

Tree And Stone

QUEER AS F*
ISSUE 3



L. Acadia | Angela Acosta | Archangel Belletti | Koji A. Dae | Luc Diamant | Venus Fultz |
Noll Griffin | Tasha A. Jones | Alexis Luttrell | Olude Peter Sunday |
Ashley Abigail Resurreccion | C. R. Resetarits | Jennifer Lee Rossman | Lisa Shapter |
Michelle St. James | Sara L. Uckelman | Mary VanAlstine |
Thomas Kent West | Cecil Wilde | Christine Wolfram

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Letter from the Editor

A Farewell

Dear Reader,

It's been an honor to have served the writing community even if it was for a little while. I'm so grateful and humbled that the contributors, supporters, and fellow creatives all trusted me to read and publish their work. When I started this magazine two years ago, I thought no one would submit anything. Who am I to start a magazine, I thought. This magazine has gone farther than I would have dreamed. It's been quite the adventure and I'm proud of what we have achieved.

I started this magazine with the goal of helping to support the writing and creative community. I hold on to that commitment. The website, the stories and art will stay online for at least one year, then for as long as I can support it. I don't know what the future holds for me or the magazine, but I will try to keep the stories and art we've published alive. All the issues will always be free to read. Always.

I hope you enjoy this last issue from Tree and Stone Magazine. The Queer as F series has been a special collection of stories for me and I always enjoyed putting it together. Please don't forget our other issues: our General issues, which showcases speculative and literary fiction, and the Para el Pueblo issue dedicated to Latine writers and artists. I love every one of these issues. If you love them too, help me keep them alive.

Read them. Don't forget them.

I wish you all the very best!

Kevin M. Casin
Editor/Publisher

Artist Biographies

Forest Kiss (Cover) and

Cozy Kiss (pg. 95). by Mary VanAlstine

Mary VanAlstine is a parent, a therapist, an artist, and a writer living in Minnesota. Twitter: artcoffeecats; Tumblr: artcoffeecats.

Morning Visitor

by Michelle St. James, pg. 89

Michelle St. James is a pagan artist and published author originally from New England. Her art has appeared on recent and forthcoming covers of Pulp Literature, Factor Four Magazine, Utopia Science Fiction, ParSec, Spaceports & Spidersilk, The Maul Magazine, and Radon Journal. Her short stories have been published in nearly twenty magazines and anthologies. View more of her art at stjames-art.com and read selected stories for free at shellstjames.com

Meditation by Olude Peter Sunday, pg. 90

Olude Peter Sunday is a Writer, an Artist and Poet from Ogun State, Nigeria. He has few of his works featured in Magazines including: Hayden's Ferry Review, The Rush Magazine, Typehouse lit mag, Ladies Girls Club, Parousia Christian magazine, NativeSkin lit, Kalahari Review and others. He won the third place prize in the Endsars National Poetry contest held in October 2020. When he isn't writing, he is painting pure pictures with poesy and photoshop. He tweets @peterolude

Enjoy Diversity by L. Acadia, pg. 91

L. Acadia is a lit professor at National Taiwan University with photography published or forthcoming in Autostraddle, Invisible City, Santa Fe Literary Review, Sycamore Review (featured artist), Tree and Stone Magazine, and elsewhere. Twitter and Instagram: @acadialogue

Hanging By a Thread and Piano Solo

by Ashley Abigail Resurreccion, pg. 92-93

Ashley Abigail Gruezo Resurreccion (siya/they/them) is a Filipina Asian-American art therapist, certified 200-Hour Yoga Teacher, and Returned United States Peace Corps Volunteer (Thailand 130) who graduated with a MA Art Therapy with a Specialization in Counseling from Seton Hill University.

Clementine by C. R. Resetarits, pg. 94

C. R. Resetarits is a writer and collagist. Her collage art has appeared on the covers and in the pages of dozens of magazines. Upcoming her collages will appear as covers for Shooter Magazine (UK) and Cowboy Jamboree (US).

Friendship Bracelets by Noll Griffin, pg. 96

Noll Griffin is a musician, writer, and visual artist residing in Berlin, Germany. His art is inspired by weird nature, vintage ads, and wistful nightmares. Noll's art has been featured in The Winnow, Polemical Zine, Moss Puppy Magazine, and Honeyguide Literary Magazine among others. You can find him on Instagram at @nollprints or on Tumblr under @nollthere.

Joan of Arc by Alexis Luttrell, pg. 97

Alexis Luttrell (she/they) is a fledgling artist and writer. Working across mediums, she explores the intersection of her queer identity, neurodivergence, and desire for a sense of place. Alexis has an educational background in geography and incorporates the study of space and place into her works.

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Joan of Arc

by Alexis Luttrell

In Pink

by Luc Diamant

*Luc Diamant is a Pushcart-nominated writer from Amsterdam, where he lives with his partner and child and their imaginary pets. By day, he works as a literacy coordinator. He has writing out in *The Deeps*, *Small Wonders*, and *Canthius*, among others. When not writing, he enjoys spending time with his family, watching the plants on his balcony grow, and thinking about lemurs. You can find him on social media @lucdaniel94.*

On the day before the haunting, Reno's hand trembled as they wrote their new name on the inside of the bathroom door. Black marker, capital letters. **RENO**. They weren't sure if it was a name for people, but they hoped the residents of the city wouldn't mind someone using it. Not that they'd ever know. Reno knew nothing of the city of Reno except that Johnny Cash had been there. That was good enough for them. The sound of it just...fit somehow.

The stall was in the girls' bathroom. It smelled different here. Cleaner and more floral. They had decided to go to the fifth stall, because there was no fifth one in the boys' bathroom. And now that stall would forever know more about Reno than any living, breathing human being.

Just as they were about to turn the lock, they heard a door swing open. Two sets of high-heeled footsteps entered the bathroom. Reno froze. They had waited until school was out and everyone was gone. Why was anyone still here? And why were they coming into this bathroom, now, at the worst possible moment?

"I swear, if it's not here, I'm gonna lose it," one of the girls said, and Reno cringed. They recognized the voice. Candy, the most popular girl in their grade. That meant the other one must be her sidekick, Anne.

A moment later they heard Anne's voice. "You're already losing it, babe."

"Thanks." Reno could hear the eye roll in Candy's voice as the muffled *click, clack* of her footsteps approached Reno's stall.

"Pretty sure it was this one," she said. "But it's occupied."

"Who the hell is still here?" said Anne.

The door handle rattled. Reno's heart felt like it was doing the same thing. They held their breath and said nothing.

"Hey," Candy said, "whoever you are, is there a lipstick on top of the toilet paper holder?"

Reno peeked over to the side and saw a black tube. They recognized the brand. It came heavily recommended, to those that could afford it.

There was no way to open the door and give it to Candy. If she saw Reno here, their life would be over. But speaking was dangerous, too. Candy might recognize their voice. They could try to open the door a crack and only stick their hand out. On the other hand, here was a rare chance.

"Hello?!" Candy said, knocking on the door loudly.

Reno took a deep breath. "Sorry, nothing here," they said.

Immediately, they winced. That came out sounding way too low. Candy and Anne would know. They would demand that Reno open up the door and explain, and then Reno would forever be known as the weird pervert who did god knows what in the girls' bathroom after school—or worse, Candy would understand the real reason that Reno was here.

"Dammit, where *did* I leave it then?" Candy said.

"Girl, you probably left it at home."

"No, I *had* it today." Candy's footsteps made their way back towards the exit. Before she left, she called back, "Good luck in there, girl." After a long moment, the door slammed behind her.

Reno slumped down onto the toilet seat. When their breathing had steadied, they took the lipstick and put it in their pocket. They waited ten more minutes before leaving, just to be sure.

At home in their room, Reno locked the door. Ignoring the buzzing of their phone, they opened the lipstick and inspected the color. It was a deep pink with a cool undertone. Reno had learned that the ideal lipstick is the color of your nipples. They lifted their shirt and compared. They almost laughed out loud when they saw that it was a near-perfect match.

They dropped the shirt and held the pink cylinder by their lips, trying to imagine what they would look like wearing it. Even just holding it in front of their mouth, the color made the green of their eyes pop and the

dull brown of their hair seem almost vibrant.

Putting it on for real would have to wait until Mom wasn't home, which was rare. As long as she was around, there would be no way to take it off without going to the bathroom and running the risk of getting caught. It was almost physically painful to finally own makeup and be unable to do anything with it.

But realistically, even if Mom went away for a week, Reno knew they would still not try on the lipstick. It felt like a step too far, like a box that, once opened, would not close anymore. The thought of anyone knowing their secret made Reno's stomach twist into a knot. Even now, alone in their locked bedroom, they felt watched, scrutinized.

Reno closed the tube. They placed it in the drawer of their nightstand, where it wouldn't be visible to someone coming into the room. Then they crawled into bed and opened their phone to a bunch of notifications from Niam.

**Niam: dude
dude
duuuude
im bored
come play robattles with me**

As always, Reno flinched internally at their best friend's liberal use of the word dude. But by now, they were very practiced at pretending not to mind, pretending to be just like the other boys.

**Brian: bruhhhh
okokok be right there**

When Reno woke up, they were still wearing yesterday's clothes. It was only barely light out. Well before their alarm then. Reno frowned. Normally it took multiple alarms to get them out of bed.

They turned over toward their nightstand to check the time. 5am. They felt wide awake. Had they fallen asleep that early? No, they had played Robattles with Niam until pretty late. So why were they so awake now?

For some reason, they felt the urge to check if the lipstick was still where they had left it. This was absurd. Where else would it be?

They opened the drawer, just to put their mind at ease.

The lipstick was still there. But it was open. And where it had still been nearly unused before, now it looked like a toddler had grabbed it and used it to draw on the table. Reno sat bolt upright.

Then they noticed the mirror. A chill ran down their spine.

There were words written on it in pink, textured letters.

RENO, YOU HAVE 11 HOURS.

Reno stared.

They had never had much trouble with the concept of ghosts. Their own sense of self had nothing to do with their body so it seemed only natural that people could exist without one.

Hauntings, on the other hand, were something Reno had never really believed in. Surely the dead had better things to do than bother the living. They had always figured that at the very least, if someone really was experiencing a haunting, they must have done something to hurt the ghost.

Was that what had happened? Had they accidentally offended a ghost? If so, they had until the end of the school day to figure out how, and to make it right.

Before they could think about that, though, they had to deal with the mirror. Mom would not be happy to discover lipstick in her son's room. Reno tiptoed to the bathroom and grabbed a washcloth. They scrubbed furiously at the message, starting with their name. Pink water ran over the mirror, staining their fingers.

When they were done, they considered the lipstick. They could either leave it here or bring it to school. Either way there was the chance of it being discovered. Either way that would be bad. The odds of it being discovered at school were probably higher—and yet, something made Reno reluctant to leave it behind. They replaced the cap and put the lipstick in their pocket again.

On the way to school, Reno looked anxiously at every poster, sticker, and spray-painted tag they could see. It didn't take long before they saw what they had hoped not to see. It was a large graffiti piece, done in various shades of pink against a lime green backdrop. It said **MAKE HASTE RENO.**

Reno stopped and looked around. No one seemed to be paying any at-

tention to the wall, which was good. Maybe the ghost was creating images that only Reno could see.

They thought for a moment. Then they stopped a passerby, a stout man in his fifties walking a caramel-colored wiener dog.

“Excuse me, sir. Could I ask you a question for a school project?”

“Sure. I have as much time as he has patience,” the man said, gesturing to the dog, which was frantically sniffing a leaf.

Reno gestured to the mural. “What is your opinion on graffiti pieces like this?”

The man looked and thought for a moment. “Well, I don’t suppose there’s any real harm. But I never understand what they’re on about. We’re nowhere near Reno, what do we have to do with it? And how can a city make haste?”

Reno felt the ground drop from under them. If this man could see it, then everyone else could too.

“Thank you, sir,” they said, “I quite agree.”

It was 7:45am. They had eight hours and fifteen minutes.

School was a blur. Reno went mechanically from one white and beige classroom to the next, wondering if they should even be here. But if they feigned sick and went home, who knew what the ghost might write on the living room wallpaper for their mom to see. So they stayed where they were.

They kept looking at the windows and the walls, waiting for their name to appear and for someone to notice and ask them about it. During each class, they opened the same notebook to the same empty page.

“Now,” said one of the teachers (Reno didn’t look up for long enough to check which of the short-haired men in their fifties it was), “this next part is important, so take notes.” Reno picked up a pen and stared at the blank page.

Are you there? they wrote on it. After a moment, they added, *What do I need to do??*

They underlined the last part several times.

They did not really expect a reply, and none came.

Reno looked at the clock. 11:55. Almost lunch time. What if the next

message was right there in the cafeteria, for everyone to see?

Reno brought the pen back to their notebook, fingers slick with sweat. *Please*, they wrote in much smaller letters, *don't tell them*.

“What’s the matter with you, man? You’ve been on another planet all day.” Niam’s hazel eyes looked at Reno quizzically from under his auburn curls.

Reno tore their gaze away from the announcement board in the cafeteria. All it said was **SIGN UP NOW FOR OPEN PODIUM**—for now. “Sorry. Guess I’m just spaced out.”

Niam leaned forward over the lunch table. “Is it a girl? You like someone, don’t you?” he said in a conspiratorial whisper.

Reno shrugged. “Maybe.” Ever since Niam started dating Sally, everything had been about girls with him. It was easier to just let him believe what he wanted to.

“You should make a move, man! Having a girlfriend is great.” He grinned sheepishly.

Reno forced a smile. “You just want another couple to go on double dates with.”

Niam flinched. “Nah dude, double dates are lame,” he said, a little too emphatically.

“Don’t worry, man,” Reno said. “I don’t think I’ll be asking you to go on one anytime soon.” Or ever, they thought bleakly.

Niam studied Reno while chewing his sandwich. “Well,” he said between bites, “I only need to study at the library after school for an hour or so for a change. Wanna hang out after? We could make pizza again.”

But Reno was staring down, barely hearing him. Right in front of them on the table, in tiny but unmistakable letters that weren’t there before, was their name.

Reno forced their hand to move slowly as they covered the writing with their lunch box. “I’d love to,” they said to Niam, “but I don’t think I can today.”

It kept happening after that. Their name appeared on tables, on walls, on the backs of chairs. Reno did what they could to keep up, surreptitiously erasing it wherever possible. But it was only a matter of time, now, before

someone saw it. And then it wouldn't be long before someone connected the name to them and started asking questions.

Every few minutes, Reno opened their notebook to the page where they had written their messages to the ghost. Each time, it still looked exactly the same. Somehow, they could not bring themselves to add anything else to the page—absurdly, it seemed rude to press the issue. Besides, it was pointless. Someone, something, clearly had no intention of answering any questions.

By the time the last bell of the school day rang, Reno was sure everyone in the classroom could hear their heartbeat. Time was running out. Time to do...something. And if they didn't figure out what, soon the whole school would know what a freak the kid they knew as Brian Mitchell was. They couldn't let that happen.

They stayed in their seat while everyone else got up, flipping back to the page once more. "Come on," they muttered, knowing it was useless. "At least give me a hint."

They found the page and fought the urge to scream at it.

Under Reno's last message, in a handwriting that was not their own, was a single phrase: **NO RENO**.

No, *what?* Reno thought. No it wasn't going to give a hint? No it wasn't going to listen to Reno's plea not to tell? How were they supposed to make sense of this?

They forced themselves to think back to the night before the countdown started. They went up to their room, looked at the lipstick...

The lipstick. Of course. They had stolen it. It was still in their pocket now. Obviously, whatever was after them was telling them to return it. That's why they had felt compelled to bring it to school. Why it was still sitting in their pocket now, warm against their leg.

Somehow, this made Reno feel heavy. They did not have a habit of stealing from people, and ordinarily they would have given it back by now. But somehow they knew that if they got rid of this lipstick, they would never have another one. They would forever just be Brian.

And that was exactly the point, Reno realized with a sinking feeling. All of this was a warning. Writing **RENO** on the bathroom door had been too much already. They had known this, deep down. They needed to get

rid of the lipstick and stay in their lane from now on.

Reno caught up to Candy and Anne as they were walking out of the building.

“Hey, wait up,” they panted. The girls turned around, seemingly confused that Reno was daring to speak to them.

“What?” Candy said.

Reno held out the lipstick. “I found this on the floor, and someone said you had lost your lipstick, so...”

She took the lipstick carefully between two fingers, looking strangely at Reno. She opened it and made a face. “Ew, it’s all smushed. What did you do with it?”

“Nothing,” said Reno, a little too fast. “What would I do with lipstick?” they added, trying to look disgusted.

Candy scoffed. “Whatever. Keep it. Maybe it’ll work with that floral shirt.” She tossed the tube to Reno, who instinctively caught it. Then she and Anne and walked away, giggling.

Reno looked up at the sky. “Well,” they said, “I tried. Does that count?”

Reno stood outside the school building, clutching the lipstick tube. It was warm and smooth. They opened their hand to look at it—and their breath caught in their throat.

Under the lipstick, on the skin of their palm, letters were forming. They not only saw but *felt* a marker that was not there being dragged across their skin, the ink wet and cold.

TIME’S UP RENO, it said, and Reno finally understood.

It had never mattered what they did. There had been no answer to their questions because there was no answer. “You have eleven hours” had never meant that they had eleven hours to do something. It meant they had eleven hours to live.

Reno dropped the lipstick and ran.

They were halfway up the stairs when they registered where they were. They had run back into the empty school building. Only once they turned the corner on the second floor did they realize where they were going. The

girls' bathroom where it had all begun. They had no idea why. No time to think about it.

Reno struggled for breath. Almost there now. The linoleum floor was uncomfortably slick under the soles of their sneakers. They rounded another corner, ran past the library—and straight into someone.

“I’m sorry, I—” Reno began, some distant part of their brain wondering why they were bothering to make small talk during their final minutes. Then they saw the face of the person they had bumped into and their heart jumped with relief. “Niam!”

“Dude, what’s going on?” Niam looked bewildered.

Reno opened their hand and thrust it in front of Niam’s face. “Do you see this? The writing?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I didn’t write this. Someone—*something*—has been writing messages like this to me all day. I think a ghost is after me.”

“Why would a ghost be after you? What does Reno even have to do with you? Are you from there?”

Reno paused. They could just say yes. But if they were going to die anyway, someone might as well know.

They looked Niam in the eyes. “No,” they said. “It’s my name.”

Niam tilted his head quizzically.

“I mean,” Reno continued, “it’s the name I’d like to have, if I could.” And once they had said that, everything else came pouring out after. “It’s just, I pretend to be like the others, but I’ve never fit in with the boys, and I don’t think I’m a girl, but I don’t think I’m quite a guy either, and I really want to wear skirts and makeup, but I don’t think anyone would still like me if I did that. So I just...try to be Brian. But I don’t know who that is,” they finished breathlessly.

There were a few agonizing seconds of silence, during which Niam seemed to be hesitating. Somehow, in those moments, Reno felt more scared than while they were running for their life.

Then Niam said, “I don’t have a girlfriend.”

Reno blinked. “What?”

“I made Sally up. Everyone seems to be dating and I really want to as well, but I don’t know how to approach anyone. I guess I figured, if people

thought I had a girlfriend, they'd see me more as boyfriend material. I know it's stupid." He was looking at the floor by now.

