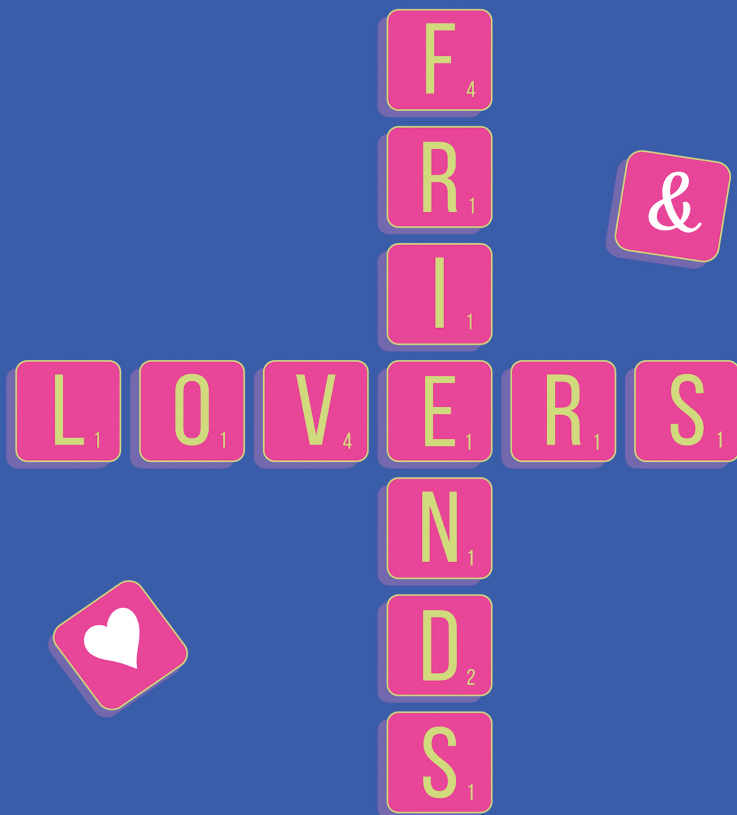


ISSUE 4

NOVEMBER 2025

# GLYPH.

*the literary magazine for the casual writer*



*the*  
FRIENDS & LOVERS  
*issue*

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# GLYPH.

*The literary magazine for the casual writer.*

**Issue 4: friends & lovers**

November 2025

# *the* FRIENDS & LOVERS *issue*

## EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Giovanni Sebastian Cardillo

## EDITORS

Rach Macpherson

Sofía Artola Díaz

Eleanor Grace

## ARTWORK & GRAPHIC DESIGN

Eleanor Grace



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~ A NOTE FOR THE READER: This issue contains prose with elements of sexual content, graphic language, violence and scenes that may be unsettling. ~

# FOREWORD.

We are Friends and Lovers. Our connections to others are a crucial part of our lives. Almost every experience we make is in some way tied to relationships—or the lack thereof. We make friends and fall in love, we keep people close or push them away, we split up and reconcile.

This is what defines us. Our experiences, our choices, our relationships—they make us who we are. Some of them are good, some are bad, and some might even be worth writing about.

The stories that we like to read—and the ones we write—are a mirror of all that. Life imitates art and vice versa. We want to relate to the characters and to their relationships, want to find parallels. Stories begin to feel real when they remind us of what we know, of who we are or who we want to be.

In “Simon Says” you will read about a friendship between children that seems innocent but still leaves its marks, about a brief encounter that can make hard times

seem more manageable in “Pedalling Philosophy”, and about coming of age and truly becoming yourself in “Three”. You will get a vivid glimpse into a love triangle in “Scents Of You”, and the novella extract “Taxidermy” invites the reader into a relationship that is still evolving and uncertain about where the couple is headed.

You’ll also read about the end of relationships—the awkward silence just after a breakup in “On The Verge”, the good times that can rise from the ashes of a sad parting in “Listening In”, and the dark turns love can take in “The Heart-Shaped Wood”. Even inanimate objects become parts of our love stories—like “The Subway Ticket” shows. And for the first time in our magazine’s young history we have included selected poems in our Friends & Lovers issue: “Half-Hour Best Friend” and “I Was In Love With A Woman Who Believed In Ghosts”, “Eyelash” and “I Live In Your Garden”, and “The Only Thing Worse Than Being 20 Is Not Being 20”. Join us and explore the intricate relationships in the stories and poems we selected for this issue of Glyph. Read about the many facets of marriage and affairs, friendships and acquaintances—about Friends and Lovers.

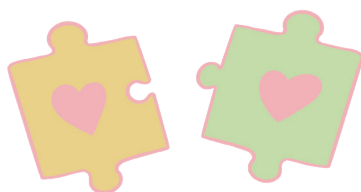
**Gio**

Editor-in-Chief

&

Team **GLYPH:**

**Rach, Eleanor & Sofía**





# SCENTS OF YOU

MOLLY MALLINDER



I rest my head where she sleeps in the gap between your collarbone and shoulder. Goosebumps shiver and hairs stand weak as I sketch out your creases. My fingertips stain your skin and leave lines for her to see.

Does she trace my touch and feel my skin on yours? Does jealousy seep into her pores and flow through her veins? Does she become weak with envy and ill with question? Does she feel like I do? Does she love as deep?

My hands stop as your touch becomes cold. Reaching for my bedside water, I watch as my hands take actions my mind couldn't predict. Water soaks your clothes that lie lonely on my floor. The costume you wear is drenched with toxicity and I apologise profusely. I insist on washing your clothes and pretend this wasn't my intention. You think it's love, but it's revenge set at thirty degrees.

Gathering our socks that have been pushed to the end of the bed and our underwear that lies in a pile on its own, I stop to feel your lips follow my spine and stand before they reach the bottom of my back. I continue collecting old shirts that you have left from weekends before and empty out gym bags of clothes you pretended to wear.

I run downstairs, eager with excitement, leaving you in bed. I drop the pile of washing by my feet and bend down beside it. I pour lashes of blue liquid gold into the top tray and watch as poison drips down. I slam the machine door shut and turn the dial. It makes me wet. My bare legs touch the hard wooden floors and my knees tingle with the pressure. I sit down, making myself small but eye-level with your things. I sit glaring like a child in front of a TV. My eyes are static with

excitement as I watch water droplets sail down the concave plastic screen. I bite my lip down, hard, till it bleeds with anticipation as our clothes become one. The machine speeds up and our things mould together. Round and round and round. They continuously fall into one and another. T-shirts turn and move in and out. My vision becomes blurry with bubbles, but I imagine our sleeves tied and pockets filled.

Your clothes are sopping, and I take them outside to dry. Colours have bled from my clothes to yours, but they have been drawn from deeper than the breast pocket of my jumper. You follow me out, encased in my clothes, modelling my silk, and laced dressing gown. I tell you it suits you and picture you in hers: it's a Saturday morning and the doorbell rings as you lie naked together in bed. Your legs are intertwined, and you want to stay smothered by her warmth, but she tells you to go answer it. The bell rings again and you grab whatever you can find and make your way downstairs. It's your neighbour and he chats your ear off, but you ignore him as the tiles you and her picked out together freeze your feet. You run back upstairs, two steps at a time, eager to get back into bed and your wife. Wearing her clothes you act innocent, as always, pretending you thought it belonged to you. She will laugh at you and tell you to give it back. You tell her to come get it. I imagine her begging you and you liking it. It makes me sick.

I shake out your t-shirt, pinning it up with pegs, feeling repulsed by the things you might have done. You don't offer to help and I'm secretly glad. I start to resent you, and it feels real. This is the feeling I have been craving. I eat it up as I tell you to go back inside. You do as you're told and I have never wanted you more.

It feels like our own version of Saturday morning; but it is a Wednesday afternoon and I'm skipping work to be with you.

I hang up my bitterness with your sweet-smelling shirts and forgive you by the time I meet you back inside. We shower together and you wash my hair. We silently swap places and as I rinse the soap from my hair, opening my eyes to find yours closed. I become fascinated as I watch you weave your hands through your thick soapy hair. Water falls from the bridge of your nose and drips onto my lips that sit outwardly.

We wrap ourselves in blue and white striped towels and I watch as water runs down the crook of your navel. I touch your clean chest and wonder if this is the feeling she gets every morning. I dry your skin, smelling your sweetness and rest my face against your bare back. My face falls into the arch that is dressed in moles and small scars; I search for ones she's never seen and press my skin against yours for as long as you let me.

She has used your toothbrush, and you've borrowed mine. Now I share a kiss of death between accidental lovers: lips sealed with secrets, bound with complexities and a minty aftertaste. She spreads across my mouth with the familiar taste of times I've had you. I spit her out, cleaning the stain off my sink, cupping water, and rinsing the residue from my lips.

You are gone by the time I wake up and my bed is cold without you in it—I am used to the feeling. I smell you on my sheets and I can't help but bundle myself up. I pull each corner of the sheet tighter until it bunches in my hands. I lift

### *Scents of You*

it up over my face and I am suffocated by the smell of you. I keep myself covered until the scent becomes so strong that it fills up my lungs and I can't breathe. I am paralysed by the thought of you and as I wrap myself in sheets on linen, it feels as if I am preparing myself for my own burial.

I break myself free and as my hair hits my face, I'm braised with a new smell. Clementine and ginger. It's fresh and musky and I know it's how you smell too. I can't help but graze my lips to feel them curl at the corner. As I touch my mouth you slip your tongue into your wife's. You've kissed the red wine stain off my lips and stamped it back onto hers. You won't give her time to wonder or worry as you thrust up against her, grabbing her thigh with your handprint still on mine. You will have raw and real sex on the sofa you bought together.

As the week goes by, the house feels empty with the ghost of you, but I know you'll be back. I come straight home from the office and decline invitations to spend time with friends. I am voluntarily lonely, keeping myself free for you. I spend my time dreaming about the times when we will drink out of a pair of wine glasses and eat from shared forks. You spend your time with her, paying for coffee from shared credit cards, arguing about the in-laws and ordering boxes of food for days when you'll eat me.

But it's Tuesday now, and I know she will be out late, so I text you to come over. As my phone stays silent, I start to wonder if she has smelled hints of spring and clarity on your shirt that I washed last week. I imagine her screaming and scrubbing and swearing, bleaching your shirts clean and getting rid of every essence of me.

Did she smell revenge and was it sweet?

Are you on your way over?

Have you left her?

Are you all mine?

The doorbell rings and I see you and as I wrap my arms around you my face falls to your chest. You don't smell of her and I don't recognise it as my own scent either.

Today you smell of someone new.



# TAXIDERM

ROSIE VOX

When her flight landed, Julie made straight for the station in the South Terminal with her prepaid ticket and waited for the train that would take her to Brighton. The platform was open-air and the cold was biting in the last brittle days of February. Above, a crescent moon hung on its side, stark white in the black night and shrouded by ragged edges of tarpaulin and frayed netting—remnants of ongoing construction work. It gave the appearance of a violent explosion, as though something had escaped upwards from the train tracks with great force. Or fallen. In any case, a site of something destructive. It had looked the same eighteen months ago, when she was last here. Huddling into her long wool coat, she took a picture of the moon—poised like a scythe of ivory, a pearl trinket, a bow hewn from animal bone—and as she did a text appeared on her phone from someone saved as ‘Gigha’.

Hey :)

She waited a few minutes and then, with numbed fingers, typed back: Hey, just waiting on train, see you soon :)

An acknowledgement didn’t come for twenty minutes, by which point she was already halfway to Brighton.

\*

The train, Saturday-night crush of glitter, cologne, vibrant voices in an accent she was used to only hearing on television. Julie sat alone listening again to the voice notes they had exchanged the night before, skipping her own responses so that it became a one-sided stream of Gigha’s consciousness where she was a silent participant.



## *Taxidermy*

*Mmmm, do you like that idea, Julie? The idea of me squeezing a confession out of you that's so deep and dark you've never told anyone else?*

*Do you like the idea of me recording and keeping it, so I always know that about you? Always. Forever. Hm, do you?*

A few seats up, a group of teenage boys were loudly bragging about their sexual prowess and taking turns going to the toilet, returning with twitching noses. She caught snatches of their conversation—*try choking them from behind when they're not expecting it, wait till your cock's all the way in the back of her throat then slap her cheek like wham*. Their reflections in the train windows mimed obscene acts.

She considered herself in the window, a dark blur with a grown-out bob, her features wobbling and trembling with the movement of the carriage, her eyes dark and depthless. She remembered the feeling of being young enough to be in their gaze. Tender as lamb meat. Held there like prey.

