

Seven by Lisa Rowe

Transcript of an interview conducted by the verbal history department of Cambridge University focusing on female staff members and their lived experience of the early C21st. This example is from a Fellow of Jesus College, recorded in 2022. The theme of the conversation was 'love'.

As a mathematician, one might assume that I am comfortable with exploring abstraction and confusion, for the pure delight of watching patterns form and seeking to make sense of them – but the complex logic of mathematics rests upon five axiomatic truths:

1. If equals are added to equals, the wholes are equal.
2. If equals are subtracted from equals, the remainders are equal.
3. Things that coincide with one another are equal to one another.
4. The whole is greater than the part.
5. Things that are double of the same things are equal to one another.

I approached thinking about my lived experience of love using these axioms as a starting place; ensuring I had a safe place to retreat to, if needed.

The ancient Greek philosophers handed down to us words to describe seven concepts of love:

1. Eros – Romantic, Passionate Love
2. Philia – Affectionate, Friendly Love
3. Storge – Unconditional, Familial Love
4. Agape – Selfless, Universal Love
5. Ludus – Playful, Flirtatious Love
6. Pragma – Committed, Long-Lasting Love
7. Philautia – Self Love

I have sought to identify if these seven loves, as lived, could be accepted as axiomatic. I add at this point that this is a retelling of personal experience; and I have not applied any research in advance of responding; I leave these recollections for others to decide if ancient Greek philosophy, and early C21st understanding of love abides in their time.

Philia (1)

We met as undergraduates, two of a small cadre who both studied at Jesus and remain here within the fellowship. Step by step we have rejoiced in each other's personal and academic achievements offering each to the other a fixed mark in a slowly changing landscape. We are described as having a Jesusan 'hive mind', a nomenclature that does not cause offence. We are proud to be here, to have lived here, to have loved here, to have learned here, to be associated with each other and to share our knowledge and wisdom with others. We are indistinguishable in so many ways – but fundamentally individual. In our time we were offered, and now offer to our students, this humble wish, 'prosperum iter facias'. Our joint

aim is to keep growing and learning together; and we proclaim that where one is lucky enough to find an equal, a successful journey in companionship, can last a whole lifetime.

Ludus (2)

It started with anonymous whodunnit Valentines cards in our second term, progressing to acknowledged flirtations in the bar; there was always a game at play, a love match. There was never an explicit choice of who to play with, just finding someone willing was tempting enough; it meant we were acknowledged, and it made us feel alive. We made the rules up as we went. We feinted and parried, soaring into the rarefied space where we alone had mastery of the air around us, it became thrillingly breathless. However, all games started had endings, they seemingly had winners and losers. In a space where there are no fixed rules a sudden change of altitude, or a shift of direction unanticipated by the other was enough to bring us back down to earth where we were grounded and went our separate ways; looking for the next contestant to start all over again with. There was someone in Malcolm Street I had my eye on. When game players are subtracted from game players, the remainder is an equal draw.

Pragma(3)

The College flag flew at half-mast. There was no wind, so it hung listlessly as if it grieved with us. I cried when they died fulsome, generous, selfish, shuddering tears of grief. Silly really, others knew them better had befriended them, lived with, and loved them. And yet I admired their commitment and long-lasting connection to the College and our science; guiding me as an undergraduate, sitting with me into the small hours nursing a glass of wine whilst my mind catapulted from expression to expression asking me 'why' and 'what if' and giving me free range of the bookshelf where the answer, or another question lay. I would look for gentle shifts of expression indicating engagement with my thesis, genuinely curious to observe how the body of knowledge was being contributed to. Their seminal text, in quarter bound leather, sits alongside mine on the shelves of my set; both equally thumbed through by my students. I considered them a mentor whom I would always continue to learn from. Their estate returned to me my first published text, which I had dedicated to them. On the fly leaf was written 'I learned more from this inquisitive mind, than I was ever able to share'. Things that coincide with one another are equal to one another.

Eros (4)

I didn't expect the rush of desire, the feeling that the whole of me could melt into the whole of them, that our bodies combined were offering worship to a higher command. A third entity, the passion that enveloped us both, bid us to follow its will. The calling was strong and insatiable; a silent, persistent, and urgent demand to be together, controlling us both and brushing aside all propriety, all others. It was more than personal lust, greed, wantonness, or whatever self-absorbed descriptor you could choose to use. I think back to whether I had a choice, whether they had a choice, to express love in this way; I don't think we did, it was a compulsion in which we were playing our roles without question. Equally driven to experience the whole being greater than the parts.

Philautia (5)

I am here, where I want to be and content with my lot. I am the product of my choices. Rooted at Jesus College, my history will be shown in the wearing of the stone slab at the entrance to the Chimney, a small scratched graffiti in Chapel Court 6, Room One (my apologies) the growth of an Oak sapling, now a tree, in the woodland walk (three acorns planted after a drunken bet, mine being the survivor), the futures of the students who sought my guidance, the stories of the Alumni who revisit to dine, and my texts in the Jesusan Collection. I was student and fellow, a double life in a single space. I cannot choose between those lives, they are equally important in the shaping of me. Things that are double of the same things are equal to one another.

Storge (6)

Whenever I think of my daughter I am reminded of the lines in Carole Ann Duffy's poem 'Demeter'; a woman who 'brings all spring's flowers to her mother's house'. This is how I feel when she visits; as if the world suddenly has a wakening vitality and the air is sweet with the scent of her. We didn't decide to be apart, we grew that way, naturally. My choice was to bring her to life, to nurture her until she sought similar choices for herself. And yet. When we are apart a fundamental piece of each of us is absent. However, there are opinions offered that describe our matching mannerisms, how we sound alike with inflections in the same places, how we incorrectly request an 'Espresso' in the Roost Café. We are both embarrassingly rubbish at arithmetic. We share the same bloodstream.

