Smote, or When I Find I Cannot Kiss You in Front of a Print by Bridget Riley

To kiss you should not involve such fear of imprecision. I shouldn’t mind about the gallery attendant. He is not staring. That’s not what his torch and lanyard is for.

I have seen at least four people holding hands already and I’m only just out of the revolving doors. They weren’t unpeeling to the root. To kiss you should not feel like anything other than embellishment. They, people, loads of people, have staged kiss-ins at Sainsbury’s and in Southbank cafés precisely in solidarity with my freedom to kiss you. They kissed en masse on Valentine’s Day with a hashtag and everything. When that historian shot himself in Notre Dame two years ago, when Larousse dictionary mooted changing the definition of marriage, he was not thinking of me tarrying in this gallery gift shop, flicking postcards and studiously not-looking at you. Larousse dictionary’s colophon is a woman blowing at a dandelion clock. Have I used colophon correctly? Where are you.

*Dandelion* comes from the French *dent-de-lion*, lion’s teeth.

I am not biding my time.

A lion would not baulk at kissing you, toothily.

The French for dandelion is *pissenlit*. This translates, broadly, as *wet the bed*. I will wait.

I could kiss you lightly, the side of your face, as if putting out a fire. The gallery attendant is not looking at us. I have spotted another couple kissing, a boy and a girl, like it was nothing, like they didn’t have to think about lions.

When you puff at a dandelion clock, puff at its puff, it looks like you’re blowing a kiss.

To kiss you would be plotlessness, and nothing like falling.

The gallery attendant is not sizing up our haircuts. In fact he’s looking the other way.

The move was mine to make,

all gallery-hushed and happy as I reached for you

and

RIGHT

LET’S                                                                                                               but

out of the corner of my

cordoned-off sight, my

– all my resolution –

all is sudden right angles – an eyeline a little botched – what *is* all this – this jaw swerve chicanery and