\*

Gigha met her at the station—dark swooping hair, hands in the pockets of his aviator shearling jacket which she knew, before he gathered her into his arms and she inhaled, would smell vaguely like a greasy café and some kind of drugstore aftershave. It was exciting to arrive in a city at night, the terrain laid out in shadow like a dreamscape that hadn't quite coalesced yet. They threaded their way uphill, past a Protestant church, past a cemetery (here she imagined him pausing, leaning her back against the iron railings, kissing her soft as a phantom), and towards the studio flat he rented in a row of white Victorian terraces.

When she'd come here the first time, the sea air was balmy and tangy with the smell of rotting garbage. The unseasonal warmth of that late October added to the oneiric quality of it all, of her usual ordered reality nudged askew—warm air, palm trees, white-painted terraces instead of red sandstone and veils of rain. She had come in the middle of a sanitation strike; bins overflowed with mounds of garbage and there were surely rats in the dark but she had been instantly charmed by it all—the solidarity of the striking workers, the winding hills and smell that reminded her of hot summer nights in Spanish cities, the salt-rime and seaside grandeur that was shabby at the edges.

In the small front garden, twined around a stunted fir tree of some kind, then trailing up and around his upstairs neighbour's window were multicoloured Christmas lights. She paused for a moment and saw that gazing down at her from the window was what looked to be a small, taxidermied owl.

Gigha got the door unlocked and she followed him inside. Tonight, as always, there was a bashfulness between them that gave way as soon as he opened his front door, pinning her against the opposite wall and pulling up her jumper to suck her nipple.

'I'm sorry,' she said, laughing in the cramped, shadowed hall, his spit still wet on her skin, 'could we have a cup of tea first?'

'Sure. I got Digestives. The good ones. With chocolate.'

'Yum.'

## *Taxidermy*

As she turned, she caught a glimpse of his flat, as familiar to her somehow as the extra rooms grown in dreams and recalled in the cotton-fog of morning: low light, ransacked mess, a narrow hallway that led to a private outdoor courtyard where the wood, underfoot, was rotten in places and slippery with moss.

‘I haven’t had time to tidy up,’ he apologized. The evidence was clear; the kitchen was a precarious shanty town of dirty plates and cloudy water glasses, and obstructing a path to these was a large pile of laundry on the floor, in front of the washing machine. The bath had a ring of scum around the rim and in the sink were the sooty remains of incense char.

Beneath the mess, his flat was just as she remembered. The Persian rug he’d found on the street; the amp he used as a side table; the guitars in beguiling colours and shapes arranged lovingly beneath the bay window which was single glazed, allowing the sounds of buses, glass collectors and motorbikes to shred the soft cotton of their sleep so she could feel the vibrations in her flesh, the proximity of the city electrifying to her. There was also the armchair he’d bought for £20 on Facebook Marketplace from a woman selling her late mother’s things. He’d kept telling her he was getting it for her so that she’d have a place to work when she visited. She had resisted thanking him too effusively—surely he needed a chair anyway, whether she visited or not. She had called the chair Susan.

They’d slept together only once, in actuality, at that point. The intervening months tallying up countless words typed to one another and hours spent on the phone, conjuring fantasies. The assumed shared space of fantasy that is still totally controlled in the imaginer’s mind. She was as seduced by this space as she was by the

things they promised to do to one another.

She watched from the doorway now as he straightened out the bed—one hard foam pillow that may or may not have been orthopaedic, one of those thin fleece blankets from Ikea that churches included in charity packages at Christmas. She loved it all.

‘I can make the tea,’ she said.

‘No, no, I literally don’t want you to see the kitchen. It’s shameful. I’ve just been so’—he stopped and let go of a deep sigh—‘fucking busy lately.’

‘I know,’ she said gently. ‘I don’t care about the mess.’

‘I do though.’

She let him go. He came back spinning a large porcelain mug in his hands, saying, ‘I’m gonna make it in my special Julie mug.’

She tried not to wonder who else the special mug was probably on rotation for. ‘This is nice,’ she said instead, ‘like the old days when I’d come into the café and you’d serve me coffee. Sorry, I shouldn’t say “serve” like you were a servant. It was an equal exchange of services between entirely consenting adults.’

‘I like it when you say *consenting adults*,’ he said.

They’d met four summers ago in the café where he worked. She was fragile from a breakup, deeply in her overdraft, and on the day they met three people had already walked into her on the street. She’d wondered if she was invisible. He gave her an extra

butter pat with her banana bread and asked what kind of work she did on her laptop.

At the time, she was making shitty money writing listicles about shampoo for a company in New Zealand. Her laptop sounded like a Boeing 747 trying and failing to take off. Often, she spent a fifth of her day's earnings on lemon curd muffins and oat milk cardamom and honey lattes. Over the counter they would chat about movies and TV, swapping recommendations. When he came around to wipe down and clear the tables, he would loiter by hers, chitchatting. It was six weeks before he stuck out his hand to her, while he was replenishing the napkins at the filling station, and they exchanged names.

'Gigha,' he said, 'like the island. Me and all my siblings are named after islands.'

She liked that it was unusual, even a little ugly and cumbersome to write down—she loved the way it sounded when she was allowed to say it, how aware of the air in her throat it made her. That night, she studied his namesake on Google Maps, as though she could divine something about him from the geography of it—how it was formed. Whittled and worn by the sea.

He left the café, and she left behind the shampoo listicles, but they exchanged numbers and over time established the strange, paradoxical intimacy of strangers. He was the first person she told when her family dog died; he confided in her the dark tug of his thoughts, his anxiety that perhaps he was making a mistake by moving six hundred miles south. They slept together five days before he left. The morning after, pausing at his door, she'd stuck her hand out and said 'Friends?' He'd taken her hand, pulled her against him and kissed her.

In Brighton now, after tea and biscuits, he unwrapped her like a wonderful gift, pulled her apart. Under her scarf, her green-knit jumper, her ratty old Pat Benatar t-shirt, she was bound up in bandage-like complications of lingerie. He beheld her. She dared not breathe. 'You're perfect,' he said. He touched the strappings. 'Fuck, I want you.' Slipped them from her shoulders, pulled them taut behind her back until she let out a little breath. Real leather. The smell of calf skin hide, the primal smell of the hair that trailed downwards from his stomach. The way her body felt, cupped in his hands. 'I want you too.'

'Am I the last person you slept with?' he asked. He was inside her, pushing her to a fiery edge.

'Don't ask me things like that,' she said, wriggling beneath him. 'You know the answer anyway, so why ask?' Suddenly she was too hot, too irritated, rolling out from under him. She could have lied, invented an anonymous lover. She could have told herself she was just playing along with his game and the truth didn't matter either way. But she was pathologically unable to lie, and almost equally unable to be truly, actually vulnerable.

'Sorry,' he said, but in his voice was still the milkeness of desire, carrying him far away. 'I just like to hear you say it.'

'Say what?'

'That you're m—' Here, he faltered, and dropped his mouth to her collarbone. 'Just how much you like fucking me, and how good it makes you feel.'

‘Can’t you *tell* how good it makes me feel?’

‘Yes, but I want to hear you say it.’

‘This is just part of your ongoing ploy to get me to say that you’re the best.’

‘Am I the best?’

‘Even if you were the best, and I’m not saying you are, I have no interest in stroking your ego’—he laughed—‘and I have no idea what criteria I’d even use to make this decision, and I have serious doubts about the ethics involved. *And—*’

‘And?’ He was trailing his hand through the faded orange ends of her hair, watching different parts of her face closely, her eyes and then her mouth and then up towards her cheekbone, in the way he had of doing that always made her paranoid she had something besides her face on her face. A stray crumb or flake of skin or something even more naked, more noticeable.

‘I’m certainly not going to say you’re the best I’ve ever had when I have no hope of hearing that in return.’

She expected him to laugh and acquiesce, but instead he said, ‘You are my best.’

She forced a laugh and rolled her eyes. ‘I’m sure you say that to your whole harem of *bests*.’

‘Nope, just you.’

It was in moments like this, when he was being unnervingly, seemingly genuine,

that she became distracted by trying to figure out exactly what colour his eyes were. Dark blue, dark brown? She couldn't tell, and it bothered her. Was she colour blind? Was he some kind of chimera?

'You don't have to say that. In fact, I'd rather you didn't say that,' she said.

'I wouldn't say it if it wasn't true.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Pinky swear,' he said, and held out the pinky of one hand.

It was such a childish and rudimentary extension of trust that she had almost no option but to believe him. Some part of her resented him for the manipulation, even if it was unintentional. Grudgingly, she hooked her own pinky around his. 'Truth' was such an imbecilic concept, a slippery nothing. It didn't exist, really. There was what you chose to believe, and what gnawed at you at night, and that was all that really materially mattered.

'Fine,' she said. 'You're one of the best.'

'One of?'

'Top two percent.'

'I guess that's saying a lot since you've only slept with, what, five people?'

'Fuck you.'

'Or is it four?'



‘Fuck you.’

Their pinkies were still linked, and now Gigha jerked hers to his mouth and bit down on the first joint. ‘Fuck me?’

‘Mmm.’ She felt his incisors grazing her skin.

‘Fuck me *what?*’

‘Fuck me, please.’

‘Better.’

Sometimes when it happened, she thought of nature documentaries. Most of her was possessed by the pulverizing present, but another part of her was far away outside her body, thinking of the slow ballet of boa constrictors wrapping around their prey; the puncture moment of tiger tooth on slender, pulsing antelope throat. In the documentaries these sequences were always slowed down, the slowness giving them a different context. The moment of life-into-death so lingering it appeared like a negotiation, a willing transference. Almost gentle.

Usually there was a point when she would start to cry. She insisted it was a physiological response to intense stimuli, her body’s way of climaxing because it never happened the expected and normal way. She had shielded this from past lovers, but Gigha liked it. It was an understood and enjoyed thing between them; sometimes he would make a game of how many times or how intensely he could elicit her tears. Her tears were a miracle. A joyous wonder. That night when it happened, he first took one on his fingertip, told her to open her mouth, and touched it—trembling and

glistening, a small and immaculate globe—to her tongue. Then he took one from her other cheek and sucked his own finger.

‘Salty.’

She laughed.

‘I like the way all of you tastes,’ he said, nuzzling his head into the hollow of her shoulder.

Her body was beginning to shake; a white expanse spreading outwards from the centre. Her teeth clacked. Her skin was smarting, scalded feeling. Handprints with missing or extra fingers bloomed pinkly on the milk skin of her thighs, her cheek.

‘Are you cold?’ he asked. ‘Come here.’

She laid herself against him. They were quiet. When they breathed in, the clammy skin of their ribcages touched, briefly.

‘How are you doing, by the way, since ... the funeral?’ The word felt like a grenade in her mouth, and she tried to drop it as gently as possible. ‘I’m sorry. I can’t not ask.’

‘I just force myself not to think about it,’ he said, tight-lipped.

‘You can talk to me about this stuff, you know?’

‘I don’t need to talk about it. People keep offering me their condolences and saying like, hey, if you need to chat come to me but, no offence, I’ve experienced grief more than most people and I know the process, I don’t need anyone to give me advice.’

‘Okay. You’re right. I’m sorry. I just wanted to check.’

‘Yeah. Thanks,’ he said curtly, like he meant exactly the opposite. He cleared his throat. ‘It’s just like if I talk about it, it becomes real, you know.’

She wanted to say *But it is real, it’s already happened*. She wanted to ask him what his grandfather had meant to him, and stroke his bare shoulder in the way he liked while he told her. She wanted to go into his kitchen and make him tea in the mess and then clear up the mess, and then come back to bed and hold him until he fell asleep. She wanted to be brave enough to be selfless, to empty herself entirely in order to love him even when he did not know how to accept it.

‘Then we’ll talk about something else,’ she said.

‘It’s really nice to see you,’ he said, faux upbeat.

‘It’s really nice to see you too.’

He kissed her temple and held her tight to him. His thumbs smoothing circles on her wrists, her veins plump and raised. Curved against him, she imagined her body like a bow. Its supple tension.

Behind them, through the window, the pulse of Christmas lights—red, then blue, then green.

# HALF-HOUR BEST FRIEND

JOSHUA WALKER



We trade our stories like pocket change,  
loose words spilling in whiskey waves.  
You swear I'm the only one who gets it—  
two strangers stitched by slurred confessions,  
laughing like brothers, drowning like men,  
spinning pasts in amber light,  
burning through secrets we won't recall.

For half an hour, I'm your lifeline,  
your priest, your last good mistake.  
We toast to nothing, to everything,  
to the wreckage waiting outside.  
Then last call comes, the spell breaks,  
and we vanish like cigarette smoke—  
unburdened, unclaimed, unnamed.



# I WAS IN LOVE WITH A WOMAN WHO BELIEVED IN GHOSTS

JOSHUA WALKER



She said the dead come back  
when the air goes still  
and the dog won't cross the room.  
She said her grandmother still visits  
in the faucet's last drip.