Agape (7)

At Evensong, in our beautiful Chapel I hear from the pulpit that 'now abideth faith, hope and charity these three; but the greatest of these is charity'; and I have sought to live my life according to these principles. Both faith and hope have been tested, but charity never has. Offering charity is not altruistic for I know what it feels like to have done a good thing; bearing witness to the struggle of others, contributing my time and efforts where needed, recycling my wine bottles! How little effort it takes, and yet I remember them all. I have had strangers hold me tight at a time of crisis, friends to share my burdens, gifts given laden with kindness and understanding. Again, I remember all of these, and the many more not noted, and regret that I cannot offer my thanks every day, most especially to those who fleetingly touched my life.

And so, if I may, I return to Euclid; adding (rather impertinently) two new axioms to describe love through the language of mathematics:

6. When wholes are divided each part retains an equal portion of the other
7. When equals are multiplied each part is replicated equally, and exponentially

Love, as experienced by me, is logical.

The Silence Around Us by Noah Rouse

There are times at night when nothing exists between death and jazz, where rivers merge with oceans and the street lights become flames on the desert sand. These are the times of night where I used to walk with you, or if not 'with you', then for you, because of you, away from, towards you. Often, I didn't know why I walked, but now I do. I wanted to taste your lips on the night air and touch your skin on the cold railings. We had a mosaic of love, comprised of scattered selves and zealous fractals.

Before I came to Cambridge I remember walking to the end of a concrete pier, where a man was fishing alone. Looking back, I feel that moment, before I had heard the whispers of your existence, was when I knew you most. You were there somewhere in the midst of the Aegean blue. You were there where line and water touched and a single man stood, daring the dynasties of time and purpose to pull him in and smother him in those depths.

When we met, Justine held herself with passionate defiance. She walked with her coat around her as if she was smuggling the sphinx's nose out of Egypt. Her struggle against the universe was evident in every minute detail of her body; holding her head high, she glared down the future and let the past batter her shoulders. I think this desperate grasp of tangible creation is why the city and its people fell before her so wretchedly. She hated its boundaries, but the living architecture of this place suited her so compactly. I remember we lay by the river one night, viscerally ecstatic that we were in the middle of something unknown, and she told me that this place reminded her of the Virgin Mary because it's everything to everyone. I laughed because so was she.

No one really knew Justine. She was so serene in the face of her grief, but she was made of stone. I don't think she even knew herself: it felt like she was always one step out of line with being at peace and two steps off wanting to be at peace. I remember when she burnt her hair on some incense. She was so pleased with herself that I decided that to be with her, to orbit around her, was an act of imminent artistic creation, unadulterated to the point of annihilation. I wish I could be romantic and say that we were 'lost together', that we had somehow come upon one another in the wilderness and were searching for some bright voice of redemption. But I don't think that would be fair, it'd be more accurate to say that we were fugitives who crossed paths as we ran in opposite directions. She was armed, and I was not.

I knew about Daniel from the picture atop the pile of books next to her bed. While I guess he must have known about the two of us, I foolishly hoped that he would one day walk in on us: I used to leave the door on the latch, and always fell back to sleep when I should have been leaving. Once, I told her that if I was knocked off my bike and died in the street, I wanted her to publish me, slipping complicated obituaries and obscure poems into library textbooks. She promised me she would, as long as none of the poems were about her. The next day she gave me Daniel's spare helmet. I smiled and kissed her, but threw it in the bin when I turned the corner.

Justine existed in relation to her setting; if she had found herself to be a character in a painting she would have been a mirror for her audience, drawing their fingers to adjust the frame and sign the painting themselves. Therefore, I never knew the Justine that Daniel knew. I remember that a few weeks before she left my life, I saw them together, but I recognised him, this stranger with whom I had an affinity, before I really saw her. She was different with him; she seemed younger and without her gritty innocence. When she introduced me, her kiss on my cheek was foreign and I felt the brand of her strange lips on my cheek the entire day. By evening, it was unbearable. The next morning I went to the dentist and he pulled my tooth out.

I wonder how she felt about me being with other people. Daniel loved her so strongly that his love masked her pain in a way that I could never do. But I never felt jealousy towards him because I didn't want Justine to be mine, I wanted her to love me. It only was after she left that I realised this. I remember that she was hurt when I told her that I had found myself in someone else's bed and wished I was next to her. I don't know which confession caused her pain and I initially regretted speaking, but this painful honesty made up for all that I couldn't be honest to myself about.

The night of Daniel's funeral, she kissed me as she cried. Her face was cold as if she had just drunk from a glass of iced water. I was helpless - what could I do for her? When I took her in my arms, the weight of her pain pressed into me. She had returned to the pain of her life, but I couldn't carry it. In the morning we sat on chairs outside the cafe while a storm began to move over us. A table needed to be tied down but I blew across the street anyway. That's when I saw the look in her eyes, through the tears I could see that she had decided something. I didn't know what.

The next time I saw Justine was the last time before she left my life. Following the funeral, she had taken a month off and had gone to Normandy to sit on the beach. It was a bright harsh day when we woke up. I kissed her and she smiled. She said that she loved me and started to cry. I don't remember how I replied, but she kissed me. It was a moment of painful bliss. The bitter air carried the sun through the windows and there were no shadows.

I realised something big had happened or was happening when I listened to her breath while the radio was on. I felt an unbearable weight of sadness and joy. A cloud had crossed over the window and somewhere in the shadows lay the bodies of who we were, mangled and destroyed. I think her arms may have been the first place that I felt wanted. I felt I belonged. She told me that she had dreamt of Daniel and he told her that she loved me. We grasped at one another and promised never to let each other go, that we were bound to each other and no longer free.

That was five months ago. I haven't seen or heard from her since. I often phone but there is no answer. Secretly, I'm glad because I don't know what I would say and so I've begun to phone less and only at the darkest times of night. All the people that I know she knew are either dead or behind impenetrable walls and I can't get through to them. I once thought I heard whispers of her existence in the meadows, but I couldn't find her. Her flat is empty and she is not there. I have been emptied and yet I am still here. I hope that she has finally fallen in step with those vast and silent armies of the peaceful. Or she may be dying on her

own battlefield at this very moment. Either way, I have no way of knowing. I am surrounded by myself.

