

mermaids monthly

A surreal artistic photograph of a woman with a crescent moon on her head and a full moon on her chest. The woman has long, dark, flowing hair and is looking upwards with a contemplative expression. Her hands are raised to her face, with fingers gently touching her cheeks. The background is a dark, textured blue with scattered golden stars, suggesting a night sky or an underwater scene. The overall mood is dreamlike and ethereal.

Issue #8 - August 2021

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Nina Kiriki Hoffman
S. Rupsha Mitra
Susmita Ramani
Thomas Jones
Tony Ogunlowo
Valerie Herron
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mermaids monthly

a magazine about mermaid stuff. that's it. that's the shell.

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The Heart Sings a Siren

by Ali Trotta

Be careful, I say,
but some things have
their own persuading current,
and you are a summer fire escape,
mouth full of matches,
smile welcoming friction,
and I could lean in
just so, crossing
this small ocean of space
between us, new
and yet, dangerously familiar,
or I could look away,
quiet this siren song,
reckless and hungry—
all fog and no lighthouse,
unpredictable,
but clearer than the stars
to chart a course by.

Why? you ask,
as if there are no consequences,
as if desire can be easily undone,
the air between us unlaced,
the ocean-rush of our pulses
slowed,
but our hip-tide
knows the truth,
echoing like a seashell,
steady and miraculous,
the flick of a tongue
on salted skin, holy,
and the gravity from bone
to bone calls like to like,
and my heart sits
like a shipwreck
in my hand,
imperfect and full of drowning—
will you take it?

A Nereid's Guide to the Underworld

by E. Catherine Tobler

Edited by Lis Hulin Wheeler

Seaweed is most tender as it begins to decay. I had a mouthful of the sweet rot as Thetis approached my cavern pond. In her arms she bore a pale bundle that squirmed and cooed; her son's voice blossomed upon the draped gypsum ceiling and trailed down every dark passage.

I swallowed the weeds and flicked myself through the cool water, tail giving way to legs, fins giving way to arms as I reached for the bioluminescent globe and hauled it to the surface. The globe spread cool blue light across the cavern floor and illuminated the look of concern on Thetis's face.

"Will you guide us?"

We had long since dropped any formalities between us; as Nereids, we were sisters even if she had married a mortal. My wide eyes dropped from her face, to that of her son. He seemed so small, just a fleck of starlight in this dark place, and I still had trouble understanding her request.

"You still wish to go?" She had made the first leg of the long journey to reach me, but still I had to ask. It was the way of things, so that later, should things degrade into terror as they usually did, I could remind her with a superior smile that she had asked three times to go.

Thetis had only to look at her child's face. "I wish to go."

Dozens of silversides splattered out of the pond with me; I shooed them back into the cool waters, dripping as I crossed the rocky floor. "No more doom-saying, no more hesitations?" I wrapped a length of lapis linen around me, glancing back at Thetis to find her laughing.

"Your questions are these very things, sister!"

I plucked the glowing globe from the floor. Indeed, my questions were such, for it was I who hesitated to make this journey. No one, not even a Nereid, traveled to the River Styx without some apprehension, even if I had good cause to lead them.

Surely Poseidon would not follow me *there*, I told myself as we left my pool steadily behind. He had not found me here, so perhaps within the earth's dark embrace, I would be wholly safe from his knowledge. I needed but a puddle of water to be— Well, not content. What was I doing, other than lying to myself?

I was turning my attention back to Thetis, that's what. Her jaw remained set, expression grim as she walked at my side. Her son had quieted as though he sensed the journey was a serious one. Or maybe he had fallen asleep. But no, I saw his eyes track the light of my globe, watching as it poured upward like water across more draped gypsum. The stone almost looked like seaweed in the light and my stomach growled.

"Two Nereids walk into the underworld," Thetis murmured.

I lifted my gaze back to her. "It sounds like a bad—"

I fell to silence and stopped walking. Thetis walked a few paces without me, until she realized I was no longer there. She turned, her face swimming up through the eerie blue light of the globe.

"Did you hear that?"

At my whispered question, she shook her head. She held her silence, though, listening with me. I closed my eyes and

heard it again, somewhere deep in the velvet dark that extended beyond the reach of my globe. It sounded like the faint clicking of shells against shells. Or like the *cracking* of shells, to expose a soft interior ripe for devouring. I shuddered at the image and peered into the dark.