Reno stared at him. Niam turned bright red. "I'm sorry," he said. "I know it's not the same as your thing. I just—well, you told me a secret so I wanted to tell you one as well."

"You know," said Reno after a moment's pause, "I think you can do much better than Sally."

Niam laughed, visibly relaxing. "And I think you could totally pull off a skirt."

"Really?" said Reno, and without waiting for an answer, they pulled their friend toward them and hugged him close. Niam squeezed his arms around them.

They stood like that for a moment and though Reno's heart was still racing, something felt different.

"Not to break up our beautiful moment of camaraderie," Niam said, "but wasn't there something about you being on the run from a ghost?"

Reno broke out of the hug and looked at Niam, suddenly feeling a hundred times braver. "Wanna kick some ethereal ass with me?" they said.

But Niam's face had suddenly gone very strange. He was looking past Reno. "I...really hope you have a plan for how to do that," he said.

Reno looked around. Something was scratching, no, *carving*, into the wall behind them. In the low light coming from the window, the vertical gash stood out in sharp relief against the red brick. The sound was like nails being dragged *through* a chalkboard.

"Come on," Niam said, pulling Reno's arm.

Reno took a deep breath.

"No," they said. "I'm done with this."

They faced the wall. "Come on, then," they snapped. "What do you have to say to me, huh?"

Niam looked from Reno to the wall, which now had a large R and an E carved into it. "Reno," he said, "are you sure about this?"

Reno nodded. They felt like their legs were melting and their chest was about to shatter into a million pieces. But they weren't going to run. *If I die, at least I'll have spent my last moments with a friend who knows my name*, they thought. Then they frowned.

“Hang on,” they said, turning to Niam. “Something’s weird here.”

Niam raised his eyebrows so far they almost touched his hairline.

“Something’s weird here,” he repeated, gesturing to the wall that now said **RENO, WE**. “You only just noticed that?”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” said Reno, trying to formulate the thought. “Something’s...different than I thought.” *Why would something that wanted to hurt me call me Reno?*

“Different?”

“Niam, I...I think it’s a friend. Look.”

They both stared as the message was slowly completed.

“Well, shit,” Niam said when it was finished.

RENO, it read, **WELL DONE**.

“I don’t understand,” said Niam. “What did you do?”

Reno looked to the side. In the reflection in the window, they thought for a moment that they saw a fluttering dress on a tall, broad-shouldered figure. Then it was gone.

“I told someone who I really am,” they said. “I think something out there knew I needed to.”

Niam stepped up to the wall and traced his fingers over the carved letters. Suddenly he started to laugh, a rich sound that rang through the hallway.

“What?” said Reno.

“What are you going to say,” said Niam, “in a few years, when someone asks for your coming out story?”

Reno grinned, a wave of relief and happiness bubbling up inside them. “Come on,” they said, “let’s go make that pizza.”

As the friends walked out of the building, the echoes in the stairwell almost made it sound like three voices were laughing together rather than just two.

Outside, Reno paused to pick up the lipstick. Candy was right—it would work with their floral shirt.

Crush

by Lisa Shapter

Lisa Shapter a cis lesbian and a member of Codex Writers' Group, the Dramatists' Guild of America, and an Associate Member of the SFWA. Her gay-themed stories "Planet 42 Alpha" & "Planet 42 Beta" will be in 4 Star Stories. Her related gay-themed science fiction play, "The Other Two Men," was on the Suggested Reading List for the Ray Bradbury Award for Outstanding Dramatic Presentation. She is an alumna of Bread Loaf Young Writers' Conference, and an Associate Member of the SFWA. Her bi-themed alternate history novella A Day in Deep Freeze was published by Aqueduct Press.

It took a week, maybe two, to conclude I had a crush on my husband. This is awkward: we've been together since our 20's, long married, have two daughters, two other spouses and many of our wife's adopted children. I don't like men. I've never loved Nebraska Vogul the way anyone should to get married—We're together because decades removed other options. And this week, and last, I felt shy around him (we live on one small colony site), I wanted to avoid him (we live in one house), his name gave me an effervescent shock (I see it every day on colonial governing documents).

I took the advice every grunt gets when he gets a brief post under air, stops eating the suppressive in ship's food, and has a brief lark with a teammate: ignore it, don't react to it, be professional, re-read the regs and consider your career. I've been with Bras a long time. I know this will go nowhere, that I will never get beyond calf love, that nothing like romance or attraction can happen between us. We've tried. We're good co-parents and good teammates and military governors but isolation, deprivation, and being good roommates will not move us into romance. Nothing can. The suppressive in ship's food, the rations we were on most of our careers, will not stop 'feelings' for one's teammates. Since everyone else can and does like men we've spent all our careers declining polite offers of affairs or thirds.

Nebraska did not think I was being chilly or unkind when I left our house after dinner. He had a colonial status report to write and I went for a walk where I would meet no one. I had spent all day with our children, staff, and consultants. I struck out for the new section of perimeter fence

where there was no planting or building or astronomy lessons where no one but us four founders would likely go since we had moved the field stakes and cleared the hazards: to everyone else this world was too unfamiliar to walk on new ground at night, but we had been here from the start.

It reminded me of when we first landed here—the dark, the untamed prairie at night, the stars now familiar (but never like earth's) bright with the town's security lights behind me. Bras and I were afraid we'd fall in love, then. Deeply afraid we'd have a lark that would never let us go, worried it had just been the suppressive and the automated shipboard monitoring that kept us from whatever made us stay together. We wanted it to be something other than injuries that would make having a lover uncertain and a bit clinical, the lack of women in farspace (we lost a transport full of pregnant soldiers and earth panicked in a way it's never gotten over), and a failure of nerve about quitting, starting over on earth, and paying out-of-pocket to get back something handsome and functional. (The military will fix what's needed to do a job and reassign, as necessary: nothing mission-critical was wrong with us. Or perhaps they planned this: our wife Resada has soured on any idea that the Farspace Exploratory Corps is motivated by altruism for anyone but a centuries-distant, collective, future humanity.)

Bras and I spent weeks, years, spooked by how we might surprise ourselves. We never have. Neither of us like men.

We did marry Rain, Resada's husband, but even he would say he lacks certain qualifications for manhood: the little cult he grew up in castrated him when he insisted on leaving and joining earth's last military.

Both of them are good friends.

I should just go home. This is weird, it is awkward, it has happened before. It will not, and cannot, change the two of us. Founding and running a world, raising our kids and managing the colonists, has been everything beyond 'a little awkward or strange' and I should just go home, say a word or two to my husband (everything in our relationship had happened before; it can all be summed up in a few familiar words), and go to bed if I really can't stand sitting across from him over a cup of decaf to play a hand of cards or a short board game. We could talk about the day but we were both there all through it and in constant touch by datatablet or walk-

ie-talkie to coordinate what got done, with each other and our two spouses and co-governors.

I did not turn towards home. I kept walking in the cool night knowing now many clicks the new perimeter circuit was and already logging it as PT. Getting enough exercise to fall into bed was an old trick from basic forward to cope with deprivation: the suppressive makes everyone and everything unappealing and snuffs out the spark that could become anything. But in the long term there's an awful sense of something missing even if the pain moves aside every time you try find or name it. Onworld, without the suppressive, I just try to keep it out of the way of everything else I need to be: governor, mother, architect, farmer, surveyor.

I stopped at the sound of footsteps: light, assured, almost dancing through grass stubble and chuckrabbit holes and rocks.

"How'd you find me, Rain? Did Bras tell you where I was."

"Beautiful, I was looking for you."

Rain held me in the dark. I felt good to hold someone who did not tighten up or try to move away. Early on we tried being actually married but it was an awkward, awful experiment since we were all just being kind and tentative rather than profoundly interested. If it's someone or go mad I can ask; Rain or Resada might say no but Resada has been through the changes, too. She will listen, so will Rain who has no squeamishness, then suggest a reflex indusor. An external uterus is built to work, repeatedly, without any medical staff on an isolated frontier; its sensations are designed to detect infections and complications, not provide delight or be appealing to anyone. The blood supply and nerves that were once handsome and functional have new functions for the next generation, the next generation is mission-critical since military advance teams must show people can be born and grow up on these worlds before we ask civilians to start families here, too, decades later.

"What did you need, Rain?"

He let me back away and let go, first. His hand rested on my arm, light, gentle. I moved away and took his hand, letting him lead the way since he seemed to have a better sense of this new ground than I did. We had both worked on it the same length of time in the day but he grew up on a low-tech plateau and must have a better sense for how to walk at night.

“Do the scars still hurt?” I asked him.

“The scars will always hurt, Beautiful, but even low-tech cauterization meant I did not bleed to death. The scars are my life and my freedom: cults are like that.”

“Physically.”

“Sometimes. Some things are necessary for the future to be. Did you want me to ask after your parts?”

“Never right: but you’ve told me no volunteer ever feels quite right.” I felt myself sigh and got annoyed I sounded so dramatic about something so familiar that gave us two daughters. “Nothing’s wrong. We got to stay here and no one else could do it. You will say what Resada says: ‘I volunteered.’”

“For something secret and undisclosed and terrible that you must always lie about outside the four of us. I would complain incessantly: I know, we’re trained not to gripe—in a demoralizing way—in basic.” Rain was silent a moment. “When we were looking for her, when Resada was trafficked, when you went to find her stolen children—”

“What?” I asked my husband: we had been cops and co-workers then and talked about all of those realities bluntly.

Rain was silent for a half-caught breath. “I don’t know when I started to love you, both of you. I was surprised and ashamed. I really didn’t expect it.”

“Why would you expect to fall in love with your teammates?” I asked him.

Rain made a soft sound and shrugged. “I didn’t think I could like you. I like men but you were both so...” he searched for words, “—straight. Then I was worried you’d hate it here, a place I already loved.”

“I’ve been thinking about that time, again, too. I have a crush on Bras.”

“This week?” Our husband smiled. “Usually it’s over by the time you mention it.”

“That’s on purpose. Any advice, Rain?”

He walked a long moment in the new world dark. “Well, I think people ought to be in love with their spouses. That’s not a low-tech idea: my first culture arranged marriages and condemned romantic love. I am glad every

day to be away from there even though I will always miss my family. This is my family.” He added. “You don’t like being in love with Nebraska? I’ve always enjoyed it: there’s such an unexpected sweetness about him even if he can’t ever return the feelings. I suppose I’d say ‘let go of what he isn’t.’”

I sighed. “Good advice.”

We talked about being married to each other the rest of the way back to their house. Rain stopped to fasten a gate just beyond glow of the security light and I went in by the kitchen door. I found our wife in a bright, comfortable workroom doing the second carding of a sheep’s worth of wool watching a historical soap opera.

“Hey, *tiarrón*. I think I missed an episode, or maybe just a scene—the next time we have a supply ship we should check if our library’s missing something.” She shut off her datatabled. “The real trouble is I forget it’s subtitled then I look away—and forget I don’t know Hanguk, or any Hanguk.”

I asked with a touch then kissed her cheek.

“I can’t help you, *kasintahan*, I haven’t seen that one. Bras and I have been watching—”

“You have a crush on him again.” She said, plucking straw out of the wool and not needing to study me.

I nodded, mutely. “I don’t want to.”

My wife Resada shrugged.

“You can’t do anything about that. It will pass.” She looked at me and rubbed my back when I looked sad.

“At least you love Rain.” I said quietly, pulling over a cushioned chair and sitting next to her. I helped her looking for bits of plant matter that no amount of soap-and-water washing will remove from wool.

Our wife made a soft doubting sound as we worked. “I think I’m just glad he found me, he stayed with me, he raised my children. I’m in one of those spells where I think ‘everyone’s only self-interested.’”

“That’s all the time.” I said, pulling a face as if confused.

She laughed. “Then I think of you and Nebraska: you have no selfish reason to stay with me and I’d better start being a livable wife. Rain might appreciate that, too.”

“I’m with you because I know you and I love you; so is Bras.

So is Rain. I know you feel worthless, I know you want to frighten us off—but I’m staying because I want to be with you and raise our kids together. I love you. I’ll say that as often as you need to hear it.”

She took my hand.

“I know, hunky. I get tired of myself and the same limited things trauma thinks of.”

I smiled at her. “So how’d you feel when you fell in love with me?”

“Really surprised. ‘Burly’ wasn’t my type. I remember going to night-clubs—always with someone to keep an eye on me because I wasn’t of age for anything and this was Manila—and looking forward to the future. When I could do anything, when I could be autonomous and free and make my own life; and by the time I was of age I was a soldier on an interstellar ship, serving out my first five years the most junior of a team of coworkers in blacksky space: I wasn’t free to do a thing I’d looked forward to in those discos. Every choice—every commitment—is a limitation; there’s other things you can’t do.” My wife looked at me and smiled, dark-eyed, always lovely, someone who never ages out of handsomeness. “I’ve never regretted loving you. I’m even glad to be in a marriage that’s uneven: I’ve bitterly regretted marrying Rain because I’ve felt so much for him. I still do. It’s such a comfort to have spouses at different levels of relationship: it’s so much easier to get along with you or Bras. It’s be hard for you to hurt me in the same way. That’s from me, I know. And here I am saying ‘You can’t hurt me; I don’t love you as much.’”

“We haven’t been married as long and we spent most of our time around each other being very careful co-workers who all agreed you had a marriage that must be respected.”

We smiled at each other: we spent those years learning to get along on one small ship and very gradually falling in love.

“So what do I do about my crush?” I asked her, genuinely.

Resada crossed her wrists in a parody of a gossiping teen. “Tell him, dummy.”

“But what if he doesn’t feel the same way!” I replied in kind.

Rain put his head around the door.

“Why do you expect Nebraska to feel the same way?”

“Didn’t hear you come in—Rain, I’m going to have to take a bath before I go to bed, this wool has been washed, re-washed, and put out in the sun and I still smell like sheep from head to toe.”

“I’ll go clean out the galvanized trough in the yard—it smells like sheep, too.”

“Shower. I’ll take a shower. Quicker. Less water. No water—and anything that smells like sheep ought to be atoms. Are you staying tonight, *tiarrón*?”

“No, I’d better go tell my husband I love him.”

“I knew that already, but thank you.” Rain called sweetly, already heading for the stairs no matter what my answer might be about staying. “Goodnight, then, Beautiful.”

“Goodnight, husband, wife.”

“I’m walking you home.” My wife said firmly.

“Resada, don’t talk to Bras; we’ll work this out—it’s just me.”

She waited until we were outside: it was cool out, new-world dark beyond the security lights, and the beauty of the stars made me forget everything about training for a moment.

“*Tairrón*, ask yourself what you want from this, what you expect from him you’re not getting. I mean to learn something about yourself, to learn what this is telling you. It keeps happening and you’ve said it’s not like you’re bi or he’s different.”

I thought as we walked the familiar path between their house and ours.

“I want to be in love. I want to feel attraction. I always do. I hoped being onworld, being off the suppressive, living together, being co-parents, going up for the changes—all of those things have changed me, have been a change for the two of us, but they haven’t made me like men. Nothing could, I know; I was a teen on earth, too. What appealed to me then is what interests me now: ‘burly’ isn’t my type, either. No man is.”

What had caught on my hopes? Had Bras done something kind? Had he smiled when I felt lonely? Had he rubbed my back or held my hand? Had he done an extra chore when I was tired or busy? He does all of those things regularly—we try to be sincerely kind and sweet to each other since we’re around each other all the time and ‘sick to the teeth of you’ is not a good basis for companionship. This didn’t feel like loneliness: I was

embarrassed to see him, as if my favorite band from my teens would be waiting to hang out in our living room and I didn't want to open the door and meet them.

I'll just go in, I'll tell him. This man held me as I gave birth. He's cleaned up my monthly blood without a comment or a murmur. I've gotten sick on him. I've been angry at him, hated him, wanted to move to the other side of the globe from him. But I've always wanted to end each day with him, on good terms, over a mug of ship's decaf and a hand of cards or a simple board game or a few words about the day being over and it being good to have some quiet, together.

"I really love him."

"You did marry him." My wife reminded me.

The regulations about common law married us once we'd shared a house and had kids together. But we've never asked for a divorce: it'd be easy, the military requests no cause or lengthy procedure. It's a simple form and nothing would change so long as we share this colony site as our post. Resada has never asked Rain for a divorce: she knows the rage and terror are trauma, not anything our husband has earned or done.

"I'm scared to tell him."

Our wife stopped me, touched my shoulders, held my face in her hands.

"Hunky, what's it going to change? Do you think he'll be at all alarmed that the mother of his children loves him and wants to stay? I think that's all he wants in the world: you can just see he's scared you'll dump him and feels insecure about what the two of you aren't. He built you a house." She turned me to the house Bras and I share, the one he built while I was away for a year, getting an external uterus and not knowing if carrying would kill me, or our baby, or just ruin my health and wellbeing. "Doesn't that mean 'I love you'? Some bureaucrat in Records thought so: they put the two of you together, first. We had to insist the four of us were sharing beds, for years, before they married the four of us."

"We kinda fibbed." I said, looking at its shape against the stars.

"The Farspace Exploratory Corps asked where everyone was bunked, not if we were happy. They never ask if you are happy. They stop mentioning it after the recruiting brochures promise you'll end up in a post where

you're 'happy and useful', or something like that."

My husband opened the door.

"I'm pretty happy." He said, coming up our front walk. "Resada, are you staying here?" At her slight shake of her head and urging me forward my husband turned to me. "Did you want to tell me something, Hon? You've looked like you wanted to tell me something for about two weeks—can you give us a moment, Res? Unless you're pregnant—"

'What have we ever done—' I try not to shout at Nebraska and our second daughter exists because we thought just trying, very badly, might change how either of us felt.

I was so tired and so sad. This is so much work to lie down in my own bed, alone, every night. I used to think about how I got here or how I could get out of it: but after the changes there is nowhere else to go. This is my world now, our world, our children's world, a world for humanity's collective future.

"I think I do feel lonely. I think something is missing." My wife patted my back tenderly. "I'm always here if you want to talk but I think the two of you should talk first."

"I agree. Thanks."

"You've always been a good friend to me: and you've saved me from making a mistake with Rain. Goodnight." Our wife hugged me, caught Brask's hand to squeeze it lightly, and left.

I stood on the front walk so long Brask came up to me and half-reached to take my hands.

"What's wrong, Hon? Ke, what do you need to say?" He was nice, concerned, familiar, and not at all likely to make my duck my head or giggle. I felt tired.

"All the same things—and I've had a crush on you for two weeks or so. I wish—I wish and I miss all the usual things. I know, you don't have a crush on me. Maybe's it's over. It usually is when I can talk about it. I—"

My husband took my hand.

"We could get into that one bed, I could rub your back, instead of talking about if we were different and in love, getting married—really married—we could talk about going on a date. Anywhere you'd like to go that's not here. Dunno. Skiing, a bicycle tour, a county fair."

I thought about veggie corn dogs and fruit pies and fresh ice cream and the music and rides and games. It made me think of girls I'd dated. It made me think of decades-unseen and perhaps dead relatives on earth who prepared fair entries and events for months. It made me think of foods we don't have here that I may never eat again.

"Homesick." He was big, familiar, and I just felt sad, again.