When I woke up this morning, I thought of you, Justine. The stranger who lay next to me told me that I looked sad, but she was wrong. I remember when I came here, I wondered who I was going to be by the time I left. I thought that being here and leaving would change me. I still know that it will. The world is different now because you, Justine, changed by having existed. You might have chiseled your name from the Pietà, or blown the nose off the Sphinx, but you still carry the stone with you, grinding it down as you haul it across borders. We are still left though, collecting the sand you leave behind. Some day you will be free of your burden, but we will have it all in our pockets.

Frail Halves of a Whole by Serena Warwick-Yamamoto

She always found it acutely discomfoting when there was something she didn't understand. Not in an arrogant, know-it-all sense but in an *'I have something I need to prove'* sense. Truthfully, she despised this mindset, which was rooted in the depths of grammar school competitiveness and underpinned by the expectations of her father. If she didn't know something, she needed to find an answer.

Unfortunately, this was not a linear equation to solve, or a passage of text to unpack. She reckoned she wouldn't even be able to pick up any method marks in trying to work out exactly what it was about *him* which polluted the perimeter of her every thought.

Lying on her bed, colouring in the ceiling with her eyes, she felt the weight of her laptop on her stomach, cruelly keeping her caged in the endless articles she had left to the very last minute. As always - because God forbid, she ever worked ahead of schedule - essay deadlines and required reading lists poked, prodded, and picked at the corners of her brain but... she was faltering. Her gaze fell to her phone, lying face down on the floor in the corner. The twinge in her chest urged her to grab it; text him; ask him if he was all right. She let her laptop slide onto the duvet as she slinked from the bed to the floor.

Anxiety whispered in her ear: *'what if he hasn't replied? Is he safe?'* Turning over her phone, his face filled up the screen, but only two notifications appeared. And neither were from him.

Within seconds, she stood up, phone kicked back to the corner, and she dragged her hands across her face; tugging her skin to scrape him from her conscience. She scolded herself for checking when she *knew* it would hurt her. Why was she always looking for ways to sabotage her progress? The more she rubbed her face, the more aggressively the tears smeared up and over her cheeks, seeping into the hairline by her ears. Knees buckling, she sank to the floor, the heat in the back of her skull becoming unbearable.

He held all the cards when it came to keeping her attention. Yet no amount of love would help her forgive herself for being all-consumed by the thought of him. The thought of him sitting here, wrapping his arms around her, and slowly twirling a small strand of her hair around his finger. The thought of him kissing her forehead and wiping away her tears with his thumbs, their noses touching as he whispered that she wasn't crazy. She wasn't broken. She wasn't unworthy of his love.

Even just the fleeting image sent her heart into a two-step. Six weeks was a long time. One hundred-and-seventy miles was a long way. The room fell cold.

The last time he was here was a fading memory. Standing at the train station, she had been checking her watch every thirty seconds, waiting for the train to draw into the platform. As a rush of commuters poured through the gates, her neck ached as she searched the sea of blank faces. Minutes had passed and she already felt as though someone had flipped over a sand timer, every second of their borrowed time together slipping from her grasp before it had even begun. Heart pounding in her throat, she scanned and studied the mass of grey and blue until finally, like sunlight spilling out from densest of clouds, she saw him.

"Caleb!" she cried out, waving frantically like a kid in a playground. A grin broke out on his face, and he beamed back at her, fumbling in his wallet for his ticket. She shifted her weight from foot-to-foot as he bustled past the slow walkers until finally, arms wide open, they melted in the warmth of each other's clothes. His scent was like a blanket of familiarity.

Everyone froze in time around them, the hubbub of the station falling into muffled background noise. Everything, and everyone, was still.

"I missed you so much," Caleb murmured into her hair, squeezing tighter. He pulled away, their faces inches apart as his eyes traced her face, and her eyes locked with his. She burned his features into her memory; she was going to need it.

They walked the long way back to her college, hands clasped together and walking in rhythm up King's Parade. The chill of the January evening hurried them along: past the Market Square where the stalls were closing up for the night and all the way to the turning onto Jesus Lane. She wondered, only momentarily, if life would have been easier had they chosen the same university, or at least universities in the same corner of the country. But it was pointless imagining it. She knew, not entirely in a bad way, their lives were worlds apart.

Hours later, long into the night as they lay together in her single bed, she rested her hand on his cheek as he slept, trying to breathe in time with him. Nothing in the whole world mattered to her when they were together. On these nights, their relationship didn't have to rely on static text messages and unanswered phone calls, and they didn't bicker over trivial, irrational things purely out of frustration for being apart. He looked so peaceful. She couldn't imagine being angry at him for anything at all in this moment.

This is what she had to remind herself, during the nights when they were busy running circles in their own lives, miles apart with the hours of no communication making the hands on the clock drag like nails down a chalkboard. Perhaps he was caught up with friends, laughing at the TV or drinking in a beer garden. Perhaps he was playing guitar, or going for a walk, or cooking a late-night meal. It was okay that she didn't know what he was up to, and it was okay that she couldn't understand why this frustrated her so much. Two years of being at each other's beck and call meant the past few months felt like a cold, unforgiving slap in the face.

Her phone remained silent, mocking her tears of self-pity. If only she could run away, catch the first train out and join him: laughing at the TV and drinking away her priorities. If only she could sit and be serenaded by him, before going for a luxurious walk and discussing what to cook together for dinner. If only she wasn't held hostage by these four walls of scholastic purgatory, perhaps she could be as free as him, and not tormented by the longing to live alongside him. In all honesty, she wondered whether she wanted to be *with* him, or to be *like* him. In a fantasy world, she was free from the pressure and burden of a degree she was voluntarily studying.

Slicing through her thoughts, her phone buzzed, and her heartbeat did not so much as flicker. Eyes dry and glazed over, she reached over and squinted at the harsh blue screen.

'Anya, I'm so sorry I lost my phone but I'm back now!! X'

Lowering her phone to the ground, numbness set in, and she crawled robotically back to her bed. Back to her laptop. Back to the essay nearly three hundred words over the limit. His attention – the only thing she had craved all night – now seemed impossibly ridiculous to lose her sanity over. With the text cursor blinking at her on the laptop screen, she pushed Caleb out of her mind in two deep breaths.

Stretching out her fingers, she began typing, quotes from the articles filling up the page and her brain was finally locked and engaged.

