

CAMPLE—LINE

**BRYONY ROSE**  
**LOVE BITES**  
**29.06 – 31.08.25**

## Notes on an ambivalent love

– Laura Plant

They were bumping up against the car windows as soon as we pulled up. We made the usual preparations – long sleeves, Smidge, scarf, face nets – all quite uncomfortable in the July heat. We were in Glen Affric, an area of ancient Caledonian pinewood and the Scottish poster child of Rewilding Europe – a more diverse environment than most. It was going to be buggy. I don't think its conjecture to say that what followed was a plague of clegs. Five minutes into our walk, we'd been so persistently bitten we had to give up and turn back. We sat back in the sealed car, flustered and shook but also impressed by the wildness of this landscape – more like an impenetrable jungle than a postcard glen. It was kind of intimidating.

There is a unique horror to the cleg, or horsefly. Thick sturdy bodies that latch onto you with mouthparts serrated enough to penetrate cowhide. The same cleg is comfortable stalking you for miles in pursuit of your flesh. Using its generic name, the gadfly has a long history as a villainous device in literature and the word itself is used to describe a person who interferes, irritates and provokes others. The Romantic poet John Keats wrote *The Gadfly* in 1818 whilst travelling in Scotland to critique various political and societal figures he took issue with, equating this with the nuisance and discomfort he must've experienced from the highland wildlife.

A quick Google search of the word clegs brings up countless forums from enraged walkers and campers that read like an Eastenders script: 'It does feel personal... there's malice there'; 'feeling targeted, chased and attacked'; 'they stalk you from behind'; 'I've been left bleeding many a time.' Like Keats, any walker might compare the wrath felt towards these flies as they hunt you down, resilient despite being relentlessly slapped from a thigh, to that which you might direct towards a mortal enemy or cheating lover.

The gadfly, and its ability to drive people to madness, is the fulcrum of a number of Greek tragedies. In *Prometheus Bound* the insect is used by Aeschylus as a mechanism of pain and suffering, sent to torment Zeus' lover Io, who is transformed into a cow to hide her from his jealous wife Hera. A plague of gadflies force Io further and

*Laura Plant is an art worker and gardener based in Glasgow. She runs the exhibition project Chorus, writes for art journals such as MAP Magazine and The Earth Issue, and has recently worked on a number of archival projects with artists and estates.*

further away from her home and away from love. Cloaked in affairs, rivalry and bloodlust in our imaginary, these insects stand in for the violent drama that plays out between humans and the natural world.

In *Love Bites* however, the cleg becomes an ambivalent subject. At her studio, surrounded by ceramic body parts in-construction, Bryony Rose tells me she'd discovered that only female clegs bite. They require a blood meal to reproduce effectively and to aid in their egg development. So, they drink our blood for their babies – those burning bites the result of a mother's love. 'It's quite sweet' Rose says, with this tenderness apparent in her treatment of the fly's formal beauty, picked out in delicate painted glazes.

Clegs appear in the exhibition as a talisman of a 2011 summer in Rose's childhood home of Penpont, their presence looming large in the unusual heat of that year. As sunshine-loving insects, they can usually be expected with the rare coming of good weather in Scotland, a scourge on many a July day. While Rose's work recovers the loving purpose of their blood-drinking, the clegs also appear as intimate neighbours, together inhabiting the pastoral scenes of her Dumfriesshire upbringing. Whether she likes it or not, they're creatures that know her body. And though it's uncomfortable to look at the brutal sight of the rosy raised weal – turned in clay for the new panel pieces – the work also encourages us to see this as an act of affection.

This sense of ambivalence percolates throughout this new body of work by Rose, located in that hiatus after leaving school and before whatever's next: the bittersweet feeling of this pause, hoping it will last forever whilst being impatient for the future. Boredom and excitement. Nostalgia and restlessness.

For me, this time was leavened by an intense bodily awareness and an alertness to skin contact can be traced throughout *Love Bites*: the swathes of fleshy tiles, punctuated by cautious moles painted in oxide and filmed with a sweaty gloss glaze, are a self-portrait of sorts. Landscapes of skin meet fields of Groovy Chick flowers with an elegant inward curve of the ceramic tile forming the threshold between limb and ground; the patchwork denim glazes like a pair of new jeans; the star pocked dandelion like an Ikea duvet cover, tugging stickily on a hot night.