I watched her move through doorways  
like she was being followed.  
I watched her make tea  
for people I couldn't see.  
I slept in her bed  
and woke up between lives.

She smelled like a rain-soaked page.  
She kissed like a seance—  
half invitation, half warning.  
She touched my chest once and asked,  
'Who did this to you?'

I told her:  
'The world. Then me. Then the world again.'

When she left, she didn't take her coat  
or her dreams.  
The window fogged.  
The mirror cracked.  
I swore I saw her shadow wave.

I no longer laugh at the dead.  
I talk to empty rooms.  
I let the faucet drip.  
Sometimes I see her in sleep,  
and she tells me stories  
I forget as soon as I wake.

Sometimes,  
I think I'm the one haunting her.

# SIMON SAYS

ALISON COYLE





I am chasing the last rice crispies around my Mr Bump cereal bowl with my spoon when there is a thump-thump-thump on the back door. Mum and I jump to our feet, but we kind of know who it is already. It's the summer holidays and only one person ever calls at the back door—Simon! Mum turns the key in the lock and pulls across the bolt.

Sure enough, there standing at the door, hair glowing in a coppery, sunlit halo is Simon. 'Morning, Mrs G! Can Emma come out to play?'

'It's not even 9am Simon, she's not finished her...'

I don't hear the rest, I've already started sprinting up the stairs, casting my pyjamas, as I run to get dressed. Outside, I can hear clackity-clackity-clackity-clack coming from the garden. I don't need to look to know that it is the sound of my new scooter (a two-wheeler, because only babies have three-wheelers) rolling over slabs. Simon is always in our garden when he comes to stay with his gran who lives next door, and he always just helps himself to my toys. I think he thinks that my garden is still his. Mum says it's complicated because Simon and his parents used to live in our house but they sold it to us when his dad went away. Simon says that his Dad got a top secret job as a spy and lives in London now, while he and his Mum live in a fancy skyscraper flat in Castlemilk, that even has a lift inside that goes all the way to the top. Mum gets a funny look on her face when I talk about Simon's skyscraper. I think she is sad that Simon doesn't have a garden anymore because we took it. Mum says it is good for children to have gardens to let off steam in. Simon has a lot of steam.

The clackity clack is getting faster, as Simon races up and down our long path.

### *Simon Says*

I know that in a minute I will hear my new scooter being jumped down the steps from the path by the lawn onto the patio...yip! There it is! I wish I could jump the steps on my scooter like Simon can but it's very high and I'm not as brave as him. Maybe when I'm nine, like he is, I'll be able to.

'Em! Em! Oi, Eeeeh-Maaaa!' Simon's voice bellows up at me. I'm just in my pants, so I stick my head round the curtain, wrapping the length 'round me like a dress.

'Wot?' I mouth down to him with a shrug. I don't shout, Mum doesn't like it when I shout in the house.

'Bring your medical kit.'

'Ok,' I mouth. My insides are doing a happy dance. Playing at being a nurse is my favourite thing.

I don't bother putting on proper clothes, I put on my nurse's uniform straight away. It isn't a real nurse's uniform, just my cousin's old blue and white school dress, with a white apron and cap that Mum has sewn little red crosses onto. I look like Nurse Nancy from my Twinkle magazines but, when I'm a grownup, I will be a real nurse with a silver watch on the front of my apron like Simon's mum.

It's because his mum is a nurse and works at night sometimes, that Simon stays with his gran during the school holidays and plays in my garden. My mum doesn't go out to work, being mum to my baby brother and me is a fulltime job as it is. Simon said his mum wasn't always a nurse, she had just been his mum for a while too, before they moved, but then the very important man who ran the hospital had called Simon's

Mum and said that all the sick people really needed her to come back and be a brilliant nurse again, like she was before she had Simon. She had really wanted to stay at home, but how could she say no to all the sick people? I heard Doreen-two-doors-down say to my Mum that Simon's Mum probably went to work for a rest, but I've seen 'Casualty' on the television and being a nurse doesn't look like much of a rest to me.

The clackity-clack continues as I reach under my bed to get my doctor's kit, but this time it is followed by a crash that makes me start and hit my head off the wooden frame. I jump up and peer out the window. Mum's angel statue that lives under the lilac tree at the bottom of the garden has been toppled and my scooter lies at its base. Simon stands next to it with the head of Mum's Angel statue in his hand. He is looking around as though he were thinking of where he could hide it when Mum appears at the back door.

'Think a cat must have knocked it over, Mrs G,' he says, standing up the fallen angel and placing her head back on to her stoney shoulders, 'but I chased it away for you.'

Mum looks like she is going to burst, but then her face softens and she just sighs, pulls her housecoat closer, and goes back inside.

Simon stares up at my window with his barely-there, blue eyes. I laugh because with his invisibly fair, ghost eyelashes and his eyes so wide, he looks like a startled alien.

'I thought I was for it then!' he says, pulling his finger like a knife across his throat and sticking his tongue out to the side with a choking sound. But I knew he

### *Simon Says*

wasn't for it. Simon never got told off for mixing the red chuckies from beside the path into the sand. Simon never got told off for harvesting Papa's baby turnips too early. And now he hasn't got told off for crashing my new scooter and breaking Mum's angel. Before I can reply, he shouts up, 'You're taking ages, I'll go look for some patients.'

Simon is always good at finding patients, the other big kids on the street know him from when he lived here full-time, and went to school with them. They don't play with me without Simon. I think they think I'm too wee to join in, but Simon says it's because I go to Saint Paul's and that makes me a *cathlick*, but he doesn't mind because his gran is a *cathlick* too.

I lie on my tummy and pull my Fisher Price Medical Kit out from under the bed. My Papa gave it to me for my fourth birthday and it's my favourite thing. The plastic case is the colour of mini-milk ice lollies and has everything you need to be a proper nurse in it. I have a yellow hammer that you bash the patient's knee with to test their reflexes. I'm not sure why you do this, but it is fun to make the patient's leg jump! Then there's an orange blood pressure cuff with a blue pump that you use to pump air back into patients that are feeling dizzy or faint; a *fermometer* with a red line that moves up or down when a patient sucks it so that the nurse knows if the patient is too hot or too cold; a syringe and medicine to make the patient well again; and, best of all, a *stefascope* that you can listen to the boom-di-boom of your patients heart through to make sure they aren't already dead. Sometimes you hear their lunch gurgling too!

Simon told me the names for everything and what they are used for. Simon knows lots of medical facts because, as well as his Mum being a nurse, his dad used to be a brain surgeon and saved lots of people's lives. Then the Queen asked him to

become a spy, finding gold bars in South America and smuggling them back here in his plane. South America must be very far away because I heard Doreen-two-doors-down telling my Mum that Simon's Dad will be away for at least six years. I'd miss my Dad if I didn't see him for six years.

On my way outside, I steal one of the cushions from the sofa to put on our sick bed to make it more comfortable for our patients to lie on. Our sick bed is the garden wall that is meant to split our garden from Simon's gran's. It runs from the house wall down to the bottom of the garden, stopping at the big lavender tree. The wall is very small, very wide and not very good at splitting gardens—big legs, like Simon's, can jump it easily and short legs, like mine, can jump onto its wide top and then off the other side—but it is very good at being a sick bed. I run up the path to put the cushion on top of the wall, under the branches of the lavender, and knock the head off Mum's angel again. I try to balance it like Simon did but the head rolls off onto the earth, and stares at me accusingly. I whisper to the angel that it'll be ok, Dad will fix her when he comes home, Dad fixes everything.

I have just opened my kit up and am sorting out my bandages, when Dr Simon appears back with a frown on his freckly face.

'There's nobody feeling ill today,' he says, pulling on his white coat, which is really Dad's old shirt, anyway. 'It'll be a training day. I'll practice on you. Sit down.' He pushes me on to the wall. 'So, what's wrong, patient?'

'Nothing,' I huff.

'Emma!'

*Simon Says*

'I'm always the patient.' I say folding my arms across my chest.

'Girls are better patients than boys.'

I look away.

'And you can be the nurse anytime because it's your kit.'

This is true, but I don't budge.

'Fine, I'm going in,' Simon says and jumps over the wall into his gran's garden.

It's a nice day and I don't want to be left with just my baby brother. Even when he's awake, all he does is drink milk until he is sick or dirties his nappy. Gross. Simon is bossy but he's way more fun than some stupid baby. I unfold my arms, 'My leg's sore.'

Doctor Simon brings out the yellow hammer and wallops my shin. I cry out but my leg doesn't jump. A sure sign that it is broken. 'This is a very bad break,' he says, 'to make sure it sets properly and stays the same size as the other leg, I will need to bandage them together.'

I have not heard of this treatment before, but doctor knows best, and anyway I like wearing bandages like a creepy Mummy. I swing my legs up onto the bed and let doctor bandage them tightly together. 'You need to be put in traction now.' I am not sure what traction is, something to do with tractors? Dr Simon gets my skipping rope, which is lying on the grass, and ties it round my ankles.

'We just need to raise your feet a little to mend the break.' He throws the end of the rope over one of the low but thick lilac branches. It knocks off one of the clusters

of tiny purple flowers, releasing a perfume that reminds me of my Nana. Simon pulls the rope and raises my feet into the air. Even through the crepe bandage, the rope digs into my skinny ankles.

I'm not sure I like it. 'Isn't that high enough?'

'Your legs need to be higher than your head.' He pulls a bit more.

'Please, doctor,' my lip trembles and I can feel my cheeks heat.

'You're such a baby.'

'I am not.'

'Are too!' he laughs, pulling more.

I am now dangling with just my head and shoulders on the wall. My dress has gathered round my chest and the whole world can see my pants. Tears escape my eyes and my cheeks warm, mad at the tears for betraying me.

'Cry baby!' Simon sings.

'Let me down.' I wriggle but can't get free. 'Please, Simon, this isn't fun.'

'Stay still and be a good patient. Or your leg won't heal. Do you not want to get better?' he says, trying to tie the rope to the tree.

I'm proper crying now. My dangling hand brushes the earth and my fingers find a loose stone. I scream and hurl it towards Simon who is startled and drops the rope. My legs clatter off the wall.

*Simon Says*

‘What on earth!’ Mum is running up the path, scooping me up in her arms, ‘Simon! Simon Taylor! Get back here now!’

There’s a funny look on Simon’s face, not his usual grin. He turns, jumps the wall and bolts into his gran’s kitchen.

‘Sorry, baby, sorry.’ Mum mutters as she holds me. ‘Gets away with murder, that boy. Your Dad was right, apples don’t fall far from the tree after all, but he’s just a wee boy, I’m sorry, I just... I just thought...I thought we should be better.’ She stops speaking suddenly, her cheeks so red the flush has moved down her neck and disappears beneath her t-shirt.

I sit on her lap like I used to when I was a baby and she rocks me until I’m all cried out. ‘Would you like some chocolate buttons, as a treat?’ Mum says, wiping my snotty face with hanky she has produced from nowhere. I nod. She stands up, and I let her carry me down the path. We are almost at the house when she sets me down to pick something up from the slabs.

It’s the stone I threw at Simon. For a minute I think I am in trouble. You don’t throw stones.

‘How did that get there?’ she offers a look at what is in her palm to me and I open my mouth to tell her I was sorry, that I wouldn’t throw stones again. Except when I look at the stone, it’s not a stone, it’s the angel’s head and she is winking up at me. Mum closes her fingers round the head and returns it to the winged body.

‘Dad’ll fix it, won’t he?’



‘He’ll try,’ she said, taking my hand and walking me into the kitchen, ‘few things are so broken that they can’t be fixed.’

# PEDALLING PHILOSOPHY

CONNER MCALEESE



Robert was glad to be out of the tension-filled air of the library. The bench outside the Fulton building was being vacated just as he stepped outside of the automatic doors. A stroke of luck.

The cool bars of the bench hadn't been warmed by the arses of the students that had just left. The chill of October was too deeply ingrained in the metal slats to be affected by a passing warm bottom. Robert began to weep as he threw himself down onto the bench, barely feeling the icy welcome he received.

He didn't stand a chance in hell. The switch from coursework and essays to exams would undo all the 5am starts and missed Christmases with his mum. It was hard enough to build a career in Philosophy, let alone with a 2:2 degree in it. If he'd only started his degree as he'd finished school, if he hadn't taken that gap year to 'earn money' by working in a stupid bloody Irish-themed bar, then he'd have graduated last year. He'd *have* his degree now. The panic and reactionary policies to AI would have missed him entirely. But now, at the beginning of his fourth year, he was already behind. He didn't understand Dialectics. At least, not enough to know *all* of it. If he just had a few essay questions, he could prepare for that, he could build an essay, he had done so many times. But to learn an entire module worth of material? And then apply it in an exam? In *Philosophy*? He couldn't. Not while he still had to keep earning money.

