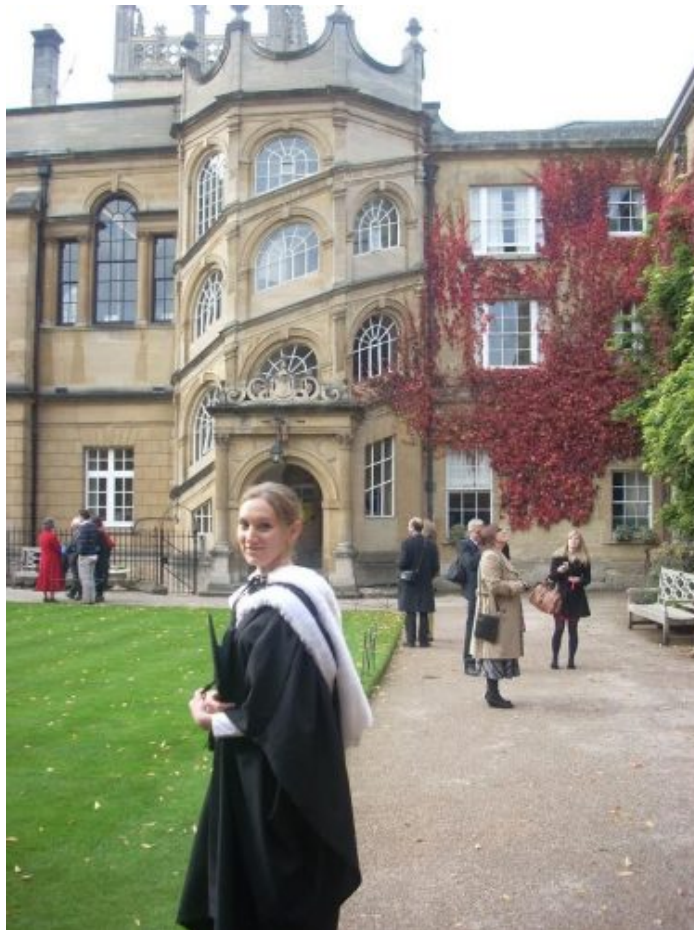


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On Returning to Oxford

📄 [From One Wor\(l\)d to Another](#) 📅 January 27, 2017



By Bryerly Long

Six years after graduating, at 28, I returned to visit Oxford with my father. We walked through the meadows with my dog Sam, along the Thames River, passing by the Perch Pub, where we picked up some free apples, to the Godstow Abbey ruins, and back into town, dispersing a rather large gaggle of

geese on the way. When I was a student at Oxford I would occasionally go out walking or running in the meadows with friends on weekends; or when I needed some fresh air and exercise, I would head out from the Oriental Institute for a quick walk of an afternoon on my own. Walking through these meadows and the beautiful town of old stone buildings on a respite from my life in Tokyo, I was reminded of the serenity and space for concentration and study offered in this place somehow removed from the regular passage of time. Seeing younger students walking and chatting about intellectual and romantic topics of interest, or going for a Sunday afternoon drink at the pub, I realized how similar we were – my friends and I some years ago, and them today. And though the stage for these stories had not changed, the actors of our time had exited, forever replaced by fresh faces.

Age 28 is a kind of turning point – working long hours to establish myself more firmly in a lasting career, falling in love, and trying to figure out how to make space for another person, also realizing that my parents are not getting younger and that I would like to be closer to them. As I walked behind my father and Sam, I was reminded of the T S Eliot poem, which states that time is always time, and place is always and only place. I realized that while time sometimes appears to flow slowly, drifting down a river on a punt on a lazy summer afternoon, we only experience youth once, as our lives inexorably flow onwards.

A late September morning in 2006, my parents and Sam drove me up to move in to my new lodgings at Hertford College, Oxford. There is a rest stop just after you turn off the highway heading into the city which is infamous in my family because there, panicking about what first impression I would make on my classmates, I desperately tried to remove all the dog hairs from my coat. After checking in at the college lodge, my parents helped to move all my stuff into my new room, which included a tea set they had given me so I could entertain new friends. Despite the beautiful surroundings, my first year accommodation was in an ugly 1960s building, with dirty carpeting in the corridors, which occasionally reeked of drunken students' vomit or disinfectant. I will never forget the morning I woke up to discover a Sainsbury's shopping cart in the corridor, which though some drunken students had managed to get up the stairs in the middle of the night, the housekeepers had no idea how to get back down the stairs in daylight... My room faced onto a quad – by far not the most glamorous one in the university, but the location of lots of socializing around the Junior Common Room, the Hertford college bar, and the bop room, where regular themed parties were held. I was a five-minute bike ride from the Oriental Institute, where most of my lessons took place, a two-minute walk from my tutor's office (perhaps too close for comfort), and just down the street from the Long Room in New College, where on Sunday mornings Freefall, the student contemporary dance company, held lessons.