"Sorry. I know, me too. We need to make new things here, for our kids, so they have traditions for their grandkids, things that will be old-fashioned on this world. I mean do you want to pretend the other us are dating? We always jump to the white clothes and the music—Honey, any day you ask me I'll make those vows."

"But you won't mean them! Nor would I. Not really." Bras looked hurt. "Of course I'd mean them: I've lived them. Don't yell at me: I get tired of this, too, and I'm always hurting over what this isn't, but let's make this as good as it can be. You could tell me you had a crush: I just thought you didn't like me, again. I thought you were tired of me. You'd say if you were mad—"

"I'd tell you if I were angry at you, Bras." I held him and felt him involuntarily tighten up and move a few centimeters away so we weren't pressed together. Why I had I imagined he gave me the giggles? "I'm sorry, I should have said so, I felt embarrassed and scared. I always go back to our first weeks here. I'm scared I'm really in love with you. I'm afraid this will change and we'll lose this. I mean it's not much and so much work but it frightens me to my core: I watch Rain and Resada and real love—"

"It's a chancy, uncertain thing. I'd rather have a friend I can depend on, one who won't ever get that needy or that angry, or have that much at stake."

"I do—the kids, this world, my health; and I already feel that, I just call it 'friendship', not 'love'. I want to be in love with you. I want something else to ever happen in that bed."

"Neither of us liked it or really felt it fit where we're at." Bras tried to relax and hold me closer since he'd stepped half a pace back, already. "I want to be in love, too. We've done all of this for so long, every day, and I wouldn't call it a crush but sometimes at 0200 I wonder 'what if you love

me' or 'what if I feel things I haven't told myself about.'" He brushed his face lightly against mine. "What can we do that will help, Hon? We try to keep this from being too difficult and too painful, what do you need?"

I kissed his mouth too lightly. The crush had stopped well before now.

"I didn't mean to be cool to you: let me rub your back and try to make up for it. Where did you want the other us to go? What will just be a nice break and not make you homesick?"

"I just want to wear white and say those vows and be in love—can we talk about that? We always do but it's all I want. Can you do that or do you still have butterflies in your stomach?"

Nebraska had stepped away, his hands only lightly on mine, as prosaic and familiar as the lumber stacked in the storage barn, as ordinary as the pottery in our cupboard. Nothing about him could give me butterflies: it was gone, it was over. I tried to make his blocky face handsome, his eyes sweet, his mouth sexy or inviting, his hands tantalizing—he looked fatigued and concerned, anxious to put the two of us on as good a footing as we ever our, our deprived and lonely status quo.

"I wish I were a better spouse to you, Bras. I feel bad about all of this."

"I don't regret it: I don't. I owe you every good thing. We might never have met, our kids might not have parents, we wouldn't have this home or this world, these colonists would still be on earth—let's go to bed together, Hon."

But for a long moment we just held each other under the strange, bright stars.

Among the Cabbages

by Angela Acosta

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Xochil hated vegetable day. Artificial gravity always got glitchy on these types of service stations and her shoulder joints always clicked in protest whenever she awkwardly slung bags of onions and cabbages over her back. It was just one gig, the same one that always followed her no matter which stars shone in the distance. A smaller station like this one often meant more work when almost nothing was fully automated and human muscle had to substitute for the brute strength of machines.

‘Hey, toss me a load of the cabbages!’ Xochil heard a gangly cook shout out from an open porthole. She could see him holding out the requisite sapphire-coloured plata for payment.

‘Head’s up!’

Another tremor came up from the station. She used the slight ease of gravity to bound over to the restaurant window and send three cabbages over to the cook.

‘Watch where you’re going lady!’ Said a passer-by. ‘Could’ve knocked me flat over moving so fast. I’ve not got the steadiest of legs and you’re moving more than the station is right now.’

‘Sorry, just making my delivery rounds. Do you have any vegetable requests?’ Xochil asked more politely than she had the patience for.

‘Not from the likes of you. I’ll have my cook fetch what I need when I’m back on the ship,’ the well-dressed androgenous looking passer-by replied.

Ah, must be one of the passengers staying in the nicer staterooms, Xochil mused to herself. They always felt so out of place on these stations. If they only knew...

Xochil marched onward to her next stop, rearranging the shopping trolley, and wrapping some of the more exotic exoplanetary fruits over her like a backpack. Five stops filled with jack fruits, guanabana, bananas, and exoplanetary delights that tasted a bit like Terran bananas later, she was finally able to return to the ship for a break. And a shower, a glorious almost one gee shower.

Maite was already in Xochil's cabin when she finished drying her hair. Her dopey smile always looked better in person and Xochil crossed the small room to kiss her long-distance partner soundly.

'How many veggies did you deliver today?' Maite asked expectantly.

'Ay mi amor, at least two dozen Terran varieties. My back is killing me again. Don't get me started on the cabbages.'

'Good. Then you won't mind if I make you sit down and watch *Asteroides de la Familia Vargas* with me,' Maite fluffed the pillow next to her on the little loveseat and Xochil acquiesced. Ritual was ritual. A space telenovela was still very much a telenovela.

Xochil yawned. Marcos had just proposed to Gertrudis during an EVA but the alarm in his suit predictably went off. The show clearly didn't even have the budget to send Marcos flying away from the asteroid, but she supposed that would have been too dangerous for the actor anyway.

Maite looked up at Xochil, having nearly fallen asleep too, and queried, 'Hey, I'd been meaning to ask. Did you get the placement in Sagittarius?'

'Mierda, I totally forgot to put in the notice for interstellar travel last week. I already contacted the delivery company there, but I still need to figure out the rest of the move.'

'It's a good ten lightyears away, you can't just pack up and cruise over to Sagittarius!'

'Ya lo sé... Sorry, I know you and your crew are headed there soon. I didn't realize you were coming here on such short notice.'

'I told you the shuttle specs and everything, that was the whole point of that two-page message log.'

'Bueno, it's not a big deal.'

‘You don’t have the paperwork in order and, if you did, we’d have at least a solar year together. Eso no es nada.’

Xochil was so forgetful when it came to personal stuff. If there were sundried tomatoes between point A and point B, she would already be halfway there. She was loathe to admit how good she was at her job, but how little thought she put into the rest of her life. Except Maite. Maite deserved better. They’d only spent a few months of real time together spread out over the course of five years. They hadn’t even bickered over Maite’s love of popcorn and how she’d get the kernels everywhere when she watched a movie.

Maite couldn’t get angry, *wouldn’t* let herself get angry. Who forgets to hold up their end of the scheme where they get to spend a solar year with their partner? Maite would move Jupiter and Earth if she had enough plata for it. She also knew Xochil’s tells. She always knew there was something more to Xochil, a lack of concern in her stomach about plans or money where Maite would otherwise fasten her tool belt while digesting her morning rice and beans. Maite never pried, never wondered more than was necessary. But she knew Xochil’s tells and something wasn’t adding up.

‘I’ll go with you, Maite. I’ll find us a little cabin to stay planetside when you’re not working and a little hab in the station where you are. Maybe I can get some hydroponics growing, wouldn’t you like that? You know I’ve got a green thumb when I’m not bending over backwards doing deliveries.’

‘Que no construyas castillos en el aire, princesa. Don’t go building castles in the sky, *princess*. You know as well as I do that isn’t going to happen. What gives? Do you not want to go?’

‘We’re going!’

‘Yeah, well you seemed pretty unprepared for the whole thing a minute ago.’

Xochil stood up, balling up her fists and trying to keep herself from crying.

‘Dammit Maite, I have money!’

‘¿Cómo? What?’

‘Fine, you got me. I didn’t want to tell you because it seemed

disingenuous only keeping this job because of you. If you must know, I inherited half a planet, not just some telenovela asteroids. I've been working odd jobs since I finished college and gave away almost all the plata in my trust funds years ago. All I want is to have a normal life, and travel. With you.'

'Oh.'

'We should've talked, sooner...It was a mistake waiting this long and I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry...' Xochil swallowed back tears, embarrassed at getting herself in this predicament and hopeful Maite wouldn't think much differently of her after this.

'Bueno, pues, tiene mucho sentido. Well, it makes a lot of sense. I'd be schlepping my stuff across star systems too if it meant getting to see more of the galaxy and staying out of whatever twisted drama surrounds your family and their money.'

'Thanks, cariño. I appreciate that. You met me when I was finishing up my rotation at the fish hatchery. Once I knew you'd be on the road so much as a mechanic, I knew I needed to get some type of delivery run job to keep up with you. I don't have the specialized skills to be a mechanic and anything else would be too suspicious or too difficult.'

Xochil looked at Maite and giggled. Maite, veteran mechanic worlds over, was trying not to smile too wide by sucking in her cheeks.

'I love you,' Maite replied simply.

'All the way to Sagittarius.'

'To Sagittarius!' Maite pulled Xochil in tightly and spun the two of them around, tripping and falling onto the sofa in a fit of tears and giggles as another hiccup in the station gravity made their legs buckle.

'I knew you were hiding something,' Maite said pointedly, arm now stretched around Xochil as they got back into the rhythm of the telenovela drama.

'I thought you figured it out. There is such a thing as the internet. I haven't exactly been that discrete in recent years.'

'That costs money, and besides, against my better judgement I've always trusted you.'

'Oh. You have no idea how much that means to me.'

'You've always followed me around with no complaint, I wasn't

going to start questioning things when our work assignments lined up. Wait. Are you going to keep doing the delivery job?’

‘I think a more sedentary lifestyle will suit me; I’m getting a bit old for lifting. How about I just bring the fruits and veggies from our garden to our little home? I’ll make you tamales and use up the cabbages in pozole and other stews. We can figure out the rest later.’

‘I think that would be more than satisfactory,’ Maite concluded, more excited about a new assignment than ever before.

That night, tucked into a sleeping pod that swayed with the movements of the station like waves on the ocean, Xochil dreamed of life with Maite among the cabbages on an inhabited planet orbiting Antares. It would be a life of stews, juices, salads, some rocket grease, and a whole lot of love.

The Spirit of the Narcissus

By Jennifer Lee Rossman

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The massive pool in the middle of the longhaul ship's exercise center glowed a soft and sterile blue, inviting gravity-weary travelers a chance to ease back into the weightlessness they were accustomed to, if only for a few hours.

But after the lights went out and the people went to bed, the pool shimmered with the glassy reflection of space visible through the overhead windows. Like diamonds spilled on black velvet, unfamiliar constellations danced with the gentle ripples of the pool filter.

Larissa only swam at night, when everyone was snug in their sleeping pod and they had the ship to themselves. At night, in the dark, they couldn't see themselves in the mirrored walls and there was no one to offer them help they didn't need, no one to stare at their crooked body with its all too feminine curves not even the most conservative bathing suit could hide.

Just them and the water and the stars.

The motor on their wheelchair clicked off as they approached the pool, its echo obnoxiously loud in the otherwise silent gym. With the electronic band on their wrist, they beckoned the handicapped lift to their side.

They despised that band. Abled passengers didn't wear them; only those the medical staff thought they had to keep an eye on. It monitored Larissa's breathing, though, which they reluctantly admitted was necessary. Infantilizing, but necessary.

The little F next to their age and blood type didn't help, either.

The arms of the mechanical lift bent to conform to their body, cradling their legs and adjusting to the contours of their scoliosis before slowly lifting them from the chair. They held on for dear life; in the months since

they had relocated with their wife to the *Narcissus*, Larissa hadn't gotten over their fear of falling. Back home—they still thought of that little space station orbiting Neptune as home—they didn't have artificial gravity. People floated, and falling didn't hurt.

But the *Narcissus* spun on a central axis, centrifugal force pushing everything to the outer edges of its giant wheel. Unable to move themselves through the gravity, Larissa needed their wheelchair again, for the first time since they left Earth as a kid. They longed for zero-g, but would never let themselves be the reason Sam didn't get to be part of the research team on Ameinias. If there was one thing that woman was passionate about, it was studying tardigrades in absolute zero.

For some reason.

The lift swung out over the pool and gently lowered, its touch disturbing the stars resting like dragonflies on the surface. The dark water took them in its cool hands, supporting their weak muscles and letting them float.

It wasn't the same, not by far, but for a short time Larissa could move unassisted again under their own power. Push off the walls and float away, just exist apart from their chair, away from everyone, under the dazzling display beyond the glass roof.

The constellations changed as they traveled, shifting with the stars to create new patterns no one had ever seen. Back on Earth, the human mind, desperately searching for meaning, would have created stories to go along with them. Great myths about the seven sisters and the hunter who pursued them, the humans who were turned into gum trees that spoke by rattling their leaves, and the monstrous giant with the face of a lion.

But in space, the constellations were nothing more than random clusters of burning gas. Humanity had long ago stripped the cosmos of its mystery, and they didn't tell those kinds of stories anymore. There were no heroes and monsters, no miracles or spirits.

Larissa lay on their back, fingers trailing across the water's surface so softly that it felt like folds of silk. They closed their eyes and let the universe melt away until they were suspended in an endless void.

Something brushed the underside of their wrist. Forgetting the sterile pool for a moment, their imagination turned the touch into a fish or maybe

a strand of seaweed. But there was nothing living in the pool; the strap to someone's forgotten goggles, most likely.

It touched them again, this time on their leg. They kicked it away, and it came right back.

Frowning, Larissa bent their leg underwater, trying to catch the loop with their toes.

Something curled around them, grasping fingers playfully tugging at their foot.

Larissa froze in panic, letting the water calm as they stared up at the stars and the far side of the station's rim as her mind whirled with visions of impossible creatures lurking in the darkness. The pool had filters, but Larissa would have heard them if they were creating strong enough currents to play with the strap. They heard only their heartbeat and shallow breaths.

The next time it touched them, they broke the stillness with frantic splashes as they kicked towards the edge of the pool. Their hand found the cold metal of the lift and pulled themselves towards it.

Their body grew heavier as they rose from the pool, and they searched the glassy black water for movement.

A shape undulated just under the surface, somehow darker and more glittering than the reflection of space itself. The size of a human, it twirled and dove deeper. Larissa cursed as they shook their dripping hair and sped over to the wall to throw on the lights.

The fluorescents came on in sequence, the darkness retreating to reveal gym equipment, climbing bars, and too many Larissas in too many mirrors.

The underwater lights came on last, turning the water transparent and blue. They could see clear to the shimmery bottom.

Empty.

Larissa stared at the pool as they shut off the lights and backed out, daring something to show itself.

The pool was alive with swimmers. Some did laps as a joint-friendly way to keep up muscle mass, but most lazed in the shallow end or splashed each other. No one had mentioned anything like what Larissa had seen the

night before.

They'd imagined it, then. The light had played a trick and their mind made up a story to explain it. It wouldn't be the first time their anxiety had conjured nightmarish things from nothingness, but they usually came on the edge of sleep and quickly fizzled out.

"Hey."

Larissa blinked away, the afterimage that swam in front of their eyes and saw Sam hanging on the edge of the pool.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, brushing her wet red hair off her face. "Do you want to swim?"

Did they want to swim? Did they want all the people already staring at them to see them transferring awkwardly out of their chair in a suit that did nothing to disguise their body? Have people run up to help without asking, give them rude looks when they wave them away, then hear them murmuring to themselves about how inspiring they were for enjoying a simple activity they all took for granted?

No, they most certainly did not.

But they couldn't tell Sam the truth. Besides containing a story about impossible water creatures, the truth started with the admission that Larissa actually loved swimming, just not with their own wife.

Instead, they pointed to the filtration system and shifted to a tangentially-related subject. "Do you think that's connected to the tanks in the fisheries in any way?"

Sam raised an eyebrow. "Doubt it. They're on the other side of the ship. Why?" she teased. "Afraid of swimming in fish poop?"

"You aren't?" Larissa feigned disgust. "Well, guess I won't be kissing you anytime soon, poo-breath."

"Oh, please." Sam raised herself out of the water some more and made an exaggerated display of showing off her body in her blue and white suit. "Like you could ever refuse this."

Larissa conceded that point with an appreciative nod. Sam was gorgeous, and the way the attention of the room swiveled in her direction proved that she could have her pick of folks on the ship.

And that settled it. Larissa couldn't tell her what they saw. Or thought they saw. Their relationship had always felt like an illusion, like one day

Sam would look too close at the stars, would reach for them a little too hard, and find that they were just reflections in a pool.

Or worse, Larissa would see that the constellations were just stories Sam told out of pity for the disabled person she pretended to love, and it was all really just balls of gas.

They already asked so much of Sam. Physical assistance, having to deal with the way people looked at them...they couldn't add hallucinations to the list, or their stars might go supernova.

The pool called to them in silent whispers and phantom ripples on their skin. Even as they worked in the farm sectors, dragging a tiller behind their chair, the water and the creature inside it dominated their thoughts.

In another time and place, people would call it a spirit. A manifestation of nature itself come to life.

But there wasn't any nature in space. Those rows of green vegetables poking up from imported Earth soil didn't count, and even the water had been purified beyond all recognition.

Two hydrogen atoms, one oxygen. No sediment, no impurities, and absolutely no spirits.

But it felt too real.

Larissa unhooked the tiller and set it against a wall. "Can you handle this for a little while?" they asked Jonquil, the older woman they shared farm duty with. Without waiting for an answer, they were out the door and zooming down the hall to the security wing.

"Mx. Jehona," the chief of security said with a nod as they entered the small room.

They looked at the wall that glowed faintly with video feeds, showing dozens of different areas of the ship. Mess hall, food storage, the bridge and all its flashing lights...

There. The gym, currently full of people exercising and kids playing. A few of them had a soccer game going in the far corner.

"Something I can help you with, hon?"

Larissa bristled at being called "hon" but bit back their comment. "Can I see a feed from the pool, two nights ago? A little after midnight?"

His fingers danced across a keyboard and a video appeared on the wall.

In the eerie gray tones of infrared, it showed Larissa wheeling up to the pool and using the lift. They cringed at the way their suit accentuated their crooked spine, and avoided the security guard's gaze as he looked them over.

When the recording of them started to flail, they studied the water for that dark shape. Nothing. Just them having a panic attack in a pool.

This realization stung deep inside their gut. Hadn't they gotten past their gravity anxiety? They hadn't woken up screaming in months, and while they still saw the ship's counselor on a regular basis to talk about losing their independence, they really thought they'd made progress.

"Mind my asking why you don't go during the day?"

"Quieter," they said, staring at the floor.

"And more dangerous."

Did he not just see them get in and out of the pool on their own? Did he not see the band on their wrist that would call for help if their breathing slowed?

No, he probably did. Just like the chair, something that gave their freedom, the band was a scarlet letter announcing their weaknesses to everyone.

"Sorry to bother you," they murmured. On their way out of the room, they ripped off the band.

"Talk to me," Sam begged.

Larissa lay on their side, facing the glass of water on the bedside table. They tried to roll onto their back but the weight of their own body against the mattress overpowered them.

The gravity on Ameinias would be even stronger. Not by much, people said, probably wouldn't even notice it, but they couldn't help thinking it would be like fast-forwarding the progression of their muscular dystrophy. Stealing away the few years they had left of breathing without a ventilator and being able to hold their head up.

Sam couldn't understand that. Her body was perfect, both in an aesthetic and medical sense. It never betrayed her.

"Rissa?" Sam laid her hand on Larissa's back.