I'm reminded of my own body at seventeen. The tussle between carefree teenage-hood and awkwardness; the desire for summery abandon bumping

up against malignant self-consciousness. Always aware of the patch of exposed flesh that the suncream didn't quite reach, or that the repellent didn't withstand, anticipating the burning embarrassment of wearing some angry red beacon on my skin for the rest of the holidays. The feeding clegs, transgressing into Rose's work, conduct this vulnerability through me once again.

Laurie Lee's writing about the Slad Valley, his home in Gloucestershire, captures something recognisable about the summers of my own coming-of-age in the West Country. Lee's work translates a feeling close to horror at the growth and decay of the countryside in this part of England, which to me often felt like being inside the lush intensity of a romantic landscape painting – fecund and abundant. His short story *A Drink With a Witch*, in which a fictionalised version of himself crosses paths with a strange verdant woman, is situated in the 'green, hot, seething valley.' He writes that 'everything there seems more livid... and more exotically lush than is decent' walking amongst the "urging, indifferent tide of green.' It's that thickness of summer in the countryside that I remember – the fug of pollen and that steamy chlorophyll smell of long grass. Lee registers the frightening quality of this feeling, writing 'there was not a breath of air in the valley, and the gold dust from the apple boughs stuck in my throat like pepper.'<sup>1</sup> The drama of the natural world does sometimes feel scary. In summer, plants seem to have an appalling reserve of vigorous energy and their will to survive, like the Glen Affric clegs, is ruthless.

This landscape was the background to the Julys of my teenage-hood. Flopping on the grass listening to MGMT on my iPod shuffle. Long bright evenings with time to spare after exams. A new relationship. Texting friends to plan which corner of the park we would meet at next to drink our cans of Strongbow. Sitting on a red ant's nest whilst trying to look cool. Too much time to think about the future, and yet not enough, changes hurtling closer each day. Playing swing-ball lethargically with my sisters. Picking dandelions to puff onto, 'He loves me, he loves me not' – the equal parts uncertainty and blissfulness of these months plays out softly in *Love Bites*.

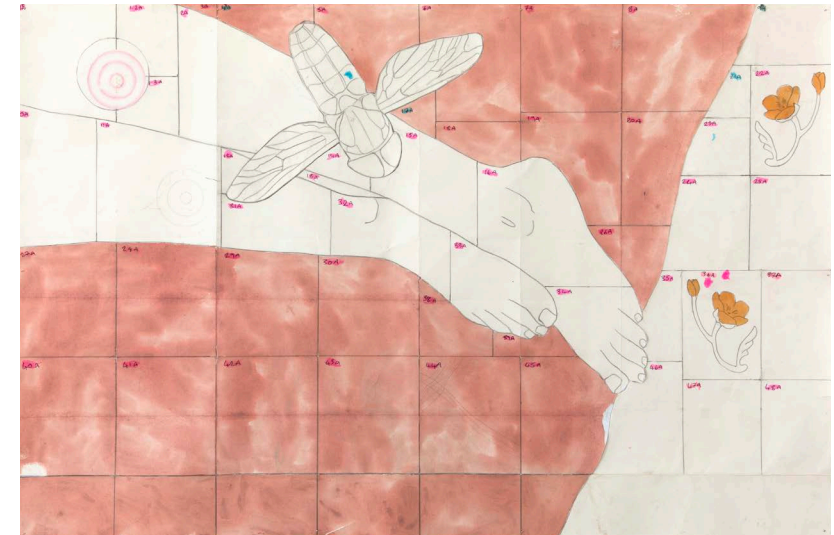
In *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson writes lyrically on the paradox of erotic desire through the work of the Greek poet Sappho. For Sappho, a lover's experience is at once one of pleasure and of pain, a

convergence of sweetness and bitterness, and of love and hate. Desire is registered as an ambivalent experience – a ‘dilemma of body and senses.’ Carson conceptualises eros as the product of deficiency or need that, recalling the exiled Io who’s hunted by Hera’s plague of gadflies, requires a kind of love triangle structure. ‘Where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components – lover, beloved and that which comes between them.’ If eros is the experience of lack, this defines the boundaries between ourselves and the world. Carson writes, ‘In the interval between reach and grasp, between glance and counter glance, between ‘I love you’ and ‘I love you too,’ the absent presence of desire comes alive.’<sup>2</sup> It is in these margins – the edges between voids, where we are left wanting – that eros exists.

