

A Love Story

ff

Couples



Couples

Maggie Millner



electrifying  
debut is a coming-of-age love story,  
a story of coming out and a story of  
coming apart. A woman in her late  
twenties leaves a long-term relationship  
with a boyfriend for another woman.  
The affair thrusts her from an outwardly  
conventional life into queerness,  
polyamory, kink and unalloyed,  
consuming desire.

Written in rhyming couplets (or,  
as the narrator has it, 'imperfect  
sets') with disarming frankness, what  
ensues is an exploration of obsession,  
gender, identity-making, sexual  
experiment and the art and act of  
literary transformation. Playful, clever,  
lovestruck, griefstruck, Millner dances  
a tightrope of her own invention with  
captivating passion and skill.



was born and raised in rural upstate New York. She teaches writing at Yale and is a senior editor at the *Yale Review*. Her poems have appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Paris Review* and *Poetry*. This is her first book.

MAGGIE MILLNER

Couplets

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*For Nick*

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## COUPLETS

It well may be that in a difficult hour,  
Pinned down by pain and moaning for release,  
Or nagged by want past resolution's power,  
I might be driven to sell your love for peace,  
Or trade the memory of this night for food.  
It well may be. I do not think I would.

— EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY



## Proem

I became myself.

I became myself.

No, I always was myself.

There's no such person as myself.

I wouldn't have to turn my eye

inward, I thought, if I could train my eye

on him – the one I loved.

But I was wrong. My eye loved

everything it fell upon.

And then one day it fell upon

a mirror. And he was nowhere

in the mirror. And she was everywhere.

*Book One*

1.1

All my life I've shown up late.

But when I do, I compensate

for my delay – I laugh and preen and carry on  
as if I had been present all along.

I stayed in utero, for instance, two  
weeks after I was due,

then came out so decisively and fast  
I couldn't breathe. I spent my first

night on earth alone inside a tent  
flushed full of oxygen, the event

from which (my dad believes)  
have sprung like fires all my weird anxieties.

Mostly I can't see myself at all  
until I sense in someone else a parallel,

like how I only realize what  
I want at the moment I attain it,

my mind the final part of me to know.  
I've hurt people I love being so

late to my desires. Last year, I met someone I thought  
I couldn't live without, and in the process lost

another, without whom I thought I'd  
die. *If I had only realized*

*sooner, etc., etc.* But I handled things ineptly  
and he left. I didn't die. Instead, I went to therapy

and saw the stegosaur uptown, stayed with friends  
and drank a lot of tea. Even then,

riding the bus to visit my new lover,  
I was breathless always, early almost never.



1.2

She found me in the winter at a bar,  
one of those places in Bed-Stuy not far

from Clinton Hill – a platonic meeting  
set up by a friend who worked in media

and thought we'd get along. I got there first and snatched  
a booth and started reading *Middlemarch*,

a novel I've been halfway through for more  
than half my life. When she strode through the door,

*Oh shit, I love that book, I've read it fifteen  
times*, she said, and asked my favorite scene.

I looked down at page 98,  
open on the table. *Maybe when Lydgate*

*first meets Dorothea, and Eliot's  
talking about how the 'stealthy convergence of human lots,'*

*when analyzed in retrospect,  
shows a 'slow preparation of effects*

*from one life on another,*' I replied. *Totally,*  
she said. The conversation turned to poetry,

our few mutual friends: one's PhD, one's startup,  
one's divorce. I was too skittish and caught up

in my charade to feel, charging the space  
between us like a ray, the knowing gaze

of Destiny, which Eliot would say stood *by*  
*sarcastic with our dramatis personae*

*folded in her hand.* Besides, I practically had a husband –  
a man as opposite to her as Casaubon

was opposite to Will. On the A train  
home, I read that paragraph again,

then closed the book and marked the chapter,  
telling myself that I'd resume it after.