"Poseidon would not find you *here*, would he?"

"He seeks me everywhere. Logic dictates he will eventually find me."

Moreover, there was little to be done about it; if Poseidon wished to find me, certainly he would. My own expression likely turned as sour as Thetis's as we continued into the cavern, away from my pool which had once seemed so safe.

The first time I met Charon, it was by accident. I was roaming these very caverns so that I might know my new home as well as I had known the old. While these caverns were impossibly dry when compared to the open, flooded seas, they had a perplexing geography. One lost in the ocean might say the same of it, but I knew every fish and coral within those boundless waters the way I supposed I would someday know these foul rocks. That day, Charon crouched near the outcropping of rock we now approached (foul, entirely foul), trying to pluck something from the ground. It was a rock he sought to claim—what else might one actually find in this place?—and his

clumsy fingers were having a time of it. I snatched the rock up before he could. He only stared at me.

When you think about it—and you should—Charon doesn't have an easy life or job. I was foolish to play such a game on him, I suppose, but slowly his mouth parted in what might pass for a grin and he smoothed a gnarled hand down his unkempt beard.

"Lady Nereid," he had said.

I made a curtsy, as one does, and things proceeded from there, with Charon gifting me with his rock (a gleaming cave pearl which I keep in the bottom of my pool to this day), and I gifting him with— Well, I suppose one might call it a sense of humor. He was sorely lacking before.

"You're certain?" I asked Thetis again.

"A fourth time you ask me!" Thetis shifted her son, draping him over her shoulder as he had now fallen well asleep. "Perhaps it is you who should be asked."

"Perhaps it is," I allowed in a mutter and turned again when I imagined hearing the clicking (cracking) shells. Poseidon at a banquet, I thought, picturing him with hair of laced seaweed streaming about his lined face, strong fingers breaking apart crab claws, bright teeth revealed with his pleased chortle.

We rested at the next pool we reached. Whether this was a day's walk or a few hours we could not guess, for time had a way of not mattering down here. There was no sun, there was no moon. One might gauge the passage of time by the child's waxing and waning hunger, but even that was unfamiliar to me. Thetis fed him as he needed, we rested ourselves in the water, and then we walked on.

Sometimes, one goes to the underworld intentionally. People surely still speak of Persephone, who goes on an annual basis. Perhaps Poseidon should have courted her, for she seemed more willing to bend her life to a god's schedule. No choice, the people cry! The world suffers in darkness while she is gone, yes I know, but *still*.

Sometimes, one comes back from the underworld (see: Persephone, Orpheus), and this is not a comfort to Charon. He likes people to stay put. He spends his days rowing and there is little more galling than having to endure people telling him to put his back into it as they have a pressing quest in need of immediate resolution. Is it no matter that they've disrupted his entire schedule with unplanned crossings?

Charon holds his gnarled hand out for his coins, of course, usually vexing the person, as they have either forgotten the tithe or hate parting with it. Either way, Charon doesn't need the coins (see: the gleaming mounds on the other side of

the river). But oh, he loves to ask.

I wondered if Thetis had remembered to bring an offering for him.

We reached the first signs of the river sometime after I asked Thetis if she heard the clicking (cracking) for the twentieth time. She still hadn't.

In this part of the world, the River Styx was little more than a trickle. This was one of its small branches, though Charon believed if we moved some of the rock, he could expand. He dreamed of hiring other boatmen, not so that they could ferry more dead, but so that he could shift some of the return traffic onto others. Charon wasn't as young as he used to be; one should take note of his hands when see you him.

This trickle of water slowly widened and Thetis and I found ourselves walking up an embankment. The rock was loose but we glided over it as easily as water would. It was here the air began to warm and pressed with insistent humidity against our cheeks. It was here the child was no longer sleepy or content; he began to wail, as if he wanted no part in his mother's madness. Such is the way between mothers and children, so I am told.

We paused and I lifted the globe so that the light danced against the rock walls. No gypsum here, only dark, uneven rocks that looked as though Charon had built

the place up out of aged bones, which he may well have. The child was not amused by the light, though, and his wail carried over the river before us.

I would have blamed the child for what came next, but I knew better. Poseidon was nothing if not crafty. While the earth loved to move unexpectedly, so too the water loved games and its master led them all. The river began to rise, overflowing the bank and our feet, as if responding to the child's cry. But no.

