

# The Love Letter

---

*David Adams*

## I

My beautiful, long-lost pigeon—but forgive me if I am presumptuous. I was struck dumb a few days ago when Stephen, who alone has remained my friend and colleague since our time as theology students, remarked:

‘Yesterday afternoon I bumped into a friend of yours—Lily. Remember Lily? What a companion she was, in the old days! While we were talking, she didn’t once quiz me about myself. Instead, she kept asking me about the change in your appearance over the years, and she tried to make me admit that I knew what your political opinions are. You always had such radical notions! She is still a pretty, unusual flower, even now...’ (He knows nothing about our re-introduction: I have tucked my cards into my palm, where they cannot be seen even by those nearest to me.)

I was equally amazed when Stephen told me that, despite the passage of so much time since the old days, you could still speak of me with great disappointment and worry. Those were his very words, disappointment and worry. He even reported to me that while he was speaking with you, he noticed you sigh, and he heard you mutter to yourself a string of disconnected sentences:

‘Over and over I reason with myself about Michael, and I think about what should have been.’ ‘Sometimes I feel as though Michael and me recently parted.’ ‘For many years I’ve been ashamed of what we did to each other: what mud-puddles we were!’ ‘Our friends and teachers were as much to blame as I was.’

Such blunt and dangerous things to say!—after all how many years have been devoured since we last touched each other, or spoke to each other in the old manner? How many years have been rapaciously swallowed since we wrote love letters to each other? In more recent times how many happy and unhappy events have grabbed us, unbeknown to the other, and turned us upside down and shaken us, completely emptying our pockets? Is it really twenty-nine years since we were each other’s sweet-corn, ten years since we involuntarily began our complete separation from one another, and two months since we accidentally met again near Doyles, when the blossoms on the frangipani near us bent in half under the onslaught of the raindrops?

I am shocked by your behaviour. Yet nevertheless, part of me understands your peculiar, audacious remarks, which you must have known would be repeated in my hearing. You cannot forget our shared past, and you wish the world and all its occupants might be thrust backwards in time, so that they could perhaps take a different path to the one they followed. For then you and I could begin afresh, and choose another route ourselves.

In return for your surprising and rash candour, I acknowledge that although for many years, I hardly thought of you; and although when I did think of you, I usually felt violent shame because of our 'indiscretions'; nevertheless since we first saw each other again, and stood talking earnestly together with rain dripping from our noses, I have wondered about you often. I have even begun to dream about you. Isn't this a strange result of all that has passed between us, and all that is absent because of our youthful cowardice? In these fantasies you do not chase me while I run fearfully away, curling and wriggling like a kite's tail, but never escaping. Nor do you perform bizarre feats, like becoming yourself after being someone else, or turning from yourself into someone else—even into a cat or a wolf. These dreams of you do not contain exhilarating or painful stories. You are there, and I feel rapture. That is all.

You will no doubt ask, as I ask, why these unexpected and fantastic thoughts? I try to understand myself; I dislike confusion; and having mentioned them I wish to explain these things to you, but I am no more a psychologist now than I was before, when such an understanding might have rescued our feelings from the pit. The cause of such deep and heart-felt impulses as those upon which my dreams depend is almost entirely hidden from me. Perhaps love cannot be absolutely eradicated from a person once they have been a ragdoll in its hands. And perhaps it is only that I am growing old, and in the darkness beneath the flaming rooms which fill my head, I am telling myself remorsefully: 'The guilt that prompted Lily and I to flee each other in our youth was out of all proportion to our indiscretions—so was the distance we ran, and the speed we ran with.'

Yes, feelings of guilt might explain my night-adventures. After all, our exuberant, passionate and tender behaviour was all that was required to condemn us in other people's heads. Others' condemnation of us was all that was required to make us condemn ourselves. Is this not true, my—but it is best not to return too often to these old, affectionate names...

What exuberance we had all those years ago, and what affection we gave to each other! How goodnatured and passionate we were! We mewed and roared at each other's jokes; we thought better, almost, of each other's intellect and opinions than we thought of our own; we liked each other more than we had ever liked

anyone. Liked each other? more than liked—we felt adoration for each other...we desired each other's company far more than we desired even solitude! At times we transfigured each other. We did not pretend, fearing that others would be suspicious or jealous of us, to feel little for each other. We were so intimate, our combat tasted like truffles. In the light of such vividness, and our attempt to shut our eyes to all that gleamed around us, who would not after the passage of many years reconsider their life-journey with a sense of shame and regret, and be plagued in dreams by lost opportunities?