It was moments like this where Anya had absolutely no idea how to navigate herself. She could understand quadratic equations, and the convoluted criticisms of academic journals, but what she could never seem to unpack was her own cognition. Even as she typed, her mind wondered exactly how Caleb managed to keep up with her, when she couldn't

even keep up with herself. Overwhelmed by the moment of self-recognition, she scrambled for her phone, heart in her throat and typing haphazardly through blurry eyes.

‘Don’t be sorry. I love you forever. I hope you’ve had a lovely night.’

Sending the text, relief overcame her. Only a moment later, Caleb was calling, his big, goofy grin filling up the screen and Anya could only laugh, choking slightly as she answered. She knew, in spite of it all, he made her feel okay.

The End of Radiant Defiance **by Hannah Charlotte Copley**

I waited for the door to close downstairs, the car door to shut, and the engine to be turned on, and looked over to the one I love. The only one I have ever loved, and the only one that I will ever love. Of that I am certain. Of that I will make sure.

Callista's hand was crooked, as beautiful as ever, with long and slender fingers and the single golden ring, slightly too large. We were here in the house we never really made into a home, in the city we could barely afford, full of aspirations unfulfilled. In the background the aircraft engine testing at Marshall's was ongoing, as it had been since 8am. I cursed it on today of all days, wishing we had not chosen a house right next to Cambridge Airport. Closing the window, and kissing Callista on the cheek, I offered her some water as her eyes fluttered open. She gazed up to me, missing her radiant defiance that had characterised our lifetime. Bunches of grapes lay untouched next to her, as one well wisher after another had used food to express what they couldn't put into words. The words that nobody knows how to say, so they stand there awkwardly, and dance around the subject.

The sun washed over the windowpane, and we were drenched, drowning in the warm golden light of the evening. Time had stopped, and movement of the cosmos waited just for us, the golden orb six inches above the horizon, waiting for our minds to take it all in: that this was indeed real. That somehow, in all the random of the universe our paths had brought us here, tonight, and we were here together. A girl I had only known for six weeks but whom I was so deeply in love with I couldn't even think straight. Everything she did fascinated me. I gazed at her ear when she slept, eventually dedicating pages and pages of poetry to capture the beauty of each inner and outer fold. Everything she said I inhaled, trying to understand this beautiful and mysterious person who for some reason said she felt the same about me as I did about her.

It had now been 12 hours since she last spoke. 14 hours since she last drank a sip of water. I had barely left her side. The hum had finally stopped, replaced by the intermittent loud roar of a modified dirt bike being raced around the loop of the road. We didn't have any friends in this part of town but had been welcomed nonetheless by this tight-knit community who all seemed to know one another's business.

Ten years later and our love was deeper, equally real. We are in a cafe at the top of a multi-storey carpark in Berlin and Callista laughs at me trying to carry two coffees and a piece of cake without making two trips from the counter. Her long curly hair frames her face and crumbs of cake collect on her red and yellow checkered skirt. Outside the clouds are dark, about to crack into a storm but we have our own world here, travelling alone with everything we need between us. Berlin was the first place we felt truly welcomed and accepted, and the weeks turned into months, living rent free in an old friend's basement and staying up late nursing bitter alcohol.

Braigh came past earlier today, but didn't stay long. They had said their goodbye already. The nurse was with us for some time, replacing the small syringe driver which went into Callista's skin, just above her tattoo of a rose. I held her hand tightly and read the words on it:

Oxycodone 10mg, Midazolam 10mg. Her eyes were shut, but not tightly. I knew she was still there.

Another ten years had passed, and we had stopped by in the magical wood - the Beechwoods - just outside Cambridge. Braigh was with us, full of the joy and sparkle that had characterised everything about them since they came to live with us. Callista ran ahead with Braigh to find the den-building area, whilst I walked behind, inhaling the scents of spring, with all the wonder of life and renewal that comes with it. I crouched down and looked at one of the new tiny saplings, which had fallen from the sky without direction or place, and now was quite determined to mark a place in the world. Braigh directed Callista to get the biggest and best sticks, and progress was made with one of the half-built dens, forming an upturned cone with dense walls and a darkened interior. "What happens if the rat who gets killed is a mummy rat?" asked Braigh, with a sudden burst of seriousness, sitting in the den they had just created, "do the baby rats do ok without her?". Callista knew what they were really asking. "When the mummy rat dies the other rats come together and one of them adopts the baby rat and loves them more than anything, just as much as if they were their first mummy rat".

I feel so helpless. Waiting for the inevitable. Waiting to plan what will inevitably happen afterwards. "It's good she's at home" a well meaning neighbour had said. Every time she opened her eyes I prayed for this to be over, for the miracle that never came, for this disease to have all been a bad dream of mine.

One summer and we were descending down The Cheviot in Northumberland. Callista was holding my hand (as ever) and we went through a kissing gate. It never got old, kissing Callista over a kissing gate. Somehow, and imperceptibly, the tiny trickle out the rock had become a strong river. We had collected up small twigs and leaves, and arranged them in the shape of a flower, right by the riverbank, as a shrine to mother nature herself. Two weeks later it appeared on her shin, in deep black ink, announced as ever with a wry smile and a "Hey Kirsty, look at this!".

The time was 6pm. Callista had stopped breathing for several seconds at once. I kept whispering into Callista's ear how much I loved her. How I couldn't understand how anyone could love someone this much but here I was. Her breathing was coarser, like she was struggling through a sticky black tar. We had known this was coming for so long, but I was not ready for it to be right now. I moved my face close to hers and kissed her on the forehead. I didn't know what to do, other than what she had asked me to, so I opened her book of poetry, added to by her over a lifetime of fighting against corporate destruction, and started to read:

*Who will speak for the river?
When the river has no voice?
Who will shed a tear when the last drop has dried up?
The river can't go on strike.*

*It will not suddenly choke, it will just fade.
The day the river bed is dry, the moon will light it just the same,*

*The life will be gone, all for a transaction,
You cannot put value on what cannot be owned.*

I knew Callista could hear me when I spoke. She took one single last breath, so shallow it was hardly there, and then... nothing. The silence and emptiness consumed the room so wholly that my vision was lost completely, coming down as a curtain after the final act of the play. I stood up gasping and opened the window that looked out onto the green trees in a nearby garden.