The words came out as less than a whisper. "I don't want to live on

Ameinias.”

“What?”

They couldn’t tell if Sam hadn’t heard them, or if she just couldn’t believe it. “I said I—”

The water in the glass rippled violently, pulsing as if trying to throw itself over the rim.

Larissa pressed their hands over their face, no longer able to contain the pressure building inside them. They were going supernova.

“I don’t want to go to Ameinias! I don’t want to live in gravity anymore! I want freedom, and not being able to move is so bad for anxiety, I’m hallucinating!”

In the aftermath, all seemed still. And then the water began to slosh from side to side, splashing onto the faux wood floor.

The bed shifted as Sam sat upright.

“I’m sorry,” Larissa said. “I didn’t mean—”

“Something’s wrong.”

“I know, but I—”

“What? No, not you.” Sam scrambled out of bed and threw on a pair of shorts, her eyes locked on the glass. “Do you see that?”

“Do you?” Larissa asked as Sam scooped them out of bed and into their chair.

“Yeah. Something’s wrong with the gravity.” Sam strode out of their quarters, walking at Larissa’s top speed and barely resisting the urge to break into a run. “It’s fluctuating, not a lot but enough to screw with liquids.”

In the hall, they met engineers in various stages of dress and alertness, all talking about drinks or aquariums as they grouped together and moved as one entity towards engineering.

Larissa tried to lift their arm and found it just as difficult as it had been that morning. As much as they wanted to believe gravitational disturbances were messing with the water, they just couldn’t feel it. And shouldn’t their hair have been floating?

No, something else was going on.

As they passed the gym, Larissa fell back, lingering at the door. They felt the pool calling, pulling on them like gravity itself.

“I’ll catch up,” Larissa said, and pushed the door open with their footrest. It closed behind them, cutting off all light but that from the stars glittering in the sky and pool.

The water here didn’t slosh mindlessly like it did in the glass, but swelled and ebbed in a purposeful, serpentine motion, following a dark shape that twisted just beneath the surface.

The figure went to the center of the pool, the churning water gathering around it as it rose into the air on a column of glittering stars.

This was not at all how water acted in zero gravity, but a living thing. A spirit, like something out of the stories people used to tell.

An impossible nature spirit on a spaceship devoid of nature, springing into existence out of nothingness. Or maybe it had been in space all this time, waiting for humanity to discover it and enter into a new era of mystery.

Maybe—

Transfixed as they were, Larissa hadn’t realized they were moving towards the pool until they felt the jolt of their front caster wheel slipping off the edge. It dangled, swinging freely over the deep end. They slammed their hand back on the joystick, but momentum won out over their motors.

They tipped forward, and gravity did the rest.

Larissa and their chair slipped into the pool with a thunderous splash and sank straight to the bottom. Too late, they remembered to hold their breath, and water rushed into their mouth and lungs. Their last screams rose to the surface as bubbles.

They released their seatbelt, but no amount of simulated weightlessness could help them escape as their chair pinned them to the tiles. They glanced at their bare wrist and a fresh surge of panic hit their heart. No band to track their breathing, to tell the automated lift where they were.

By the time anyone came looking, they’d be dead, a victim of their own vanity and self-sufficiency.

In the old world, people would turn their story into a myth. A cautionary tale about the dangers of pride and alienating oneself from loved ones. People would believe in a spirit, but twist it into a malevolent entity, one that corrupted them and lured them to this dark demise. And they would point out the constellation of Larissa in the night sky, and tell the tale

of that poor soul too stubborn and fearful to swim with the woman they loved.

But not now. Now they would be a tragic accident, one more reason to track and coddle people with disabilities. One more reason to pity the poor, unfortunate souls, and fear the hallucinations that they had followed to their death.

Their chest burned, aching to take a breath that wasn't there. The darkness seemed to grow ever darker, the kind of blackness that could only exist at the end of the universe, after every last star blinked out for good.

Larissa thought of Sam. Of how safe she felt to lie against, both in the bed with straps to keep them from floating off, and in the bed where the quilt weighed a thousand pounds. Of the way Sam looked at their crooked back and bent limbs and saw only gorgeous curves.

Of the life they could have had together, whether in weightless space or on the planet with the most oppressive gravity they could find.

The shadowy figure of the water spirit passed in front of Larissa, or maybe it was their mind desperately searching for meaning in the ghostly movement of their own hair. Either way, they reached out to it. A hand grasped their wrist just before they lost consciousness.

Larissa's arms floated at their sides and something pressed down on their body. Until they opened their eyes, Larissa thought they were still underwater, but they found themselves secured to a bed. Suspended in mid-air beside them, her red hair bobbing like a halo, Sam held their hand.

"Am I—" Larissa coughed painfully, struggling to catch their breath. "Am I alive?"

Sam nodded, wiping the clouds of tears from in front of her eyes. The individual drops wobbled in the air.

"You almost weren't," Sam whispered, pressing a warm kiss to their lips. "What happened?"

"Where am I?"

"Hospital ship. They thought, with your lungs, you'd recover better without the pressure on your chest." Her fingers tightened around Larissa's hand. The illusion had been shattered, she knew how fragile Larissa was.

And yet she was here, eyes red from crying, looking at Larissa like

they were the answer to every question. Sam had seen the ugly balls of gas hiding in the constellations, and loved them even more.

“It was you that saved me,” Larissa said quietly, unsure of how that made their feel. On the one hand, there was no magic in the water. But on the other, Sam had put the safety of the ship on hold to save theirs.

Sam hesitated before saying, “It wasn’t me, babe. I found you next to the pool. Security cams saw... they saw a wave lift you out.” Off in the corner, the orb of her tears took on the shape of a water nymph, dancing and twirling through the air. “I can’t explain it.”

Larissa smiled. “Good. Hey, do they have pools on Ameinias?”

The Tricks of This World

By Christine Wolfram

Christine Wolfram is a queer writer of weird and macabre fiction. When she's not dreaming up new stories, you can catch her at her local Renaissance faire, playing Bloodborne, or geeking out on her Youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/whimsydearest>.

Grief is a heavy thing. It weighed on Ophelia like a stone. She felt like she was treading water, never quite reaching the shore, no matter how much she struggled, until finally, exhausted, she found herself drowning into the depths of her sorrow.

It was grief and regret that drove her to the water's edge. She waded into the pond, singing a song about lovers and a weeping willow, a bouquet of flowers in hand. She trailed aimlessly in a dream-like trance amongst the hyacinths and reeds.

When her foot no longer found purchase on the muddy floor, she slipped below the surface and the water met her like a lover's embrace, enveloping her.

A voice greeted her as she sank downward.

"Only the wicked may drown in my waters, and you are not one of them," it said.

Phantom hands hoisted Ophelia up. They brought her gasping to the surface and deposited her on the bank where she retched up water.

Wiping her mouth, she glared up at her rescuer—an inhuman woman with amber eyes and wild cascades of seaweed green hair. She looked to be a sort of water spirit, a *sjörå* from her mother's tales.

"You must possess a cruel sense of humor to deny me the one choice that was mine. You should have let me drown," said Ophelia.

"What if I told you that there were other paths to achieve the freedom you seek. Would you still think me cruel then?" asked the *sjörå*.

"The prince would have me sent to a nunnery, the king would have me rot in a cell, and my brother would have me wed to a lord who bears

me no love. I am nothing but a calf at the market, so pray tell, what path would you have me take?”

“The one where you leave the market with no master.”

Ophelia laughed bitterly. “You say that so easily, but you’re not human. You’re not bound by mortal laws.”

“You needn’t be either.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your mother was one of the huldra. She withered away as you do now because your father thought to keep her like a rose in a garden.”

“You’re spewing nothing but lies.”

“Search your heart, you know it to be true.”

Ophelia’s mother had died when she was a young girl. She didn’t have many memories of her, but she remembered her as a frail, beautiful woman who was confined to her bed. Ophelia would bring her wildflowers and she would gaze at them with an indecipherable expression of yearning and sadness.

“No,” Ophelia said, her voice small in her ears.

“I’ve watched you play along my banks, weave flowers in your hair, wild and carefree as one of the hidden folk. You were not made for life confined in a castle. There is a wildness in your blood. Embrace it and inherit the birthright that is yours.”

“How should I do that?”

“Here,” she said, gently cupping her face. “Let me show you.”

The sjörå bent to kiss her, and in response, something unfurled and blossomed inside Ophelia—a seed she had long kept buried. She felt herself unraveling, expanding, being remade. Once soft and yielding as a willow, her body was now hardening into oak.

But the pain of it all was oh, so bright and searing. It threatened to consume her, until finally, it did.

Her eyelids fluttered open as she stirred awake.

“Ophelia, are you here with me now?” asked a voice.

“Yes,” she groaned.

“Good. Then I have something important to tell you, but please promise me you won’t faint again.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know how much your mother told you about the huldra, but you’ve sprouted a cow tail and your back is now the hollow of a tree.”

Ophelia’s hand immediately went to feel along her back. Instead of skin and bone, she found a gaping cavern between her shoulder blades.

She fought against her rising wave of panic and the scream that wanted to escape her mouth.

The sjörå shushed her, cradling her, and smoothed her hair. “Hush, now. This is what you were always meant to be.”

Ophelia clung onto her, weeping, until she dried her tears and pulled away. She peered up at the sjörå’s face, searching.

In her mother’s stories, she had warned Ophelia of the nøkke’s trickery and to never climb upon a bækhest’s back, and, while sjörå are more benevolent than other hidden folk, they are creatures of reciprocation; they expect favors in return.

“Why are you being so kind to me?” Ophelia asked.

The sjörå smiled ruefully. “Because I, too, know what it feels like to be strung along by the ardent promises of men who sought to tame me.”

“Are your motives purely out of the sympathy of your own heart, or do you expect me to pay you a boon later?”

“I suppose I wouldn’t protest against hearing you sing again from time to time.”

A genuine smile came to Ophelia’s lips. “I can manage that.”

Then a thought came to her. “By the way, I don’t think you ever told me your name.”

“You may call me Idunn,”

“Then farewell, Idunn, until we meet again.”

Ophelia stood up and turned to face the looming silhouette of the castle.

“What? After all that trouble, you would return back to Elsinore so soon?” asked Idunn.

“I will make myself at home in the woods, but first, there are some loose ends I must take care of.”

Ophelia padded through the austere halls of the castle, reeds tangled in her

hair and her bare feet squelching against the floor. She drew snickers from the servants and mutters of “*poor girl!*” from noblewomen as she passed.

She paid them little mind. It was the king who currently plagued her thoughts.

When she arrived outside his chambers, the guards stopped her.

“I don’t think it’s wise to intrude at the moment. His Majesty has been in a foul mood since the banquet.”

“That’s precisely why I’ve come. I wish to apologize for my earlier behavior,” she replied.

The guards silently exchanged looks with each other.

“Please, I know how to soothe his spirits. Let me see him,” pled Ophelia.

One of the guard’s cheeks reddened, and they both begrudgingly shuffled aside. She brushed past them and entered into the king’s chambers.

Inside she felt a palpable gloom lingering in the air as if the former king’s spirit still remained. She wondered how King Claudius could bear to sleep at night. Did the guilt of murdering his own brother gnaw away at him? These past weeks had taken a toll on him. She saw it in his sunken eyes and the weary strain of his jaw.

She found him staring out the window now—a gathering storm brewing across his visage.

He was furious.

But Ophelia knew all too well how to appease powerful men and wear sheepskin as an armor. That was how her father raised her, after all. She would play the meek, innocent lamb one last time before she showed her claws and teeth.

She dipped into the deepest curtsy she could manage, bowing her head. “I’ve come to humbly beseech your forgiveness, Your Highness.”

He turned to confront her, but her appearance took him aback. He gestured at her drenched state. “What is this? Another one of your performances or has madness truly taken you?”

“Neither. I took a swim to clear my mind.”

“Did it work?”

“I found it...sobering.”

“Good. Now that you’ve returned to your senses, I hope you realize

how much a fool you made of me in front of the entire court.”

“I meant no harm, truly. Lady Brynild suggested that I give you flowers to brighten your spirits. I didn’t understand their meaning until afterward, and I beg your mercy for my ignorance.”

Her mouth quivered and she burst into tears. These tears were not out of regret for slighting the king. She did not care in the slightest. No, these tears were a cold fury. King Claudius had used his father as a pawn in his schemes and held his funeral without ceremony—without rites or even a sword to decorate his father’s bier.

All he saw now was a weeping woman, and he only knew part of the reason for why she wept.

He drew a long sigh and his expression softened. “I suppose I cannot fault you while you are still mourning the loss of your father.”

He crossed over to her to wipe a tear from her cheek. “You know, I am truly sorry about his passing. He was a loyal man, a good man. Can I count on you as I did your father?”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

He extended his bejeweled hand out to her. “Swear it.”

She bent to kiss the ring on his finger. “I swear my most ardent fealty to my king, to love him and to serve him for as long as he reigns.”

Her mouth lingered and she peered up to catch his reaction.

The king’s breath hitched. His eyes filled with desire as he eyed her, taking in the sight of her wet dress clinging to her figure.

“You’re beautiful. No wonder my nephew is so besotted with you,” he murmured.

“And yet he refuses to visit my bed any longer or so much as touch me.” She straightened herself and trailed her hands over his chest. “Do you know how unimaginably lonely I’ve been?”

This was the same man who took his brother’s wife, his crown. The opportunity to take his despised nephew’s lover was too great a temptation to resist.

“I can remedy that,” he replied.

He hungrily met her mouth. His hands went to grope her, claiming her. He fumbled to unbutton her dress and she shed the sodden thing onto the floor.

They stumbled onto his bed. His slimy tongue slid into her mouth, and she yielded before biting down with razor-sharp teeth. She retched her head back, ripping his tongue out from its roots, and gulped it down.

He made a gurgling sound as blood gushed out like a geyser, spraying her front with blood. He glared at her in accusation before columbines shot through his eyes then his mouth, blooming.

He writhed and shrieked in his sheets as they stained red, until he quietened and moved no more, collapsing onto her. With a grunt, she rolled his body aside and she pulled herself out from under him.

She calmly strolled out of his chambers in her blood-soaked chemise, humming a lullaby.

Before the guards could cry out, tangled roots burst through the cracks in the floors and walls. They snaked around the guards and snapped their necks, leaving them to crumple like broken dolls onto the ground.

Ophelia stepped over their bodies and the roots retreated along with her. When she rounded the corner, she came face to face with a stunned Horatio.

She tilted her head quizzically. “What’s wrong, Horatio? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“That’s because you look like death. ‘Zounds, Ophelia, what in the devil happened to you?’”

“I bit the king.”

He gawked at her. “Forget I asked. Let’s get you cleaned up before anyone else catches you in this state.”

He seized her by the arm and tugged her along as Ophelia threw jabs at him.

“Trustworthy Horatio, loyal Horatio. Hamlet’s little lapdog. No wonder Hamlet relies on you and divulges secrets with you that he wouldn’t dare share with me.”

“You may not believe it, but everything he’s done was to protect you.”

“How considerate of him to keep me in the dark like I’m some fragile child.”

“That’s because you’re acting like one.”

Ophelia halted and Horatio rounded on her.

“Is that what you think of me? You think me naïve?” she asked.

“Trust me, fair Ophelia. Naivety is a precious thing in this castle, and I envy you for it.”

“Naivety is something I lost along with my father. I see the tricks of this world. I hear the murmurings of ghosts, the whispers of the courtiers, and they say something is rotten here in Denmark. I thought if I could smile, it would all disappear, but I can’t pretend anymore. This has festered for far too long.”

Horatio looked at her gravely. “Then you’re in all the more danger now. I’ll have to speak with Hamlet, and then we can figure out where to safely hide you until this storm has come to pass.”

“Hamlet?” She peered at him intently. “I thought he had fled to England. Is he still in Denmark then?”

He hesitated, catching himself.

Ophelia laughed. “It’s alright. You can tell me where the prince is. I think the king bears as much ill will against me as he does against Hamlet.”

Of course, she needn’t confess that the king was now a ghost...yet.

Horatio pinched the bridge nose and squeezed his eyes shut before finally relenting.

“The truth is, Hamlet never boarded that ship. He’s currently hiding at Lord Sighmund’s estates in the countryside,” he replied.

“Then take me to him.”

Ophelia waited in one of Lord Sighmund’s spare guest bedrooms, her hair and skin now scrubbed clean. She found herself periodically checking her back to see if this were all a dream. Each time she would feel that her back had been carved out and inside she was made of bark like the rotted hollow of a tree.

This was real.

She was a huldra, not a mouse.

Her tail flicked as she stewed in her own thoughts. She cursed Hamlet for being so consumed with vengeance that he could not see what lay before him, and she cursed herself for loving him still. All along the ride here, she had debated whether she should kill him, but what do you do with a man who already wished for death?

Her attention snapped when a rapt came at the door.

Hamlet stormed inside and shut the door behind him. “You have to leave at once. We haven’t much time.”

“That’s a rude way to greet me after I’ve traveled all this way to see you. Why would you have me leave so soon?” she asked.

“We need to get you far from here before the king demands your execution. There’s a nunnery in the south who has already offered to take you in and offer you shelter. I wasn’t joking earlier when I told you to get thee to nunnery. It was advice...and a warning.”

“Well, thank you for your kind warning, but I’ll unfortunately have to ignore it.”

“This isn’t a game, Ophelia. I don’t know what sort of hare-brained scheme you were hatching, but you’ll have to leave until I’ve cleaned up your mess.”

“You don’t get it, do you? The king is dead. I killed him.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Do you honestly expect me to believe you murdered the king with your own two hands? You and I both know full well that you don’t have the stomach for it.”

She threw back her head and cackled manically. “Oh, but I did.”

With a heave, she belched up the king’s tongue at Hamlet’s feet and smiled like a content cat who had just brought its master a present.

“There,” she said. “Is that proof enough for you?”

He blanched at her with disbelief. She watched the color drain from his face and the gears whirling in his head. Hamlet was clever—too clever. He presumed he knew how people would act and how he could move them along like pieces on a chess board. He couldn’t fathom that Ophelia—sweet, angel Ophelia—had bloodied her hands.

He swallowed, and stared at her like he saw her fully for the first time. “You ... ate him.”

“Just the tongue. Isn’t that what you’ve wanted all along? For him to choke on his lies?”

“Not before justice was served!” he bellowed, spittle flying. “But now, thanks to your carelessness, we’ll never get a public confession out of him.”

She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes at him. “This isn’t about the

truth getting buried, is it? No, you're angry that I did what you were too craven to do. You're angry at your own cowardice."

"Then kill me for the spineless coward that I am."

"Here." He stepped toward her, placing a dagger in her hands, hilt first. "This is the dagger I stabbed your father with."

He pressed his forehead against hers, intimately close. "Go on. Take your revenge. It would be a poetic end for the bards to sing about."

Anger flashed through her. For a moment, she imagined herself grabbing the dagger, carving his heart from chest, and bringing it dripping to her lips. Once his heart was all that she desired, but now it had hardened over, shriveled into a plum pit, and she no longer had use for such a pitiful thing.

"No." She backed away, letting the dagger clatter to the floor. "I will not be your martyr or your executioner, so live, my sweet prince, and slowly rot in your wretched castle with nothing but ghosts for company."