And what after all were our indiscretions? What crimes produced others' displeasure? Does their trifling nature not make it all the more likely that indefatigable remorse is the cause of my visions? Did we ever kiss each other anywhere but on the cheeks, hair or forehead? Did we ever make plans to run away together? Did we ever drink up each other's bodies, rather than hope to marry according to the laws pressed on us by our beliefs? Perhaps we secretly thought of many passionate, dangerous actions, but we did not mean to undress them, let alone embrace them. How pitiful it was, then, that because we were one drop not two, many of our devout superiors were sure we were going to run away with the quickness and suddenness of a raindrop that remains still for a moment on a pane of glass, before abruptly descending! How pitiful it was to heed the voices of these genial and conceited sheep!

Once I was sitting at my study-desk writing an essay, when I was visited by the Assistant Dean of the theological college, Doctor Browne. I had just written, 'Can anyone say it is more probable an enthusiastic friend of Paul's wrote some of his letters than it is that Paul himself wrote all of them?', when there was a knock on my open study window. (I still remember how smooth and thick the paper was beneath my pen.) Doctor Browne thrust his head inside and said, 'Hello'. Then withdrawing suddenly, as though he were a chicken pulling its head back through the bars of its run, he came around to my door and entered without bothering to knock. Once over my threshold he paused to take off his rectangular half-glasses, and his long black overcoat. (I noticed then that his lips glistened, as though just before he came to see me, he had been drinking water.) Leaving the door open, he sat down clumsily in the chair that always stood beside my desk.

He said, tittering quietly and staring at the papers in front of me, 'You're busy with your work; I'll come back another day, when sainthood occupies you less.'

Guessing he had come on business, and preferring to let him speak then and there, I stood up and closed my door. Returning to my seat, I said, trying not to grin at his peculiar joke and merry titter, 'I'm tired of Paul—I don't mind having a conversation. What do you want to talk about?'

Doctor Browne gently laid his overcoat across his thighs, and flattened and crossed the sleeves. (I thought he did this almost tenderly, as though his coat were alive.) Then he lectured me in a carping voice, saying things like, 'Someone has to talk with you about Pigeon...about Lily—Miss O'Connor. I hope you won't find that my words taste as unpleasant to you, Michael, old friend, as they taste to me. (While he said this he pulled a face, as though he had bitten a chicken-bone hard thinking it was a piece of meat.) The way you look at her; the way you speak to her; the giggles; the babyish practical jokes; it's too much for anyone! The tittering and muttering during lectures, readings, prayers and sermons; the unbridled letters; the enthusiasm with which you share glasses and cutlery when you eat together in the dining-hall (after he said this, he again looked as though he had bitten a chicken-bone hard, thinking it was meat); the unhappy way she looks at you, obviously craving something—these things disturb and frighten me. Pigeon is...seductive...a ripe pear. *Aren't you planning to marry her?*'

When he asked this question I told him, compelling my face to be thoughtful when my desire to laugh was a tantalising itch that I feared to scratch: 'No, she's not as seductive as that.'

This was perhaps a lie...

After patting his overcoat for a moment, looking nervous and bewildered, he said in a manner that was even more like that of a lecture or seminar-paper: 'I'm relieved, as you appear to have asked yourself so many important questions already. You show such promise, you make me think of a new farm. But you should probably reconsider. Perhaps you ought to marry her: I see the way she looks at you.'

In making this suggestion, he was as presumptuous as a curious child.

'I'm endearing to her, that's all.'

'No, you're wrong—she wants to—'

Because Doctor Browne did not finish his sentence, it was unnaturally striking—my imagination furtively whispered to me a lewder conclusion to his words than I could ever have conjured deliberately, without such a hint. As a result I was less repulsed by him than I was by myself.

However, regardless of these self-deprecating feelings, I spoke happily and reasonably: 'Whatever her cravings, Lily blots her desires with what she knows about Christ's.'

Doctor Browne said merrily, 'Sexual desires are often stronger than even the best handhold on Christ's rules can be.'

