

sewing glass into velvet by Hannah Morley

everything about them is gentle, everything about them is soft, fingers in her hair, powdered cheek to powdered cheek. louisa can't stand it sometimes, feels like she's choking on velvet.

it's not a mistake when she kisses sissy. it's not the act of a troubled girl or an outpouring of grief. she needs it, needs sissy's teeth against her lip to remind her she has them, to remind her the world can be hard and sharp and sour.

sissy kisses back. sissy kisses back and the world tilts on its axis, everything shifts into focus. sissy kisses back and louisa doesn't stop.

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bounderby kissed her once, a kiss entirely devoid of love, a kiss that would brand her mouth with his for all the world to see, a dainty china doll to add to his collection of fine things.

what he didn't know was: she hated him too.

she thinks about it sometimes, lets her nails brand her palms, lets hatred make the world revolve around her.

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love is only sweet in fairy tales. love in real life is shards of mirror glass in your heart and eye, making the world a different colour, beating out of sync. sometimes the distortion is beautiful, sometimes ugly. sometimes it's just dull.

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their love is a patchwork of shadows, of kisses that catch at their blood like a fever, sending it rushing through their veins, kisses that spread like a virus, more and more appearing each day.

hands clasped under dinner tables become hands rubbing against thighs become gasps in the night time, worlds that open up beneath sissy's fingers, the thrum of her pulse like the start of a new clock, a whole new kind of time.

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'it's not as if i love you,' spits louisa who was taught the dimensions of a dinner table rather than the manners to display at it.

sissy lifts her chin. 'don't be childish,' she says, no longer that blushing child but the girl who makes members of parliament run out of words. (still not a woman, women speak their feelings aloud.)

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men ask louisa to marry them, and louisa is not above saying so in words iced with sourest sugar.

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'do you think you shall ever marry?' says jane, eyes wide and guileless.

sissy looks at her in question, all poise and respectability with eyes like living coals.

'i don't see why not,' says louisa, who doesn't see much at all, really.

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'i am considering accepting james hardy's proposal.' it comes out of louisa's mouth like a perfectly innocuous statement.

'it's far too nice a day for talk of weddings,' sissy wants to say, but instead she says, 'indeed?' as though she can't quite believe it, can't help picking at scars.

~

louisa allows herself to be courted, speaks in the charming voice she knows from imitating sissy, allows her arm to be taken, her hand to be kissed. she scrubs herself free of the smell of him afterwards, and later, after sissy pants into her mouth and rubs her fingers feverishly between her thighs, buries her head in sissy's neck.