He was grateful not to work in the *Cork and Connagh* anymore. And while fielding the questions of angry phone users in a mobile phone shop wasn't much better in terms of stress, it had eliminated the late-night shifts, and that meant he could form a routine. And a stomach ulcer. Or what he thought was an ulcer. He didn't possess the

necessary combat experience to go toe to toe with his doctor's receptionist. Neither at 8am or any other time. He'd taken to Pepto Bismol like a twink to poppers and that took the edge off long enough for Robert to convince himself it was all in his head. Acid reflux be damned.

'Is anyone sitting here?' Robert heard a girl ask from above him.

He shook his head 'No' and pressed the palms of his hands into his eyes in an effort to stem the flow of tears.

'At what age do you think it becomes cool again to ride a skateboard?' the girl asked as she sat down. The tickle of cold pierced through the thin material of her tartan skirt.

Robert looked from his palms towards the girl now sitting beside him. She was a year or so younger than he was, and her hair was a violent shade of both green and pink. Her eyes were adorned with a bright cyan eye shadow that shimmered with glitter. It was 10am on a Tuesday morning, but this girl didn't seem to care. She was enjoying Robert studying her face, if anything.

'Over there,' she nodded, as if to explain her point.

Just next to the library was a pedestrian zone for students that had once been a small road. Four boys—no doubt first years, Robert thought, judging by their coked-up Golden retriever energy—were each rumbling and jumping with skateboards.

'Like, if they were 10 or 11, I'd think they were pretty cool. They're jumping quite high, see!' She stopped to point at the tallest and thinnest of the boys who had

just launched himself from the kerb and caught ‘hella airtime’ if his friend in the KORN hoodie were to be believed. ‘And if they were, maybe, like fifty or sixty? That would be pretty cool too. Recapturing their youth even with the threat of a broken hip or knee, ya know? But where do the parameters sit? Like why are these guys absolute cretins, but a fifty-year-old wouldn’t be? Where’s the cut off? One for the philosophers I suppose,’ she said finally, imitating the voice of Olenna Tyrell from *Game of Thrones*.

‘Why do you think they’re cretins?’ Robert asked despite himself.

‘Look at them,’ she nodded towards them again. ‘This is all performative. They’d have a much better time down on the cycle path behind the science centre. It’s quieter there and there’d be more room to pick up speed. But these jackasses *want* to be seen. They only started this street theatre at about ten to ten—they know that’s when classes let out. I guarantee they’re gone by ten past ten when the traffic dies down. Deal?’

The girl stuck her hand out towards Robert. He thought for a second she might huck a loogie into her hand like kids in an old American movie, but she didn’t. Or at least, she didn’t before he put his palm in hers.

‘What do I owe you if I lose?’ Robert asked.

‘Nothing. Obviously. It’s just a wee game to pass the time. And I really hope they do stop at ten past ten, I’ve got to walk down there towards the Tower Building and I don’t want to loop past the Dental Hospital if I can avoid it. Maybe God is listening and wants to take a low stake wager on this fine Tuesday morning. I’m Carmilla,’ the girl smiled at Robert, showing off her straight, white teeth.

‘Like the vampire?’ Robert asked.

‘*Exactly* like the vampire! You’re the first person in over a year to not need to be told that. I mean, do I look like an Aimee to you? Absolutely not. And Carmilla is cool, she was the inspiration for Dracula, you know.’

Robert did know. He also agreed that she didn’t look like an Aimee with her coloured hair and bold make-up. Carmilla suited her. Even without the vampiric lore behind it, the mystery of the name, the cadence when it was uttered, suited the aura that Carmilla (née Aimee) embodied.

‘So do you skateboard?’ Carmilla asked.

‘No,’ Robert shook his head. ‘I’m not a fan of wheels. I don’t mind a car, or a coach, but anything else makes me nervous.’

‘You don’t like riding a bike?’ Carmilla twisted on the bench to look at Robert, her tartan skirt gliding effortlessly over the bars of the bench.

‘I can’t ride one,’ Robert said back. He didn’t know why he had told this complete stranger something he desperately tried not to tell anyone. He didn’t even go with Erin to spin class on Saturday mornings because he hated bikes so ferociously. But Carmilla was charming and easy to talk to. Despite her judgement of the boys on the skateboards, she seemed kind.

‘You *can’t*?’ Carmilla said. ‘I’ve never heard of someone not being able to ride a bike at your age. What are you? Like, 25?’

*Twenty-Two*, Robert thought but didn't say.

'25 and you can't ride a bike. That's pretty cool. It says a lot about you.'

'I don't think it says a great deal.' Robert tried to keep the embarrassment out of his voice, but the tricky thing managed to creep in anyway.

'It does!' Carmilla said while becoming more animated. 'It says a great deal. Can we play a game?'

'A game?'

'Yeah, a game. Can I guess why you can't ride a bike? I don't want you to think I'm rude, but this could be really fun.'

Robert said nothing and Carmilla took his silence for consent and he was glad she did.

'So, you can't ride a bike. Now, we could go down the 'broke a leg' route. Maybe you were learning to ride a bike, then you fell off one, broke your leg, and never jumped back into the saddle.' She let her guess hang between them. 'But that would be too convenient.'

Robert watched as she pressed the pink of her tongue to the pale white of the skin above her lip. He noticed then, that for all her make-up, she wasn't wearing any lipstick. As Carmilla formulated her next guess, Robert watched her tongue pass over her lips and he guessed lipstick probably wouldn't last long with her.

'I know! Your grandfather,' she paused while appraising Robert, 'let's say

great-grandfather. He was in the war. He used to bike messages from one position to another. A postman of the battlefield, and he was blown to smithereens, *pachoooww!* Carmilla screamed while flicking the sleeves of her too-long hoodie up and out around them both. 'He was blown to bits by an Austrian salvo of heavy artillery. And now you won't put your backside on a bike until you have your revenge! That's it, isn't it? That's why you *won't* ride a bike. You could if you wanted to, but you won't. Not until those devilish Austrians pay for what they have done to your family.'

Robert laughed as she spoke. Her story made no sense, she was a war or two further back than his great-grandfather could have possibly lived through – let alone fought in – but her enthusiasm, and animation, and kindness all lifted the weeping fog that had threatened to smother him only a few minutes before.

'Your dad's not around, is he?' Carmilla said with her third guess. 'Dead or abandoned?'

'Does it matter?' Robert replied, the levity Carmilla had brought now seeping away like air escaping a balloon. 'My mum tried to teach me once. But she could tell my heart wasn't in it. So she let me be me and didn't push me.'

'She sounds like a wonderful mother,' Carmilla smiled.

'She really is.'

'Mine was too,' Carmilla said eagerly. 'So, you want to talk about why you're crying on a bench in the middle of the uni?'

'I'm going to fail this year.'



### *Pedalling Philosophy*

Once Robert said the words, they became real. His throat began to close and the panic that had meandered around his abdomen since his tutor had told him that this would be the first year Philosophy modules would be weighted by 65% with exams finally sprinted to his head and made his eyes feel like they were bulging from his skull.

‘Said who?’

‘What?’ The question brought Robert up short. The anxiety attack that had been building abated as suddenly as it had tried to consume him.

‘Who said you were going to fail this year? Your tutor? Lecturer?’

‘No, I just—’ he cut himself off.

‘Ahh, I see. *You’ve* decided you’re going to fail. And instead of using your powers of precognition to avoid the next global conflict, or help the uni shop stock the next big sweetie, you’ve decided to selfishly use your gift from God to self-diagnose Failure-itis. What an incredibly stupid thing to do.’

‘You don’t understand,’ Robert said back. ‘There is only one essay now. Most of the grade is weighted by exams!’

‘What’s the split?’

‘10% tutorial participation, 25% essay and 65% final exam,’ Robert said, reciting off the numbers that had been haunting him since he first heard them.

‘And how is the exam built? Essays? Multiple choice?’

‘Does it matter?’ Robert said a little too loudly.

‘No, it doesn’t actually,’ Carmilla said calmly. ‘Write the essays you would have written.’

‘What?’

‘You’re butthurt you can’t write essays to get your grade. But you can. Write the essays you would have written. Are you saying that you’ve not learned a single thing for your entire degree? Because you’ve put all your knowledge into essays then forgotten about them?’

Robert shook his head.

‘So write the essays you would have written and learn the material that way.’

Carmilla’s tone of voice was so matter of fact that Robert considered what she said.

‘What if I write the essay and it doesn’t come up in the exam?’ Robert asked.

‘Well, not all of it will. But you’ll have learned something about the module. Surely it can’t be that big of a module? It can’t cover *every* philosophical thought from Plato to Simone de Beauvoir?’

Robert realised that Carmilla was correct. There was more to it than she was saying, but the building blocks were making themselves known to Robert. He could see a path to success now, and that’s something he couldn’t before he spoke to her.

‘Anyway, I’m going to go now,’ Carmilla said as she re-zipped her hoodie. ‘The skater boys are gone. See ya later boys!’ Carmilla shouted. ‘And I’ve got a class to get

to.'

'You've got a class at 10:15?' Robert asked.

'No, it started at 10, but it's two hours long, so I can catch up,' she shrugged as she stood.

'Why did you sit with me if you had a class?' Robert asked while stuttering over his words. He looked up at Carmilla as the bright grey clouds behind her head framed her.

'Because you looked like you needed a friend. Even for a wee half hour,' Carmilla smiled. 'And I needed one too. It's nice to be helpful, it builds Karmic Credit. I like my ledger to be full. So, when I need a friend one day, maybe one will come along.'

She placed her hand on Robert's shoulder and squeezed gently.

'Anyway, good luck philosophy boy. Oh, and, just because I *can* technically ride a bike, doesn't mean I ever possibly could. My brain wouldn't even know how to find the muscles needed to pedal for more than two seconds, let alone send messages to them. Ciao!'

Robert watched as Carmilla made her way down Small's Wynd towards the Tower Building. He smiled as he stood from the bench and walked back towards the library to take Carmilla's advice. He'd study by writing essays that would never be marked. If he understood it enough to write an essay, he'd surely understand it well enough to pass an exam.

Had he reached back to feel the bench, he'd have felt the metal bars were warm to the touch.

It was remarkable to be seen—to be known—by a stranger, and not judged.

It was ineffable to be helped by one—even for a moment.

# EYELASH

HOLLY FLEMING-GUNN



f or a whole day  
I wore an eyelash  
on my cheek  
hoping  
you'd let me  
make a wish  
from your  
fingertip

The background is a solid light pink color. In the top-left and bottom-left corners, there are white, wavy, line-like patterns that resemble stylized smoke or water ripples.

# I LIVE IN YOUR GARDEN

HOLLY FLEMING-GUNN

## **I - SUMMER**

flat against the flat of the rocks I am  
bathing  
the light the heat is golden the view is perfect i can see you  
moving cooking cleaning  
holding carrying making  
breathing  
and i think i can hear it too and your singing  
singing singing spoon in your hand stirring

the night draws close to me the stars watch me  
draw closer to you  
I am at your door

I want to feel the heat of your house  
and to taste the food in your mouth

summer grazing past like teeth on a neck  
sharp enough to hurt just enough to remind you  
it's real  
it's passing

## **II - WINTER**

clinging to what little warm seeps from your windows  
wonder if your lamp light is enough to keep me  
alive i know that i will not leave i know that i  
shiver tremble gasp shake  
for reasons more than the cold  
holding in my breathing so i can do it  
with you

flat against your window  
willing my body fade through the glass  
better yet become the glass  
become all about you  
upstairs too by your bed  
it would be okay if i could never touch you as long as still  
i was with you always

snow like a blanket failed because i melt it away



nothing could obscure you from me i am  
molars about your wrist the jaw is clenched keeping hold

I want to feel the heat of your house  
and to taste your fingers in my mouth



# THE HEART-SHAPED WOOD

LAUREN PENZER



The truth is this: my husband's death, while unfortunate, was long overdue.

Our story begins on our five-year wedding anniversary, which also happens to be Valentine's Day. Irony is a bitch. The material assigned to those celebrating five years of marriage is wood, and so my husband decided that the best gift would be a grand romantic gesture. The moron.

He planted a *forest*. No, don't coo about it. This isn't a sweet story.

My husband, Damien, planted 50 weeping willow saplings in the shape of a heart, in honour both of this special anniversary and the cheesy date of our wedding. While this may seem lovely—a grand, open, loud declaration of love—it is in fact the second most stupid thing Damien has ever done.

Don't worry, I'll tell you the first soon enough.

Anyone with a brain and a search engine knows that weeping willows have a tragic shelf-life; in an ideal world, the trees wouldn't expire until after *we* did. We do not live in an ideal world. As it turns out, the trees have outlived both my marriage and my husband. Again, irony.