I made my face disguise as cheerfulness the feeling of insolence that was awakening within me: 'You're making me uncomfortable by speaking about our

sexual desires so openly.' I wanted to say 'your sexual desires', but did not have the courage.

He smiled, and raised one eyebrow almost to his fringe: 'I wish I were more truthful when I was *thinking* about my own sexual desires. I like to speak as truthfully as I can about all these things. The truth will set you free.' He closed his eyes abruptly, pointed at me with his half-glasses, and in a gentle tone whispered, 'I see what danger stalks you, as plainly as I can see the meaning of "Jesus wept".'

I said, after looking at him with scorn for a few moments, and quickly poking out my tongue at him, 'But your eyes are shut.'

He opened his eyes slowly, and I saw they had a gentle expression in them. 'Even with my eyes shut, I can see that if you don't behave properly, your career in the Church might be harmed. You might even lose your candidature. If the worst happened, you would be expelled from the college.'

'But you can't take these things away – notes and giggles are cake, not poison.'

'Perhaps we can't yet; but if you and Pigeon take another step together...'

'Before anyone can take my candidature away, they must prove I've behaved improperly, when I haven't! Before anyone can expel me from the college, they must prove that I've broken its by-laws, when I haven't!'

'You're a rare student, Michael, whose talent is being bolted by this stupid desire for a pretty, lusty girl's mind and body....'

As Doctor Browne spoke, it suddenly occurred to me that the college's staff, and our fellow-students, all thought our behaviour was infantile, gaudy and treacherous – that they said to each other, 'Their talents and their love for Christ have been besmirched by their childish desire for each other's mind and body – and what do they care!'

Because of the feelings of shame, indignation and rebelliousness that accompanied this unexpected thought, I preferred not to answer Doctor Browne any more. However, he did not appear to mind: realising that I felt too uneasy to say any more, he took the opportunity to explain himself further.

'Many intelligent and earthbound men and women have been routed by the temptations associated with physical beauty. Plato's theories have harmed many of them. (Truly, while he talked for no good reason of Plato's theories, he looked as obstinate as a sheep that will not leave the pen to go into the shearing-shed.) Many devout, intelligent and earthbound men and women have often been routed by these revolting urges. Some of them have been able, like Theresa, to exchange their body's repugnant impulses for spiritual devotion. They've composed some of the most beautiful prayers that have ever been written down. You could read them for inspiration. Many have allowed their devotion to Christ to be positively bolted by

their body's impulses, and it has travelled through their stomachs, and turned into dung. No-one should underestimate these impulses' power and unpredictability. They can't always be controlled—not even by the most devoted saint. They make disloyalty sweet, and the sweetness of disloyalty more appetising than a strawberry-cupcake.'

He grinned for a moment at his own aphorism, but when he noticed that I was looking directly and contemptuously at him, his face expressed trepidation, and even shame. Still, he added: 'An immoral woman drips honey, but she tastes more bitter than absinthe. Rejoice in the wife of thy youth.' He blushed. 'Let her breasts satisfy thee at all times.'

When he had finished quoting these severe, ancient texts, Doctor Browne stood up abruptly, and said: 'We will all utter fervent prayers for you; all.' He opened my study door, hastily mentioning an essay I had written for him a few weeks earlier. In this essay, I had thrown a tennis-ball at agnostics.

Only half-filling the doorway (he was unusually thin, even before his final days), he said, 'I like your joke about agnostics, Michael. What a future you have in front of you! I memorised it so that I could tell everyone. This is the question to ask an agnostic; for the problem of knowledge is what an agnostic has scruples about—"How do you know I do not know that God exists?" *Haw-haw-haw*. See, I know it word for word.'

Then he went out without looking back; without even closing the door behind him. He was a cork that, having been fired from a toy gun, flew speedily and undeviatingly away until the string connecting gun and cork was stretched tight.

This is what we knelt before, and treated as an idol—yet it was the gambolling of chimpanzees. How I wish I had spoken to you then about this conversation! Perhaps the end would have been—however, we had so many conversations with our 'helpers'; and so many that were more painful and exasperating than my talk with Doctor Browne; I thought, 'Why mention this to Lily? What good will it do anyone?' Do you remember how, when I gave you my bicycle, some of our dearest companions were furious, as though this act of generosity were proof that uncontrollable passion was my draught-horse; and as though a bicycle were a symbol of tender sexual acts, and the gift of one, therefore, were a symbol of a wild desire to perform tender sexual acts with the person to whom the present was given? It was all too painful and incomprehensible...Why make such absurdities worse?