Hamlet fell to his knees and buried his head in hands, sobbing.

She turned and fled out of Lord Sighmund's estates, tears of joy streaming down her face. For the first time in a long time, she felt lighter than air, unchained, from all the men who sought to control her.

She ran home—the way a bird migrates home from the winter or a salmon returns to the place it was spawned. The forest called to her, sung to her bones, and she answered. She needed no horse. Her own swift legs carried her to the forest where she remained, never to return to the halls of Elsinore, but legend has it, if you listen closely, peals of her laughter and singing can still be heard amidst the elms and oaks and, on occasion, even along the banks of the pond.

Sunday

by Archangel Belletti

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I don't do well with truths.

Sometimes I don't look in the mirror when I'm crying because I know that if I realize how much I'm hurting, I'll hurt even more.

Sometimes, when I look at my boyfriend Sebastian, asleep in my bed right next to me, I think that this is the rawest and most perfect scenario I've ever seen in my life, and if I look at us for a moment too long, I might break down.

That was one of those mornings when I did. I looked away, listening to him slowly waking up. The air in the room was heavy, the early sunlight peeking through the blinds and painting our furniture like the inside of a ship lost at sea.

I got up as slowly as possible, minimizing the tending of the white sheets and the creaking of the mattress.

Sebastian didn't move. He was turned away, his soft curly hair like a crown. I caressed his cheek with a finger. "It's eight already," I whispered.

I saw him blink without moving, only his fingers closed in a loose fist.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm tired."

I laughed under my breath. "We didn't sleep enough." I got up, pulling up my pants. "But it's Sunday, we can do nothing all day if you want."

Sebastian would spend most of his Saturday nights at my house. On Sunday morning, then, we'd go to the café close to my apartment, and he'd order bacon and eggs. I'd be unable to eat anything except a cookie, and we'd be sipping coffee until it got too late to do anything else but shop for lunch. I loved the long stretch of those hours, the lazy morning turning

into lazy afternoon, the newborn sun cradling us when we sat at the shop, his shiny sleepy eyes and his ruffled hair.

“It’s not that.”

I wore my white shirt and went to the other side of the bed, kneeling in front of him. His eyes were almost closed, blue turned dark by the low light. His Adam’s apple went up and down as he swallowed. “I need to call my therapist.”

I hummed in response, and left a light kiss on his forehead, pushing the curls back. He had been diagnosed with depression about a year before, but he had known about it for much longer. He had made huge progress in therapy, but getting better wasn’t a straight line going upwards.

“I hate this,” he whispered against my chest.

“You’ll feel better soon, you’ll see. Is there anything I can do to help? Even a little?”

Sebastian looked up, very slowly. “No.” He put his hands on his face, his eyes distorted as he took them off. “I feel gross.”

“Do you want to take a shower?”

He pressed his lips tight together. “I don’t want to. I don’t want to walk there.”

I nodded. “Okay. Maybe I can just stay beside you, if you want.”

Sebastian moved his hand around mine. “You have work to do.”

“You’re more important than work.”

The sheets rustled as he moved. “How are you going to spoil me if you don’t make money?”

I laughed, caressing his knuckles. “You got me there,” I said. “I still have some days to submit the designs to my client, though. I’m not in a hurry. Are you hungry?”

His eyes looked right through me, like I wasn’t really there. “No,” he said, after a few seconds. “I will be.”

“We’ll take care of it when you are, then.”

Sebastian looked at the ceiling, planting his eyes there. His chest raised and emptied slowly, but almost imperceptibly.

“Did something trigger you?” I asked him.

“No,” he said.

“How do you feel about the new meds?”

“Worse than before.” And then, more seriously, “Dan.”

“Yes,” I replied, interlocking my fingers with his.

“Don’t leave, please.”

I caressed his hand. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“I know it’s a lot.”

I ruffled his hair a little. “It’s not a lot at all.”

Then, something dawned on me. The worst phases of his depression lasted for a day or two, usually, if it hadn’t been triggered. During those days, I’d do the best I could to help him with the things he had to do. I took his calls, fixed him food when he wanted some, replied to simple emails that didn’t require work or knowledge about his job that I didn’t have. And then, the last time it had happened, at the zenith of a long night of him tossing and turning in bed, he had whispered something. His lips were shiny in the night and the moon was casting blue streaks of light on his face. *Even though I know it’s not true, sometimes depression makes me feel like no one cares about me.*

Just like I know there’s no real danger when my panic attacks make me feel like there is, this is what happened to him. Even though I know that I’m perfectly healthy and there is nothing wrong in my body, I can still feel like I’m about to die. Inside of that haze that covers you during those episodes, you feel alone like you’re the last person to get to the Moon, and no one expected anyone to need air anymore.

“You have an appointment with Dr Martin at nine on Tuesday,” I told him after I finished the call with his therapist. Then, I switched off my phone and I threw it on my side of the bed.

“What are you doing?” Sebastian asked me.

“I have an idea,” I said.

“Is that a Dandea?”

I laughed. “Hey. It’s not bad.”

“Yeah, you said that when you decided to buy a last minute flight and we ended up sleeping in the airport,” his voice said, a little tired, gray like the sky during those boring days in the winter. “Or when you decided to buy a ton of rice to make sushi even though you had no clue how to cook it and we ended up throwing away all of it.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, kneeling beside him again. I looked him in the eyes. “I love you.”

He blinked. “I love you too.”

“I love you,” I repeated.

“I can hear you.”

“I love you.”

“Yeah, I love you too.” His eyes turned a little sparkly. “What’s up?”

I slipped my arms under his body and pressed him against myself, softly. “I know that love doesn’t cure mental illness, but maybe it can make it a little bit less hard if you know that you’re not alone fighting it.”

His fingers closed around my shirt on my back, but he said nothing. A pause. I felt his heart beating hard against my chest. “What’s the idea you were talking about?”

I smiled. “Everything you want to do, we’ll do it together. I’ll do everything you want. You can’t get up? I’ll carry you. We’ll shower together and I’ll wash you. I’ll make you breakfast and we’ll eat together. Only for a day, though, because tomorrow morning I’ll have to go to work.”

“God, Dan, I can wash myself.”

I pulled away. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to make you feel like that. I just want to... serve you.”

His lips stretched in a curious smile. “What do you mean?”

I traced his knuckles with my thumb slowly. “What’s your first order, your highness?”

A smile formed on his tired lips, and he looked away for a moment, embarrassed. I didn’t. I waited for his response.

“There’s nothing worth doing,” he said, in a lower, hushed tone, the same one he used a night of a couple of months ago when he was feeling like this.

“There is,” I whispered back, giving up the old and expensive butler accent I had put up before. “Making cakes with flowers and your name on them. Having bubble baths. Making a new shirt you’ll wear when it’s warmer. Lighting candles with weird scents like chocolate or pine.”

Sebastian shook his head. “Pine is totally average.”

“It’s not. Pine trees don’t even smell like that.”

“It’s not a—” Sebastian raised a hand just to let it fall back down.

“Whatever.”

“Come on,” I said, sitting with my legs crossed. “We can do whatever you want.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Try,” he said. “Try and let’s see what it feels like. Maybe you’ll hate it.”

“Impossible. It’s you we’re talking about. And if it makes you feel uncomfortable, we’ll stop.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes, but blushed. “Oh, God.”

I raised my head again. “Your order, your majesty.”

His chest swelled as he sighed. “You said bubble bath before.”

I smiled. “Yes, sir.”

Sebastian nodded. “That doesn’t sound awful.”

I beamed. “Private Dan of transportation in action”, I said, picking him up. His head laid against my chest, and I hoped he wouldn’t hear my heart racing. It didn’t matter how many times we had kissed, how many times we had gone on dates, slept in the same bed, worn the same clothes, and done things together—like running in drag, climbing rocks to get to a beach, or accidentally drinking too much of his grandpa’s homemade liquor. Every time he touched me, my skin felt electric. Tender things like that made me tingly, like a star had just been born and only I could see it.

I laid him on a chair in our small kitchen, the light outside still dim from the closed blinds. “Cover your eyes,” I told him, and he did.

I opened the blinds, the windows, let the fresh air in. The breeze tousled his curls. He smiled a bit.

“I’ll be right back.” I left a kiss on his forehead as I went back to the bathroom. The water splashed with a continuous, almost hypnotic sound as it filled the bathtub, warming up.

I went back to the kitchen to find him sitting hugging one of his legs, his blue eyes still sleepy, fixed on a point somewhere beyond the horizon. Behind him, my kitchen utensils hung, silver contrasting with the pale green of the wall we had painted together.

“Juice or coffee?” I asked him.

Sebastian blinked. “You don’t have to do this, you know,” he said, his lips red and opened like he was waiting for the right moment to say something vital. “I don’t want you to think you do.”

“But I *want* to do it,” I replied.

“I can’t give any of this back,” he finally said.

I smiled, pouring two cups of coffee. I chose for him his favorite, the one with a Naruto quote on it that his brother had given him. “Love is not a transaction,” I whispered, lips close to the black liquid already.

His eyes filled with tears. “I don’t want to feel like this.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” I interlocked my fingers with his. “It’s going to be okay very soon, though.”

“I wonder if the meds he’s going to prescribe are going to work or if I’ll have to go through this shit again,” he said, the side of his head in his palm, fingers closing in a fist taking in his hair.

“I really hope it’s going to be okay. And if it won’t, next time it will.”

He nodded, gulping down warm coffee. “Okay,” he whispered, taking his hands away from mine to dry his eyes. “Yeah. It will.” He tried to sit up a little straighter, his collarbones evident under the thin white pj shirt. He cleared his throat. “Is my bath ready, sir Dan?”

I got up to attempt a respectful bow even though I was wearing sweatpants and a crumpled shirt. “I believe so, your highness.”

Then, Sebastian opened his arms, his big blue eyes way too soft to be those of the king who ordered, “Then take me there.”

I put up a playlist I had made for relaxing times with a mix of our favorite singers. I opened the blinds and we both watched as the sun made every shadow darker, their shapes changing through the hour we spent there. I lit the candle. I put the lighter and Sebastian put the cupped palms around the newborn flame to help it grow.

I took off my binder, and he took off his pajamas.

We both fit in the bathtub, his back on my chest, his head on my shoulder. Our skins, mine darker and his, already covered in goosebumps from the moment he touched the water, were soft against each other.

“Can I?” I asked, scented body wash in one hand and a sponge in the other.

“Yes,” he said, his curls leaving wet circles on my skin.

I soaked the sponge, added the soap, and washed him slowly.

“In a lot of religions of the world, the first people were created by dirt, clay, dust, or things like that,” Sebastian whispered.

“The soil is our mother,” I replied.

“Why not the sky?”

“Because we can’t fly.”

A pause. He lifted his arms and I washed his sides.

“I feel like the first clay man who still doesn’t have a shape,” he said.

“Or the breath of life.”

I imagined clay Sebastian as I washed the soap off him and squeezed the bottle to pour some body wash into the water to make bubbles. In my imagination his eyes were staring at the sky, his hair was dripping wet dirt, and in that stillness God decided what he would have been.

I counted each of his fingers. “Clay men can’t love, though.”

“They’re not alive.”

My hand rested on his chest. His skin was wet and cold, and his heart was beating steadily underneath. “You are.”

He breathed out and almost giggled. His hand covered mine. “I’m alive,” he said. “And you are, too.”

“We’re not clay men.”

“Maybe we are. But God has already given us life.”

After we got out of the bath, we were both hungry.

I dried his hair slowly, with care, making sure his golden brown curls didn’t get frizzy. With him sitting in front of me, I took his leave-in conditioner and applied it on his hair. He gave me a little smile as he directed my movements. I didn’t talk. I was thinking about the last time I had done something like that when he had had a broken arm and about how different it is to see someone when they think you’re not supposed to.

I washed the conditioner out of my hands and massaged his face with hydrating cream, drawing a small heart shape on his cheek.

“You’re so cheesy,” he said.

I nodded. He was right. I couldn’t stop thinking about the day when we would have been like that in our old age, gifting each other flowers, cooking for our Sunday lunches with the rest of the family, maybe our children and their grandkids.

For the moment, we were that. His skin reddened around his cheekbones when he laughed or drank, we stayed up talking until it was too late

to go to sleep but also too early to get up. And we had days like these.

I did the same thing with his legs, his arms, his torso, and eventually we were both ready to get dressed.

“Wait here, I’ll bring you clean clothes,” I said, hurrying out of the bathroom. From his closet, I chose the most comfortable pair of sweat-pants and hoodie.

“Lift your—” I stopped, clearing my throat. “Your majesty, could you please lift your arms?”

He did it. I pushed the sweater down, and when his head popped out of it, I smiled at his fluffy hair setting down in soft curls. I kissed them.

“Are you kissing your king, peasant?” Sebastian said, sitting straighter, his tone suddenly like that of an old monarch.

“I apologize, your highness.”

“I mean, why only once?”

I wrapped my arms around his chest and sank in the small space between his shoulder and his neck, leaving light kisses there. “What’s your next order?”

“A good breakfast.”

I bowed again. “On it, sir.” I bent, taking him in my arms, and I looked into his eyes in the reflection of the mirror. “Your means of transport is here again.”

“It’s okay,” Sebastian said, touching my arm.

I offered a hand in humble service anyway.

I learnt how to make eggs Benedict on my own when I was twenty and I couldn’t manage to wake up earlier than ten every morning, so instead of having two meals I had a brunch every day.

The recipe is easy, but the results depend on many things that are sometimes out of your control. First, you need a pot deep enough. Then, you need to boil the amount of water you’d use to make pasta for three people and add vinegar. Once it’s boiling, take a spoon and create a vortex in the water, and when it’s spinning fast enough, crack the egg. Let it be swallowed by the water.

It’s a delicate science, much like the game we were playing that day. I knew depression can make you feel powerless and worthless. I knew that

carrying him around could have made him feel worse. I also knew that sometimes, the weirdest things can make you feel loved, like someone remembering your coffee order, or carefully choosing rocks on the beach to give you.

I looked at the egg in its half shell, the water and vinegar spinning, and I prayed for it to turn out the best egg Benedict in the history of eggs Benedict, and for our day to be better than the other ones.

Right that day, though, while my boyfriend was going through hard times and I was betting on way too much for this to fail miserably, the egg did it. The transparent filaments quickly turned white, twirling fast, hugging the yolk. The water kept on boiling. I exhaled a satisfied *ha!* and showed Sebastian my creation once it was cooked.

He smiled proudly.

I also prepared some cheese using the heart-shaped cookie cutter we had bought for Valentine's Day and cut the cheese and bread into little heart-shaped slices.

At the end, our half morning looked rich in the rising golden sunlight, the temperature slowly getting warmer now that it was finally April. In front of us, the cheesy (put intended) sandwiches, a cup of coffee and a glass of water with fresh mint and lemon juice, sauteed veggies, and beautiful, soft eggs Benedict as fresh as we could get them.

Sebastian looked at them. Slowly, he lifted his fork and poked them. The orange core bled out slowly, creamy and warm like he wanted. He looked up at me and smiled. "Good job, sir Dan."

I bowed my head. "Thank you, my king," I said.

We ate in silence. We never had great conversations over food. While he took every piece of food and tasted it, taking his time, I cleaned my plate and sat back.

By the time he, too, was done, the playlist I had put on for our bath had ended.

"Can you put up some music again, please?" Sebastian asked me.

"Of course." I chose something a little more lively at that point. It was almost noon. We needed to enjoy the day as much as we could.

"We should live like nocturnals, once," he said, when I fell back on my chair again. "We should spend a whole night doing something and then

sleep all day and then wake up the following night and live like that for a couple of days, just to see what it feels like.” Sebastian fumbled with the edge of the tablecloth. “I wonder if it feels different, if it feels lonely or safe.”

“Maybe it feels like something entirely different,” I suggested, stretching, letting my hands interlock behind my head.

He nodded. “Usually, what people are afraid of never happens, and the things they think they know what they’ll be like are nothing like that.”

“What’s the thing that surprised you the most in your life?” I heard myself ask him.

Sebastian didn’t move. He kept fumbling with the cloth. I could see words forming on his lips and just slipping away, unimportant, disregarded. “Is there anything really surprising?”

“Have you ever made a surprised face?”

He lifted his eyes, stopping. “I can lie with my expression.”

“Why would you do that?”

“So that my mom would think I’m not an asshole when she tells me of her friend’s new baby?”

I had to laugh. “New life. That is definitely surprising.”

He looked away. “There isn’t much to do, here, anyway.”

“The town isn’t that bad, come on.”

“I mean on Earth. You work and run and sweat and in the end it’s all for the same thing: not working. Going on holiday, taking days off. How can you work only to have days off?”

I sighed. “Of course, you’re right. There is no reason to work, and there is no reason to do almost everything we do.”

“Then why do we do it?”

“Life-long satisfaction is almost impossible. Imagine eating your favorite food everyday: it gets boring. The same goes for that awesome job, those summer holidays, everything.”

He took in a long breath and blinked, still looking down at the cloth.

I leaned on my forearms. “I’m trying to say that there is no *outside* reason why people do what they do. They play basketball because it’s fun. They eat because they’re hungry. They watch movies because they want to do that, watch a movie. There is no secret meaning behind those things,

no underlying key to unlocking the benefits that they will give you. Diets often use the phrase ‘because it’s good for you’ to make you drink smoothies. Well, life doesn’t work like that for most people, nor does it work like that for me. I don’t drink the smoothie for any other reason than the smoothie itself.”

Sebastian nodded, slowly taking in what I had said.

“It’s just my way of seeing the world, though. I might be wrong,” I added.

“So, you date me for the sake of dating me and nothing else,” he stated.

“Yes,” I said. “Of course. Because it’s you.”

He looked away. The sun reflected in his eyes, turning them almost transparent.

“Do you date me for other reasons?” I asked him.

“I don’t know.” He looked down again, his fingers tracing patterns on the table. “I can’t do life without direction. Dating you is the most dangerous thing I’ve ever done.”

I had to giggle. “The most dangerous thing you’ve ever done was bungee jumping after having dessert.”

Finally, a smile appeared on his lips. “And whose idea was that?”

I nodded. “Right.” I got up just to kneel in front of him. “What’s your next order, your highness?”

And just like that, our day went on.

The unTangling of Transcendence in Tragic Times

By Koji A. Dae

A born drifter with plenty of dark stories, Koji A. Dae now finds herself strangely settled in Bulgaria with two kids, a cat, and a whole lot of responsibility. She writes about things mothers see from the corner of their hearts and all varieties of human relationships -- with each other, with technology, and with the greater universe. Her work has appeared in Clarkesworld, Apex Magazine, Zooscape, Daily Science Fiction, and elsewhere.

The three of us were having sex when the first bomb hit the city. From Jerry's soundproof bedroom, it sounded like a thunderstorm, some distant grumbling, the occasional crack, and a constant pattering; could have been rain for all we knew. With each explosion, we tensed and clung to each other. We slowed, like cautious animals, untamable. Nothing can be done about thunderstorms. You get struck by lightning, life goes on.

Inside our little bubble, we were all skin and sweat, slipping over each other. The excitement and fear made us fall in love. The sex thing was routine now. A bottle of whiskey and the early morning hours weren't uncharted territory. But that night was different. As our city crumbled around us, we fused into a unit.

