathery raw edges.

tegrate, that is part of the process and makes the piece more interesting. I'm always drawn to textiles that are torn or damaged and I like the idea of things fading and falling apart over time."

Having previously studied complementary therapies and run creative workshops for Family Support Centres, Ali understands why many people have turned to making as a form of therapy during the Covid pandemic. "The sense of being absorbed, using your hands and engaging your mind in something that takes your thoughts away from personal difficulties is so powerful."

The impulsive, albeit mindful, making involved in the tokens is at odds with the considered approach Ali usually applies to her work. Projects normally begin with a collection of collated letters, personal documents (although never items from people known to her, which would be "too complex and emotional to work with") and timeworn textiles to inspire her. Then, because she claims she is "not confident sketching", she develops mind maps of words, emotions and phrases in her sketchbook to organise her thoughts and ideas – a process she calls "thought-catching". These mind maps inform the themes and structure of her projects. ➤➤



Rules for Ironing (above) and Notes from the Scullery (right). Charming yet thought-provoking textile collage inspired by words from a treasured vintage domestic science jotter.

Traditionally, her pieces are mixed-media works incorporating clothing, accessories and extracts from handwritten documents printed onto textiles using an inkjet printer. Pieced together, perhaps in the form of a jacket or camisole pattern block, they form a narrative that combines Ali's original source inspiration with what she reads between the lines. "Clothing is so personal. How do I represent this person, what clothing do I imagine them wearing? Are they exposed and vulnerable, are they strong?" For *Baby Sends Love*, a larger work in

progress inspired by Jimmy and Peggy's letters and started during lockdown, Ferguson chose a 1940s camisole slip design as a template.

The letters were copied on to paper and silk and stabilised on freezer paper before going through the inkjet printer. The fabrics are left untreated, leaving the print to fade over time, an idea which appeals to Ferguson. Vintage lace has been added to echo the original lace on the slip. Fragments of seam from another silk underskirt, tiny ➔



“Peggy sounds vulnerable ...
so I wanted to use fragile
garments”



mother-of-pearl buttons and of course the hand-stitched writing and embroidery all add texture. “Peggy sounds vulnerable, very depressed, so I wanted to use fragile garments. I have included pieces of handkerchiefs, because I associate them with emotion. They are always about your person, absorbing all your secrets.” Reading between the lines, Ferguson believes Peggy suffered a miscarriage in 1945. Earlier in the year Peggy wrote, ‘Baby sends love to Daddy’, but by December Jimmy wrote, ‘when you are completely recovered ➡

Above and left: Work in progress on Baby Sends Love. The stitched baby shoe represents the baby that Ferguson believes, reading between the lines, Peggy lost towards the end of 1945.



we can try again'. The battered tiny leather baby shoes represent the baby. "I am very aware I am putting two and two together, but that's why I like to work with letters with which I have no connection. It leaves me free to take things in my own direction, adding my own thoughts and emotions."

Recently, Ali has started to work with wood and other materials, and has evolved some of her creative ideas to develop 'workshops in a box' as an alternative to the face-to-face sessions that she looks forward to resuming. "It's my way of adapting to these times, offering something that might encourage other people to make things. But I miss workshops: I like talking to people, sharing memories and sparking ideas in a real-life mind map through conversation and interaction. This has been a year for stepping away and producing things I wouldn't have made otherwise. It has been quite liberating and thought-provoking; instructive, I suppose. It has made us all think about the doing, not the goals and aims. Moving forward, I hope that will remain." ❖

You can read more about Ali Ferguson's creative process for her piece *Stolen Stories* at www.textile-org.com



Above & left: Textile collages inspired by postcards from the men of an East Lothian fisher family. Below: another token featuring a line from a letter from Jimmy to Peggy which feels like an appropriate way to end the last issue of this extraordinary year.