We should never have let our friends, teachers and spiritual advisors direct our thoughts and feelings—when we loved. We should never have let our

consciences check our wills or our powers of judgement, so that we each fled the other. We exchanged the smell of coriander for the stench of milking-sheds.

So much feeling after so many years! There are wounds that reach beyond blood and flesh, beyond even the realm occupied by what really troubles and delights us, to a place for which there are only the vaguest notions...Yet time and this sorrow have made the world much larger; it is impossible to make the heart small, when the world grows. Is it any wonder that now I frequently think and dream about you?

## II

Perhaps instead my thoughts and dreams of you occur because I am lonely. What a furore I produced in my parish one day, when I said with pain and foreboding in a sermon: 'If my sister, who is an atheist, is in Hell while I am in Heaven, how will I ever experience bliss in Heaven? If I were God no-one would suffer forever!' (Humane considerations of this kind are to many of us the *non plus ultra* of immorality and unhealthy freedom.) Last month I was called an old, ignorant fool because I complained in a letter published in one of the small religious journals, that new church music is often sentimental, humdrum and unintelligent; and that some of our musicians are wrong in thinking we are all able to sing with rapture to Christ lines like, *Your sunlight turned my*

*night to day*—or, *Thank you for the wings you gave me, so I can fly up to the sky*. Yet there is far more beauty in the fingertips of Sviatoslav Richter, who was much-admired among communist intellectuals and played at Stalin's funeral, than in the souls of our greatest writers of modern religious choruses. Anyone can know this. Who would not become cynical and isolated at these clear signs of our religion's decay? I am surprised I did not bite this grapefruit sooner. I wish to divide my most fiery notions and feelings with others, and I have no-one now, except perhaps my daughter Beatrice, and Stephen, with whom to share them. I wish others would divide their most fiery notions and feelings with me, and I have no-one now, except perhaps my daughter Beatrice, and Stephen, who does. When I am in doctors' waiting-rooms, or supermarket queues, I find myself involuntarily telling the story of my pleasures and troubles to anyone who will listen; it is only with the greatest difficulty that I can stop myself talking, even when my auditors inattentively yawn and look away.

Four and a half years ago when my wife Cornelia caught pneumonia unexpectedly, and died, I was naturally aghast. Because she was so much younger than me, I had always imagined she would outlive me.

When at my most charitable moments I think of her, I recall her sweetness, which usually smothered any fits of bad temper she had. I recall her loyalty, which often led her to defend me when I was not being assaulted. I recall the mischievous look that often wrinkled her smooth face; and that she did not try to hide at times when she might have been giving offence to others. I recall her dislike of the impractical methods used by many devout people who try to live by half-understood religious ideals. I recall her talent for saving broken tree-branches, and for mending window-sealing. Her enthusiasm for the marvels of twentieth century physics, and of Aristotle's peculiar biology, was as sharp as a teaspoon of zest.

I often think of her light brown hair. She kept it short until the day she died, although I would regularly tell her she should let it grow just once. I often think of her body, also. Because she was so tall and thin, she reminded me of the pipe-cleaner women I had made when I was a small boy. I remember the alert, mirthful expression that was usually in her eyes. What a startling pale blue her eyes were! I will never forget how often happiness peeked out of them. I will never forget the freckles on her cheeks and neck, either. They made me think of marigolds or daisies...

For any person who was as sensitive as an eye, as I have been, her strength and gentleness were more precious than diamond-eggs. What a loss! This will show how tall she was. Not long after our first child was born, murkiness entered Cornelia's soul. For three weeks she was unhappy and worried. Although she gave me no reason at all to blame myself for her gloominess, I took the responsibility for it almost entirely. I asked myself whether she was unhappy because during her labour, I had been as hysterical as a cat in a pond; or if she was unhappy because I did not help more with our new son; or if her misery arose because I was not more sympathetic about her labour-pains, or the bizarre activity of her hormones.

Whenever I was in her company at this time, I was uneasy, irresolute and confused. I felt as though I could barely see: now and then while I was with her, truly, I walked as though I could barely see—I collided with chairs, or tripped slightly on little rocks.