all at once

it’s sugar cubes and squares of basalt in a line, monochrome shapes aligned as teeth in a first taste of treacle-toffee, a sucker punch that crazy-paves the direct route, I stand here having steeled myself when I would will every word be cursive and supple and tender but now I find all my letters strung out with rigid symmetry, bending, tined as the strongest parts of my spine finding the spin of optic tic-shout unframing itself beyond your ear, behind your ear, [THIS IS ALREADY RATHER EMBARRASING], how could you frame such a thing, I mean a painting, or a print?, that has thumbed such a black hole into the wall just by being nailed there, I can see something in the painting rolling along a wall as though a maw (that is ‘maw’ spelt M-A-W not A-M-O-R-E, if you were asking, but you’re not, you’re looking, not at me, not at the lion-couple you are just clear-eyed and looking at a beyondness) made of lines on a wall – I did not know hand could hold hand but also *not*-hold like this, standing in a gallery, when looking at a painting so regular and simple, not-looking directly at you and not directly thinking how, *how*, then, when I move to take your unbold shoulder and the attendant is quite so *attendant* and the painting is quite so unwatchable I cannot stand to be here, looking there, standing in front of a painting the surface of which itches with vertigo, seeing suddenly that there is a weft to its spirit-level: looking at this painting over your shoulder and taking your hand is like trying to taste wordplay, or suffering snow-blindness with your hands, it’s like the Northern Line on the tube map unfurling and crosshatching the city and as I steady my eye-line I fall for you through straight lines to something hillocked and tussocked and wispy and girdled and girderful and dog-eared, it’s all there in black and white, hounds-tooth fabric spoked with clock-hands smoothing and then rumpled as over your shoulder the ‘Movement in Squares’ (1961) by Bridget Riley becomes a vinyl record’s surface gleaming white as if the light was bouncing from it but in fact, now, I think it has become broken disc, or spiders’ legs across fresh bed-linen, a capital letter first person *I* becoming a forward slash, an exclamation mark becoming a backstroke because I find I cannot kiss you standing by this painting, I would start bleeding salt and pepper although I *could* imagine kissing you by other gentler, less queer checkerboards, by hazy Hammershøi’s windowpanes, by Sarah Lucas’ ‘Self Portrait with Fried Eggs’ (1996), by Vermeer’s ‘The Allegory of Painting’ (c. 1665-1668), in the marble checkerboard-spelt-with-a-k or chequerboard-spelt-with-a-‘q’ hallways, always queuing-up the next opportunity rather than being quite up for it, there, in situ, mindlessly, I have gone too far to pull back, I could kiss you under severe black and white patchwork-quilts so why not *here*, with you wearing black and white gingham and me wearing Walt Jabsco ska-suspenders, working out skunk-back Rubik’s Cubes on a headboard, but! I, despite myself, I find I am now all mouthfuls of sinister made-forpurpose ludicrous black and white-checked Battenberg cake, I am squaring up, I am *not* holding you but holding *onto* you for fear of slipping, parallelographic graphite zest, Stendhal Syndroming at the thought of you by this painting and my lips anywhere near yours, the gallery attendant and his lion eyes, the painting sewing up my heart with false orthogonals, darts, black runnels in snow for a moleskin-night-time, to hold you here is a game of chess on a grumbling crumbling glacier, the gambit’s gone your way and I am bishop-fumbled rook-to-h8, stale-mate giddy, I might as well be pushing marzipan through an iron portcullis, I might as well be kissing you through a trellis, I might as well be pushing you up against a snaggle-toothgrinning and ruined keyboard, with apologies for any cross-posting, it all potholed covers of Abbey Road album crossings, we cannot arrange the pulp of black and white things like dragon fruit nor custard apples nor mint humbugs on a plate, ‘not in a *gallery*, think of the children!’, it’s Guinness-thick the choke of it, it’s as strange as your hand in mine, all pirated copies of ***The Seventh Seal*** that twist and bulge with white noise interface and interference, the squeak of it: something like dandelion seeds on velvet, like lions’ breath steaming in the night, like vanilla pods and icing sugar, something like black rye bread lying grout-thick with white cheese, something like black kelp crawling up against the humped sea-foam on a white tide, a nocturne’s stave in a key made mazy and thick with dièses, a printout made tweedy with hashtags, my hand, clumsy with a melting tessellation, I think, damnit Bridget Riley 1961, my 6 hand with a melting tessellation could feed you crushed Oreos and moon slices, my hand not quite in yours, but not yet quite out, the starting flag at the race track, a white flag meaning surrender, Black Flag meaning punk bands formed in Seventies California, I cannot tell whether you or I are leaning now nor if the attendant is approaching or I just think he is, nor if I am staggering into the falling and rolling of the painting, its rolling lines like tarmac heating through a drift of snow, a sky thick and slick with black and white *Pontia protodice* butterflies, piebald horses on an oil-slick, in this second’s thought I could have, rather than grown anxious and aware of the attendant, dreamt of dressing you in coats trimmed with lemur tails and corner you in fields filled and frilled with Friesian cows and badgers’ scalps and California king snakes, this is absurd, this is all absurd, and that’s the power of it, the checking of my hand in your hand, I’m sure there are rules about this kind of thing on a noticeboard somewhere, that we can ignore, and others can misread, it’ll all be there in black and white, the empty page so daunting, the full page so disappointing, a new moon seen through eyelashes, many moons grated by one eyelash welted and unbelted and wrought through space’s hot static of white noise’s rough and tumble tumbril wheelings, the white and black of it bletting the Whitsun eiderdown even as I watch it, the pairing of us, the painting, behind your shoulder, through your hair, striations, despite the gallery attendant leaning in — I cannot find the angle of your jaw in a way that isn’t calming: I do not want to calm any part of you in this gallery when this painting could autocorrect the clouds outside the Tate into order, make us greyscale plaid-eyed and with ears full of Sillitoe Tartan’s klaxon blare, all new ceramic and sable-fur, eggshells on the kerbside, charcoal in the cream, bone in the coffee where

headlong, and garbled, on the gallery wall, geometry curdles

and all that I am, you have made italic. Holding you here is to make a chequered past. I will never be brave, and I cannot kiss you by this painting.

You have leaned in, and have kissed me without even thinking about it

it is the easiest thing in the world

and you stark me

and I am strobe-hearted

and as you move onto the next painting the gallery attendant fiddles with his watch, a Bridget Riley print grows a little cooler on the wall, and all in all you spectrum me, unexpectedly.