Me, him, her: us.

Things were far from simple, but tangled in that mess and pressed by inevitability, they were easy. Light exploded in the window, one of us came, we were terrified and ecstatic.

Jerry and I liked to put Katherine between us. Each of us leaned on her while waiting in line for provisions or news of our loved ones who seemed long gone in the gray chaos of evacuation. She doled out cigarettes by the drag, but was liberal with her kisses. We flanked her during approved exercise periods, always close enough for her to give us a playful, backhanded smack when we got too boisterous.

"There's a war on," she would hiss between clenched teeth.

While slurping watered-down soup at community dinners, I slipped her an extra bite of potato. Jerry gave her part of his roll. Even then, she

had seemed to be wasting away to nothing.

She needed us, and we needed her.

She was the mother who kept us in line and the child we had to protect. She was our fiery glue until she began to transcend.

That's what they called it, because they had to call it something. Since we'd already had a pandemic followed by wars popping up around the globe, the media went with a more hopeful label for the latest unknown plaguing us. They said it wasn't an illness or reaction to chemical warfare, and I believed them only because whatever transcendence might have been, it seemed impossible. People simply faded away. They became translucent, then clear, then nothing. Experts said it was the next step of human evolution—the transcendence to a purely spiritual state. I didn't believe them. Wasn't transcendence rising above? We were drowning in sorrow and exhaustion. I could feel us sinking. But arguing with experts was pointless. They were little more than heads in our phones (the few that still worked) and voices on the radio. They didn't listen to our reality.

By the time Katherine started, a few of our acquaintances had already transcended. We no longer had friends. Pandemic bubble. War exclusion. The three of us were a family unit and the friends we once had faded away. Figuratively at first, then literally. By then they were too distant for us to care, but Katherine's transcendence was up close—a painfully slow process we could see and feel.

It started with her hair. Once bright red and falling over Jerry's chest as we lay in bed, it turned brassy, then milky, and finally clear, like fiber optics sprouting from her scalp. It was still soft to touch and beautifully confusing as it slipped between my fingers. I will admit I experienced a thrill as I stroked her hair. This was something new and different. It had been so many months since our life was more than sex and depressing meals that barely settled the growling of our stomachs. The cigarettes and alcohol had long since disappeared, leaving us with drab apartment walls and only skin to amuse us.

The internet was always up and down. A satellite destroyed, a new one deployed. We gave up on doom scrolling and spent our hours kissing Katherine's freckles until her skin went out with the same flickering as the

net. There, then gone, and one morning there were no love-spots to count. We could see her sinew and muscle and watch her heart race.

It can be addicting, watching the dilation of your lover's veins and seeing the exertion you drive her to. Jerry focused on the heart. I liked the way her lungs expanded, then collapsed when she sighed.

I caressed her clear skin. Jerry kissed her see-through neck. The bombs fell closer, hitting still standing apartment buildings as if they were cleaning up a level in a video game. Can't miss the extra points. One of those buildings might contain a prize.

We were no longer certain whether Katherine shook from the blasts or pleasure. No longer certain it mattered. We kept her between us, the three of us pulsing like some alien with six arms and six legs tangled around one giant heart.

In her final days, we didn't leave the apartment. She didn't want strangers to see through her—that was a privilege reserved for her lovers. And love her we did. We made love until, quite unexpectedly, her clear bubble of skin and translucent organs burst in waterfalls around us.

Jerry and I fell through the wet patch that once was our love and, for the first time, he and I touched skin to skin, our sweat blending in her memory. I was uncertain where her mess ended and Jerry's began.

We went still, his skin warm and solid beneath my hand.

He opened his mouth to speak, but I covered it with mine. His moan was lost in another explosion. This time we were uncertain if these were bursting people or falling bombs. But did it matter anymore?

Our contact was messy and tragic. We grabbed at each other with an urgency that was either meant to keep Katherine alive or push us into the place she went. Transcendence or no, it had to be better than this place.

Our undiluted kisses were tangy and metallic. His tongue held traces of her last cigarette.

Another bomb fell, and I wished us clear as we pressed into each other, slick sweat and the tiniest glimmer of hope.

All You Hear Is My Voice

by Tasha A. Jones

Tasha A. Jones (she/her) is a queer writer with ADHD who enjoys many genres, especially science fiction and fantasy. When she isn't shoveling her driveway during a Canadian winter, she enjoys playing games, meeting new people, and drinking delicious tea to warm up.

I wasn't able to keep a thought to myself for the last three years. Most people have control over what they share with others. I was happy for them, but I wasn't one of them. I wasn't oversharing—allegedly, there's medically nothing wrong with me—but everyone was hearing my thoughts. And I mean everyone.

It was infrequent at first. It started when I hit puberty, then for the next decade it worsened, until no thought was private.

Despite the challenges it presented in social situations, I had managed to land a decent-paying job. I worked as a park attendant at a nature park on Mars.

I still had to work with people, but it was only a few dozen a day, and for no more than a minute. At some point I learned how to hide it—the personal thoughts at least—by repeating a word, over and over until the transaction was complete.

“Hello?” asked a young man, politely waving from his rover to get my attention.

“Oh. Yes. Hi, how long will you be staying?” I asked. Before I could hide my thoughts, I caught a glimpse of him and I was doomed.

He was handsome, from what I could tell through the window of the surface suit he wore. I blushed, thinking about an impossible scenario where he wasn't put off by my thoughts *and* he was gay. Or bi, or pan. Queer in the right direction. Whatever he needed to be to have one date with him. I hadn't had a date since my thoughts had become public.

“Just a day pass, please,” he said. He showed no sign of disgust. I stared for a beat too long into his eyes.

“Can I get your name? For safety reasons, of course,” I said. It was true. We needed to know who was staying for how long, in case they got lost. Oxygen tanks only lasted so long. But I asked because I wanted to know his name. He was the first person not put off by my thoughts.

“Of course,” he said.

That smile made my heart flutter.

“Caleb.”

“A-and your last name?” I asked. I didn’t want to screw up the first normal conversation in years. And the one in a billion chance at love.

“Woods.”

No one used electronic money anymore, not since the collapse of the stock market, so he handed me the cash through the booth’s tiny air lock for money and receipts. I considered scrawling my number on the back of his. “Enjoy your stay.”

“You too,” he said, then hurried off as if he was embarrassed.

Had he heard me? I fought off the downward thought spiral that threatened to replace my thoughts of him with feelings of shame. I couldn’t let myself fall into that again. Those thoughts *really* pushed people away.

An hour later I was still thinking about him. Wishing upon Sol, the only star during the day, that he hadn’t found my thoughts repulsive, and that maybe I could muster the courage to give him my number on his way out.

My shift was coming to an end, and I still hadn’t seen him. *Perhaps*, I thought, *he’s lost, and he needs me to save him*. It was a silly thought, and of course I didn’t wish him harm, only that I needed extraordinary circumstances to have a shot with him.

“Hey, Brody?” asked Caleb on his way out.

“Yes?” I said, suppressing hope. A blush betrayed me.

“Would you be interested in... uh, maybe you’d like to call me sometime?” he asked, as he dropped his card into my air lock.

“Why aren’t you repulsed by me?” I regretted it the moment the words left my mouth. Maybe the speaker would jam and he wouldn’t hear it. I reached for the card, pressing my glove against it, as if it would have some sway in his answer.

He gave me a puzzled look. “Why would I find you repulsive?”

I explained my reverse telepathy problem, leaving out the most embarrassing stories, and how many times I undressed him in my mind. My condition wasn’t just uncommon, it was rare. Until people heard the first stray thought, most thought it was a myth—if they knew about it at all.

“I see,” he said, pausing for a moment.

I didn’t breathe as I waited for his response. I must’ve been purple by the time he spoke.

“I’ve only heard what you’ve said aloud,” he said, reassuring me with his warm smile. “If you’re not interested in a date, I understand.”

“I—yes. I would like a date, please,” I said. I couldn’t help my desperation. An acquaintance was more than I could’ve hoped for, but a date? I thanked whichever forces in the universe made this happen, and said, “I’m almost done my shift, if you’re free now?”

Caleb sighed with relief. He waited the fifteen minutes or so until my replacement arrived, and I climbed in beside him in the two-seat rover he drove.

He took me to a nearby lookout point, and we talked for hours until Sol met the horizon. He was handsome. He was kind. He was *still here*.

He took me back to my place, a secluded little dome outside the city. I’d wanted—no, needed—this kind of connection. It couldn’t end so soon.

“Would you like to come inside for a bit?” I asked, my heart stopping.

Caleb nodded, putting my heart back in rhythm, and he followed me into the air lock. It was small, meant only for one person. He pressed his shoulder into mine. I almost felt the heat from his body through our insulated suits. If all went well, I would feel it soon. The air lock hissed as it equalized the pressure.

When we were out of our surface suits and seated on my couch, he leaned in toward me, then pulled away with a nervous laugh. *He was going to kiss me.*

It had been so long since I connected with someone like this, so long since I’d been touched, or held. What was a kiss going to feel like? I

waited for him to make a move, until I remembered that he couldn't hear my thoughts.

“Do you want to kiss me?” I asked, failing to hide the stupid grin that was spreading across my face.

He leaned in again, this time with confidence. He tilted my chin with his hand, my skin tingling where we touched.

Caleb paused a moment before our lips touched. I rested my hand on his chest. Beneath my fingertips his heart raced against mine.

His soft lips grazed mine, then he took my bottom lip between his. Something exploded through me, but it wasn't just excitement and lust. It was relief, companionship, and kindness, chasing out the loneliness and self-doubt. It was a wish come true.

The Deepest Blue

by Thomas Kent West

Thomas Kent West is a queer writer of speculative fiction. He is the winner of the Rue Morgue Magazine “Artifacts of Horror” Contest and the Black Hole Comics Short Fiction Prize. In 2023, his work was shortlisted for the Uncharted Magazine Novel Excerpt Prize, judged by New York Times Bestseller Sequoia Nagamatsu. His stories have been featured in online and print publications such as Maudlin House, Flash Fiction Magazine, Vanishing Point Magazine, and The Spotlong Review. More information is available at thomaskentwest.com.

The first thing I remembered was sand. And sand so unlike what I’d felt as a boy in the ocean’s depths, where it plumed in glorious clouds behind fleeing fish, where it poured in chthonic rivers from the plains of island-shallows down to the black depths where my father kept his throne.

No, this sand was hard, grating against my new skin. And hot—not warm, not even like shallow water in sunlight, but searing, like I imagined fire to be. And with the sun burning my naked back, I was fire too; it surrounded me. Became me.

My body ached with the memory of the crushing depths. How quickly that which was once my home conspired to kill me; how the once-cerulean water was suddenly dense and cold and deep blue, crushing my brand-new skin like a desperate hand. How soon love becomes desperate; how quickly your home can vanish in its wake.

My lower half was still cold, in that familiar way, still wet; I lifted my head from the sand, brown locks matted with it, and, looking at my lower half, discovered that I had feet. I marveled at them for a moment, and the legs they were attached to, and wiggled everything around in stupid joy. I took time to inspect all three new appendages, especially the third, the most curious of them all. Merfolk had no need for such banal organs, being more spirit than creature, and yet I quickly found that there was something pleasant about the experience.

That was how the prince found me; naked, sand covered, brown from the sun and splashing in the shallows, exploring myself. I wondered if the prince finding me there was part of the bargain that I’d paid so dearly for, or if it was only luck. I could not remember; the memory of the sea-witch

was like a dark dream, vanishing in the daylight. Still, I hoped that his finding me ashore was part of the bargain. The cost I paid was too high for anything less: a home. A family. Sisters. A father. A kingdom. A voice. All for him, this human boy I'd never met, only watched, from the depths, as he rode along the sea.

I didn't ask my father for permission, nor my sisters. I knew what they would say, and if I had stopped to ask them, they never would have let me leave. Of course, my sisters knew I'd fallen in love with the human prince from the moment I rescued him from the shipwreck. They'd kept it from my father as best they could, but nothing stays from the ears of the Sea-King, when all the creatures of the water are his subjects. He heard of the days I spent near the shore, waiting for the prince to come riding along, as he did each morning since the shipwreck. I was certain he was looking for me.

My father bellowed. He boomed. He brought cyclones of water and made storms crash in the sky, and summoned cadres of sharks and eels and darker creatures from the black deep. *No son of mine*, he said, *will love a human man*. I fled his palace of basalt and emerald, tail carrying me as fast as the currents, until I was alone at last, holed up in some dreadful cave where no one, not even my father, could reach me. That's when the sea-witch came, found me, at my most vulnerable, and offered me her bargain: in the morning, I would be transformed into a human. And if I could convince the prince to marry me, then I would be able to live a human life, and claim a human soul—something merfolk do not have.

But if I failed to marry the prince, then I would forfeit my eternal life and turn back into the sea foam from which I was made. And in payment for her magic, I would give the sea-witch my voice, forever.

I was so convinced that the Prince loved me that I accepted.

I didn't even know his name.

The prince trotted towards me on the palomino he rode each morning. He wore a white coat, open-chested, over dark skin. Wind flurried his hair, dark strands waving like bird's feathers.

He hopped down from his horse, as huge and glorious as he was, and looked all around him, as if curious of where I came from. To my surprise,

he waded into the water, curling up his trousers as he went. He stopped ten paces from me, then called out something in the human tongue. I never learned that language—father would never allow it—and even if I knew what he was saying, I could not have said a word back to him.

He tried again, speaking slower, deliberately, as though I were simple. And Gods Below I felt simple, looking at him; his square jaw, rounded at the bottom; a soldier's body beneath his prince's coat; brown-green eyes that glinted like wet wood in the sunlight. And a smile, a smile that gleamed and dazzled and seemed to catch the sun. A mouth full of pearls.

I stood up from the water, wobbling like an infant. It was the first time I stood, and I was shocked at the pain that accompanied it. Every wary step I took was like stepping on glass.

When he could see that I didn't understand, he smiled and shook his head. I didn't know enough, yet to be ashamed of touching that curious new appendage. I'd stopped, but still held myself in my hand. He gestured to it, his other hand placed on his waist, like my naïveté amused him.

He ducked down, cupped the sea with his hand, and splashed me. I was shocked at first, then I laughed; he was playing. I returned the splash, and then another, and soon we were running and jumping in the water, under the glittering jewel of the sky. The day was a turquoise set in a fastening of sand and sea. It didn't even matter that each step was agony; it was worth it, to run with him.

He tackled me unexpectedly. We plunged into the water, and I panicked, never having needed to hold my breath before. Then in a moment we were above the surf again, and he was holding me by the arms, looking into my eyes.

He laid a kiss as gently as he could on my cheek, then forehead, then lips; prickles of the invisible hairs around his mouth were like the spines of a sea creature, each one filled with poison. It melted me, there, into foam.

Who is to say what the people of the castle thought? The young prince bringing home a strange boy, found on the beach, naked and mute? And how the two became fast friends, how this strange simpleton became the prince's most beloved servant, even allowing him to warm his bed at

night? Such things were not strange in his kingdom—male friends shared beds together as any others might, to stay warm on cold nights. If I had been a woman, maybe then they would have guessed. But as it stood, I became another feature of the prince's regalia: his crown, his sword, and his mute cupbearer, towed along at his side.

I thought, at first, that I'd won the sea-witch's game. After the kiss on the beach, the Prince and I were inseparable. I followed him everywhere, running alongside his horse, even though each step I took on land was agony. Even though every time I climbed a hill with him, or ran along the beach, or danced with him in his chambers, it felt as though my feeble, newly-made legs were breaking. I did all of this with a smile, because I loved him. I felt lucky to be with him, even through the pain. For him, I would have danced on glass forever.

We'd share our bed each night, and I satisfied his hungers as best I could, knowing so little of humanity and their needs. Afterward, he would caress my hair, hum a song his mother used to sing to him, and all was well. Sometimes, in the distance, I'd hear the crash of the sea against the castle's shore, and think of family: of my father, of my sisters. Of the friends I'd made and abandoned. But here, in his arms, in that bed, I found something I never had before: the makings of a human soul.

My sisters had explained this to me when I was a young boy—how merfolk, being spirits of water, lived for centuries until, having spent themselves, they fell away into sea-foam and ceased to exist. Human beings, in comparison, lived hardly any time at all. Eighty years, sometimes a hundred. But when they died, their soul went on, finding new bodies or going up to heaven, so they never really died at all. And I remembered thinking how lovely it must be to have a soul; to be seen in the eyes of God. To be welcome. I wondered if I could ever truly become human. If somehow, I could move from the edges of the world to the center.

And here I began to feel it; laying in bed with him, his large arms wrapped around my slender ones. I could feel his heartbeat. And each day, as I took him into my body or he took mine in his, I could feel him falling in love with me. I could feel a little bit of that heartbeat spread, like a drop of dye into water, from his body into mine. And day by day, I was growing a soul.

It was a year or two into life at the palace when the prince began to participate in the ruling of his kingdom. His father called on him to make decisions, and take diplomatic trips, and attend balls. And in all these things he did his best to include me, his old childhood friend. But often he could not. By this point I'd learned to understand the human tongue, although I could not speak it. Instead, the Prince and I created our own language, simply using our hands. Often he would ask about my past, although I could not tell the truth, bound as I was by my pact with the sea-witch. So I remained elusive, although I longed to tell him all of it: *I am a prince from under the sea. I have loved you from afar for so long, and I gave up everything to be with you. All I ask is that you love me in return.*

Once, I asked him to marry me. Or I approximated it. I made all the right hand signs, I thought. But clearly it didn't work: he simply laughed, and insisted I was confused.

It was after one of his diplomatic missions that he brought back his would-be wife. She was a princess, with glittering dark hair and eyes like chips of crystal. The woman came from the neighboring kingdom, and for generations the two lands had been seeking to join their houses and end the horrible war between them. The wedding could not be delayed; it would take place at first light.

At first, I was confused. He explained to me, sitting in his chambers, that I would always be his friend. That this marriage changed nothing; that once the political alliance was secured—and few healthy heirs produced—we could go back to our life as usual.

I shook my head, not understanding, and signed that it was I, not this woman, who he should marry.

He laughed again and said that I had made that joke before.

But I signed it to him more fervently, insisting that if it was *me* that he loved, then he should marry me. This seemed simple to me at the time; I had always assumed that love was the natural predecessor to marriage. That nothing—not sex, not species—would get in the way of that one true, good thing. I did not yet understand the implications of reproduction, not on the emotional or political levels. How could I? I'd been crafted by my father from the foam of a crashing wave; I had no mother.

But I could not give him children, and so we could never be married. A kingdom needed heirs. He explained this, to his credit, as gently as he could. After all these years, he still thought me simple because I couldn't speak. But I signed, more aggressively, interrupting him:

You do love me, I said, don't you?

And he stopped. The look on his face said what I needed to hear. I stood and ran from the room. Every step was like walking on glass.

I ran down the corridors and stairwells of the castle and out to the wall that faced the sea. There was a railing there, but if there hadn't been I would have flung myself into the deep, to become foam, to disintegrate. I felt the little piece of a soul he gave me—the little light that had started to feel, just barely, like humanity—vanishing. Going out like a candle-flame robbed of air.