I suppose the reason that Damien chose the weeping willow is because of the fast-growing nature of them. Men are obsessed with instant-gratification; if it lasts longer than five minutes, they lose interest.

So he planted the forest, and I—still honeymooned, lovesick, and naive—was delighted. This, too, was short-lived.

Over the subsequent years of our marriage, the trees grew and grew. That damn forest turned out to be one of the only reliable and consistent things in my life. And over time, stories grew with it. The forest was planted upon our land, but could be seen in all its glory from the trainline; tourists enquired about the forest, wondering at its origins in folkloric whispers.

A false history of our little wood developed. Some rumoured that a young farmer's daughter planted it for her beloved, an up-and-coming pilot, so that whenever the two were parted, all he had to do was fly over the northeastern countryside, and he would be reminded of her undying love.

The story turned tragic, as love stories often do; the young pilot died in a crash, and the farmer's daughter wept beside the trees daily. She died, soon after, of a broken heart.

This is all fiction, of course. But the rumour found its sentimental roots within my heart. The idea that a bittersweet story of first love and heartache arose from my hurricane of a marriage is inspiring, in a way. Perhaps romance isn't dead. Though, in my case, the opposite is true.

The mythos around the heart-shaped wood continued. Some believed it was a natural phenomena, sprouting as an optimistic message from nature, perhaps protesting deforestation in the surrounding area.

Others were—understandably—more cynical, stating that the land the forest lived on was an old Victorian Plantation (truth), and that the bows of the trees coincidentally formed the heart shape, non-correspondent to the saplings planted

below (fiction).

The ideas ranged from romantic to deranged, but few knew the truth, until now: that my husband Damien planted the forest as a gift for me. Even fewer know that my dear Damien is now buried within that forest. But I am getting ahead of my story.

My suspicion of my husband grew slowly, watered in tears and dining room arguments. Our marriage was corrupted by the busy hours of our respective jobs, and the levels of exhaustion that we both experienced. While I soothed my burnout with hobbies, friends, and communication, Damien took a different route.

The first sign I noticed was the late nights. While Damien had always been a hard worker, he had never been extraordinary. This may sound harsh, but it is simply the truth. He had never gone above and beyond in his entire life, never taken the extra step or done anything other than what he was directed to. He was a stickler for technicality and routine. So when he started staying late at work, picking up extra hours at the factory, the alarm bells began to ring in my mind.

The next was the secret phone calls. While I had regular coffees, drinks, and game nights lined up with friends, Damien had a less-than-ideal social life. What is it with men, and having no initiative when it comes to keeping in touch with friends, or making friends at all? In my opinion, much of this male-loneliness epidemic is self-inflicted, as well as being patriarchal nonsense.

So who, one may ask, had my husband rushing out of the room to answer his phone, often at late hours and with no discernible pattern. And why, if it was so

innocent, would he be leaving the room to answer the phone at all? Why clam up when casually questioned?

I needed to know. One thing you should know about me is that I do not leave pots to boil over. If something is bothering me, tingling at the back of my mind like an itch that just won't go away, I cannot sit by and ignore it.

So one day, when the opportunity struck—Damien had forgotten his phone, and only realised when he was an hour into his shift—I took my chance. Rather than leaving a trail for anyone—Damien, the police—to follow, I simply opened his phone, and checked the call logs. hilariously, his passcode was still our anniversary.

One number consistently cropped up, with no name denoting the caller's identity. This number had called Damien's phone the previous night, at exactly the time he had skittered out of the room mid-dinner.

I wrote the number down on a heart-shaped post-it, and left the phone where I found it. Then, I gathered my handbag and slip-on shoes, and headed out of the house to run my errands. Business as usual. I had the day off of work—all of the stars had aligned on this day, the day of the discovery—and so took the opportunity to investigate.

I headed to a corner shop. Not my corner shop—we all have our favourite local, right?—but one a bit further out, less-frequented by myself. Couldn't have anyone recognising me.

I walked through the poster'd front door, a small beep announcing my

entrance. The shop was mostly deserted, aside from a teenager browsing the sweet aisle, and an elderly lady reaching for her weekly carton of milk. I headed straight to the till, shifting my facial expression into one of a vague, flustered appearance. There was an older man behind the till, shuffling some receipts and plastic bags around the cash drawer.

‘Hiya,’ I said in a high-pitched, rushed tone. ‘I’m sorry to bother, but I’ve left my phone at home, and really need to make a phone call. Do you have one I can borrow?’

The man nodded, and handed me an old, plastic landline without hesitation, as if he receives this request daily, and keeps it on standby for ruffled women. ‘Thank you, my love! I’ll just be a second!’

Taking the phone, I walked slightly away, towards the aisle with the wine and mixers—you never know what you’ll need to pick up in the shop. I sneakily pulled the post-it out of my coat pocket, and tapped the numbers into the sticky buttons. Placing the phone against my ear, I turned a faux smile towards the till, though the old man had already lost interest, and gone back to his sorting.

‘Hello?’ A questioning voice answered the phone. A woman’s voice.

‘Hiya, love,’ I said in a rush. ‘I hope you’ll be able to help me. I found a phone on the ground, and hoped to find the owner. The screen is cracked, so it won’t let me make calls, but yours is the last number that called. Sometime last night?’ I spoke the last words in a heightened, uncertain voice, trying to sell my innocence.

‘Oh!’ The woman said. Her voice was bright, perky. Somewhat young sounding, if you catch my drift. ‘Yes, that must be my boyfriend’s phone. Does it have a black leather case?’

I hesitated for a second before answering, taking in her words, ‘Yes. Yes it does.’

‘Bless him, he must have dropped it on the way to work.’

I hum my agreement. ‘If you give me his address, I can pop it through the letter box. He must live nearby.’

The woman on the other end of the line relayed my own address back to me. *So she’s been to the house.* I chirped a quick thank you and goodbye, and got off of the phone as soon as possible. My suspicions had been confirmed; for some reason, I hadn’t expected it to be so easy, so quick. I hadn’t thought I would know so quickly.

I ran my errands as normal. Another thing you should know about me is that I roll with the punches. I don’t flinch, don’t crumble. And part of me had known, deep down in my heart. There was never any doubt, really, just a desperation to know for sure.

Even stronger than the desperation was the anger bubbling up in my chest, rising up my neck and grasping me in the throat. She had been to our home. *My home.* Somehow that made things worse.

The stupidest thing my husband has ever done is not, as one may believe, his affair. Men have affairs every day; they keep separate families, live separate lives, at



*The Heart-Shaped Wood*

almost twice the rate of women. While it was devastating, infuriating, and ultimately the catalyst that detonated our marriage, it was not the worst thing.

The worst thing was underestimating me.

When Damien arrived home from work, I already had my story straight. I knew that his little girlfriend would likely let him know about the mysterious good samaritan who'd rang her that morning. He walked into the living room, looking around slowly, attempting subtlety.

'Oh, hun?' I spoke up from my position on the sofa, where I'd stationed myself, reading half-heartedly. 'Someone posted your phone through the letter box today. Did you lose it?'

He let out a sigh of mock-relief. 'Thank god. I had no idea where I'd dropped it.' He picked it up from the dining table, waving it slightly with a sheepish grin. *God, she's even calling him at work. Not much of a secret affair.*

But I needed to bide my time. I couldn't react immediately, despite the rage rolling inside my belly every time I saw him. As I cooked dinner, my eyes flicked consistently towards the sharpest knives in the drawer. As he packed his lunch for work, I wondered what I could slip into his sandwich. But after everything he had done, every betrayal that he had committed and hidden, I would not let him drag me down with him.

It was months before my opportunity arose; months of secret phone calls, hushed voices, and resentment. Every time I drove along the motorway, I would spy

the forest he planted for me, and the heartbreak would begin anew. I had thought of many things; sparking a forest fire, hacking the trees down one at a time. Finally, the solution was simple. I knew what I needed to do. All I needed was time.

On a day like any other, Damien came home from work with the news that he would be away for the weekend on a work placement. Overtime, he said, with the potential of a promotion. As if he had ever done a day of overtime in his life. I suppose it was time for the lovebirds to go on their first trip.

I played the doting wife, encouraging him to pack his bag thoroughly, with everything he would need for a weekend trip. He even went above and beyond, grabbing his spare cash and his passport, just in case. He made it too easy for me, really.

The following evening—a Friday, I remember so clearly, with all the potential and relief of the weekend to come—Damien came home from work, grabbed his bag, and kissed me on the cheek. I remember that very clearly, too: our final kiss. Every couple remembers their first kiss, holds it dear in their memories, but very few think of their last one. I suppose you'll never know the last kiss is the last. Difference is, I knew it, and Damien didn't.

He left in his car, and I followed on foot. I needed my car to remain in front of our house, in case any friends or neighbours came driving by. I knew where Damien would pull over for petrol, at the station right round the corner, and so I cut through the field to get there first. By a stroke of luck, he did not get right back into his car, instead wandering around the corner of the building, towards the edge of the trees surrounding it. He pulled his phone out of his pocket, but I didn't give him the chance

## *The Heart-Shaped Wood*

to make his call. Damien didn't even see me coming.

To my credit, I didn't make him suffer. I didn't inflict the same misery upon him that I had suffered for months. I'd like you to remember that. This was not about revenge, nor punishment. This was justice for myself.

I struck him in the head with a hammer, a blow so fast and brutal that all he could do was die. I grabbed him quickly, before blood could spill and evidence linger. I placed his body—still warm, still conscious, but by all accounts on death's door—into a large suit bag, curled like a fetus. The handles, and sheer force of will, gave me the momentum to drag him back through the woods, staying under the cover of darkness and canopies. It took me two hours and all my strength to drag him onto our land, and into the heart-shaped wood. A fitting place to lay him in unrest, as I'm sure you'll agree. It took another two hours to bury him, right at the centre of his anniversary gift to me.

His little girlfriend would wonder, of course, why he didn't show. When the station attendant looked up from his phone, he would wonder whose car had been abandoned in the lot. But all of this would be in time, and I would be home and in bed before red flags were raised.

I waited until Monday evening to report him missing. For all I knew—his naive little wife—he was away on business, and his car miles away. When he failed to return home from what should have been his Monday shift, I called the police, lacing my tone with worry and uncertainty, and told them of his absence.

The investigation turned up nothing damning, of course. The police found his abandoned car, his phone discarded mere feet away, and his bags packed in the boot. They went through his phone and found calls and texts to a mistress, who was subsequently exposed and questioned. In all this, they never suspected me. I was pitiful—the deceived wife, the heartbroken widow of a missing man, but nothing more.

All this little tale truly reveals is that my husband didn't really know me at all. He thought that I would be quiet, docile, and accepting of his crimes. He imagined that he could continue his facade indefinitely, and that I would not question nor act. He believed I would go down without a fight.

Tourists still question the heart-shaped wood, but with a new level of morbid curiosity. Damien's sudden and fruitless missing persons case made headlines, and added a new tinge of darkness and rumour to this landmark. It became a sort of hallowed ground, a place protected by mystery and heartache. No one ventured in, not even I. My husband would remain alone, and lost, and I would be free.

# ON THE VERGE

EILIDH HARROWER



The sea breeze rustles the curtains by the open window. He feels the wind brush lightly over his face, reminding him it's been several days since he picked up his razor. There is something different in the air. The view looks the same. Ocean and sky, both dark masses, seem to merge into one on the horizon. The moon rippling on the curling waves gives the ocean character, the lunar glow dancing over the surface the way the sky could never hope to replicate. The light spreads across the surface of the water, giving life to what would otherwise be jostling shadows. Sea and sky in a battle for claim over the edge of the world, just out of his sight. He gazes out to where they meet, and can see storm clouds beginning to roll in the sky, mirroring the ocean's waves. A sense of foreboding sits heavy in the air, quite apt for the circumstances, he thinks. Despite the cool appearance of the night sky, the heat from the day still lingers.

He stands at the hotel room window. He can hear the jukebox in the restaurant cycling through the same repetitive guitar melodies they play every night. Sharp melodic strums floating on the breeze, in harmony with the symphony of noises created by the Tuesday evening festivities. The position of the hotel room gives the perfect view from above, the light from the restaurant spilling out into the crowded sandstone courtyard. It's filled with people drinking, laughing and dancing, and will probably carry on well into the small hours of the morning. He has watched this performance every evening of the trip, getting lost in the character each person takes on in a performance seemingly made just for him. The bustle of the square makes for very interesting viewing. He has often found himself looking out over the window ledge, an unseen watcher, doing his best to deduce the circumstances of each gesture and action below him.