Poseidon himself frothed from the dark waters, rising like the god he was in all his power. He was naked but for the creatures of the sea and the water foam; shells and stringed weeds clung to his ebon hair, while sea stars trickled down his broad shoulders. Shells cascaded from his strong chest, to tumble through the rising waters and crack apart against the cave walls. Thetis shrieked and fled up the bank, where the water had not yet reached (despite wanting to make this journey, she remained somehow delicate), but I could not; Poseidon curled a watery hand around my ankle and pulled. My globe broke apart on the cave stones, its small gleaming creatures scattering like blue embers.

In the water, I let go of my human shape, becoming the fish I more comfortably was. And Poseidon only laughed and dived in after me, his own human form shattering against the river.

I was fast here, but not so fast I believed I would outrun Poseidon himself. I flicked my tail and felt the water skim over every scale as if welcoming me; this water was not clear like the ocean, or even my pool. This water tasted of the dead, for alone, Charon could not keep up with the cleaning in addition to his ferrying. I swallowed a smaller fish, a strand of dark, bitter weed (I still long for another of its kind), and the lump of an obolus. The water darkened further, every light eclipsed, and I realized I had been swallowed in turn.

Poseidon made himself as large as a cave, holding me with the river water in his mouth. I flopped against the warm beach of his tongue, then curled close against the branching coral of his teeth to survey this strange landscape. We were moving; the water sloshed as we went and I pictured his feet leaving deep depressions in the River Styx as he went. I slapped the water with a fin then surged forward to buck against his closed mouth as if I could escape. A glance the other way—down the long black tunnel of his throat—told me that wasn't an option. I would walk to the underworld, but swim down a god's throat and into his belly? I wasn't that foolish.

Turns out, I was.

Poseidon, however, contained the ocean—*was* the ocean—and I found myself vomited in a rush of clean saltwater,

landing on a rocky shore where I flopped and blinked, and opened and closed my mouth like, well, a stunned fish. I stared up at Poseidon, who shrank himself to kneel at my side. His sea-wrinkled fingers stroked over my belly, setting the scales to shimmering.

“Like abalone,” he whispered in wonder.

I didn't care what I looked like, only cared for the feel of that hand against me and knew then that much like Persephone, I was a lost cause. When had it first happened, I wondered, and then found myself listening as he told me when it had happened for him. He had seen me dancing with a group of my sisters, and while they were pretty enough, it was my liquid feet he came to treasure. I just stared and gaped. (And probably flopped a little, for how he made my heart pound.)

He trickled water over me, more clean ocean, and I flopped in the puddle he made, until every inch of the River Styx had been washed from me. I could still smell it, or perhaps it was him I smelled, the deepest ocean silt edged in crackling salt. He did not smell dead, no.

“Should you help Thetis?”

I hardly remembered who Thetis was just then, but opened and closed my mouth as if to say yes. I bled from fish to girl and Poseidon thoughtfully draped me in my sodden linen, as if seeing my flesh were

somehow more scandalous than seeing my naked scales.

“She worries for her son,” I said as I tied the linen into place. I was still staring at Poseidon and dared reach a hand up, to pull an errant shrimp from his beard. Before I could discard it, Poseidon leaned forward and ate it from my fingers.

“Half mortal boys are trouble.” He glanced across the river to where Thetis stood, clutching her son as Charon poled his boat across the river.

Realizing this could all go horribly wrong, and then Thetis would be telling me she’d told me so, I bolted from Poseidon’s side, fouling myself in the river once again until I was again at Thetis’s side. She reached for me with a shaking hand.

“I didn’t bring him anything,” she said and I exhaled a wet breath.

“You know he will ask.”

She squirmed.

Charon made a striking figure as he approached, chest puffed out, legs braced wide apart to show his thighs to their full advantage. Rowing all day and all night puts a nice figure on a man. So did swimming apparently. Thetis’s elbow in my side brought my attention back to the matter at hand.

“Lady Nereids,” Charon said, his tone so even it could be called flat. He plainly knew this would go poorly for him—what woman willingly gave up the splendor of a son?

“Lord Charon,” Thetis said and dipped a proper curtsy, as you do.

He extended his hand.

Thetis shifted from foot to foot.