I stepped over the balcony and clung to the side, the wind threatening to knock me over, dash me against the rocks below. It was only then, moments before I cast myself off, that I spotted, among the rocks, the plume of white hair that marked my eldest sister Serabel.

She floated in the water, with only her head visible above the surf. Beneath, I could just make out the curling mass of her tail, the sharp crescent of her fin. Her hair swam around her, white and round as the moon, and her eyes shone up at me like light moving through water.

My brother, she said (into my mind, which is the way of merfolk, for we cannot speak where there is no air), word has come to us of your predicament. We know of the pact that you have made with the witch, and father's magicians have found a way to remove you from her power. You can return to the sea, to live out your immortal days among family.

How? I said, barely hanging onto the railing, *how can I return? I feel so foolish; I thought that he loved me, truly. Now I see that I was a child.*

Before sunrise tomorrow, Serabel said, before he is wed to the human girl. Before you turn back to the sea-foam from which you were made. Take this knife and plunge it into the prince's heart. Only then will the witch's pact be broken, and only then will you return to your true form. Go, brother; make haste. Dawn approaches, and your death with it. Kill thy lover; save thyself.

Serabel disappeared into the sea, her hair pluming behind her. As she

went, she flicked her fingers, and something began to form in my hand. It coalesced from the sea spray crashing against the rocks: a dagger, long and wicked, carved from fire-coral. I stared at it, my lightless eyes reflecting back.

I returned to the castle, the blade hidden inside my tunic. No one noticed the mute boy anymore; I was mere decoration to them. Even after years, they were not my family. The prince was not my family. I was an old toy, something found in his youth and discarded when it was no longer suitable to play with. These were the thoughts I used to steel myself as I took the long walk to that bloody chamber.

Once there, I slid the door open. The only light came through the curtains by the balcony, thin moonlight reflecting off the sea. The chamber felt like it was underwater, in that dark blue light. Linen curtains curled in the breeze, moonlit seaweed. In the distance, those waves. The sound of home.

I stepped towards the bed, slipping the dagger out of the folds of my tunic. In this light, the fiery orange seemed almost white. A shark's tooth, tinged with blood.

He was not alone in the bed. A head of dark, luxurious hair, tinged blue by the moonlight, lay on the pillow where I used to sleep. His new wife, less a day. She was beautiful in the moonlight, up close: I watched her delicate, regal features. A slender nose; eyebrows like black half-moons. Eyelashes fluttering as she dreamed.

I should have supposed he would call for her, really. I had run off, angry, fuming at him. Part of me wanted to believe it was my fault. And besides—there was no time to waste. An heir was needed to solidify the bond between their kingdoms; why not consummate a night early? It occurred to me that perhaps this had been happening all along, on his diplomatic ventures to her county. Perhaps this alliance was not purely political after all, I thought. Perhaps he was in love, and not with me, or not *only* with me. What would he do with the mute boy he'd once professed to love, once he had a wife who bore his children, who shared his bed, whom his father and mother doted on? He had the choice: a queen or a cupbearer. The answer was simple. Perhaps I should have felt acceptance, maybe

even happiness, that he would go on to sire sons. To be a father. To know a loving wife.

But I felt anguish. I felt grief. For him, yes, and for all the things I'd lost because of him. My old body. My sisters who loved me. My father who cared for me. The sea, my home. The soul I'd been promised. I wanted to wail. I could feel it rising in my throat, and yet the sound wouldn't come. I had no voice with which to scream.

I raised the dagger; tears pricked at my eyes, then erupted into streams. Rivers of grief. I looked down at him, my love, my lover; dark of hair and eye, dark of heart, his face resting peacefully on white satin. I wondered at his cruelty, at his callousness, and then wondered at my own. Could I kill him for not loving me as I loved him? And I realized that, yes, I could.

I knew then that I had no soul. I was not made for eternity, for God, for love—I was a creature of the darkness and the depths. Not a human being at all. As soulless and petulant as the sea.

I raised the dagger higher, crying silently as I did, and plunged it down.

Not into his stomach, but into mine.

Blood spilled; it bloomed in glorious patterns from my tunic. The pain was excruciating, glorious, divine. I'd never known anything as gut-wrenching, as perfect as that pain. And coupled with it, my lover's eyes, looking up at me. His face, splattered with my blood. His expression shocked.

His lips moved; I heard nothing. The princess, dark hair a mess, rose and screamed, ran out of bed and to the hall. I staggered backward, still clutching at the knife in my stomach, regretting—no, not regretting, but *wishing*. Wishing that, somehow, it could have ended differently.

The Prince rose, horror on his blood-stained face. I fell backward, toward the door and the balcony beyond, toward the sea below, that which called me back. Toward death.

My lover lurched towards me, begging me not to jump, hands moving frantically. But he paused. On his face, my blood had started to plume and expand, fading from red to gentle green. Human blood becoming the foam of the sea, as promised.

I looked down at my hands and saw the blood there had turned to

foam as well. And soon the knife—once stuck irretrievably in my stomach—came loose easily, clattering to the ground, streaming foam behind it. I reached out a hand to the Prince, but the hand quickly fell away, the fingers collapsing into foam as I stretched, in vain, toward the past.

The Prince lunged one more time. Too late. I fell backward over the railing, the wind tearing me apart, and scattered to the four corners of the sea.

In the palace of the Sea King there is no pain, or misery, or unhappiness. There is no trouble or strife. Each day the dolphins perform their dances in the waters above, and on the ground, crustaceans play an orchestra of stones. My sisters will swim about their currents, taking mere glances of the world above. They think nothing of humans. Of the meaning of a life with an ending. I wonder, then, what they make of me. The one who left, seeking something greater, and failed. I wonder.

Now I am the waves at sea. Now I am the foam that caps them. Now I am water and rain that coalesces into clouds, that drifts offshore and rains down mountainsides, making flowers bloom in spring. Now I am sea-foam, and all that touches it. I am not a human of the land or a spirit of the sea but something in between, and something at once less and more. I wonder.

In the cycle of waves to foam to spray to rain, I see things. I cross countries, dig rivers, water crops. I feed bodies, pass through them as though they were my own. And occasionally, I visit that distant kingdom of my youth, where my Prince still lives. He is old, now, as is his queen beside him. They had children, little princes and princesses with my lover's eyes. Most of them died young, to become rain, but some lived to be old and fat and happy.

I was a rain cloud over that kingdom on the day my Prince died. I watched them burn his body, and it was my rains that quenched the flame, that lingered over the flavor of his ashes for a good while. I remembered the taste of leather and musk and old love, of seashore and sunshine and halcyon days. And when the sun rose in the morning and I turned from sea to steam to air, he rose up with me, and we ascended to the heavens together, in the mist and the ash.

Heroes

by Cecil Wilde

Cecil Wilde (they/them) is a storyteller based in Naarm (Melbourne, Australia). Their work is unapologetically queer, kind, and hopeful. They have been a regular contributor to Concrete Queers. If left unsupervised, they will nap anywhere.

You haven't seen a soul in person for two hundred and forty-seven days when he crashes through the window of your eighth-floor flat.

You know about superheroes, of course. They're the sort of thing that happens to other people. Like house fires, like lightning strikes. Like illnesses.

But he's here now, bleeding into your threadbare rug in his silly little outfit. You've seen his face on the news. It's just as well you switched out the coffee table for something smaller, something to keep water and medication within arm's reach, or he would've crashed through that, too.

He's dead, or close enough to it, when you manage to get up off the sofa. Then he gasps, ragged and sharp, and the eyes in his vaguely familiar face snap open, wild and glassy. They're green, and a striking green at that. You'd never noticed before.

"Sorry," he says, with a tightness you know yourself, and an accent that comes from a hundred miles west. "Sorry, hate to be a bother. See myself out. Have a lovely day."

Between apologies, he limps to the door, and slips through it with only the softest click of the lock engaging.

Your window is replaced the next day, and your rug. Exactly the same, minus a stranger's blood.

The next time, he doesn't crash through the window. He climbs through it.

"D'you mind if I just...lie here a minute?" he asks, one eye swollen shut, as he collapses onto the rug again. "Promise not to bleed on it this time."

You make tea, and realise only when you wrap your hands around your own mug how painful your fingers are today.

He sits on your rug, and drinks his tea, and then disappears again.

The third time, he coughs up blood on your kitchen floor.

The fourth, he sheepishly eats his way through your protein bar stash—every one you have, from everywhere you leave them around the place for when you can't quite get up to eat. It hurts, he confesses. It hurts so much, all the time.

You know the feeling, so you don't mind.

There's a whole case of them delivered in the morning.

He knocks at the window, the fifth time. Clinging to the frame, eyes crumpled with pain as he looks in at you.

"You've still got that bruise," he says when you let him in, covered in them himself. You hadn't realised he noticed.

"I heal slowly."

You make tea. He heals quickly.

You haven't seen another soul, apart from him, in two hundred and eighty-four days. You have not left your flat in as long. You do not leave your flat, if you can help it, for anything.

No one but him comes to you. Not even through the front door.

You kiss him, over a split through his lip. When you take him to bed, he bends the frame, but leaves nothing worse than stubble rash on your skin.

"You must be a prince," he murmurs between sleepy kisses as you both drift off. "That's who they keep in towers."

"I'm not," you insist. "Just sick."

He shakes his head, and kisses you again, and the heat of his body soothes the worst of your aches. "You're a lot more than that."

In the morning, the space beside you is empty, but the mattress is warm. A note scrawled in an untidy hand reads I've had a lovely time.

You don't follow the news, really. It all seems so distant, here in your tower. It happens to people who live out in the world.

So it's not until the sun sets and you can see the eerie glow through his window that you check your phone with a sinking feeling. Unexplained explosion. Serious fight. Villain apprehended.

He's not among the pictures. He must have been there.

You wait. You wait. You pace, and when pacing turns to agony, you crawl into the space he slept in last night and cry yourself unconscious.

You find him on the rug, stained deep red. You sit beside him and watch him die. And watch him die. And watch him die.

And then you watch him live.

No one ever comes to you for help. You are no longer useful. But he lets you hold him while he sobs his way through coming back, and it feels like helping.

"That wasn't very brave of me," he says, still shaky, still wrecked. You stroke his hair, brushing away flakes of dried blood.

"I don't want you brave," you say. "I want you alive."

It isn't fair, that the way his body is obliges him to be a hero. It isn't fair that yours does, either.

He leaves, as he always does.

A man you nearly don't recognise past his thick acrylic-framed glasses, in a shapeless jumper that hides his frame, stands at your door with a shy smile and a bunch of supermarket flowers. He's not injured. There's no emergency.

"I know it's a cliché," he says. "The glasses. But they work."

You nod.

"I don't think I want to be a hero anymore," he says, fidgeting with the flowers. "I think I just want to be alive."

You know. You tell him that. You tell him that's all you want, as well.

And you let him inside.

Lonely Pit Stop

by Venus Fultz

Venus Fultz is a non-binary writer (he/him) who enjoys prodding and pushing the boundaries of form and genre in writing. He received his MFA in Fiction at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. His creative work is forthcoming at Resurrection Mag and can be found at Marrow Magazine, Wrongdoing Magazine, and BubbleLitMag. He enjoys cooking and writing sappy love poems to the Moon.

“What’s that on your neck? A hickey?”

Boss gives a wry grin, and the cigarette between her pale lips bobs up.

“It’s an old burn,” she says, plucking the cigarette.

A plume of smoke follows, encroaching upon Micah, sending xem into a coughing fit. Boss is usually good enough to smoke when Micah is out of range, unless of course xe is being nosy. It’s only been three weeks since Micah started, and Boss still won’t chat about herself. Doesn’t care much to hear Micah chat about xemself either though. Prefers the crackle of racing updates over the radio or centuries old jazz tunes humming through the sweaty workdays. It was unsettling at first, only the radio and whirr, scrape, and hum of the shop. When Micah’d worked at Pa’s salon back home there was always chit chat fighting with the snip of scissors, hiss of dryers, and beat of the latest synth Pa kept playing in the background.

“You coulda just said,” xe musters between coughs, voice dry and wheezy from the smoke.

“And you could’ve kept your trap shut. Now stop asking pointless questions and find me that exhaust pipe for the B-24J Liberator.”

Xe would groan, but Boss’s raised rusty eyebrows is warning enough so xe scuttles off to file through the boxes and piles of discarded automobile, plane, and spaceship parts. When xe moves aside a large cylinder a plume of dust and the foulness of old grease breathes into the summer heat. Xe recoils, stomach churning, and almost regrets the greasy meatball sandwich for lunch.

“It wouldn’t be in that pile,” Boss says as she presses what’s left of her cigarette against her workbench, the slim body folding onto itself while kernels of nicotine spill onto the wood. She flicks the mess onto the floor, but some of the seeds remain in the whorls of the table, like gravel in a wound.

“Where then?”

“Probably upstairs in the storage room.”

“Right,” xe mutters but is thankful not to have to rifle through the piles of junk. Three weeks and xe is still trying to figure out Boss’s organization system.

The metal stairs whine under xyr weight and xe can feel the heat the metal has collected from the day. Upstairs has only two rooms: Boss’s room and a storage room for the more fragile and rare parts, though Micah has some opinions on what is rare and what is just out of date. Xe goes to the door on the left and opens it to a puff of humid, stale air. It’d be swell if Boss would update the place with some air-conditioning, but she’s too cheap for that, preferring to spend her earnings on more parts, whether needed or not. Never know when an outdated or brand-new ship will cruise into their lonely pit stop. It’d be ridiculous if it didn’t actually work. No other reason for rich city dwellers and mercenary pilots to stop by a lonely pit stop boasting only a sad diner, fuel station, and the garage so far outside the city. Certainly it isn’t Boss’s charm breeding customer loyalty.

The windows in there are sealed and screened over to prevent damage from the harsher UV rays. For such a well-insulated room, you’d think there would be meticulous organization, but nope. Just a slap-dash more of organization than downstairs.

“Just let me know when you’re ready for me to organize this junk yard,” Micah calls down, and swears that xe can hear Boss chuckling in response. Xe pushes up xyr sleeves determined to not have to spend more than half an hour looking for the damn part.

The sun is half gone on the rocky horizon by the time Micah collapses in defeat among xyr perfectly organized delicate piles of parts. Xe watches the daylight shrink along the walls, trying to ignore the feel of sweat and dirt mingled in the crevices of xyr skin. If xe asked for help now, xe might as well admit xe wasn’t really qualified for this job. Just another jobless

kid after the economy had slipped. Micah wasn't the enthusiastic mechanic xyr resume promised, just needed money to send back to Pa and Dad to keep the salon open. It helped that Dad had been determined that his children should know how to fix a cruiser in case of an emergency so xe knew the basics. This job wasn't about fixing everyday transport, though. Unless it was illegal, rare, or state-of-the art Boss didn't even glance at it. Why she'd hired Micah was still a mystery. Gumption, she'd half-muttered the second day xe'd started working but what that really meant was she just needed someone to keep track of schedules and messages, and she already had Alaska for all that. Micah stared at the organized parts, silently begging the part xe needed to miraculously appear.

If xe went back downstairs without the part Boss wouldn't say anything, but xe knew xe'd have to come back up here tomorrow to search for it, unless of course the customer who needed it was the lady coming by tomorrow. If that was the case then Micah was gonna have to stay all night. There was no choice then; xe couldn't risk losing another job when the salon was barely hanging on. Even Fern had put a pause on her volunteer work with the archeology museum to get a job. No use being a sorry sap, though. If Boss needed the part by tomorrow xe better keep at it.

As xe organized more, the door opened.

"I'm sure I've almost found it," Micah said, feeling Boss's cigarette smoke winding up to xem like a terra pet.

"Looks good in here."

Micah turned to see Boss holding two mugs of coffee, one with considerably more cream than the other. Just like Micah preferred.

"Um, yeah well, Dad always said you'll never find anything if you don't clean."

Boss grunted, and Micah felt like xe was six again and just insulted xyr teacher's lack of effort in style and appearance.

"Not that--"

"I found the part at my work bench, too much flotsam and jetsom clogging my eye-sight, y'know. Was easier when Prageeta was around, but well, girl was meant to roam the stars."

Boss held out the coffee for Micah, letting xyr scramble to stand. Xe took a grateful sip, keeping his mouth busy to stay the temptation prod

more about Prageeta and why she was in the stars and not with Boss. Was it a former wife, business partner, kid?

“Perhaps you could tackle the workbench tomorrow. Alaska keeps ordering storage stuff, the most efficient and high-tech he assures me. But I’ve really no idea what to do with it and he’s too busy running up the client hospitality card with brunches he promises are why the younger clients stay. And well, with this economy, can’t argue with that.”

Micah just stared over xyr coffee mug, confused. This was the first time Boss had ever talked to xem for more than a few rough chuckles and grunted responses.

“So tomorrow you might as well find some use for the damn storage tech Alaska bought before you joined the team. It’s on the company card after all, can’t be wasting money. Not in this economy.”

Boss was staring down into her own half drunk mug, cigarette lonely between her fingers. It reminded Micah of when Pa complimented his stylists. All business with a veneer of detachment when really, he was so proud underneath. Not that Boss would be proud right now, but that same ruddy-cheek half grin half grumble was familiar as home and it loosened the anxiety Micah had been worrying at all day.

“I’ll get on it after my coffee break.”

“Right.”

The scratchy announcement of racers came up from downstairs, taking back Boss’s attention, grumbling something under her breath. Micah looked back at the organized piles xe’d made and smiled into xyr coffee.

Autism, Gender, and Authorial Voice

by Sara L. Uckelman

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We are all aware of the importance of diversity of voices in fiction, especially speculative fiction. I will take as a starting point in this essay that it matters whose stories get told, and by whom.

Diversity and representation come in many forms. Most commonly, we think of representation in the form of the presence of certain types of characters in stories, either central or peripheral—characters that deviate from the “norm,” that are “other” in some sort of way. Of course, central representation is better than peripheral, and both are better than *token* representation, which is often not any better than no representation at: we are all familiar with the gay best friend whose sole characteristics are being gay and supporting the main character. We are familiar with the lone autistic genius, whose behavior is excused because he is a genius, we are familiar with disabled characters who exist only to provide learning experiences for the main character. As writers, reviewers, and readers, we’ve all encountered stories where the author *thinks* they’re doing some minoritized community a service, but in fact they are not.

But there is another form of representation that gets talked about much less often, and that is representation via the ways of telling the stories themselves, regardless of the types of characters involved. This type of representation, through what I will call “authorial voice,” is the focus of the present essay, and I will look at it through the lens of autism, as this the lens through which my own experiences as a reader and a writer are filtered.

What, then, *is* an autistic “authorial voice”? What does it mean to tell a story “autistically”, or (perhaps better) *as* an autistic writer? There is of course no one single answer to this question. What I will do here is explore the ways in which my recognition of myself as autistic (knowledge I came to rather recently, and rather late in life) has resulted in my ability to embrace particular features of my own writing that maybe go against

traditional narrative expectations or standard writing advice—to develop an authorial “voice” of my own.

Until I began looking at my writing through an autistic lens, I often struggled with beta-reader feedback—not because I disagreed with it or had difficulty incorporating suggestions, but because the feedback seemed to be indicating a way of engaging with my story that was fundamentally different from the way that I engage with stories, not just my own but other people’s as well. It often felt that beta-readers were telling me they liked *the story*, but wanted it to be told in an entirely different way, a way which however they tried to articulate it, I simply couldn’t understand. One common complaint was that I spend “too much time in the character’s head,” and that everything is mediated through how a character perceives or interprets it.