The honeymooners are easily spotted. A couple sitting at an alfresco dining table, lovingly clinking glasses, oblivious to the waiter attempting to serve their food, or locked in a tight embrace swaying gently amongst the crowd of dancers. Despite being immersed in the action, they are separated from it, truly consumed by only one another. It's enviable to be detached from reality in that way, feeling a level of love that he realises has become a distant memory. He can spot the single people in the crowd almost immediately, the men being the more obvious in their actions. They laugh with their friends, engage in conversation, and seem to be enjoying themselves, but they always have one eye on the rest of the room, looking for the opportunity to put their best foot forward as a possible suitor. He understands this well. He was one of them in his younger years.

He raises his hand to brush his hair back from his face, and catches sight of the staining on his skin. His nails are rimmed with dirt, every line on his fingers and palm are illustrated veins of reddish brown. He reaches into the deep pocket of his trousers, feeling for the handkerchief he always carries with him. He takes the worse-for-wear white cloth out and raises it to his forehead, dabbing at the moist beads that have sprung up in the thick heat of the room. The handkerchief has an orange tinge to it when he takes it away from his skin.

He had caught a glimpse of his face in the reflection of a shop window as he passed by, making his way along the cobbled street from the coast to the supposed sanctuary of the hotel. He hadn't thought his face looked dirty, but the rich tan his complexion has taken on over the last few days must have disguised the filth. As for the hotel being a sanctuary, his companion has made sure to thwart any possible moment

of calm he could have hoped for.

He turns from the window, making to retreat to the bathroom, seeing her frantically racing across the room, from wardrobe to bed, packing everything into two open cases. Just watching her made him aware of sweat rising on his brow again, as if her movements were raising the temperature of the whole room.

He has been lost in the window since they got back, but she has gone straight to packing. They have a flight to catch. They weren't supposed to be leaving for another two days, but those plans have changed. Or more accurately, she has changed them. She has decided they can't stay. The trip hasn't been what they were hoping for. It wasn't going to plan, and she has admitted defeat. Why bother staying when there was no need to? They have obviously found the answer to their question, or he has not given her the answer she had wanted.

He knows he should be helping her. He should be more than ready to get on a plane and return to some sense of normality. And yet, here he is, wasting time at the window. He sighs, shrugging into a heavy release of tension he hadn't realised his shoulders were holding. He raises his hand to the back of his neck, trying to force some relaxation into his muscles, before pushing through the door to the bathroom. Maybe a good cleaning will sharpen his mind, or at least he hopes it will.

As he stalks into the bathroom, she pauses, looking up just in time to see the door close behind him. Her arms are full of suit jackets and shirts. His clothes. She thought he might help her with the packing. When they got back to the room, she thought he would have done something to help. But here she is, doing all the work on



her own. It's a force of habit now, doing these things for him. She knows she should leave him to do it himself, but he would never get it done in time. She'll do a better job of it. He has never been very organised, and she would have to do all his work over again, or risk the clothes being creased in ways she wouldn't know how to smooth out. Maybe it's a blessing that he's been too taken with the view tonight to even look her way. She can get on in peace without his interference. He's better off not in the way.

Although, she can't help but think how nice it would be to know he was thinking of her, instead of the ocean, or whatever else he's been staring at through the window. She places the suits on the bed, and starts folding. She works quickly and methodically through the pile. She wishes she could go faster. She wants to leave. Wants to pack her things and go, but despite everything that's happened, she can't leave without him. She picks up the last of the shirts, feeling the linen between her finger tips. It's slightly scratchy, and yet still soft to the touch, very much like his stubble after a day or two without shaving, she thinks. She holds the shirt up to her nose, taking a light breath in. She catches the faintest aroma of his cologne, lingering near the collar from the last time he had worn it. Then she breathes the scent in one more time, wondering whether she will get the chance again once it's packed. She slowly folds the shirt into a neat square, placing it gently on top of the others in the suitcase. Her hand lingers on the surface of the shirt.

She wonders whether she is making the right choice. He thought leaving was the wrong thing to do. He wants to stay, finish the trip like they had planned. This trip was supposed to be a way for them to escape the problems they have at home, but it seems they just ran into more issues instead. This was their chance to see what it would

### *The Heart-Shaped Wood*

be like, being together in close quarters. Whether they were in it for the long haul. She had so much faith they were going to be able to push through everything that weighed down on them at home. She thought they would forget all about it for a week, and just exist as if they always lived like this. It was childish and naïve, really, to think it would be so easy. There are too many factors to think about. There are other lives involved, other people to consider. They were selfish thinking they could run from it all, and she feels stupid for thinking it could be possible.

She pivots on the spot, marching to the wardrobe again. Only her dresses remain. Hanging peacefully, undisturbed. She envies them. They drip with the expectation of what this trip was meant to be. The colours sang of moments waiting to be lived. Memories waiting to be made. Vibrant greens, yellows, pinks and florals shouting of happiness and joy. They seemed to have dulled since she packed them to come on the trip. As if they had realised there was nothing to be joyous about.

Next to them is the deep ruby satin dress she was hoping to wear on their last night. On the night they were supposed to realise they were meant for one another. Instead, it hangs in front of her, unworn, taunting her. She feels the heat rising at the back of her neck. She is already warm, running laps of the room had seen to that. But this is different. This is a flush of annoyance, turning very quickly to boiling rage. She is angry at the dress, angry at this trip, and the fact they decided to take it in the first place. But, most of all, she is angry with him. She hears the handle on the bathroom door jostle, as he emerges holding the now damp handkerchief to the back of his neck.

He has rinsed his hands and face as best he could, and definitely feels the better for it. Now, however, it has become even more apparent how filthy the rest

of him is. He glances down at his once cream trousers, now stained an almost khaki colour. The crisp, white shirt was beyond the help of any detergent, and the undervest had done little to stop the stains of perspiration that now yellow the back and underarms. Asking for a change of clothes seemed out of the question, considering he could see they had all been arranged in military fashion in the suitcase. He doesn't want to make her feel any more flustered than she obviously is. He moves back to the window, taking up his watch post once more. The people below continue with their evening, oblivious to the storm clouds on the horizon, and in the room above them. There is a faint flash of lightning far out at sea, allowing the detail of the clouds to be seen for just a moment. Shortly after, a soft rumble of thunder, barely audible against the sounds of the courtyard. To the people dancing below, it must have seemed like nothing more than a rhythmic beat in the latest song, remaining blissfully unaware of the storm brewing above them. He wishes he could swap places with them. He wishes they were on speaking terms, so he could take her down to the courtyard and become one of those happy couples lost in one another's arms.

They were supposed to be dining at the restaurant tonight. They are supposed to be guided to their seats right about now. He looks out and sees the empty table, just at the edge of the courtyard, removed from the business of the dance floor. Their regular spot, waiting for them to arrive. He longs to be there with the rest of the happy people, instead of being herded out of the hotel to a flight he wasn't certain he wanted to catch. Returning home meant explanations, excuses and lies, all of which he hated. If they could stay the extra two days, finish the trip as they planned, there would be no need to explain his early arrival. And yet, he knew it was unfair to keep her here with him. The trip was over for her, no matter whether they stayed the two days or not.

Forcing her to stay for his own convenience would be cruel.

He considers risking a glance over his shoulder, to see whether she is looking at him. Maybe catching her in a moment of calm would mean they could discuss the situation. At the very least, they need to get their stories straight. They can't have any overlapping elements in their tales of travel when they return home. Nothing to arouse suspicion. He senses now, however, is not the right time to broach the subject. He stays quiet, focused on the horizon, with the storm clouds moving closer and closer.

She looks over her shoulder at him, with a small part of her hoping to see him gazing back at her. He has a way of being able to calm her nerves with a single look. No words required, just one kind glance and her worries floated away, soothing her anxious mind. But he's not trying to soothe her. No attempt at telling her everything will be alright. His figure is silhouetted against the glow of the courtyard below through the window, completely motionless. He seems happy to have her flitting around the room like a blue bottle, while he's completely absorbed in the view.

She turns and grabs the dresses from the wardrobe. She stomps, with a childish disposition, to the edge of the bed, trying to make as much noise as possible. Trying to stir up some reaction in him, urging him to look away from the window, without having to speak up and tell him to turn around. She always has to ask for what she wants. He never acts, only doing as he's told. It had never got under her skin in quite the way it was now. She throws the dresses down on the bed, hoping to see even a slight movement in him. Looking up, she sees he hasn't moved an inch. That now familiar rage bubbles to the surface. She stands up tall, and stamps her heeled foot, just once. One solid pound.

The suddenness of it causes his head to whip round. At least she knows he can still hear. He turns slowly away from the window, seeing that familiar pink flush in her cheeks. The way her hands were positioned on her hips, trying to make herself more imposing. He had trouble meeting her gaze. It was the first time he had tried since telling her they were through. He had bought a gift, a beautiful pair of sapphire earrings, in a little blue velvet box, and thought they would soften the blow. Hindsight is a great thing, as he can see now how misleading it must have been.

When he pulled the box out, they were standing on a grassy verge, overlooking the ocean. The view of the horizon was breathtaking, and she stood looking out at where the two blue expanses met just out of sight. As he moved closer to her, pulling the gift from his pocket, she turned to face him. She saw the little square box, and thought how perfect it was that he had chosen such a beautiful setting for such an important question. Looking at the blue velvet case, she pictured a small diamond embedded in a silver band. Tasteful, not too garish, but perfect in every way. She felt ready for a ring. She was prepared for a ring.

When he handed it to her without opening it, she thought it seemed a strange way to propose, but then again, he had done it before. Both of them had, and had been happy with their answers at the time. They had done the romantic question, celebratory parties and large-scale weddings before. Despite having been through it all, there was still a flutter in her stomach at the thought of announcing their engagement. She pictured a small gathering of close friends. No need for anything grand.

She opened the box, her breath catching in her throat. She saw the dangling sapphire earrings, a deep cerulean that matched the ocean below. She stared at them,

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how they sparkled in the sun. He was rambling on about duty, obligation, considering our spouses feelings and the effect this would have on them. She heard him saying they should stay at the hotel, finish the holiday as they had planned. She couldn't think of anything worse. She caressed the soft velvet of the box, taking in every detail of the delicately crafted earrings. She carefully closed the box, raising her head to meet his gaze. They stared at each other, for what felt like an eternity.

He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, she drew back her arm and sent the little blue box flying it into the shrubbery further along the verge. His gaze followed it through the air, watching it land in the bushes. Before he could turn back to face her, he heard her march off down the hill. He hesitated for a moment, unsure of what direction to go. He ran over to where he had seen the box land, and scrambled through the greenery to find it. Orange dirt covered him, and after a few minutes he had to admit defeat. He knew he could catch up to her if he ran after her. He took off running, barely keeping his footing as he scurried down the slope. When he reached the room just after her, she had already started packing.

# THE SUBWAY TICKET

E. C. MCLEAN



I am printed into existence. Painted red nails pluck me out from the bottom pocket of the ticket terminal. Whisked across the subway, I am placed face down on the reader to be scanned. The small light turns from amber to green under my say so and the turnstile swings open. Our journey together begins. A finite one, at least. Through the tunnel, the subway appears and I am tucked into the back of a strawberry phone case. I feel useful traveling along the eight minute circular route. I am spun in a dizzying circle and bounced against a pair of jeans as the commuter fidgets in their chair. There are ads overhead for spa days and college courses that I read upside down until the doors slide open at the correct stop; I know it to be so, for I have stopped spinning.

Various different shoes shuffle up the stairs and at the top, a vibrant tiled mural catches the light. The wall depicts colourful flowers and animals highlighting the landmarks that await above the underground. It must be nice to be that mural. To hold such value. As a Return ticket, I know that I have one more trip along the outer line in me and then...well, I will be discarded. If I am so lucky, then perhaps the recycling awaits me. I escape the used ticket bin for now and find myself in a faux leather purse. Inside that purse, inside the bag, inside a locker, I wait.

A hand eventually searches for me in the back zip of the purse that has become my ephemeral home. Night has fallen, and by the brightly lit entrance to the subway, I notice an old ticket on the pavement next to an even *older* piece of chewing gum. The fate of the ticket haunts me as I am scanned again. I see the escalator, hear the screech of the subway before the painted red nails place me back behind the pop-socket of their phone again. A precarious place, I must say. I take my last trip round the subway and treasure every moment, noting each of the stops through the rectangular



windows, knowing that this is it for me. My final use as a Return ticket. The subway collects students leaving the university campus, visitors and locals. The owner of the purse holds their phone, and by extension, me, a little tighter when boisterous groups appear on either side of them.