One day, we were seated opposite each other at the old wooden picnic table that stood in our backyard. We were drinking orange juice that Cornelia had squeezed a few minutes before. The weather was so warm, the table was almost too hot to touch with your arms. Our new son lay not far away on a wide, checked

blanket that we had spread out in the dark shadow of the nearby fence, where it appeared to be cooler. He was on his back, grizzling and cooing.

Cornelia sat with her hands on her head. Now and then she groaned stealthily, like a child that has banged its shin on a fence while playing hide-and-seek, and doesn't want to give away its hiding place.

I felt so miserable, I thought, 'If I don't ask her why she's unhappy, I'll start weeping.'

Using a mournful tone because I didn't want to offend her, I asked her: 'Why are you so glum?'

To my amazement she began to weep violently, and putting her hands on the table, she gasped between sobs, 'I—don't like—pork cut—lets any more—'

Before her pregnancy she had liked pork cutlets: she especially liked them with honey, orange or ginger sauce; and she preferred the way I made them. However, during her pregnancy they had made her sick. Now whenever she thought of them, she looked nauseous, and poked her tongue out.

*'I—don't like pork—cut—lets—any more.'*

I pretended to understand, saying in a kind, yearning tone that Cornelia called 'woothing', 'That's a real pity. Still, you'll probably be able to eat them soon.'

*'It— isn't—really—the—'*

I took one of her hands, and with my thumb stroked her long, thin fingers tenderly. 'What is it?'

She gulped, and said as serenely as she could (each of these clauses was, however, pressed out of her mouth by a gentle gasp): 'Everything has changed, not just some things have changed, everything has changed.'

Still 'woothing', I said, even though I guessed what she was referring to when she said 'everything': 'Do you think that, no matter what, pork cutlets will always taste horrible to you from now on?'

She suddenly gave a loud, teary laugh that rumbled in her chest: 'No, you goat. What I mean is that I have to get up twice every night. I can't read any more: I'm always exhausted. I think about nothing but breast-milk, rashes, weight-gains and sleeping habits; and I much prefer thinking about black holes, or Copernicus.'

I exclaimed shyly, 'I understand now; how difficult it must be for you!'

*'Do you know just how difficult I find looking after a baby is?'*

Sensing greater trouble, I replied, 'How could I know that? I can see that you find it difficult: but I only have a tenth of the difficulties you do.'

'A tenth?' Cornelia took away her hand, and wiped one eye with the tip of her thumb. Her eyes seemed to be paler than usual. 'That's a much cleverer answer

than I expected, after the question about the taste of pork cutlets.' She was so pretty to me, then, that I felt as though my heart had been hit roughly with a stick.

I asked anxiously, afraid for a moment of the burden that our new son was, 'Should I help you more with Jon?'

'I'm grateful for what you are doing—you could be doing less.'

'I wouldn't mind helping you more, though—why don't you express some milk, and let me feed Jon in the night sometimes?'

She said in a rumbling, amused voice, 'How conscientious you are!'

To which I replied nervously, thinking again how appealing she was, 'Do you mind if I'm conscientious? I could be more...'

She laughed violently at me because I had put a leash on a spaniel that was already wearing one. Then she looked at me with her cheekiest expression in her eyes, which were still watery. 'I hate it. How annoying conscientiousness is! It's a broken heel, or a ripped stocking.'

A few moments later, she said, shielding her eyes from the sun with her thin forearm, 'I'll find you more work, as long as you'll do it in the way I tell you to. It will be dirtier work.'

'All right, find me more work, and if I can, I'll do it the way you tell me to. I don't care how dirty it is.'

Whereupon she yawned, closing her eyes, and said, 'I'm tired of being unhappy. What a waste of time! As well, I'm tired of you looking like a basset hound. I've been thinking of calling you Bobo.' Over the next few days, the murkiness steadily vanished from her soul, until it was virtually gone.

When I was afraid or worried, what ointment her strength was! When I was in her company the world swelled like a balloon being inflated by a giant. Yet her breath has gone; she has gone. Sometimes when I think of her body, I do not see four pipe-cleaners that have been twisted into the shape of a person. I see worms; I cannot help it; this macabre image fills my head, as piercing light fills your eye...

