



# BENEATH THE ATLAS

by Paul McQuade

**THEY** trace the paths it would take them: Glasgow to Tehran. Home for one, far for the other. Beneath the atlas, push-pinned above Sam's bed, they travel the A702, down through Carlisle, to Peebles, Innerleithen, Galashiels, all the way through Kielder, past the English border, pick their way through the forest corridor, to Newcastle, the North Sea, a ferry to the Netherlands. After Amsterdam the names become strange to them, though Adam had lived there for two months when his father was stationed at The Hague. Apeldoorn, Deventer, across the border, to Hanover, Helmstedt, round the south of Berlin. The road leads them through Poland, Ukraine, the Black Sea to Georgia. Skirting through Turkey, they flirt with Armenia,

winding down through Tabriz, Zanzan, Shahriar, reaching, finally—with migratory exhaustion—Tehran. The city where Adam was born.

Except, they go nowhere, of course. They are where they are, are who they are: two men in their early twenties, in their final year of university, lying on a bed in a two-bedroom flat off Gibson Street, talking about a trip post-graduation, to celebrate. For now, they deal only in hypotheticals, in forked paths and maybes. For now, they lie there, still, beneath the atlas.

The front door rings open, the hall side-table stamps its battered legs and is righted with a giggle. The thin walls carry each tremor. Whispers in brick and ailing plaster.

“That’ll be them back from the exhibit,” Adam says. “Sounds like they made a day of it.”

Muted laughter, the wet sound of kissing. The door to Lucy’s bedroom shudders shut.

“When don’t they?” Sam replies.

And the day had started so well—the plan pulled off. They have talked a lot about plans, these months since *The Estrangement*, though none have transpired: they haven’t been to the new pub in the Merchant City, still haven’t driven the long road to Skye. Idle talk for idle times. But with

graduation approaching, things have begun to take a certain pitch, an intensity.

And so they had met at Queen Street, Adam's bag weighed down with bottles, selected indiscriminately, so they could pass the journey sampling Czech lagers and Bavarian Weißbier, pale ales from Alloa and Polish pilsners, and they had boarded the train to Edinburgh, following through, finally, on a plan. To see the exhibit: "You Are Here: A Journey Through Maps."

Adam had no interest. For all that he was about to leave Glasgow with a degree in International Relations, he had never understood the allure of maps—this is Sam's speciality, the dull science of stone and drumlin, altitudinal contours, space given shape. Adam is dismissive of geography. Trade deals and embargoes, civil war and disaster—these things pump the blood. The exhibit would change his mind, Sam thought.

Three beers was all they could manage before the concertinaed glass of Waverley, the long trudge of stairs and the medieval slope up the Royal Mile to the National Library.

They had been standing at the start of the exhibit, in front of a map unlike the others: a map of Scotland with place names changed—all its

Gaelic and its Scots, its Norse and still older, transformed into English, the toponyms now strange and too literal: *Ridge of tears, lovely place, the drowned land. Blue cairn, meeting of the waters. The place of the dead.*

The instructions next to the map said: *To be read aloud, to form a poem.*

Their fingers on the paper drew roads in the aether, breath connecting distant places: *The grey one, land of the stranger, field by the sea. Kestrel moor, fort on the height. The hidden place.*

“If you two don’t stop laughing,” a voice said behind them, “I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Sam spun, cheeks colouring before he recognised the voice, and the small woman standing in front of him, next to her girlfriend Amanda. An old woman walked by behind them, her eyes trained on their clasped hands, the way one might look at a pair of coiled snakes.

“Christ, Lucy,” Sam said. “You trying to give me a heart attack?”

“Awl reet,” Amanda said, in what she apparently considered “spot on” Glaswegian.

“What are you two doing here?” Adam asked.

“We just came through for the day,” Amanda said. The years in Glasgow had done little to her Bath accent. “Thought we’d see what was

on. Didn't even realise it was about maps. You two on a date or something?"

"How many times do I have to tell you two we're just friends?" Sam said. "I'm trying to convince Adam maps are interesting."

"Ever persistent, eh?" said Lucy.

Sam glared.

"Right, well, we'll leave you to it," said Amanda. "Don't do anything we wouldn't do."

A ripple of laughter, and they walked off, deeper into the exhibit.

It had been an innocuous interaction, and quite amicable, for how things stood since *The Estrangement*. But Adam's brows drew down as he watched them leave, and as he and Sam made their way through the rest of exhibit, something seemed to weigh on his mind.