They must lose focus, for I slip from the pop socket—my earlier anxieties proven right, I see. At least I can take solace in that as I fall and land on the grubby floor. Face first, *lovely*. There is not much time for the despair to truly sink in before another hand reaches down and retrieves me. The doors beep loudly but my saviour dashes through, and it is not long before I find myself back in the hand of the commuter—my commuter, I suppose, for I have gotten a little attached, now. Reunited, I am swiftly swiped across the turnstile, placed back into the purse and then I am forgotten. Sitting amongst receipts and loyalty cards, the owner of the purse will never need again, I wonder when I will next be of any value.

The commuter must have purchased a monthly ticket for I am joined only by a few stray coins. I lie there in the darkness of the purse until I see light peek through the fabric and I think that this is the end. A familiar hand—nails painted purple this time, not red—fishes me out. I find myself slipped into the pages of a hefty hardback. A makeshift bookmark for me it is then. As I hold the space in chapter twenty-three for the commuter, I cannot help but wish that I held a story of my own like the beautiful art mural and this thrilling book—although the commuter has been on this chapter for quite some time. Must be a lull in the story, but who am I to judge? The only poetry I have to offer are the date and the words:

*Subway. Retain ticket for exit and inspection. Adult Return £3.50.*

## *The Subway Ticket*

Moving, indeed. I know I should be grateful for my extended time in this earthly plain as a bookmark, but it is only delaying the inevitable. Somehow, I escape the bin another day as I travel from book back to purse. I long to be more than a throwaway ticket—I want to *mean* something in my brief printed existence. I get my wish.

On one particular journey inside the purse, the very same hand with nails now decorated a shade of teal, removes me hastily. I am placed not into the bin, but into the hand of another. A pen scratches across my surface before I am passed back. There is a reverence in the way that I am carefully handed over. I draw a small smile from each of their faces. The painted blue nailed commuter holds me in the same hand as a disposable coffee cup. I brace for impact as the cup is dropped into the recycling, knowing I am likely to follow suit, but I do not share the same fate.

I cannot call myself a forgotten subway ticket. Not these days. Despite all my growing fears, I have yet to be ripped up and thrown away. I no longer live in that faux leather purse, but in another wallet, you see. I hold a designated spot in the notes compartment, right next to a small polaroid of the commuter who originally printed me. I am slightly torn at the edges as time slips by, and a little water damaged from a brief fall into a particularly deep puddle, but my ink has not faded. Not yet anyway. Beneath my printed £3.50 message are the scribbled words:

*You are the love of my life.*

The End

# THE ONLY THING WORSE THAN BEING 20 IS NOT BEING 20

ELEANOR HARPER



*I'm in the pursuit of passion !*

An Icarus tryst with danger,  
an elbow graze on a razor.  
A double shot, method actor,  
empty-eyed, rodeo regular.  
Who lets me forage for you,  
'tween canine and incisor.

*It's empty.*

The makeshift place we felt it,  
deeply in times abundant.  
When bone and brow furrow,  
were bright, brilliant wonder.  
Now... a futile reminiscing,  
supercut, circles spinning.  
I think I was quite beautiful

*In a past life.*

I'm your sweet solar power,  
silenced angel of substance.  
Lasting muse, not the artist.  
Madonna, perfectly endless.  
Youth sold to indifference,  
till archived from existence.  
I think I gave all I was to this.

*...I'm in the pursuit of passion !*



# LISTENING IN

JOHN BARRETT LEE

In the garden of the rented house near Uzès, Lucy sat alone at a pretty tiled table, as breakup ballads spilled from her phone. She felt not quite rested, not quite awake—a drifting calm, yet always close to tipping into tears. The fierce August sun had cooled, but the evening still pressed on her face like a warm cloth.

As the light faded, she set her unopened novel aside and detached a strand of blonde hair from her cheek. A bottle of violette—a gift from her landlady, Hélène—sat on the table. Lucy touched a drop to her tongue. It was just like the Parma Violets of her childhood: sweet, powdery, nostalgic, and not everyone's cup of tea—like herself, she thought. She poured a measure into a glass, then lifted the bottle of sparkling wine from the ice bucket. Cold water dribbled down her dress, and she gasped, suddenly seized by the urge to dive into the pool. In the kitchen window, her reflection looked back: fringe damp, cheeks rosy from the sun. Too full, too pink, too much.

Lucy popped the cork and poured the wine over the violette, turning it the colour of cornflowers. She pressed the cool bottle against her sunburnt neck and glanced at the sky. Surely it was eight by now. She began to think about Christian, picturing what he'd be doing. Who was the real loser? She had the pool and the Languedoc sun, but deep down she knew it was her. He'd already moved on—she didn't need proof. Of course it would be a laminated wellness goddess: all protein smoothies and chia seeds instead of white wine and crisps, the kind who never got boob sweat unless they'd just finished a half marathon.

Christian had ended their engagement a week earlier. No call—just a WhatsApp, all lowercase, with a hug emoji. The very next day, he was on Instagram, flexing in the gym mirror. Caption: *New Chapter*. There had been warning signs:

the barbed references to her age, her weight, her old-fashioned tastes in music and clothes, her fondness for drinking and smoking. At thirty-two, she was already out of step with these polished, self-improving times. Cottagecore with cigarettes wasn't working for him.

At first, she'd liked his confidence—his optimism, the talk about 'levelling up' and chasing the best version of life. For a while, it was infectious. She almost believed they could have the kind of polished life that made others quietly jealous. But his upgrades soon included her. She tried to please him—Paleo, Dry January, CrossFit—but it was never enough. And truth be told, throwing kettlebells around a freezing warehouse at dawn, with shouts of *Push!* ringing out, was never really her. Still, she did it, flattered into thinking for two years that they had something. Foolish, really—falling for a man-child with veneers and a ring light.

In her mind, she rattled off the usual break-up clichés her friends had offered—'plenty more fish in the sea,' 'put your crown back on'—kindly meant but toe-curling. The split didn't just sting; it left her diminished, worthless, and she had to fight a sudden swell of tears. She quelled it with a big sip of wine and reminded herself that at least she could smoke with impunity. In quiet defiance, she took a pack of Marlboro Lights from her bag and lit one from the candle.

As she smoked, Lucy listened to the cicadas, unseen in the coarse grass beneath the olive trees around the pool. To her right, three porcelain cicadas hung from the whitewashed wall, all garishly painted in black, red and yellow, and with cut lavender protruding from their mouths. The scent was mingling with that of the ripe apricots she had bought in the market at Uzès, which nestled in a basket on the table. As Lucy squeezed them, they were warm and yielding.

### *Listening In*

She put out her cigarette and admired the supper she'd laid out. Fat olives; a bowl of radicchio salad; a bottle of *Coteaux du Languedoc*, and a round of Pélardon goat's cheese, creamy and sharp, and ready to be smeared on a crusty baguette. Just as well that Christian wasn't there, she thought. He hated goat's cheese. And bread.

She was about to eat when a tall man appeared at the low gate leading to Hélène's house. He wore tattered old khaki shorts, work boots, and a paint-splattered black shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and Lucy guessed he was Hélène's husband. As he let himself into the garden, he waved.

*'Bonsoir,'* he called. *'Comment ça va?'*

*'Ça va bien, merci,'* Lucy replied. *'Et vous?'*

The man approached her and held out a hand. It was like a paving slab with fingers, and when Lucy shook it, she found it equally dry and rough.

'I am Bruno,' he said in faltering English. 'You are Lucy, yes?' He looked at her apologetically, 'I am sorry. But my English...is not so good.'

*'Enchantée,'* Lucy said, then continued in French, 'You're right, I am Lucy. And your English is fine, but we can speak French if you prefer.'

Relieved of the effort of speaking English, Bruno seemed to relax. 'You speak excellent French, Lucy,' he said. 'Your accent is like a *Parisienne*.'

'Well,' Lucy said smugly. 'I studied in Paris for nine months. I took French and economics at university.'

'Ah,' Bruno said, pulling on his chin and nodding slowly. 'An economist. Then perhaps you can help me to avoid these crazy property taxes.'

Lucy laughed, 'If you're like the other Frenchmen I know, I'm sure you've got that covered.'



‘Here, I have brought you some apricots,’ Bruno said, holding out a grubby plastic carrier bag. ‘I just picked them from our garden.’ He noticed the basket on the table and clapped his forehead with his palm, ‘*Mon Dieu!* You already have some. I cannot even give them away.’

‘It’s very kind of you,’ Lucy said, and took the bag from him.

Lucy went to the kitchen to fetch another glass, and when she returned, Bruno had settled into one of the chairs, and was sitting back with his legs crossed and his hands on the arms. He was a wiry man, around forty-five, Lucy guessed, with long limbs. He had the sheen of outdoor toil on his face, and his skin was the weathered bronze of someone who spent their life outdoors. Lucy couldn’t help looking at the lavish black moustache which sprouted from his upper lip and curled up towards pointed tips. Normally, Lucy loathed moustaches, associating them with pompous ex-military types, but Bruno’s was so unapologetically Gallic, she was impressed.

‘I’ve started this violette your wife gave me,’ she said, picking up the bottle and unscrewing the cap. ‘It’s delicious.’

‘My wife?’ Bruno said with a peculiar expression on his face. Lucy worried she’d made a faux-pas, but then he said, ‘Oh, you mean Hélène. She is my sister, not my wife. She did not tell you?’

‘Perhaps she forgot,’ Lucy said quickly, mixing Bruno a drink. ‘I only spoke to her for a few minutes—it was late when I arrived.’

She handed him the glass and sat back down, still wondering what that look was about.

Bruno gestured to the spread on the table. ‘Such wonderful food—you are

eating like a local.’ He picked up the wine bottle and studied the label. ‘And the wine,’ he said, shaking his head, ‘is a good year.’

‘Have some,’ Lucy said, ‘and help yourself to food. There’s plenty there, and I’m far too fat already.’ She prodded her belly to prove the point.

‘No,’ Bruno said, helping himself to a hunk of baguette, and spreading it with goat’s cheese. ‘You are a real woman. Not one of these...’ he waved his hand as he searched for the word, ‘...crazy catwalk models in Paris. But I think you need to use sun cream,’ he added with his mouth full. ‘Your legs look sore.’

Bruno opened the wine with the corkscrew on his penknife and poured it. As they ate and drank together, making small talk about the weather and the food, Bruno’s French shifted into the local Languedoc dialect—softer, rounder, more musical. He lingered on his vowels like an Italian and pronounced every syllable with care, the cadence slow and lyrical. Soon, Lucy found that it hardly sounded like French at all. But he spoke slowly and clearly, and she listened in, letting the sound flow through her. Dusk was falling when they finished eating, and the olive trees were silhouettes against the cobalt sky.

‘It’s so beautiful here,’ Lucy said, popping the last olive into her mouth. ‘But these mosquitoes are driving me mad.’

‘Unfortunately, even paradise has blemishes. Here in Languedoc, they are the mosquitoes. And property taxes, of course.’

‘Right,’ Lucy said, swatting a mosquito from her thigh, ‘I’ve already been bitten five times.’

‘You must have the right blood type. They do not like the taste of me.’

‘Lucky you.’

Bruno got up and went over to the small shed where the pool equipment was kept. He returned with a mosquito coil, which he lit with his lighter and placed by Lucy's bare feet so that the fragrant smoke drifted up around her legs.

'So you are here all alone, Lucy?' Bruno enquired, taking a battered tobacco tin from his pocket before sitting back down.

'Not intentionally. My fiancé dumped me last week.'

'Ah,' Bruno said, for want of a reply.

'He said it wasn't me; he needed time to figure himself out. That kind of faux-profound crap, you know? And by text message, too. Says it all, really.'

She talked and talked, getting it all out. It was easier to speak about it in her second language—it gave some distance—and Bruno seemed happy to listen. He just sat there smoking and drinking and nodding from time to time to show that he was following.

The drink had emboldened Lucy, and when she had finished talking about herself, she asked, 'What about you, Bruno? Do you have a girlfriend?'

'No.'

'Well,' Lucy said, 'I'm sure there are plenty of women who'd love a tall, rugged handyman like you.'

'I used to have a wife.'

'Oh,' Lucy said, pouring herself another drink. 'So, where is she?'

'She died.'

Tucking her hair behind her ears, Lucy instantly felt compelled to reel off the insincere clichés she so hated, stuck as she was for something meaningful to say. What do you say to a man who just told you his wife died? She lit another cigarette

and gulped some wine.

‘God, I’m so sorry,’ she mumbled. ‘What was her name?’

Bruno gazed into his glass. ‘Audrey,’ he said, after a moment, his brown eyes distant and sad. ‘She was called Audrey.’

‘Was it recent?’ Lucy said awkwardly. ‘Your loss, I mean.’

‘Three years ago. I am OK though. Do not worry, Lucy. I am OK.’

Lucy leaned forward and squeezed his hand, ‘I can see how much you loved her.’