It took doing an exercise on interiority vs. exteriority in a writing workshop for me to begin to understand the nature of the complaint. The exercise was simple: We were given passages from four or five different novels and told to highlight in one color anything that was an instance of “interiority,” that is, some insight into a character’s mind or inner world, and in another color any instance of “exteriority,” that is pure description or scene-setting that is independent of any character viewpoint. In reflecting this exercise back into my own writing, I realized what I struggle with is producing these non-interiority parts. It’s not that I don’t know what to describe, but that I don’t know how to *neutrally* describe it. If I were to factually describe the room I am in, I would struggle to do so without it ending up being just a laundry list—a well-lit office with painted paneled walls, three overfull bookshelves and an olive green couch, two desks that reflect the detritus of many years’ research, walls covered with paintings of various qualities. In order to take this laundry list and turn it into story-telling prose, I have to do it mediated through my own experiences.

The realization I had is this: That *this* is part of being autistic. I can’t separate the world from my experience of the world, from my constant sorting and classifying and organizing and determining meaning and trying to interpret and to understand, all the things that everyone else does automatically. Which means when I’m writing, *of course* I fall deeply into my character’s head, and every attempt to factually describe a scene or

situation is mediated through how that scene or situation impacts on the character and how they make sense of it.

This realisation also helped me to understand another aspect of writing which I struggle with, namely, dialogue. I often end up with characters who would rather hang on the fringes of things, who don't know how to express themselves fluently, whose anxiety ties their tongues and prevents them from engaging in the way that characters need to engage with each other in order for the story to be driven forward. When I am too deeply inside a character's head, I then experience their world in the way I experience my world, which, as noted above, is *entirely* mediated through how that scene or situation impacts on the character and how they make sense of it. This is a clear instance of the adage "write what you know": When I write characters that are close to my own heart and experiences, and are characters that I understand, I end up with characters who are like me. I do not understand people who can fluently express themselves in any given situation, who can dominate and direct a conversation, who are not constantly afraid of how they will be viewed or whether they will transgress the ordinary turn-taking norms of conversation.

"Write what you know" is one tried-and-true writing adage¹, and is one of the easiest ways for an autistic person to develop their own autistic authorial voice. However, doing so can result in crashing headlong into another tried-and-true writing adage, "show, don't tell. Of course, both of these adages are blunt hammers inadequate for the finessing a good story requires. Nevertheless, they wouldn't be so often repeated if there weren't kernels of truth in both of them. But what happens when there is a fundamental contradiction between the two, for me as an autistic writer?

The typical advice for "show, don't tell" usually concerns the portrayal of emotion, with authors being advised to focus on the body language and spoken words that demonstrate an emotion rather than factual statements about the emotions. But this assumes that the move from body language, etc., to identification of emotion is a straightforward, reliable process;

1 And one that is often misunderstood or misinterpreted: It is not saying "if you don't know about something (whether because it is something factual beyond your sphere of knowledge or some lived experience that you have not participated in), then you can't write about it." Rather, it is a challenge: If you don't know about something, and you want to write about it, you'd damn well better go and educate yourself.

and this is not at all how I experience either my own emotions or those of others. I do not take physical or external actions and interpret them as emotions, instead, I identify emotions and then determine what that appropriate outward physical manifestation of those emotions is.

Trying to conform my own neurodivergent experience of the world (“what I know”) with what neurotypical readers expect to be given in stories (“show, don’t tell”) became increasingly difficult before I understood where this fundamental mismatch came from. Now, I am able to exploit this mismatch in a way that helps me tell better stories and understand better how to tell them. Let me give two examples.

The first concerns “who gets to speak?” in my stories. While dialogue between characters can still cause me great difficulty, there is another writing context where I have no trouble at all writing characters who can speak to each other easily, in fully formed, well-developed, and distinct voices. This is when I have an external narrator, telling about events that they are not a part of. It isn’t an omniscient narrator perspective, but a *storyteller* narrator perspective; these are the sorts of stories which, at least in their initial drafts, start off with a “here we all are around the campfire, let me tell you a story” setting, stories that start off “They say...” or “It has been told,” or even “Once upon a time.” The story is told through a person, not a god or an “above” sort of view, but it is always told by someone who is in some sense external, or removed, or remote from the events they are narrating. In a sense, this is also a way of experiencing events mediated through the way in which they impact on people, it’s just that the people they’re impacting on are not the person telling the story. So, who gets to talk, in my stories?

The ones who are in the middle, acting and being acted upon, trying to interpret, failing to understand — they are the ones who struggle to communicate. It is the ones who are not a part of things who are the ones able to talk easily: They can stand on the fringes, observe, interpret, understand, communicate.

This non-omniscient, external-but-still-mediating narrator forms the basis of my second example. Another common type of beta-reader feedback I get is that there isn’t enough description. As a reader, I often skip over the more immersive scene-setting/describe all five senses bits in

stories — not consciously but just in the sense my eyes slide over those sentences more quickly because I don't get anything meaningful from them. So when I'm writing my own stories, I just skip the bits I wouldn't ever read! And then people are like “why tf are you describing doors in such great detail but I have no idea what anyone looks like?” when they read my work. This is in large part due to my moderate aphantasia and prosopagnosia – on the one hand, I can't really visually imagine scenes, so there's no scene for me to describe; on the other hand, things that impinge on other people as important simply don't impinge on me. (Why describe what a character looks like? It's literally something I'd never notice in real life.) Nevertheless, people keep wanting details, so in the story I'm currently writing, I challenged myself to provide them – and found myself continually falling into producing laundry-lists, writing the dullest of dull prose that even I could barely bring myself to read as I transcribed handwritten first draft into typed second draft. “What I really want to,” a voice kept saying in the back of my head, “is to just say, ‘This is the scene:’ and then describe it. Let me explicitly build a model where I know where each piece of furniture is, where each character is placed, where they are all in relationship to each other and the furniture, where I know how their limbs are placed and what their faces are doing, and *then* I can begin to tell the story.” After weeks of ignoring that voice, I finally listened to it...

This is the scene: A hospital waiting room, sterile and old, punctuated by unpatterned beeps, constantly eroding attention, and the murmured sussuration of worry. A young man sits in a chair near a corner, his elbows drawn in on his knees, his fingers playing with each other.

He is Su Aman, and he is fighting to breathe as the walls press closer and closer.

And suddenly, I'd found the voice I needed to tell this story: The voice of the person who sits on the edge of things, present but not involved, who can receive the scene and interpret it, and then explain it to me – the voice of the same person who sits in my head and helps me figure out how to inhabit a world which is not designed for neurodivergent people. Words began to pour out of my fingertips in a way that has not happened since before the advent of the pandemic.

Where, then, does gender fit into all of this? How is autistic voice a matter of queerness? Why is there “gender” in the title of my essay? The relationship between autism and gender expression/gender identity is something that researchers have only begun to study directly, but even preliminary studies show that there is a much higher correlation between gender variance in autistic people than in non-autistic people (van Schalkwyk *et al.* 2015, p. 81; Lai *et al.* 2015). Not only this, but autistic women (or rather, AFAB autistic people) experience this gender variance at a higher rate than AMAB autistic people (Cooper *et al.*, 2018).

It’s a complicated relationship, between gender identity and autistic identity, which operates on many levels. One facet is that being autistic can affect one’s gender expression and identity, but also “it is possible that receiving a diagnosis of autism, with traits perceived to be male, has implications for how autistic natal females feel about their biological sex and gender” (Cooper *et al.* 2018, p. 3995).

Another facet lies in the gendered nature of neurodivergent diagnoses, not just for autism but also things like ADHD, where the typical symptoms for diagnosis are highly correlated to how these divergences are presented in men, leading to women being underdiagnosed (Duvekot *et al.* 2017, p. 647; Estrin *et al.*, 2021; Green *et al.* 2019; Rynkiewicz *et al.* 2019, p. 739) or experience delayed diagnosis (Green *et al.* 2019). It is only in the last decade and a half that researchers have specifically addressed the issue of gender differences in autism diagnoses, and this only happened “a result of women themselves questioning their often late diagnosis” (Gould 2017, p. 703). Duvekot *et al.* (2017) argue that girls “are less likely to be diagnosed with ASD than boys despite demonstrating similar levels of autistic symptoms” (p. 646), and point to other studies which show similar effects in the diagnosis of ADHD in girls (Taylor *et al.* 2016; Wilcutt 2012).

All of this means that, especially for autistic women, one cannot disentangle one’s experience of autism or other neurodivergence from one’s experience of gender. As an autistic woman who writes, this complicated entanglement raises many questions for me: How does being autistic affect my experience of my gender and gender identity? How does my gender and gender identity affect my experience of being autistic? And what impact does all of this have on my writing?

The most visible impact these issues have on my writing is that when I write the characters I want to write, unreflectively, they are almost always men. When I push myself to be more reflective, to understand *why* I have that default, to challenge and interrogate it, the question fractures into many further questions:

1. Do I default to men because this is the patriarchal norm in the fiction that I grew up with? If so, then this is reason for me to reject that default, because I want to be part of a story telling culture and community that incorporates all voices and all stories, not just those of the dominant part of society. As a result, I have an ongoing challenge to myself, that whenever I find myself defaulting to “male,” I stop, and pick something else. This works quite well for minor characters, and has the pleasant result of forcing me to interrogate all sorts of other defaults, such as who gets to do what type of job, and how seniority, authority, and gender intersect in my fantasy worlds. But it is *much* harder, I have found, to do this for my main characters. Which brings me to the next question:

2. Do I default to men, because my own experiences trying to identify with and understand women have often been such failures that I don’t even try? Cooper *et al.* (2018) discuss research which indicates such an experience would not be atypical, noting “Qualitative research findings suggest that autistic girls and women prefer socialising with boys and men rather than women...and do not readily identify with the construct of femininity” (pp. 3995–3996). The challenge, then, to myself is: Don’t fall into the “write what you know” *trap* (cf. footnote 1). Just because I am bad at identifying with and understanding women doesn’t let me off the hook from trying to become better, and to use these experiences to inform my writing. But this can be a complex, awkward, and sometimes painful process. Which brings me to the next question:

3. Do I default to men, because deep down, that is what I identify with more? That’s a question which I’m not sure I’m prepared to answer yet.

But that’s okay. These are complex, complicated questions about the way in which I inhabit the world and asking these questions is the first step towards understanding how I can translate this into an autistic authorial voice that allows me to tell my stories in ways that mirrors my own experiences of inhabiting the world.

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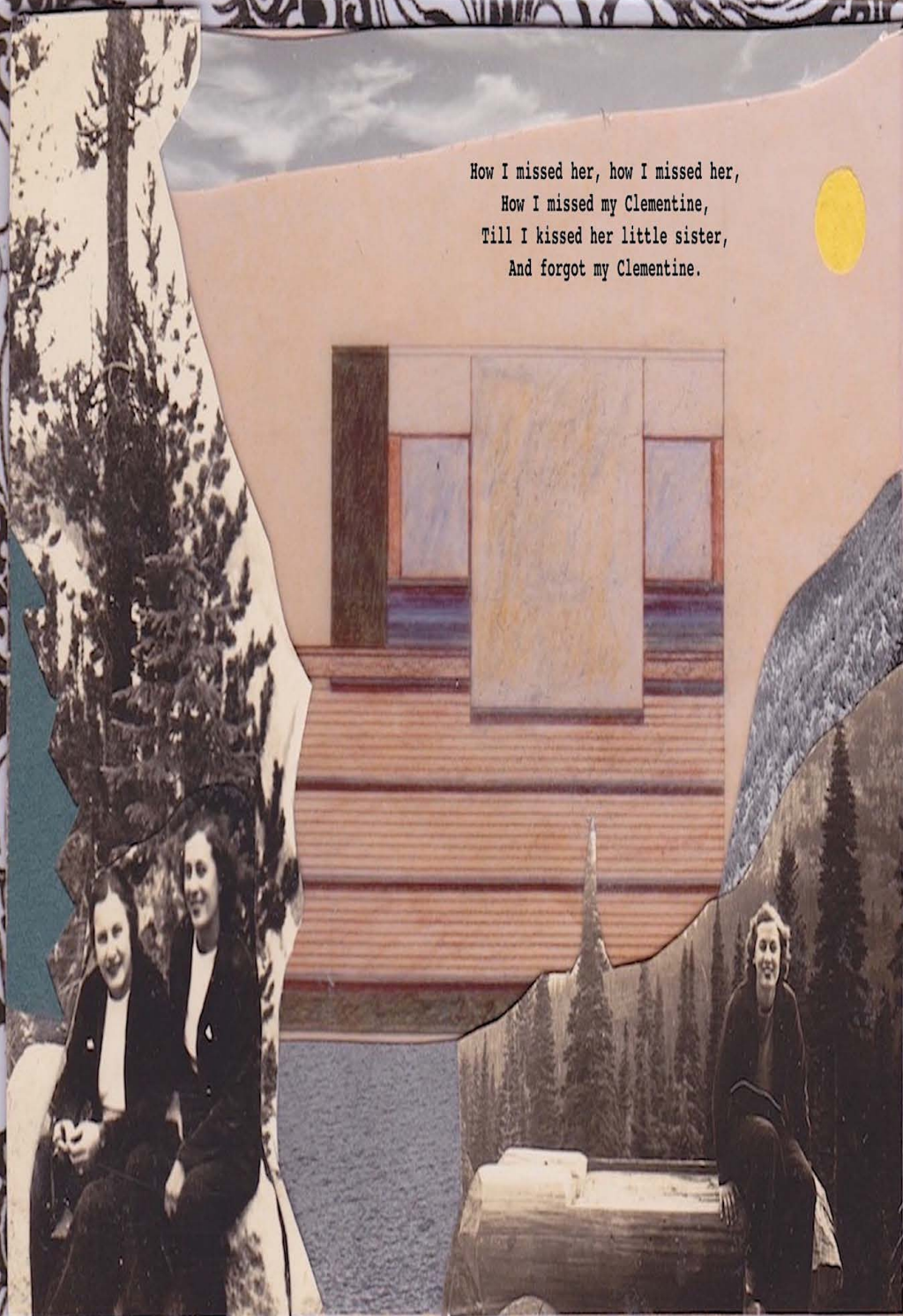






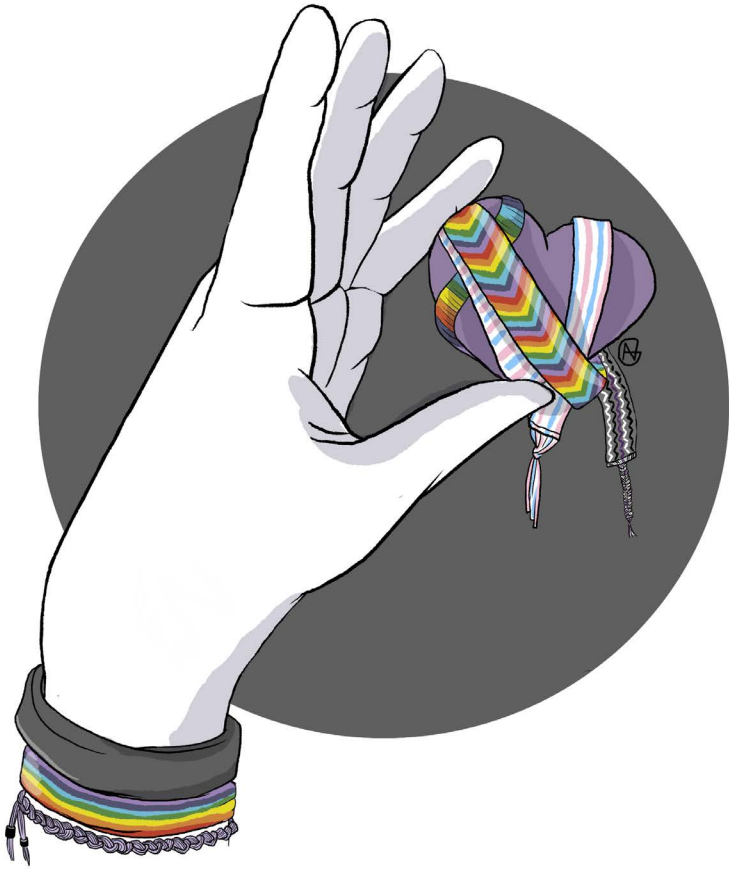


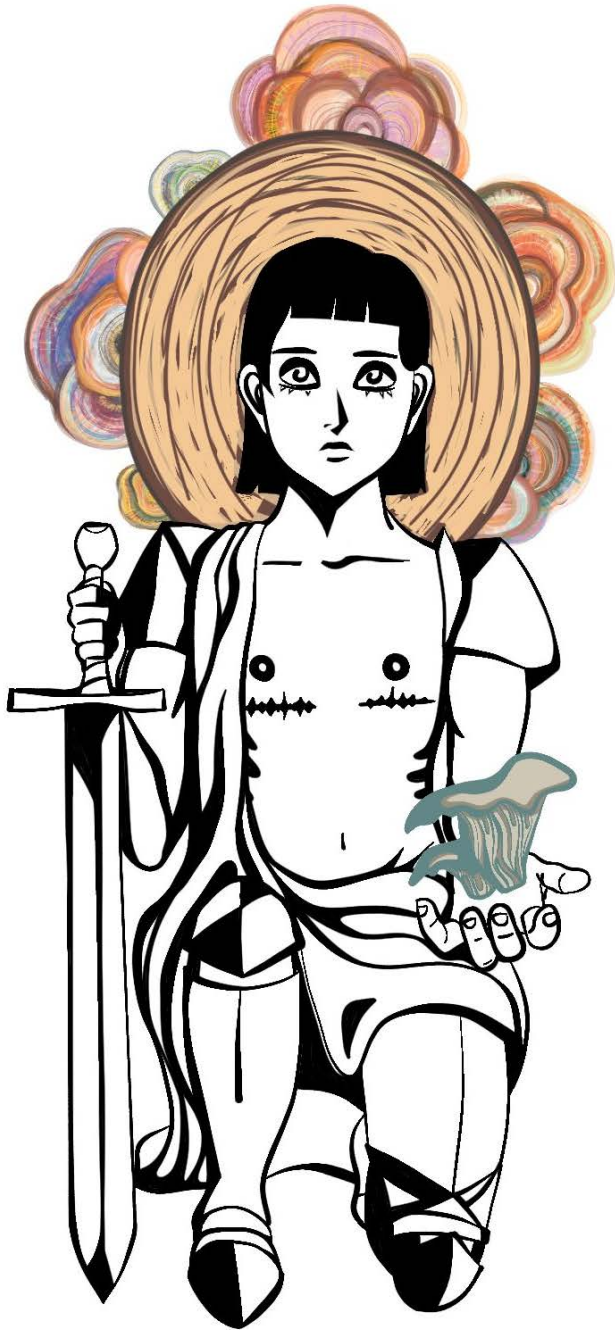
How I missed her, how I missed her,
How I missed my Clementine,
Till I kissed her little sister,
And forgot my Clementine.



Clementine / ... / ... / ...









Tree And Stone