The first year Japanese course at Oxford consisted of two terms of intensive Japanese language study, followed by one term in Japan, at Kwansei Gakuin University. Having met during our interviews, I quickly became inseparable friends with Zuz, a girl of Hong Kong and Czech heritage who had grown up in Germany, studying Japanese with me, and Gus, a British guy studying Chinese. Gus, Zuz and I would go to lectures together in the morning, eat meals together, and drinking tea and delaying any study, hang out in each other's rooms in the afternoon. Zuz was already fluent in Japanese, and Gus had a good base in Mandarin; however I struggled a lot over the first couple terms to learn the Chinese characters, to the extent that I would be called in for extra one-on-one

lessons with my Japanese teacher. The other day my father asked which Oxford professors had the biggest impact on me; without a doubt, the Japanese language instructors gave me a tool, which changed the course of my life. Though there were only eleven people in my year studying Japanese, we were divided into two classes, according to Oxford's rule that there could not be more than seven students in a language class. Unlike many first year courses at Oxford, we had lessons five days a week, starting every day at 9:15am.

The distinctive feature of the Oxford education is the tutorial system. At least once a week, we would meet in small groups of one to three students with an assigned tutor, an Oxford professor and researcher. We were expected to read our way through a long list of books and write an essay, which we would then discuss in the tutorial. I suppose our first year tutor, Dr. Frellesvig, a historical linguist, was trying to ascertain our ability to think and write. The first essay he assigned us was to explain why the 1960s hit song by Kyu Sakamoto, "Ue o muite aruko" (I walk looking up at the sky) had been mistranslated to the "Sukiyaki" (beef stew) song. A poetic description of withstanding loneliness ("I look up at the sky to keep the tears from falling, a lonesome evening") had been lost in translation to some vaguely Japanese-sounding words referring to anything from a popular dish to a Japanese port city associated with the American atomic bombing and Dutch learning ('sukiyaki' rhyming with 'Nagasaki'). I leafed through Edward Said's "Orientalism", but quickly realized that the answer to this essay question could probably not be found in books.

I also wonder why no one has ever bothered to change the name of the "Oriental Institute" – a place where one can study the languages and cultures of anything and anywhere from North Africa, through the Gulf, across Asia and all the way to Japan. Chinese Studies stood apart with their own institute and library; but the rather nerdy Japanologists sporting the occasional Harajuku fashion and neon-colored hair shared quarters with the students of Arabic, Hebrew, Farsi and Sanskrit. Much to my relief, as having no particular interest in manga, anime, video games, or 'costume' play, I felt I had little to nothing in common with the other people on my course. But I enjoyed hanging out in front of the Institute drinking coffee, bumming the occasional cigarette and chatting in French, English or German with the dashing potential future recruits of MI6.

In a small town like Oxford, one would bump into the same people around town, in the libraries, cafes, on bikes, or inside the Covered Market at lunchtime. My favorite haunts were a salad bar called Alpha Bar, Ben's Cookies, and Café Nero on the High Street. Even when we hadn't previously agreed to meet up, I would usually bump into one of my close friends – Omar, a Historian at Magdalen College from Cairo and active thespian; or Emily, an American exchange student studying Philosophy at Hertford, and fellow dancer. On warm, sunny days, Emily and I would sit outside the Radcliffe Camera Library, eating our salads, watching people going by, and often hoping that one of the many guys I was interested in at the time would walk by, to exchange a look or stop to chat. I'm not sure if everyone was aware of this, but the Rad Cam, a round library, where one could look across at other readers, was a popular pickup place of sorts, and certainly offered some nice distractions from tedious academic texts.

Freefall was an eclectic group of women – and some men – from across the university who loved contemporary dance (with the occasional ballet or jazz class). We took turns teaching each other classes, coming up with new choreography, and presenting regular dance performances. Having come from

full-time dance training, and unsure for the first couple years whether academic study was the right fit for me, I spent an important part of my time at Oxford dancing, choreographing, teaching and later directing and organizing Freefall. I also made some lasting friends there. Because I really wanted to train every day, I would book out squash courts to practice dance in the mornings before lectures and on weekends with Emily, or Lucy, a British friend studying English at St Hughs, who had trained at the Royal Ballet School.

In the summers I continued to train at the Merce Cunningham Studio in New York, taking part in the work-study program and working part-time as a waitress. I felt that the worlds of performance and academics were so radically different; and often became frustrated sitting for long hours in front of a desk reading books by various academics expressing ever so slightly different opinions about topics, which were irrelevant to most of the rest of the world. I realize now that the worlds that many artists or people of any profession really, look at are just as narrow.

