Reading other people's letters, like reading private diaries, offers thrilling and unexpected glimpses into the lives of others—their pledges of love and their sharp remonstrances, their thoughts on war and peace and the gossip of the day, their intellectual travels and idle chatter. It is partly this guilty pleasure we take in such literary eavesdropping that makes The O
The Oxford Book of Letters from the halcyon year 1995, a beautifully-produced and jam-packed thing edited by Frank and Anita Kermode and devoted, of course, to what is now axiomatically referred to as the lost art of letter-writing. Axiomatically, but not, I think, melodramatically; letters were tangible things, after all, capable of surviving floods, fires, and estate sales, whereas our present forms of written communication—email, Facebook, Twitter—are easily deleted (hell, Snapchat deletes itself), and also easily lost: I wrote my first emails twelve years