He sighed. ‘It was not perfect—what is? But it was right more often than it was wrong. We loved each other, flaws and all. That is all we can give.’

Lucy twisted a strand of hair, uncertain. Bruno’s hand was warm and steady beneath hers, roughened by years of use and care. She noticed it was badly scarred, and the tips of two fingers were missing—old injuries, faded but unmistakable. She wondered if Audrey even noticed. Love, she thought, is not perfection, but acceptance—blemishes and scars included. She wondered what Christian would have said if her hands had been less than manicured perfection. The thought settled in her chest, like the soft scent of lavender on the breeze.

They sat without talking until Bruno broke the silence. He had seen Lucy’s iPhone which had slipped out of her bag and was lying on the flagstones.

‘Your telephone,’ he said, picking it up. ‘It is an Apple, no?’

Lucy laughed, wondering what decade she had stepped into, ‘Yes, it’s an iPhone.’

‘Ah, yes. Hélène has one. I have this.’ He pulled out the kind of Nokia brick Lucy hadn’t seen since primary school.

‘Do you use it for hammering in nails?’ she smirked.

‘Yes, that is why I bought it. You cannot destroy it. I dropped it off the roof once.’

‘Don’t get one of these things,’ she said. ‘It’ll ruin your life. But it’s excellent for music.’

‘What music is on it?’

‘Anything you like. But definitely no Johnny Hallyday, I’m afraid. Sorry.’

Bruno raised his hands, ‘*Merde alors!*’ We French are not all Johnny Hallyday fans. Do you like Cliff Richard?’

Lucy grimaced, ‘OK, OK. So what music do you like?’

‘Jazz,’ Bruno said, his face taking on the happy look of somebody talking about a great passion. ‘I used to play trumpet in a band.’

‘Oh. Don’t you play anymore?’

‘Not anymore. Not since Audrey died.’

‘Of course,’ Lucy said. ‘I am sorry.’

Bruno reached out and touched her arm. ‘Do not feel bad. Our drummer ran away to Avignon with the sax player, so the band was finished anyway.’

Lucy saw Bruno smiling, and she laughed. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘I don’t really know much about jazz, but I love Billie Holiday. My grandma used to play me her Billie records when I was little.’

‘Ah, Billie Holiday. I know her very well.’

Lucy put an earbud in her ear and offered the other to Bruno. After a couple of attempts, he managed to fix it in place, and Lucy searched her playlists until she found what she was looking for. A moment later, the bright piano opening

*Listening In*

of *I Can't Give You Anything But Love* trickled into their ears. When, four bars later, the languid trumpet poured out like molasses, Lucy looked over to Bruno, whose eyes were filled with the knowledge of something lost forever. She turned up the volume when Billie began to sing, her sweet voice heavy with heartbreak, and roughened by life.

It was dark now, and Bruno walked over to a metal cupboard on the wall, opened it, and flicked on the pool lights. In the pale blue glow, the water became the colour of violette and wine, and they sat for a time with their knees touching, and the warm night enveloping them.

‘Shall we dance?’ Bruno said as the track finished, and the next one began.

Lucy got up. She was more drunk than she realised, and she had to touch the back of her chair to steady herself. She stumbled slightly, catching her toes on a crack in the flagstones. Bruno steadied her. She gave a tight laugh, feeling a flush rise in her chest. Bruno didn’t flinch. He simply slid the iPhone into his shirt pocket and held out his hand. Lucy took it and saw that her own was like a child’s in his huge square palm. He closed his fingers around hers and placed his right hand on her waist. She looked up at him, tilting her face, half-aware of the invitation. He hesitated—then brushed her temple with his lips, soft as breath, the way you kiss someone whose sadness you recognise in your own bones.

They began to move, awkwardly at first, but as Lucy laid her head on Bruno’s shoulder and inhaled his scent of tobacco, wine, and apricots, he pulled her close. Soon her mind and feet floated in time to the music. When had she last let someone hold her like this—when had she last let herself be seen without trying? She tried to picture dancing like this with Christian but couldn’t. He would have

joked about her two left feet, taken a selfie, or complained about the music. The thought barely stung. It drifted away like smoke.

Song after song they danced, their steps finding rhythm on the warm flagstones. From time to time, Lucy translated fragments of lyrics into French. Bruno closed his eyes and held her as they swayed softly in the dark.

He didn't ask for anything more—simply offered his presence. And in that moment, it was enough.

She didn't need to impress him, or explain, or pretend to be younger, cooler, less herself. What is connection, she thought, but meeting someone exactly as they are?

For the first time in a long while, she felt entirely at ease in her own skin—no upgrades needed. Billie's voice, raw and honest, as she was in life, threaded through the air between them—proof that it was still possible to be broken, brave, and beloved. Billie had sung that she had nothing to offer but love. What else was there to give?

As they swayed on in the pool's violet glow, her cheek resting against his shoulder, she let the moment settle around them in the hush of the August night. Even the dark seemed to be listening in—swaying slightly too, like an old love song felt but not heard.



# THREE

R. LO. CASCIO





You're fifteen when you kiss your favourite friend on her bare shoulder.

It's not something you planned. You're parting ways in the unseasonably hot spring—she's moving away, her backpack weighing heavily over the straps of her tank top—and you hug, and you've hugged countless times before but not like this.

She apologises for the sweat on her skin. You say you don't care. And you place your mouth just there, at the juncture of her neck.

The contact burns your lips for hours. You press your palm against them to quell the heat, or maybe to preserve it, to let it spread to your hands, your limbs, let it scorch you in that secret place you don't know exists yet.

You're not in love with her, says the cross hanging over your bed. Love is white veils and golden rings. Love is all things simple and clean, and this is neither. Still the memory of it won't leave your mind, populating your daydreams with whats, whys, and what ifs.

So you do the one thing you know how to do: you pray. You pray for this all to go away. You pray to see her again. You pray for things you don't even understand.

In the end, the two of you grow apart, and you never know why. That is how things go. You bury that question deep, then, so that you never need to find an answer. Little did you know it was a seed.

You're twenty-one, and haven't thought of her in years, and her obituary hits

you with the force of a hurricane. It's only then, in front of her digital tombstone, that you let yourself understand.

\*

You're seventeen when one of your girl friends kisses you on the mouth.

You see it coming and you don't stop it. You're sitting on her couch, surrounded by your friends after a night out, and she leans in towards you, eyes closing and a silly smile curving her lips. You mirror her movements and let it happen, even though you're terrified that she will know, then, how much you've been wanting her to do that. You will yourself stone-still and quiet, barely allowing yourself to feel the contact. One moment, and then it's over, and there is no doubt in your mind that it was given in friendship, and nothing else.

The ghost of that peck lingers on your lips, stinging, for days to come, haunts your dreams and weighs on the cavity in your chest where your heart is supposed to beat, but it can't. The thought of it stops your breath and steals your words, your mind a blank canvas that fills with only her, her, her.

You can't tell her, says the voice in your own head. You don't know what 'conditional' means yet, but you know her affection is a privilege, not a given. You convince yourself that what you have is enough. You try, at least. It's a fair price for getting to keep her.

You learn of fragile balances. You learn the weight of things you can never tell, and you learn to bear it on your chest. You learn that silence is a thing with

teeth.

You're eighteen when your world collapses.

The delicate thread that held you and her together stretches too thin, until it snaps under the pressure of the truth. It cuts your skin and flails your flesh, crushes your lungs and for a time you think it will crush you, too. You cling to the pain like an anchor, never mind that the metal is scorching. You burn with the fever of it and let it boil you up from the inside.

You learn, eventually, to let go, and you survive.

\*

You're nineteen and your best friend is kissing you—really kissing you, pressed down on the twin mattress of her childhood bedroom.

She invited you over for a movie that neither of you is watching. You know this was a long time coming. You know this, because the last time you two were together in the dark your hands kept finding each other and refused to let go. How unreal now to feel those hands caressing your face, your arms, your waist.

It is messy and unpractised. No one has ever kissed you like this before, all lips and tongue and teeth. It's imperfect, but intentional, tangible, and the reality of it knocks the air out of your lungs.

I love you, she whispers. You can't let yourself say it back just yet.

You spend the first moments after the kiss talking yourself down to her.

You're a hard person to love, you're bad at relationships; you are convinced of this.  
So you offer her an out, fully expecting her to retreat, to let her let *you* down easy.  
She just laughs, and kisses you again.

The world expands. You step on a plane, one day, and leave everything you know behind. She stays back, your tether to reality, to a homeland you have never understood. That secret language everyone but you seems to know reveals itself, morpheme by morpheme, in the syntax of her heart.

You learn how to be a person. You grow up, you burn out. You learn what 'queer' means, you learn there are more like you. You love her in secret, for a time, until you learn that you can love her openly.

You come back to her, again and again, and she waits, patiently.

You're thirty, and you're wearing her ring.

# CONTRIBUTORS

**MOLLY MALLINDER** is a Glasgow based literary fiction writer. She has just finished writing her first Novella 'The Funeral Tea'.

**ROSIE VOX** is a writer and editor based in Glasgow. When not finishing off her debut novella, 'Neoprene', she can be found appreciating *The Real Housewives* for its vast anthropological value, bagging bothies in the Highlands, and reading books that keep her up till 4a.m. (If you do actually find her doing any of these things, remain calm and don't make any sudden movements.)

**JOSHUA WALKER**, known as The Last Bard, is a poet blending timeless rhyme with modern truths. He writes from Oklahoma City, weaving myth, vulnerability, and the human experience into work that reaches over 310,000 followers online.

**ALISON COYLE** is a writer from Glasgow and is about to graduate from the CW MLitt at UofG. Her publications include the Scottish Book Trust and From Glasgow to Saturn.

**CONNER MCALEESE** is a Dundee-based author and Ph. D. graduate. Both his research and fiction deal with generational trauma and the families they force us to build for ourselves. He is currently writing his first 'possession' novel about a single mother from Glasgow and her 'stinkin' son. His debut novel, *The Goose Mistress*, can be found in all good retailers.

**HOLLY FLEMING-GUNN** is a writer of poetry and horror, who is currently working on her first novel. When she is not writing, she is spending time with her husband, cat, and her new baby.

**LAUREN PENZER** is a writer, editor, and Co-Founder of her own literary magazine, ELA. She loves all things gothic and dark, and stories that challenge the expectations and comfort levels of her readers; Lauren draws inspiration from her busy and chaotic life, her love for weird girl literature, and her deep-rooted feminist rage. This is her first fiction publication, and hopefully the first of many.

EILIDH HARROWER is an author, actor, and general haver of far too many interests... She has dabbled in prose, playscripts and sometimes a hybrid of the two, and will keep writing (and rewriting, and rewriting) so watch this space!!

E. C. MCLEAN is an MLitt graduate from the University of Glasgow. Illustrations of hers are published with the Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic. Eva has presented research on the digital and eco humanities at numerous academic conferences. She can be found through her art handle @evamcleanart

ELEANOR HARPER is a 24 year old writer based in Glasgow. She has work published in Big Red Cat Zine and Kelvingrove Writers first anthology. She loves film, Stevie Nicks and finding vinted bargains.

JOHN BARRETT LEE is a fiction writer and teacher from Pembrokeshire, now based in Vietnam with his Welsh-Vietnamese family. His work explores memory, identity, and the places that define us. His stories have appeared with Fairlight Books and Free Flash Fiction, and he was longlisted for the 2025 Historical Writers' Association Short Story Award. Find him on X @johnbarrettlee

R. LO CASCIO is an Italian born, Glasgow based professional translator who occasionally steps away from reading and curating other people's words to find her own. Long time fantasy reader, full time cat lady, part time writer. If found, please return to the nearest library.

# the GLYPH. team

## **Giovanni Sebastian Cardillo (Editor-in-Chief of Friends & Lovers):**

Giovanni is a German-Italian writer who abandoned both of his native languages to write in what's left of the King's English. His prose and poetry are influenced by the shockingly mundane experiences and encounters he made while meandering across the globe.

## **Rach Macpherson (Editor & Social Media):**

Rach is a writer in love with mythology, fantasy and all things romance. Always on the hunt for her romantasy, you can usually find her thriving on caffeine, annoying her husband and her cat Cheese, battling her novel, and hunting for fairies at the bottom of her garden.

## **Eleanor Grace (Editor & Graphic Designer):**

Eleanor is a writer who switches literary genre as frequently as she changes her hair colour (read: often). Currently—though for how long we're not sure—she's trying to write the perfect villain and is meticulously plotting novels with colour-coded post-it notes.

## **Sofía Artola Díaz (Editor & Web Editor):**

Sofía is a Spanish writer who finds being bilingual means struggling both in Spanish and English. Obsessed with commas and emotionally unavailable characters, she finds inspiration for her writing in her daily battles against energy companies, spiders, and heights.



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