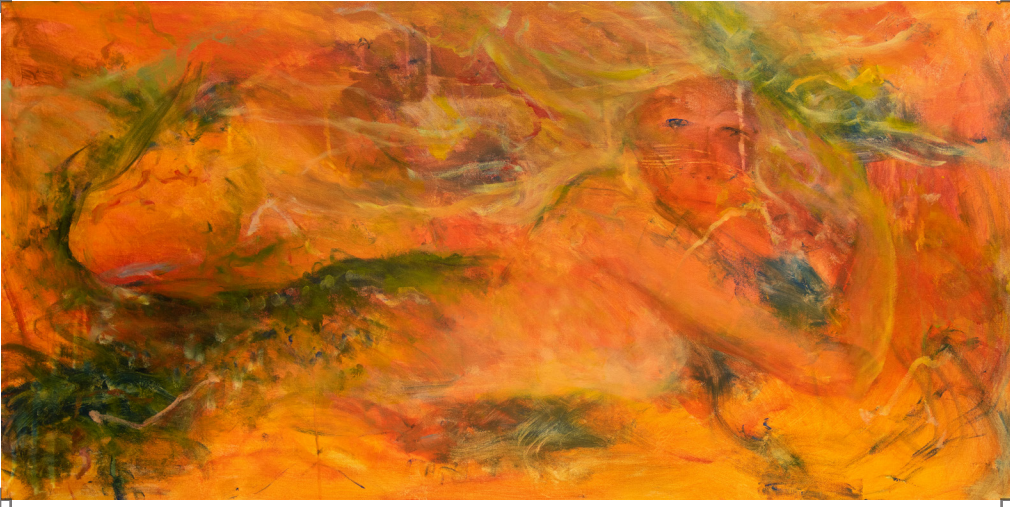
I cleared my throat and coughed up the obolus I had swallowed. I stared at it in my palm a moment, then offered it to Thetis.

“I don’t want to cross,” she hissed.

I nudged her none too lightly. “It’s tradition.” I pressed the coin into her hand and she took it, making the same face I imagine Demeter made when Persephone said she would be staying with Hades half the year. She offered it to Charon.

He took the coin and made quite a show of looking it over, inspecting each side, and then biting it, as if to ensure it was true silver. Then, it vanished between his fingers.

“If not crossing, then...” He tilted his head and I smiled at him, appreciating his patience. When Thetis looked at him, he flexed his arms against his oar as if to



*Illustration by
Thomas Jones*

The Styx gleamed with a sheen of oil, fragmenting with color as she dipped him under. She held tight to his foot, only the heel of it spared the river's slimy caress.

entice her to cross after all.

"I wish only to dip my child, Lord Charon," Thetis said.

Charon blinked and his dark gaze swung to me. My smile deepened. He looked back to her.

"Sweet Nereid," he said, making it clear that he had better ways to spend his day, "this water is foul, for it carries the dead. Smell the stench of your sister here. Were the rumors of these waters true, do you think I would look as I do?"

Thetis was quick with a smile. "But the river has worked its magic upon you, has it not?" Her eyes slid down his muscled form and I had to look away. This was typically when things began to degrade into terror, when a Nereid took to flirting with the ferryman.

Charon only laughed and when I dared look, Thetis bent to the river, holding her squalling child closer to its surface.

"And you?" Charon's gaze was on me again.

I shook my head. "Not crossing," I said. "Not today." I pointed toward the scattered blue light on the shore. "You might like those, though."

And then, I found myself swallowed again, Poseidon tucking me into his cheek. We fled the underworld in a torrent of rushing water, and he shattered the cavern I had called home for so long, allowing the sweet ocean to flood into it, which set the gypsum to gleaming in the sunlight. It was exhilarating—it was terrifying. The crushed glitter of my home shone from beneath the water, an illusion beckoning.

We go there when we may, to eat the seaweed as it sweetens with its rot, to spit cave pearls into sea foam with our fishy mouths; to crack shells open and devour the sweet insides, to visit the underworld and curtsy to Charon. As one does.

Mammiwata Bay

by David Ishaya Osu

she walks out of silence.
and talks to her tail.
and all the silhouettes

in need
of a blue
surrounding:

a lake is
the dream we
all carry

in our minds

a city
stuck in a
trance

—in the left mirror
is a rainbow, a

breeze
can carry on its
wings

on and on and on
she walks
back to
the lights
on the secrets of
a water skin

that cannot stay in pictures

Only Circles in the Sea



Story by Carlie St. George &
Art by Clare McCanna

There be her truest self, two feet on land. It
are makes no sense to you. What's so alluring
these about the deep? It's just a graveyard with
straight more fish. It isn't family. It isn't home.
lines you
draw So, you collect data. You ask which, you
between ask how, you ask WHY?
human

and mermaid, earth magic and
ocean magic, blue mer and pink. An
obsession with taxonomy, but also with
linear comprehension, always these hard
divisions between past, present, and
future. Such human presumptions. What
are straight lines in the sea?