If we consider love and desire in an expanded sense – the love of a parent or sibling, of friendship, of home as well as romantic love – we can see the moment of interval between high school and the rest of life that Rose is so interested in, as a moment of intense loss as well as renewal, saturated with this bittersweet love. Like Io, as teenagers, we have to leave that which we care about behind – we say goodbye to childhood friends, to our family home, our landscape, perhaps to a relationship. In a turn of dramaturgical tragedy, the act of leaving forms new boundaries for love to expand and swell into and we face the heart-wrenching ambivalence of losing old loves to gain new ones.

In a heady account of his own first love, Lee describes sex as a constant force in the countryside – ‘like grain in the wood... never obsessive, nor crowding the attention, but always going on if you cared to look for it.’<sup>3</sup> Teenagers in the country implicitly understand the rotations between fertility and rot that govern rural life, living congenially alongside the theatricality of birth, death, sex and gore as they do. The rows of sheep in Rose’s work – which I recognise from a favourite Paperchase notepad set I had with matching fluffy pen – are seen through a car window. They’d come closer to the house that summer, perhaps the cause of the hoards of clegs. The boundary between the biological cycles of the flock and the household perhaps felt flimsier than usual.

Landscapes like Dumfriesshire are shaped as much by sheep as by humans, and rural communities live intimately with livestock



Untitled plan for Love Bites, 2025

and their corresponding ecological chains. While female clegs bite, the males are an important pollinator, and the much-derided dandelion produces essential insect nectar in its early flowering season. All these environmental actors are engaged in a ‘long waltz’<sup>4</sup> with us – a historic, loving, fraught, coevolutionary relationship.

In *Meat Love*’s melodramatic Greek-style chapter headings of Tragedy, Harmony and Beauty, writer Amber Husain identifies a new kind of relationship between humans and animals in which love is wielded as a tool for redeeming the violence of meat-eating and the desire for flesh, she writes: ‘Love has always been capable of meaning many things, among them a propensity to kill.’<sup>5</sup> Maybe in that case – alongside a mutual dynamic of brutality and blood thirst, where their savage feasting on my flesh makes me long for their annihilation – I can learn to love the cleg.

1. Laurie Lee, *A Drink with a Witch* included in *I Can’t Stay Long*, 1975.

2. Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 1986.

3. Laurie Lee, *First Love* included in *I Can’t Stay Long*, André Deutsch, 1975, Pages 37.

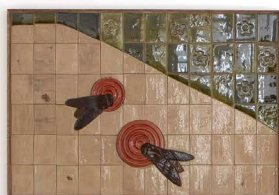
4. Ed Yong, *I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes Within Us and a Grander View of Life*, Ecco Press, 2016.

5. Amber Husain, *Meat Love: An Ideology of the Flesh*, MACK, 2023.















Blowball 1, 2025









## List of works

1. **Untitled plan for Love Bites**, 2025  
Ink, pencil, highlighter pen and tip-ex  
82 x 53 cm
2. **Blowball 1**, 2025  
Glazed ceramic  
69 x 101 cm
3. **Blowball 2**, 2025  
Glazed ceramic  
69 x 101 cm
4. **Biting point 1**, 2025  
Glazed ceramic  
52 x 36 cm
5. **Biting point 4**, 2025  
Glazed ceramic  
52 x 36 cm
6. **Biting point 2**, 2025  
Glazed ceramic  
52 x 36 cm
7. **Sucker 4**, 2025  
Glazed ceramic  
72 x 104 cm
8. **Sucker 3**, 2025  
Glazed ceramic  
38 x 51 cm
9. **Sucker 2**, 2025  
Glazed ceramic  
42 x 80 cm
10. **Sucker 1**, 2025  
Glazed ceramic  
42 x 80 cm
11. **Biting point 3**, 2025  
Glazed ceramic  
52 x 36 cm

*Dimensions are given H x W x D*





**Bryony Rose** was raised in rural Dumfries and Galloway. She studied painting and drawing at The Glasgow School of Art, graduating in 2015, where she received the W.O. Hutcheson Prize for Drawing. She lived and worked in Margate from 2019 to 2024, and is now based in a studio at Govan Project Space.

Recent exhibitions include: *Blinking, glare* (Quench Gallery, Margate 2024), *Night Car* (Kiosk, Glasgow 2023), *Glass Houses* (McBeans Nursery, Lewes 2020), *The Reception Was Brilliant* (Open School East, Margate 2019), *digging* (Embassy Gallery, Edinburgh 2018) *Say What I am Called* (Glasgow International 2018). In 2024 Bryony collaborated with Extra Well (Well Projects) to create a limited edition print. She was an Associate at Open School East in 2019.

*Biting Point 4* (detail), 2025



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