The exhibit still left them time before the evening train back. A trip to the National Museum—Adam wanted to see the dinosaurs—and mussels in a restaurant facing the castle lightened the mood, somewhat. Though Adam stayed distracted, oddly contemplative. When pressed, he simply said: "I wish you and Lucy would talk more."

In some ways, Lucy is unchanged since high school. She is still the

same girl Sam came out with, hand in hand, in the ladies room of a pub in Drumgelloch, for a friend's seventeenth going on in the next room, while phone calls connected them to Bishopbriggs. Not so far, but the other side of the world, it seemed, after the words were spoken. A sea change, that. The kind of change that breaks and makes new.

The other changes came after they moved in together for university. Hairline cracks, at first, the bare suggestion of fissure, then giving, suddenly, when most required. Sam considers it a kind of continental drift, on a personal level. These past four years, she has become political, discovered how to be political. And in this respect, she finds Sam lacking. Myopic, insular, too concerned with his own interest.

“You sit, there,” she said to him, one night, in the flat, the last night he can remember spending one-on-one, “and you think it's over, now you're out, you think you're done with it. Got a clear shot on your road to a husband and a dog and a house in Milngavie. And you just sit there, alone, pining after things you'll never have and people who'll never love you. Because you're too afraid to put yourself out there. It's pathetic. You came out and went nowhere. And you know the worst thing? The absolute worst? You'll be fine. Because you're white, and you pass, and you speak posh. And you'll never know what it's like to go through life like this, like a

big old dyke, getting hurt but really living. Rocks are easier for you than people. It's a joke—you look at the world all the time, on your stupid maps, and you see nothing.”

He nodded, looked out the window, let it pass. She swore, finished her drink, stormed out the room. In the morning, they didn't speak of it. The face they put on things would hold, for a time—till graduation, at least. The bedrock worn to sand.

If it hadn't been for Adam, Sam isn't sure how he would have coped. When things were at their worst, there were always these talks, this prate and blether, beneath the atlas. Thanks to Adam's life of middle-class itinerancy before Glasgow, dictated by his diplomat father, there was never a lack of people and places to talk about: Paris, high school, holidays in Greece; New York models with coke habits who were best friends with his sister. Adam would point to the map, draw the roads between places, and it was as if Sam were part of it. The wider world. Adam.

There is a new addition, next to the atlas, after the trip to Edinburgh: a map of Scotland written in Arabic, bought from the gift shop at the National Library.

Sam is fluent in maps: boundaries, faultiness, alluvial planes. These



things make sense to him. But the strangeness of the lettering on this one, its curves and claws, the hooks and diamond dotting, blend into the roads, rivers, and lochs. Scotland here is incomprehensible to him.

“What about a journey into the North?” Sam says. “In Farsi.”

Adam takes his finger and draws the road: *ghlasku, 'iinfrnis, jazirat skay.*

“Ghlasku,” Sam tries. “Glasgow?” Adam nods. “*Ghlasku, Glaschu, Glasgon, Glesga.*”

“*Och, gie’s peace.*”

Sam’s pulse quickens. It is his favourite thing to hear, though, of course, he would never tell Adam that. Or how his heartstrings tremble in the vibration of the ‘*ch*’—a kind of resonance, where Persian joins Glaswegian, on the tongue of the man with whom Sam has fallen—hopelessly—in love.

“Aye, awright, *Arash.*”

Few people in Glasgow know Arash, for convenience and unfortunate homophony, goes by Adam. This revelation had precipitated their newfound closeness, some months prior, in the wake of The Estrangement.

“So we’re definitely doing it,” Sam says. “After graduation. Tehran?”

Their legs lie across each other, haphazardly. An unexpected crossroads.

“Oh most definitely,” Adam says, though he still seems to be considering something. “I can’t wait for you to see home.”

Tehran is still home to Adam, though he hasn’t been there since the last trip back for a cousin’s wedding, almost six years ago. There is something heartening in this, to Sam; a sentimentality that he finds hard to approach.

It is only on a much smaller map, of Glasgow itself, blue-tac’d to the door, that it is possible to locate the town where Sam and Lucy come from. On a larger scale, Bishopbriggs ceases to exist.

“What comes from Bishopbriggs?” Adam had asked, in the front room, one night, with Lucy and Amanda, in a time before *The Estrangement*.

“Nothing,” Sam said.

“Jackie Kay,” Lucy cut in.

