

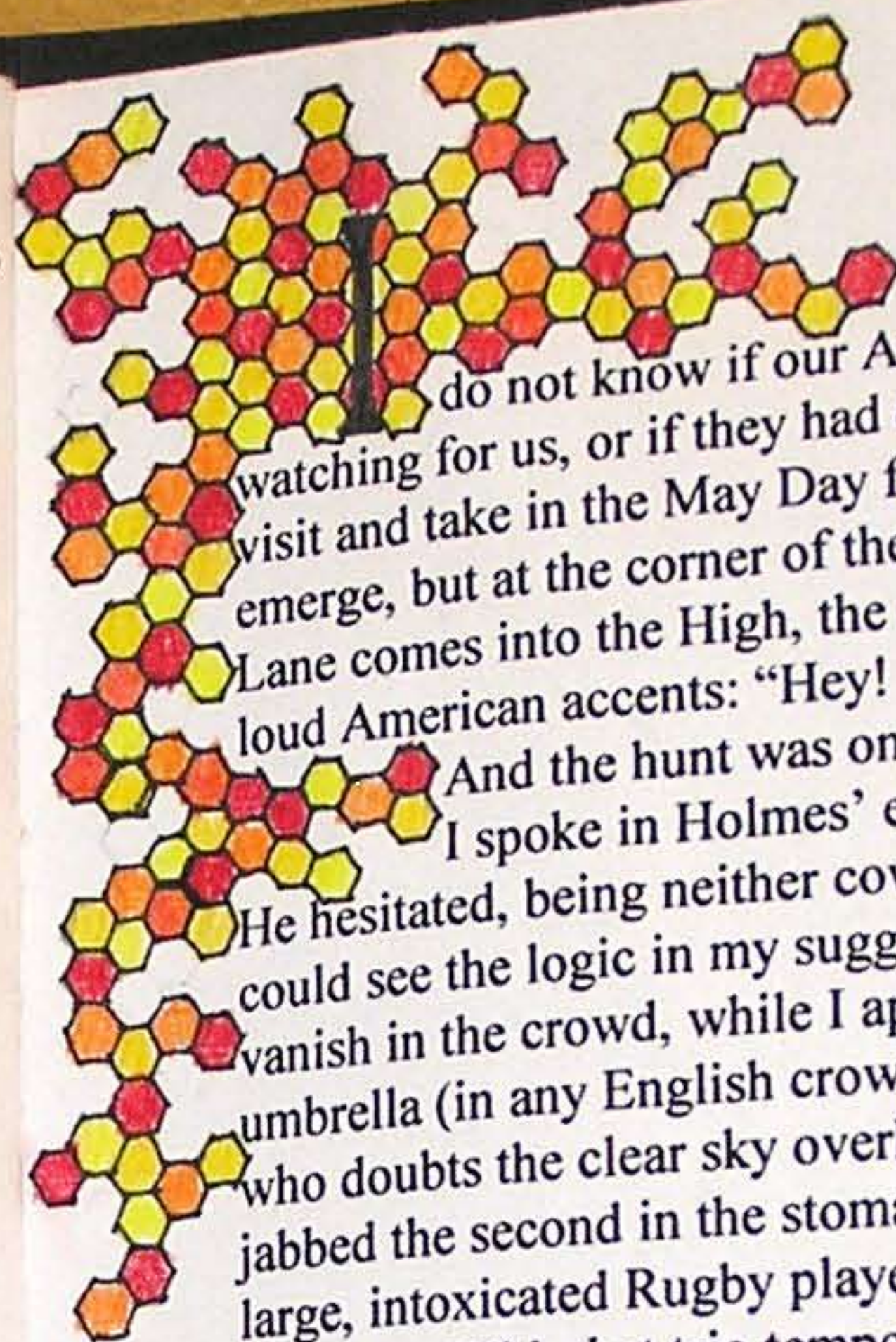
13 May-Day in Oxford is an ancient ritual, which has been suspended from time to time over the centuries due to excessive unruliness. It begins well before dawn, when from all directions people trickle into the high street, making their way in the direction of the Magdalene College tower.

At dawn, choir-boys raise their voices to the day, their sweet, high chorus trailing down over the packed street of families and homeless men, passing tradesmen and beer-sodden undergraduates, antiquarians and tourists. Participants of the previous night's college balls, held upright by the press of the throng, pass around half-empty bottles of cheap champagne, most of them bedraggled, tieless, sometimes shoeless, and often sodden from the puzzling ritual of leaping out of punts or off of bridges in their evening dress. When the snatches of song finish drifting down from on high, the crowd shakes off its attentive silence, gives a noisy pulse, and reverses its progress, out from the Magdalene College. Morris dancers bounce and rattle on the paving stones surrounding the Radcliffe Camera, Hobby horses give the kiss of fertility to doomed young women, odd foodstuffs are sold, the manifold clergy of the town looks on fondly at the pagan frenzy, and the rites of spring are officially ushered in.

When the sky was still dark overhead, Holmes and I let ourselves out of the gate and joined the trickle, soon stream, of May Day celebrants.

However, before the Magdalene choir had finished, we had been spotted.

... there will always be a man who doubts the clear sky...



14. I do not know if our American pursuers were actively watching for us, or if they had decided to make the best of their visit and take in the May Day festivities while waiting for us to emerge, but at the corner of the Botanic Gardens, where Rose Lane comes into the High, the straining silence was broken by loud American accents: "Hey! There he is!"

And the hunt was on again. I spoke in Holmes' ear, ordering him to abandon me. He hesitated, being neither cowardly nor disloyal, but even he could see the logic in my suggestion. He bent down enough to vanish in the crowd, while I appropriated a nearby furled umbrella (in any English crowd, there will always be a man who doubts the clear sky overhead) and tripped ^{one} attacker, jabbed the second in the stomach, and nudged the third into the large, intoxicated Rugby player beside him.

With that trio temporarily disposed of, and making certain they had seen me, their unlikely assailant, I pushed into the crowd, crossing to the Magdalene side of the High and making for Magdalene Bridge.

Halfway across, I ducked down to make my way back up the human stream, ducking into the grounds of the Botanic Garden and making for the river.

Holmes had located a punt, worked its anchoring pole out of the bottom, and was waiting for me. I heard a shout behind me—English, not American—and tumbled into the boat. He pushed off, and I turned to face the boat's irate owners.

"Terribly sorry," I called to them. "There's a trio of Americans just behind you who said they'd be happy to repay you for the hire cost. You take it up with them, there's a good lad."

A sweet old lady in a boat; how could he argue with me?

... being neither cowardly nor disloyal...