Here's what I told your mother, years
before she died:

Someday, you will drown here. You'll
be alone. Terrified. Cold. It will hurt
more than you can imagine, and the sea
will keep your bones. This fate cannot
be avoided. The sea gets what the sea
wants—but oh, little sailor, it never
wanted you dead.

Ocean magic is resurrection,
transmutation. Spells to become who
you're meant to be. Ocean magic is a
melancholy wonder. A goodbye, and a
hello.

You call my kind the Cassandra-mer.
You're here to collect, to categorize
prophecy. Tell me the future, you say, so I
speak of your mother. She loved you and
you loved her—but the sea loved her, too.
It called to her, whispering its siren songs,
its unfathomable magics. The sea gets
what the sea wants—

That's the past, you interrupt. My mother
is dead, and the dead have no future.

Your mother is waiting, little taxonomist.
Will you come and say hello?

Yes, the accident. Your mother could never

Twenty Thousand Last Meals on an Exploding Station

by Ann LeBlanc

Riles Yalten has approximately thirty minutes before she dies, and that's just enough time to try the new gravlax place on level sixteen. She ducks through a staff-only hatch and slips into the swift cold waters of the maintenance access canal. Up in station engineering, her team is probably just starting to panic, having found the impending failure she so carefully hid.

Down on level sixteen, the gravlax joint looks promising. The owner stiffens when he sees her. His eyes slide up and down her body. First: her hairless head, mucus-slick skin, and black-metal smart-nose. Second: her gilled and wattled neck, the bio-metallic utility-tentacles that take the place of hands. Finally: her backward knees and flippered feet.

She is dripping wet from the canal, making a mess of his floor. A pause stretches between them, a mere second

lengthened by adrenaline. Then he goes to the closet and pulls out an aug-friendly seat, setting it at the counter. Riles smiles, and notes in her review that this place is aug-inclusive.

She orders one of everything, knowing she won't have time to finish it all. With hope, she can at least try each dish and cross this place off her list. If she doesn't, she'll have to come back next loop.

The cured salmon—locally sourced from the station's aquaponics rigs—is creamy and salty, the perfect companion to the crisp of the knäckebröd. This one has a dab of mustard-dill sauce, that one has a bit of roe and lemon zest. She notes everything—texture, taste, plating, ambiance, and so on—in her mem-aug.

As she takes a bite of the last plate—new-potato with roe—the station lights flip from calm blue-white to fearful red.

The shop owner's eyes widen, stuck in panic response, before he starts packing up his little shop—in violation of protocols; he should evac immediately.

“Don't bother,” Riles says over the howl of the sirens. “Station reactor's gonna blow. Anti-matter containment failure.” She takes another bite. “So you might as well try to enjoy the next... three minutes. Your food is astounding by the way.”

His eyes flicker between fear, anger, and confusion. He points at the emblem on Riles's wetsuit. “Aren't you station engineering? Why aren't you up there helping?”

She starts to respond, but all that comes out is a slurred, “Oh, blarghle.” Her emergency mem-backup flenses her brain like a nictitating membrane made of fingernail scraping across her consciousness. By the time it's done, the owner has fled.

She wipes the drool from her face, takes one last bite of potato, and waits for the end. She wanders out into the promenade, to an observation window, and watches ships flee through the speckled black of space, trying to escape their inevitable antimatter annihilation.

All but one. She gasps when she sees it. A ship emblazoned with the logo of the Pan-Aafaras Insurance Agency, burning hard *towards* the station. Had she not noticed it

before? Or was this something new?

Before Riles can frantically update her mem-backup, the reactor fails. One moment she is alive, and the next she is bathed in a glory of white hot plasma. She dies, along with all the station around her.

}-€

Three days earlier, Riles Yalten awakens, immersed in the warm waters of station engineering. The memory backup activates, pumping three days of memories into her brain. And then another three days, and another. More than two-hundred iterations of the three days before the reactor failure, all the way back to the first loop.

In this iteration—like the several hundred preceding—she pushes off from her work station and swims down to the emergency backup hub. An alarm tolls in time with the blinking lights, indicating a mem-backup from the future has arrived.