“Who?”

“A poet.”

“Ah,” Adam said. “I’ve never heard of her. Poetry’s not really my

thing, y'know? But we had an anthology of love poems in the house in Tehran. Old Persian, that stuff. You'd like it, Sam—lots about men. Published before The Revolution, obviously. I don't know if you could even find it in Iran, now."

When Adam talks about The Revolution, Sam doesn't know what to say; it is an event too large to grasp, too staggering. He doesn't understand it or what it means. Only that when Adam speaks of it, his expression conveys loss. Absolute loss. As though Adam is mourning something gone before it could even happen.

"But you two need to make up before we go," Adam says. "You have to, you know. Promise me you'll do it before we go to Tehran."

"What does it matter?" Sam says. "We're graduating soon, and I'll never have to see her again."

"You're breaking my heart, mate. You've known each other your whole lives."

"Yeah. Well."

"Heartless," Adam says. "Would you cut me out that easily?"

"*Och gie's peace.*"

Adam laughs.

*“Aye, nae danger, pal.”*

They settle back and begin to repeat the itinerary. For every Scottish place name, Adam supplies its Arabic complement. The sounds float and join in thin air.

“You know,” Adam says, turning over onto his front to look Sam in the eye. To Sam, Adam’s face appears between the two maps. “It didn’t freak me out as much as I thought it would. Lucy thinking we were a couple, I mean.”

In another time, perhaps, this kind of comment would have been casual, glancing—something meant to pass. But graduation is days away, now. Time is running out.

The room hums with intensity. Fever pitch.

“Funny?” Sam says. “What, like, the idea of dating me is a right good giggle or something?”

*“Och gie’s peace, you.”*

The laughter shifts tectonics, their bodies rearrange: Adam’s cheek touches Sam’s, and Sam is surprised when Adam leaves it there, skin pressed against the border.

Sam swallows hard, tries to work up the courage, the whole time

Lucy's admonishments ring in head—*you sit there and you pine*. He steels himself for it: this first and final step.

But it is Adam who takes it—a small gesture. He turns his head to press his lips to Sam's cheek, holds there, waiting a response.

The second step follows the first, somehow easier, now, logical. No matter how new these things appear, it is as though the path were paved in advance, waiting for this one day, when they would take these steps.

Arm to arm, and eye to eye, the press and pull and curve, chest touching chest, hair knotting, growing matted in the heat that rises in each surge of clenched muscle.

*Read aloud to form a poem.*

After a while, they no longer care if Lucy and Amanda hear them.

Lying there, after, spooled in each other, *this is it*, Sam thinks, *life finally begins*. Graduation, Adam, the trip to Tehran. The world to be travelled. The whole future unfolds in front of him. The world, for once, seems promised.

When Sam wakes, Adam is gone. If it hadn't been for the new map above the bed, and the smell of aftershave pressed to the sheets, he could almost think that nothing had happened. He sends texts, emails, private

messages, calls. But Adam, this time, will not supply the complement—in this language or any other.

When graduation is over, still without word—though Sam had seen Adam briefly, a head in a crowd—when it is time to pack up and leave the flat and Adam is still vanished, Sam knows. He is leaving, empty-handed, his degree and not much else: some ruined friendships, regret.

He doesn't know where he will go now. Only where he can never. The road to Tehran is shattered. Is it the same kind of change? The kind of break that makes new?

Alone, again, he sits there, in his room, Lucy having left already, without goodbye, without ceremony. Everything is packed and nearly ready. He sits beneath the map where he and Adam had followed the paths of a future lost before it could happen. Outside the window, Glasgow grows dark. The amber streetlight floods the atlas.

*Read aloud to form a poem.*

“Bishopbriggs,” he says, drawing the line with his finger, “Kielder, Newcastle, Amsterdam.” The finger launches itself across continents. “Tabriz, Zanjan, Shahriar...” Stops. “Tehran.”

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul McQuade is a writer and translator from Glasgow, Scotland. His work has most recently been featured in *Pank*, *Gutter*, *The Island Review*, and has been shortlisted for the *White Review* and *Bridport Prize*.

---

LF #109

© 2017 Paul McQuade. Published by **LITTLE FICTION** | **BIG TRUTHS**, June 2017. Cover design by Troy Palmer, using images from The Noun Project (credits: **Paul Jackson**). Edited by Troy Palmer and Beth Gilstrap.

Read more stories at [littlefiction.com](http://littlefiction.com)