In doing so I dislodged a small and brightly coloured golden butterfly, which flew up purposefully, as if it knew where it was going. Higher and higher it rose, well above the brightness of the setting sun, until I couldn't see it any longer.

Goodbye Callista.

Their Careless Caresses

by Ella Curry

It's some time around twelve in the honey-soaked room, one window thrown open to the echoing night. She sits, a half-moon smile on her illumined face, and in the large pane behind her head, golden reflections twist in the misted glass. The flickering forms merge, smears of life swimming against the dark sky, disappearing now and again behind her unmoving head. In her hand she holds the hem of her skirt, bunched between two twitching fingers; she slowly brushes the rough threads across her palm as she watches her friends. They're sat around the table, huddled together in twos and threes, and she observes them fondly. She is content not to talk, to simply be there, bathed in the floating glow, gently buffeted by their cartwheeling conversation, the soft susurrations of their half-slurred whispers. She smiles slightly: they are just drunk enough that they float, suspended in a glowing happiness of glistening eyes and shivering hair. Yes, she thinks – it is, indeed, quite beautiful.

Every now and then the blanket of quiet murmurs billows up, scattering into laughter, the glowing giggles caught around their lips as they gulp from glasses drenched with lipstick and wine. Each kiss leaves an imprint, a shimmering mouth made duplicate, and she knows that her friends must touch everything in this way: their humming hearts burn with the urge to leave a mark on the world, a trace of life on everything they touch. They can't resist caressing, kissing every object with mouths hungry to taste, to feel it all. By these kisses, they taste the world.

As the moon drifts higher in the stygian sky, the room blushes ever brighter, the glowing embers of the day cupped within its shadowed walls. These shadows waver and shift as hands flit, bird-like, from glass, to table, to chest, then face, hair, and back again; her hand remains on the table as she absentmindedly traces whorls in a dull purple pool of wine that has collected there. She watches tenderly as the milky, golden light wraps itself around her friends' bodies, clinging to their clothes and hair; she marvels at the red-wine roses that bloom across their lips and cheeks, growing and glowing in the pearlescent fluorescence of the halogen bulbs. Her heart flutters, and she sighs gently.

For she looks at them all through a lens of love, such luminous love: she watches and wonders at the beauty of their wide laughs and their loud mouths, the glossy chorus of their clinking glasses. This love flows through her, sometimes gently, a passing ripple; other times, a flood that sweeps her around, rising in her chest until her heart is as tight as a bunched-budding rose. As glass crashes against glass, she wonders that they do not break – with each "cheers" a fresh fear-flash – but each time they stay intact; fragility frustrated. And the hands that grasp the still-whole stems remain flushed and plump with life and youth, uncut by shards of shattered glass.

The washing machine next door begins to hum, mellow and strange, and she is pulled up to dance. She laughs as they twirl in wild, joyous circles; the room is suddenly all eyes and sugar-glazed lips, split-second glimpses of too-pink tongues and purpled teeth. As they spin around, their bodies merge, morphing into distorted images in the glowing glass bottles that adorn the table – reflections bulging bottle-green, then lost in an instant. She is among them as they stumble and sway, golden wheat bodies in a soft summer's breeze.

And then it is over, and they are all hands and flushed cheeks again, clutching at goodnights. The ceiling throws back the sharp echoes that burst from the clinking of wild

hugs and colliding glasses as a new dance begins, a ballet of careless, carefree caresses. Liquid slips from near-empty glasses onto grasping, clasping hands. Kisses just miss. It's nearly two.

They leave, one by one, their farewells flying away into the darkness. With the opened door, the honeyed sheen to the room fades, and – curiously – she fights the urge to cry. The shining tendrils of her love float away on the chill night air, drawn into thin threads; they pull in all directions as her friends fade one by one into the misted morning, each step away another gentle tug on her heart. And then it is her turn to go. As she walks home alone, the last lights go out in the upper window, and the moon's hazy penumbra touches the clouds with silver.

Just Like Buses

by Angela Abbott

I lay unmoving on the bed, staring blankly at the rain drenched window, watching with unseeing eyes at the droplets of water running down the glass, forming tiny fjords, merging into each other and distorting the view beyond. Outside lay a world I no longer wanted to venture into. I was happy within this space, locked inside my head with only my thoughts for company. No-one to see, no-one to speak to, not having to explain myself and my actions, all alone.... again. I sighed deep in self-pity and shifted slightly to adjust the numbness that was setting in. I was glad to be uncomfortable, it distracted me from my thoughts, but only for a short time. The ache of loss and longing had crept over me like an icy hand, reaching my core and slowly squeezing and twisting its un-wielding grip on my heart. I let out a sobbing, gulping cry, surprising myself that the noise breaking the unforgiving silence had come from me.

My thoughts had wandered back to the last few days as I tried to pin-point exactly when it was that I could have averted the situation I had caused. Where exactly, I could stop time and rewind, to make everything go back to normal. I had been replaying the scene over and over in my head during the depth of the night when I lay awake with nothing but thoughts of him. I had loved him with all my heart for the last three years, we had spent nearly every moment together since the day he entered my life on a boring autumn day in Cambridge. He had slipped into the room with that silly look on his face, he was a bit funny looking really, all legs and unkempt hair but I couldn't take my eyes off him. He came and sat down beside me, looking at me with such adoration, and all I could do was gaze back at him, I was helpless. I did not believe in love at first sight until that moment but all at once I knew what I had been missing out on. I felt my heart thumping and unconsciously raised my hand to my chest to try and still the beat in case anyone could see the movement through my clothing. He only rested a few moments before getting up and as he left the room, he turned his head back looking me full in the eye, an unspoken signal passing between us. I was left breathless with wanting and longing for him to be part of my life, for the rest of my life and I knew then I had to see him again and soon. We did meet again the next day and ended up walking together along the Backs, past the Colleges and on to the Punter where we stopped for a drink. We met every other day for the next few months and formed a bond this way, meeting up and walking through the streets of Cambridge, walking miles together, onto Grantchester avoiding the cows along the way, walking and walking. Before too long during one of our long walks, it was decided that he would come to live in my house, and we could be together properly. It didn't take too much planning as he only had a few precious possessions so move in he did, turning up on the doorstep one day with his bed and his few things in a small overnight bag. I was overjoyed, trying desperately and failing miserably, not to make too much fuss and to give him a bit of space, But I couldn't restrain my love for him, it spilled from every pore and the more I gave to him, the more he returned his love to me. We were truly made for each other.