“False alarm,” she lies on the engineering staff groupchat, after disabling the alert. “I'll look into it once I'm done checking the S4 baffles.”

They don't need to know they're going to die. If Riles tells them about the fatal flaw in the newly installed magnetic baffles, they'll spend three days stressed beyond bearing, working nonstop with no sleep, to save a station that cannot be saved.

Instead, Riles slips out—taking a sick day—while her team meets to discuss the latest round of department budget cuts. It's time for her next meal.



They say Bellayn station has a restaurant for every planet, every culture, every taste. There are over twenty-six thousand restaurants on the station. Every year, a quarter of those restaurants close—competition is fierce, and rents are high—and are replaced with new ones. Thus, even if someone did nothing but dine out, it would be impossible to eat at every restaurant in the station, before churn rendered the task endless.

Impossible—unless you are trapped in a time loop.

Riles Yalten lost hope of escape more than a hundred iterations ago. Now, she has a new goal: to eat at every restaurant on Bellayn Station, and to review and record each dish (along with notes on service, ambiance, and accessibility).

This loop is dedicated entirely to a single restaurant, The Lab Wisteria. Specializing in Neo-Minimalist cuisine, they are consistently rated one of the top ten restaurants on the station. Getting a reservation can take months. Riles only has three days.

She pauses at the door of the restaurant,

her date, Ina, standing beside her in a lavender halter-dress. Ina squeezes Riles's bicep, then intertwines her fingers in Riles's tentacles, unbothered by their writhing.

What Ina doesn't know is that Riles is only on a date with her because—in a previous loop—she'd scoped out that Ina fit the narrow criteria of both already having a reservation *and* being willing to go on a date with a merp-aug. Riles is the reason why Ina's original date flaked on her. Does Riles feel guilty about that? She would have, in the times before the loops, but now she has grown accustomed to knowing the consequences of her actions will be wiped away in hot plasma at the end of each loop.

Through the door, and the maître d' smiles, unaware that Riles considers him her nemesis. She sees the exact moment he notices her augs. She is deeply familiar with the transition from friendly to formal, relaxed to tense, open to guarded. He is about to declare that a reservation is required. He will say that the waitlist is months long. He will *not* willingly offer any opportunity to add their names to the list. He will be exceptionally polite, overtly kind in tone, but the subtext will be as obvious as it is deniable.

Riles's date—bless her—does not let him say anything at all.

She has a reservation, she says. She asks

if the owner is in, her words and tone implying a personal relationship. Throughout this exchange, her arm is draped across Riles's back, her hand resting at the top of her hip, holding Riles close under her protection.

They are not seated at Ina's usual table—near the windows that look out over the restaurant's flower garden—but in a table nestled in the back corner. Riles doesn't care, she's here for the food. In the time before the station began exploding, she would've been frozen with anxiety over the semi-polite glances and hostile stares of the other diners. Current fashion only accepts augs if they're discreet, and only if the owner is polite enough to be mildly ashamed. Riles is not discreet, but she has learned not to care for the opinions of those who will shortly be atomized. Not only will they forget, but she has practice of hundreds of iterations at ignoring her own internalized hatred.

Despite the ambiance, the food is excellent. An interesting take on Neo-Minimalist cuisine utilizing specially-bred flowers acting as light counterpoints or accents to the simple flavors of each dish. The decor—a much celebrated commentary on the color of wisteria flowers—does nothing for Riles. She prefers the plastic tables and bulkhead walls of an inner-station hole-in-the-wall. Or—even better—one of the few waterlogged canteens that serves the station's merp staff.

The first course is a spoonful of black-cream, topped with spinach foam, and a single nasturtium blossom.

After that is fried skate—wild-caught, imported at great expense—with a caper-citrus sauce and a borage blossom dressing. The best part of being trapped in a time-loop is not having to worry about blowing a years salary on a single meal.

While waiting for the third course, Riles feels a familiar itching and excuses herself to the bathroom. It's as bad as she feared: recessed lighting, trendy gargle-pop music, hanging vines, and no hookups for a waste port. Twice, someone walks in, sees her emptying her waste-tube into the sink, freezes, and then ducks out again.

So she's already in a bad mood when—making her way back to her table—she hears her sister's voice yelling her name. Which is impossible because Milla is light years away, and the station's loop-bubble is only three light-days in radius.