I often yearn for my children's companionship. Now they are adults, I can only enjoy it occasionally. Why did I carelessly urge my children to swim wherever they wished to in life? Why, once they could swim alone, did they swim so far away from me? I am not an angler-fish or a barracuda. I am a dolphin. They cannot know how I yearn for their laughter, their conversation, their jokes, their aplomb, their complaints, their certainties. What a mystery that the orange should break its stem, and drop to the earth, when the stem has nursed the orange, and the earth might well be its grave! Still, even through such frustration and wastefulness the world grows, and forces the heart to grow with it...

Often loneliness fills me as though it were, not a chilly flake buried in my heart, but my heart itself. Who in this situation would not think affectionately of once dear companionship that has recently been revived?

Still, old friend, while any of these might be the cause of my thoughts and dreams—shame because of our youthful shame; hope; cynicism; loneliness—nevertheless a moment ago, as I sat at my desk looking at the silvery needles of the pine tree outside my study window, and thinking with joy and regret about the disillusionment of our past and the less gloomy present, I felt none of these things. No—*then* I merely felt as though I were eating a mouthful of white honey. Who can say from whence my visions come?

### III

I am sitting on the waterfront, watching the sea, and mingling recollections of the past with warm and cheerful dreams. The sunlight twinkling and shimmering like a star under the water is very beautiful...

Because I am often unoccupied, and have many rowdy memories of failures, errors and evils, I regularly summon my happy memories in this fashion; and I am grateful when they come. Often they stuff me with the kind of rapture that I feel when I duck safely under large, higgledy-piggledy waves, while swimming at the beach. I have plenty of time to muse.

Can you still remember seeing *Macbeth* together, so many years ago? I often recall that night now. How deafening the bagpipes were in the confined space of the theatre! How delighted and surprised we felt when the play opened, and the witches, who were wearing cloaks that were the same shade of brown as the set, unexpectedly leapt up, and began chanting! To think—when the audience entered, the witches were hunched on the stage, unseen because of their drab camouflage! To me they had arisen, because of a dark spell, out of the stage's planks. Do you still remember the argument one of our lecturers had with you about the moods of English tenses? As though I were witnessing the argument again, I see and hear you joyfully asking him, 'What do you think of the English language's sixth mood?' And I see him reply, 'I've never heard of a sixth mood'—to which you answer: '*Everyone's heard of the jocular*'.

Often, too, since we met again I see and hear myself lying next to you in the Botanical Gardens, and reading pages of *The Origin Of Species* to you while my mouth is full; and moreover I see and hear you laugh more and more as my words become more and more clogged with food. I frequently hear myself saying in a

garbled voice, as I did sometimes when we were clowning before going in to lectures, things like, 'That revolutionary masterpiece; that remarkable addition to the scientific imagination's productions'; and once more I hear you laughing joyously at my childlike antics. As I write, the sound mingles with the patter and splash of breaking waves. Also, I think now and then about the anger of our supervisor when you asked him whether you could write an essay on the effect that orthodox Protestant doctrines had on Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas; and I hear you saying to him after he had calmed down, 'But what could be more natural than that the child of a mediocre and overconfident clergyman would be an ingenious and overconfident atheist?' This memory can still make me giggle as though I were nine years old.

I picture you and I writing that clumsy, comical essay in which we joined together a hundred technical words and phrases, without bothering about their meaning—'One of the Pre-Millennialists' errors is that they rely on English translations of St Anselm, which are inaccurate, and that they misread the ablative case where it is used in these diaabolical translations'; 'The decline of English Thomism after the Reformation is almost as much to blame for the incomplete sentences in the Authorised Version as we might.' What pleasure we felt as we worked at this piece of nonsense! How disappointed I was when your tutor gave you a mark for this essay of thirty-nine per cent, and my tutor only gave me a mark of thirty-five per cent!

I recall the abhorrent college-food; and then I hear you asking the Dean once more whether, on the college's next Open Day, our mothers might have dinner with us. I even hear you innocently giving him your reason afresh—'Then they would see for themselves that our college-meals are as tasty as the meals we have at home.' Now and then I picture you sitting at my desk, writing the letter in which you suggested to the Dean that the college's rules about wine, beer and spirits be changed; and I laugh anew at your reason—that we longed to wash down our food with anything which might help us to forget what we were eating.