I shifted position where I had been laying in bed, the numbness that had set into my joints gave way to pins and needles and I had to rub the feeling back into my arm. The rain had finally stopped, and a weak sunshine was trying to break up the jostling clouds in the sky. I knew when it was, I knew the point that I could have avoided all this. I should have fed the cat. If I had fed the cat then we would have gone walking five minutes later and then the bus would have already passed by and we would still be together.

We had left the house together that morning as usual, walking along the road towards the fields that lay between Histon and Girton. The fields that had once been separated by an old railway track that had in recent years been replaced by the guided busway. It was a bright, crisp morning, the birds were singing, the tress were swaying gently in the breeze and the rabbits were out amongst the hedgerows, rummaging for tasty morsals.

He didn't give me any warning that morning, he just went. He normally walks so well by my side, he never needed to be restrained as he only ever had eyes for me, not until we got closer to the busway at least. Then he couldn't help but try and chase the buses, he thought he could catch them as though they were the giant rabbits in his dreams as they rushed past on their concrete tracks, but of course he couldn't as I would hold him back. But that morning something caught his nose, a rabbit perhaps, and he gave chase, the rabbit running, him running, me running behind screaming his name over and over to stop. The rabbit gone, the bus right there, right at the point where the field met the track, he thought he could get it that day, the bus, he could get hold of it and shake it like a rabbit, it was right there for the taking, right there, right there...I heard the dull thud of impact, his body lay still on the tracks, the bus disappeared into the distance, unaware of the devastation it left in its wake.

A Match in Malcolm Street **by Nicholas Ray**

1

Sophie was particularly pleased with the symmetry of the supper party she had arranged for that Thursday evening. It was well into the Easter term – exams completed for most but the round of parties and May Balls still to come. She had found a day when two of her housemates had arranged to go to the cinema so that it wasn't awkward to be inviting the other three to meet two non-Jesuans. Of her housemates, Jeff and Isobel were already an item: she rather envied their straightforward and demonstrative relationship. They shared an interest in sport – Jeff a rugby-playing Cornishman (against the advice of his parents, both of whom were doctors) and Isobel, reading physics, who managed also to row in the Jesus first boat. It was not that Sophie disliked sport, or was bad at it, because she'd been in her school's lacrosse team, just that the pressures of work, or perhaps her complete absorption in the subject of anthropology somehow meant that it no longer had the attraction for her that it used to have. Sophie thought the third housemate, Henry, was more complicated. He was reading French, indeed was practically bilingual in the subject, having spent a year in Paris before coming up. Habitually dressed all in black and seeming a solitary figure until you engaged him in conversation, Sophie thought he revealed his sense of humour. She wanted him to meet her boyfriend's twin sister: they were the two other guests. She and Antoine had been going out for six months now, and his sister Amélie, whom she had never met but had heard so much about, was coming to stay with him for a few days.

It was a round table: Henry would sit on her right and next to him Amélie, then Jeff and Isobel so Antoine would be to her left. Six people, three men and three women, on a warm if sultry summer evening, and she had prepared a delicious creamy lasagne which she would serve by itself, followed by a light salad and a gooseberry fool – nobody wanted anything too heavy on a night like this.

2

Although the Eurostar had been on time, the train to Cambridge was delayed – a 'shortage of drivers'. Antoine texted to apologise; he and Amélie arrived a little breathless a quarter of an hour after the others had assembled in the half-basement dining room; by then they'd consumed a bottle and a half of indifferent white wine. Sophie was pleased when Antoine unwrapped the two bottles of PUILLY FUMÉ he had brought – so typical of his generosity and fastidious taste. They started at once on the lasagne.

"You were both at an international school in Brussels weren't you?" Sophie said to the twins and then, to Amélie: "Why did you choose the Sorbonne rather than trying for Cambridge?" – regretting instantly the unintended implication that this was a lesser choice, or achievement. "I prefer to live in Paris", she replied, unperturbed: – "the French are both more rational and more emotional than the British, a paradox I find intriguing". "Well", Isobel said, "it was certainly sensible of them not to abandon their nuclear programme, as we did". Jeff

nodded: “And then, they also understand that in a global world small nations need to stick together”.

The conversation moved on to Brexit, whether Le Pen’s recent defeat by Macron was ominous, given her increased percentage of the vote, or encouraging, Republicanism versus Monarchy. Sophie looked closely at Amélie for the first time. Above her upper lip was a faint fur, where Antoine was fashionably half-shaven. Her neck was a little longer: she was perhaps taller than Antoine or maybe it was her firm and upright posture. Her fingers were as long and delicate, but she didn’t clean her lips after each mouthful in the slightly annoying way he did. “Why doesn’t Henry say anything?” Sophie wondered.

3

It was time for the gooseberry fool. “Let’s change places!” Amélie suggested. But only she moved – to Isobel’s place and Isobel sat between Henry and Jeff. Amélie could now look more directly at Henry, Sophie noticed with pleasure. The conversation drifted to recent films the six of them had seen recently. Antoine declined a second helping of fool but said how delicious and well-balanced the meal had been.

“But there is cheese as well, if anyone wants it?” said Sophie, then, looking apologetically toward Amélie “... though I know in France you would have served it before dessert”. “I can enjoy cheese at any time”, Amélie replied. And though the evening was close and humid now, as if there might even be a thunderstorm, she ate heartily as she surveyed the table of Cambridge undergraduates.