Yet here she is, power-suit clad, face angry behind her plex-bubble helmet.

“Why aren't you in engineering?” she asks, stomping towards Riles.

Riles opens her mouth, but her brain is too busy screaming confusion to provide any words besides, “Ummm...”

Milla gestures at Riles's body. "Does mom know about this?" always—"

The screaming in Riles's head transitions to horror, shame, anger. She wishes the station would explode right now.

"I... no. We don't really talk." Riles and her mom have been no-contact for five years now. Riles has been careful to only talk to her sister briefly, vaguely, and with no video.

"Whatever." Milla rolls her eyes. "We can deal with your bad decisions later. I need a debrief *now*. Station computer says your mem-backup's active, so don't play games with me."

"I'm in the middle of something." Riles tries to edge her way back towards her table.

"Not any more you aren't. Debrief. Now. What's causing the backup system to engage? And why haven't you fixed the problem already?"

The nerve of her. "You think we haven't tried? You want to know why we're still stuck in a loop? All of the replacement magnetic baffles—every single one—is tainted." Riles is up in her face now, breath fogging Milla's faceplate. "Our department has been defunded over and over again. Forced to use a cut-rate supplier, and now, here we are, with an antimatter containment system that will

Milla interrupts, "But haven't you tried—"

"Whatever you can think of, we tried. Nothing worked. Nothing. Which is why—"

Milla tries to grab Riles's hand. "Then what are you doing here? You should be—"

"Let me finish! One-hundred and thirty iterations me and my team tried to save this station. Over a year of subjective time." Riles gestures to the diners.

"These are the people we were trying to save. Do you think they'd do the same for us? These people voted to defund engineering, voted against merp accessibility measures, voted to make it harder to aug new merps. One-hundred and thirty iterations I tried to save them, and these people have no idea. I couldn't let my team keep dying like that."

"What did you do," Milla's voice is flat, eyes like she's going to hit her. Riles remembers that look. Riles thought she was free from that look.

This time though, Riles doesn't back down from the implied threat. "I disabled the backup system for everyone but myself. And now I'm taking some me-time."

Riles starts telling Milla about her plan to eat at every restaurant on the station, but only gets halfway through before Milla's armored fist crunches into Riles's nose. Ina rushes to her side, butter knife brandished against the power-armor wearing stranger.

The station lights go red, alarm wailing. Riles laughs, blood streaming down her face, as the mem-backup painfully yanks all the threads from her brain.

Her nose hurts worse after the backup. "Your team must've messed up," she says. "Been there. See you next—" and then they are bathed in fire.



Riles awakens three days earlier, knowing she is doomed. Her sister—acting on behalf of the company that insures Bellayn station—will not stop until the station is saved and the loop is cut. Even if it's impossible; she's the sort that will grind herself to dust to meet her superior's expectations.

Riles has to prevent Milla from making the situation worse, but she also has to eat. She can do both right? Fight her armed and angry sister, while dining the full breadth of Bellayn Station.

Two days later, Riles is enjoying the smell of the trees and open water at a lakeside cafe nestled in one of the station's larger

parks. She's slurping broth from a bowl of spicy braised beef noodle soup, so she doesn't see Milla coming. An armored hand knocks the bowl from her tentacles; hot broth goes everywhere, chili-oil stings Riles's sensitive mucosal skin.

"You have loop-psychosis," Milla declares, grabbing Riles's arm and clicking a shackle onto it.

Riles tries to twist away, but the chair and table get in the way. "I'm *fine*. I wouldn't be enjoying a nice meal if I still had—"

Milla grabs Riles's other arm, hard. "LP is inevitable if you've been in a loop too long." Milla's arms—assisted by her suit—are too strong to pull away from. "You're obviously suffering from delusions of grandeur." She drags Riles out of the cafe, into the park.

"No. I *had* loop-psychosis. I know what LP feels like."

"If you were fully sane, you wouldn't have disabled the mem-backups in order to go on some hedonistic mission." Milla pulls the shackles, dragging Riles down the path that winds towards the lake. The shackles are rubbing raw the part of the wrist where arm transitions to tentacle.

"You have *no idea* what we went through. My sabotage was a mercy. And my restaurant reviews? How I saved myself. Staying focused on an achievable goal is

exactly what the regulations say to do when loop-stuck.”