At the end of my first and second years, I considered quitting Oxford to return to full-time dance training in New York, which my parents strongly opposed. I also presented a proposal for taking a year off to my tutor, to which he replied, "I am impressed by your power of persuasion, Bryerly; however I am not convinced." After that, I would travel down to London once every couple weeks to attend classes for professionals at the London Contemporary Dance School or one of the other London studios. It was nice to escape the Oxford bubble from time-to-time and catch a glimpse of the working world of London. During those years my mother was assigned to posts overseas – first in Boston and later in Cairo; so I would often meet up with my dad, who was living by himself and working in the City of London for lunch or dinner. Over time I found that I enjoyed leaving the congestion of the city and public transport and returning to the quiet and complete darkness, which fell over Oxford at night.

The first two years were a kind of foundation course, over which we acquired spoken and basic written Japanese, as well as the ability to read some classical Japanese, and overall knowledge about the History and Culture of East Asia. Coming from French schools, my knowledge of the history of China, Korea and Japan was limited to events, which had a direct effect on the US and Europe (primarily Pearl Harbor and the division of North and South Korea in the beginning of the Cold War). It is embarrassing to admit, but at first even the names of important historical figures sounded interchangeable, and having no idea how to even spell the Chinese names, a lot of follow-up reading was required after the lectures. I realized that the History I had studied up until then was so Euro-centric, and that probably most people in the world never got the opportunity to study the world from another place, or otherwise that I had perhaps just lacked in curiosity?

During the third and fourth years we were able to choose subjects in which to specialize. I chose Classical Literature, particularly of the Heian and Edo periods. Through Dr. Harries' tutorials, I discovered a great pleasure in reading and translating poetry – finding the right words to convey a specific sensation. The descriptions of nature relating to universal human experiences as described in *Kokin Wakashu* and *Shin Kokin Wakashu* made me more acutely aware of the beauty of nature in Oxford.

It was thanks to Alex, the British boyfriend I dated in my final year, that I first discovered the areas around Oxford – going far beyond the meadows, along the

river and past the adjoining towns, or driving into the Cotswolds; as well as some of the charms of English country life – toasty pubs after a long walk in horrid weather, or long afternoons eating strawberries and enjoying a glass of champagne while slowly gliding down the Thames in a punt. We also regularly attended Formal Hall – a multiple course dinner served in one of the colleges, and where one was expected to dress up, and wear a black gown. These dinners took place in stunning surroundings, candlelit, and were amazingly affordable for the experience offered.

From my four years at Oxford, there are certain days that stand out particularly vividly. One was attending the Magdalen College Ball. I wore a vintage black ball gown with white gloves and a stole. Two of my friends who I was meant to go with were running late, so I found myself reluctantly walking alone across Christ Church Meadows to the entrance of Magdalen College at 6pm. After a day of rain and grey, the clouds suddenly cleared, and it was a brilliant sunny summer evening. At the entrance, where beautiful people in ball gowns and tuxedos were lined up, I bumped into a French girl, whom I had met twice briefly. She introduced me to her friends – a group of French people; and I immediately hit it off with them. We spent the rest of the night dancing, riding on bumper cars, watching fireworks, and eating and drinking all sorts of amazing things. The next morning at 8am, as my feet had grown tired from the night on high heels, one of my friends carried me up the High Street like a princess.

Another was when Alex returned from a trip to Colombia, and we took a bus along the snowy Cowley Road out to some local community center offering salsa lessons. The contrast between the propriety of Oxford, the cold and the snow, and the vivacity and warmth evoked by the sounds of Latin music was quite jarring and funny. After that, we went and drank rum in a Jamaican bar on Cowley Road, the owner of which was perpetually stoned, resulting in prices and servings made up according to his mood. I also remember Alex and I smoking a Colombian cigar together at night in the middle of winter on the edge of a sports field.

I experienced some moments of darkness during my time at Oxford. The final year in Oxford is quite stressful because while beginning to think of where one will go next, applying for jobs, saying goodbye to the innocence of student life and writing a dissertation, first and foremost one is expected to study for Finals. In a set of exams taking place over a couple weeks, students are evaluated on everything they have studied throughout their course, and grades are entirely determined on these Final exams. I had the misfortune of coming down with mononucleosis in the beginning of my final year, which meant that I spent the better part of a couple months sleeping, and trying to read in bed in the limited moments when I was awake. Then I was also too weak to dance or run as I was used to, and it was extremely frustrating to be constantly tired. As a side effect of the mononucleosis, I became depressed for the second time in my life. Luckily I pulled through thanks to the understanding and sympathy of certain friends and my father. The weekend before my exams, Alex drove me to the South Coast, where we walked along the cliffs. As I looked out into the ocean, I thought of where I would be thousands of miles away in Japan, and how I might long to return to the wild and windy coasts of England.