4

Only Sophie took milk with her coffee, which was consumed at the table together with more of the white wine the company had been drinking before the twins’ arrival. By now the conversation was animated and had reverted to politics: “Why did the British not march in the streets” asked Amélie, “or at least go on strike, in protest at a Prime Minister and government that is manifestly corrupt”. “That’s not how we do things in the United Kingdom”, her brother replied. “Speak for yourself” said Amélie. A slight flush had appeared on her cheeks – Sophie wondered whether Henry noticed it, as she did, but he simply remarked: “Maybe a ‘shortage of drivers’ is as close as we get”.

Amélie helped Sophie clear the dishes and when they were together in the little kitchen placed her arm on Sophie’s; “I am sorry”, she said, “to express myself like that”. “Don’t apologise – it is refreshing to see someone who stands up for what they believe in.” And Sophie, embarrassed to recall her foolishness in imagining a match that evening between two people who had never met each other, lent impulsively towards Amélie and kissed her. In the clearing light of the evening – there must have been a storm somewhere – Amélie, clearly unsurprised by Sophie’s kiss, looked closely at her and smiled. “Yes”, she said, holding both her hands, “the pattern has become clearer to you this evening, hasn’t it?”

Dear Charlie
by Niamh Bradshaw

Return Address:
Jesus College
Cambridge
Cambridgeshire
CB5 8BL

Dear Charlie,

It has happened – as we knew it would. I just left them in the kitchen downstairs. He still does not know that I know. I love being able to tease him; am enjoying all of this, really. What a relief to finally get to this point: to see her smile. We share that unspoken warmth now. You know, those summer secrets rippling on the air – the haziness of knowing and unknowing that softens us all. Only a few moments ago, we were laughing. I had to come back upstairs because it is one of those beautiful evenings here, Charlie – tell me you're seeing this too? It's those skies again. Like the ones I remember; the light, most of all.

I am not quite sure how I will look the others in the eye this evening. Sometimes I wish that I could run across the hall and just tell somebody and know that they already know everything that I do. It is easy to talk to you, Charlie; you, who are seeing everything through my eyes – I know that you know, that you know what I know. It is as if we are back in school, passing notes across the table or slipping them into one another's pockets. We're on the inside, you and I. And yes, there are moments when I do feel a little lonely here, Charlie (before you ask). But if you'd seen them together, I think you'd understand.

Close to where we are, there is this place – and here, there are always people passing by one another, finding one another. There are some times I find myself here as well. I have snatched at glimpses of other people making plans (the little and the life-changing) and, listening, I cannot quite believe how in each and every one of these people, there is a whole life which extends beyond the edges and the moments I have seen – that I have brushed past the most beautiful, the most fragile, thing in the world. I have touched it. And I just can't help but smile at it all: at us all.

Hold on one second – there's someone at the door. But shhh, if we're quiet, they might not think there's anyone here. If I open that door, Charlie, I will have to let them in, you know that don't you? I just don't know whether I can do that quite yet. Because it is still here – perhaps it is only the residue of it but it is still here nonetheless. When I look into their eyes, I will have to admit that I am held by them, am linked with them, but that we cannot say what each other knows. I know how much that feeling hurts, Charlie – and I don't know if I can do it again. Could you?

Forgive me this honesty; I've had a little to drink. But you know there's no harm in it; just warmth (only softening). We both know the consequences. Every breath surrenders something through me and there is this emanation which reaches and reaches as though my nerves stray outwards shadow like finger print like into some invisible aurora that shines

and blinds dappled from the eyelashes veiling it all though I blur into them – into you. Sorry. I will open that door now.

Over the last six months, I have watched these two people grow into one another. They are the people, Charlie, who make me feel my happiest, the happiest that I have been in so so long. With them, I do not feel quite so alone anymore. I did not think I would be able to do this – you know, leave you all behind; what I didn't realise, though, is that I would make a whole other family here as well. Sometimes, they are not quite the same – but then neither am I, Charlie. I can feel things now; at least, I think I might be able to.

The sunlight has almost dissolved here. So much so, in fact, that I am struggling to make out the letters on our page. The thing is, I don't think I really need to be able to with you, Charlie. Like them all, you have your edges, that horizon, where the sunlight dips behind – but I trust you, Charlie; and I mean all the knowing and the unknowing too. You can read me. So come see me, please. You know where to find me. And I promise I will share with you everywhere that I know. Who knows, I might even introduce you?

Yours,

— .

DANCING WITH RAKEL

by Anonymous

After leaving secondary school and going to sixth form college, I got a holiday job at the big department store in our West Midlands town. I was employed in Despatch, a subterranean area called the Van Way. There were four men unloading incoming goods, uploading outgoing deliveries. There was stress: rows over breakages, porcelain and glassware; curses when we lugged king-size mattresses, or three-seater sofas. I'm small - five foot one and a half; but I'm nimble, and I work with rhythm. But foreman Geoff, a tattooed hard case with a mullet hair cut, liked to press my buttons. My name is Timothy (Timoteo to Mum who's Spanish, Timmy to my Dad who's Irish) - at school they called me "Tiny Tim", which was OK. When Geoff called me "Titch", I stupidly sulked. So it was "Titch" all the way.

I liked it best when we heaved our trolleys into the maintenance lifts and went up to the sales' floors: soft background music, wafting scents from Cosmetics (a change from the dank diesel stink of the Van Way); and I would try to linger by the TV section, especially when tennis was on.

In Domestic Lighting, among the glowing lampshades, I discovered Rakel the pretty young Asian assistant. She was no taller than me, even in high heels. She wore her thick lustrous hair down to the waist. She had large, watchful amber eyes; a dazzling open smile. Even the corporate black skirt and blue blouse looked stylish on her. One lunch time I saw her walking ahead of me on the High Street, poised, graceful; she walked like a dancer. You don't have to be tall to be graceful in my view. I never heard her speak; I guessed her voice was a kind of posh Indian lilt.

Rakel's senior colleague was Misty, frantic blond mop, violet eyelids, hang-glider lashes. Misty used to come down to the Van Way for a smoke. She was into horoscopes on her smartphone: she had all our birthdates. I asked Misty where Rakel came from. She said her Mum was from Goa and her Dad was "from Malaysia or somewhere..." Then she went: "Whoar!... ho ho ho!...d'you fancy 'er then?"