We tested our friends' and teachers' patience over and over. How irritating we must have been! What hilarity we fed each other with, how bright were the spoons of childish wit we used, how deep was the bowl of love that stood between us, how soon we emptied it!

Do you remember your journal, which had the picture of an ugly, thin angel, a relic from the middle ages, on the cover? I can still half-remember a number of the entries that you made in it. How biting as garlic were their frustration, longing and youthfulness: 'O Christ, if you had made human beings so that we usually lived for a thousand years, I would kill myself before I was two hundred years old: the

grief of twenty-five years is beyond bearing; the pain of two hundred and fifty years would be worse than if all the blood in my veins were to catch alight, or explode.'

'O Christ, how easily my friends learn! They believe what they are first told; or what they first read; or what their teachers say confidently; or what is most convenient; or what their parents tell them is true; or what everyone like them appears to believe. I, on the other hand, am wary of everyone else's opinions. One of my professors tells me, "Synaesthesia is confusion between the senses." I won't believe him: why shouldn't my professor be wrong? After all, he is no nimbler than a bumblebee. I read a textbook. Its writer agrees with my professor. I won't believe its writer, either: why, if my professor might be wrong, shouldn't its writer be wrong? I consult a dictionary. It gives a simpler opinion than my professor's, and my textbook's, and mentions modernist art. "Aha," I think to myself, "I was right to be wary. My professor, my textbook and my dictionary could easily be incorrect." I begin to wonder whether I can know anything. How often I shut my eyes, and think because it is dark that I am lost in the deepest chamber of a cave!'

'O Christ, now and then the most eager desires tug my mind and body here and there. Often my desires people my mind with lusty daydream-creatures, of whom I am one. My zest for living makes me float in the air like dandelion-seed after a violent puff of breath.'

I love all such memories—the visits to the theatre, our youthful follies and laughter, your strange half-pagan prayers—and the more time passes, the more I depend upon them all. How large and beautiful they make the world seem...

Still, I am eating a pinch of dirt, thinking it is icing sugar. Paper is not a face. Ink is not smiles. The letters of the alphabet are not kisses on the cheek. Full-stops are not voices. Hyphens are not laughter. Nor are memories living things. Let us meet, but this time as though we have returned to the old days, when we did not notice the net everywhere around us, so near at hand we might have touched it, ready to snap shut at the first tremblings of unaccountable life. Then you can tell me whether I, too, have begun to think in slogans, like the dogmatists who helped to spoil our youth; or whether I am only exhausted and despondent—whether in my heart I am the same contemplative lover of moderation, intelligence, education and honesty that, once, you told me I was. I will ponder how much you have augmented what you had when we were young, and pay you compliments for growing so large within. You can tell me what you have suffered: if I have caused you intolerable pain by kissing the absence of shameful pressures more eagerly than I ever kissed you, or my child-like love for you, I will denounce the planets for it; or at least myself, for possessing a heart that was not the measure of the

space inside a tennis ball. I can remind you of what I have suffered through the years. You can tell me yourself what you have been thinking about me; and what your feelings for me are. I can return this favour. There is no need for others to speak for us any longer, nor for either of us to write to the other so candidly and yet so slyly! We can speculate together on the causes of my strange, glowing thoughts and dreams. Perhaps we will be able to speak with each other almost as freely as we ever did. (How I loved in my youth your taps, snorts, nods, squirms, punches and giggles! How I relish the memory of them!) Perhaps we cannot befriend each other now in the same way as we befriended each other thirty years ago. But even should this prove true, we may be able to reach more deeply than we have since we were restored to one another in that peculiar way, during the rainstorm.

A sentence tolls in my head:

‘If we do not attempt to return to our youth, the regret and unhappiness we feel now may never pass. If we do not attempt to return to our youth, the regret and unhappiness we feel now may never pass. If we do not attempt to return to our youth, the regret and unhappiness we feel now may never pass.’

Please write or call as soon as you can, and tell me whether you would like to make such an attempt with me. If you would like to do this, please tell me where and when you would like to meet. Until I know your reply, this bell will peal in my head, over and over.

*David Adams is a senior post-graduate at the University of Sydney. He is writing his doctoral thesis on Jacques Maritain's theories of creativity in the fine arts.*