Another quintessential Oxford experience is the tradition of ‘trashing’ people at the end of their exams. Every day of exams, students pin a carnation to their ‘sub-fusc’ – the gown all Oxford undergraduates own for these occasions. A

white carnation signifies the first exam; pink those that follow; and red the last one. I would go into Hertford College Chapel in the morning to pick up a carnation before walking down the High Street to the Exams building. At the entrance we were checked for our student ID's, exam numbers, and that we were wearing the correct uniform (a white shirt and black trousers or a black skirt with black tights and black shoes and socks), and then assigned a numbered desk. We also had to display our scholar's cap, but were not allowed to wear it, and our university card. All exams were three hours, and consisted mostly of a series of essays and translations.

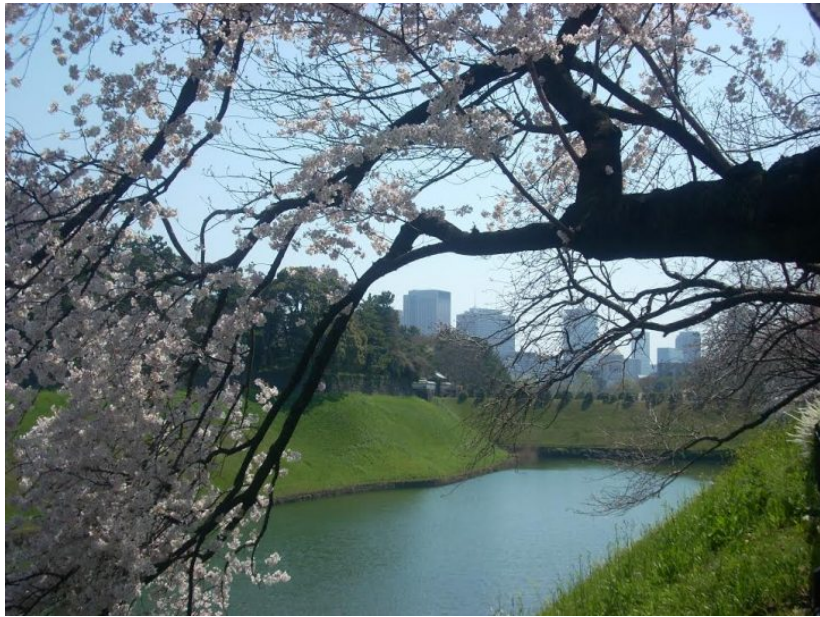
Students would meet their friends at the gated exit of the Exams building on the last day of each other's exams; and then down some alley 'trash' the survivor of said ordeal by spraying Cava on them, as well as confetti, party hats, or in some cases, raw eggs or other foods (this was of course prohibited by the University). My 'trashing' involved lots of champagne, an afternoon at the Turf Pub with my friends, part of a spliff on a punt, sitting on a lawn in a quad and going around and repeatedly hugging and kissing all my friends, and finally waking up some hours later lying on my bed fully dressed in boots. After that, I spent one last week in Oxford, saying goodbye to friends, packing up books, and visiting my favorite spots one last time before I moved to Tokyo. I recall sitting in friends' rooms and on the staircases of their dorms, someone playing a guitar and singing, hugging each other goodbye, and being overwhelmed by intense nostalgia.

I visited one year later, staying in the dorm room of a friend a couple years younger than me; but over the years, as all my friends moved on, the connection to Oxford grew increasingly faint. Walking around Oxford today, I felt like an intruder, looking for the past in the Eden of another generation. At the end of the day, my father, Sam and I drove back down to London, to meet my mom for dinner. And in a way I was relieved to return to the everyday reality of people going about work, raising families, figuring out how to put dinner on the table, and inventing their own lives, beyond the prestige, entitlement and academic pressures, which were so defining during my time at Oxford.









Some names have been changed.

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3 COMMENTS



Ray

January 28, 2017

Lovely! Glad you loved the Magdalen Ball....

Though I didn't realise the Radcliffe Camera "was a popular pickup place of sorts...." Should have gone there more often!

REPLY

Emi Hamana

January 28, 2017

REPLY



I'm delighted to know you read Japanese at Hertford College. I was there or rather mostly at Bodleian Library for one year as a British Council scholar from October 1985 to September 1986; to my embarrassment, I was there before you were born, although I have visited Oxford several times since then. I am a theatre-goer; I suppose I've seen all the works, plays and film, in which you played. I'm strongly interested in humanoid, cognitive approaches to theatre, cognition and affect, etc. I look forward to watching you in a new play in Tokyo!

Emi Hamana
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Tsukuba University
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Bryerly Long

January 30, 2017

REPLY

Thank you for your comment and for coming to see my work. See you at the theatre soon!

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