After that, whenever I passed Domestic Lighting wheeling the trolley Misty nudged Rakel and whispered in her ear. Rakel would take a look at me and turn her head with an inward smile. And I would be wondering how to ask Rakel to go dancing.

I'm crazy about Latino dance, which I got from my Mum. I danced in the bedroom by myself. In my early teens I got into Cuban Salsa which I learnt online But I was always looking for someone I could take dancing. There were all these lanky netball girls in my year. I fancied Tara, the goalie team captain. I was older than her, but I only came up to her shoulder. She used to tickle me, lift me off the ground and spin me around. I asked her to come dancing: only the once. "You gotta be joking!" she said, and tweaked my nose.

I began to fantasize dancing with Rakel.

One day Misty came up to me in the staff canteen.

"Oy, Titch! You fancy Rakel....."

My face felt hot.

"...I seen you - eyeballing Rakel...and she *really* fancies you...Why don't you date her...Go on...*Go for it!* She's right in your stars, Titch!"

I froze; but I was quivering inside.

I got thrills in the stomach when I passed Domestic Lighting. Then one morning: it happened. Rakel looked up, flashed a wide smile, and she *winked!* Well, more a one-eyed blink than what big Bro calls an 'Ello Sailor.

My heart cracked.

I got to wheeling the trolley on roundabout routes to pass Domestic Lighting; if she winks again, I thought, I'm going to ask her. As I passed by, Misty fluttered her eyelashes, screwed her lips into a mid-air kiss; rolled her eyes in the direction of Rakel, as if encouraging me to make my move. But Rakel now seemed nonchalant.

I'm on tea break in the staff canteen. Misty creeps up behind me. She whispers. "Cineworld, Saturday, seven o'clock. Don't keep Rakel waiting...She's dead keen." It wasn't a dance date; but it was a beginning - and I'm seriously into movies.

I got a text: "C U SAT 7 @ SINNYMA PM RAK ELLE X". The saucy "SINNYMA" and "RAK ELLE" didn't chime with my impression of shy Rakel. But I could hear Misty's voice in my head: "Go on, Titch...*Go for it!*"

Saturday afternoon I had a long shower and brushed my teeth three times. I borrowed a jacket from big Bro. He said: "You look like a sack of hammers in that thing." He likes to wind me up.

I cycled the two miles to Cineworld, arrived in a sweat. I reckoned on the new James Bond - "Spectre", or the Kray story - "Legend." (I'm a fan of Daniel Craig and Tom Hardy; not tall men, incidentally).

I stood at the entrance till nine o'clock.

I cycled back in the rain. Got home sodden. Big brother quizzed me. "Sly minx!", he cackled. In bed, I played my Mum's favourite video of all time; which I watch when I'm depressed: Al Pacino and Gabrielle Anwar dancing their amazing Tango to "Por una Cabeza" in the old movie *Scent of a Woman* (Pacino's quite vertically challenged too). It always gave me the feeling of missing the fabulous dance partner I'd never had. It's all a bit mixed up, I know; but it helped me cry which I sometimes still did (and still do).

Come Monday Geoff was sounding off: "How was the hot date, Titch?" I smelled a rat. I dreaded facing Domestic Lighting; but I had to make a delivery there before the end of the morning. As I approached, Misty called out:

"Oy! Titch, where were *you* on Saturday? Rakel waited a whole hour outside the Odeon!"

It felt like a punch in the solar plexus.

"You said Cineworld..."

"I said Odeon..."

Rakel covered her mouth and nose with her hand. I could only see her wide stretched eyes. Was she ashamed? Was she mocking me?

I couldn't get back to the Van Way fast enough.

Geoff rubbed it in: "Titch don't know 'is Odeon from 'is Cineworld, or 'is 'ead from an 'ole in the ground..." The Van Way men were in stitches.

The afternoon dragged. Had I *really* screwed-up?... No! It was a rotten practical joke. My stomach was churning as we stacked cutlery, pots and pans. It kept going round in my head: "...Odeon from 'is Cineworld...!" We mopped down the loading bays. By closing time I was a wreck.

I'm taking my bike off the cycle rack; I turn and it's Rakel. She's standing there blocking the front wheel.

"Listen," she says hotly. "I didn't know *anythin'* about a date.... And I didn't text you neither...it was all Misty."

What's happened to the lilting Asian princess? This Rakel speaks broad local *Brummie*. And she's calling me "*Kid*". She's saying "...and I *never* went to the Odeon, Kid." It comes out like "...an' Oi niver wint to the Odeon, Kid."

She's waiting for me to say something. I'm dumb-struck by the shock of this in-my-face Rakel. She's fuming, eyes blazing; but she's angry *for* me, not *with* me, After a night and a day of rotten misery I have this feeling of painful sweet relief.

Then I blink, and blink hard, because my heart is heaving.

Rakel stares.

"Bloomin' Eck!" she gasps. "Are you cryin', Kid?"

I'm trying to wipe the tears with one hand and grip the handlebars with the other

"...Oh Jeez..." she murmurs. "... Honey! ... "

I feel a firm soft hand over *my* hand on the handle bars.

I'm trying to control the storm in my pounding heart ...this Rakel, this *real* Rakel - she's no shy princess, and she's no sly minx either. She's just flippin' gorgeous: And I'm just a Kid: a *silly* Kid.

Then I *go for it*.

" *Will* you..."

She's looking apprehensive.

"Come for... a *coffee*?"

Time and the whole flippin' Universe stand still.

"Are you asking me on a date, Kid?"

"Yes"

"Now?"

"Right now!"

"Why not!" she says.

So we're walking together, Rakel and me, slowly at first, the bike between us.

She taps my arm, like she's checking whether I'm OK.

I've stopped snivelling, and we're both laughing.

She comes round so the bike is not between us. We're walking together, in step, shoulder to shoulder, along the ramp from the Van Way up towards the sunlight, the High Street, and the welcoming doors of our local Oops-A-Daisy Café.

We're sitting at a table by the window. There's an edgy silence between us; Rakel is staring intently into her café late. Eventually she looks up: eyes expectant.

"Hey, Kid!" she says. "D'you like dancing?"