Milla scoffs. “You can’t evaluate your own condition. The fact you thought becoming a merp was a good idea tells me you weren’t in a good place mentally to begin with.” A low blow, but Riles *really* doesn’t want to talk to Milla about her transition. She needs to focus on getting free.

Milla pulls harder. “My team’s on its way to disable your mem-backup.” She laughs when she feels Riles flinch. “I would’ve preferred your help, but we’ll handle this without you. You don’t have to suffer anymore.”

The lake spreads out before them, the water mirror-calm. Riles waits till the path takes them alongside the shoreline, then she strikes. Milla’s mistake was thinking of Riles as-she-was—a non-aug with hands larger than her wrists—and not as she is—a merp-aug whose utility tentacles hold within themselves a multitude of tools useful for deep-space engineering.

The shackles fall, clattering on the sidewalk. Milla tries to grab Rile’s arm, but Riles pushes off her, twisting and falling off the path, down into the water.

A splash, and she is away. Moments later Riles feels the vibrations of Milla’s plunge into the water, but now they are in Riles’s element. Milla’s powered suit—fast on

land—is heavy in the water, and she isn’t familiar with the water-based layout of the station’s core. Slipping away into the maintenance canals is trivial. Stopping Milla’s team will be harder.

Swimming down the spine of the station, Riles searches the station’s cam-feeds. Four suits, all non-aug humans, float outside the engineering office hatch, scrabbling futilely at the door controls. Fools probably didn’t bring any water rated equipment. Not surprising; there aren’t that many old merp-built stations left.

Their stun-sticks don’t work underwater either, as they discover when Riles comes up behind them. Her equipment works just fine, and after she stun-locks their suits, she locks the hatch behind her.

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Riles awakens, though the water doesn’t feel as safe as it usually does. She thought she had escaped her family. When she was a child, Riles mother told her stories about Bellayn. The people were rude, fast, and unrepentant thieves. It was a hub of moral decay, the sort of place people went to make money or buy their own debasement.

The reality was stranger, bigger, and kinder. Riles couldn’t help but stare at the first merp she saw, wet-slick seal-skin, metal head-plate inscribed with

concentric circles of sea creatures and ships and constellations. He was eating nopales tacos with a confident ease, and none of the diners in that cramped commissary paid him any mind.

Riles had no idea a person could have a body like that.



Riles is trapped, and the walls are closing in.

The station's vast antimatter stores—released all at once—are capable of reverting time three days—enveloping a three light-day wide sphere. Milla's fast-response ship would've been caught in the loop as soon as they crossed the reversion line, but it's equipped with its own chrono-reversion system. Only able to revert one-hour at a time, it took her ship more than seventy iterations to make it to the station.

Every iteration, Milla arrives earlier. More and more of Riles's time is spent setting traps, finding new ways to thwart her sister. It is never enough.

"Why are you even here?" Riles asks, over comms, as her sister chases her from a mussels-and-fries joint.

"PAIA insures Bellayn—we're contractually obliged."

"No, why are *you* here?"

She doesn't reply. Either the question caught her off guard, or she found the lamprey-drones Riles set in wait for her.

Or, she's preparing her own ambush. Riles hides behind a decorative shrubbery along the promenade. The afternoon crowd is thick with slow-walking tourists, loud kids, busy locals. Milla could be anywhere in the stream of bodies, waiting for Riles to make a run for the canal access hatch.

A scream cracks across the noise of the city, and the crowd ripples. Milla hurtles past, an electric lamprey-drone stuck to her neck. She goes down, eyes locked to the ceiling, lamprey writhing, debilitating current locking her suit.

"You being here isn't an accident," Riles says, foot on Milla's shoulder, keeping her down. "It has to be mom. She pulled strings."

Milla tries to reach up to Riles, and fails. "Loop... psychosis," she grits out.

Riles presses harder into Milla's shoulder. "Mom interfering isn't farfetched. Remember when she got me fired from the remediation job on Mintilla?"

"No. You lost that job because you were obsessed with saving those clams."

Milla won't stop struggling, so Riles uses her utility tentacles to weld her suit to the floor.

"Is that what mom told you? I'm thirty-eight and she's still treating me like I can't make my own decisions."

"Is she wrong? You had such a promising career. And you threw that away because you wanted to be a fish? Why can't you just be normal?"

Riles's chest swirls, a mix of rage and fear. But instead of cranking the lamprey's current to max, she says, "You sound just like mom," and walks away. She probably has enough time to try the caldo verde joint before Milla's team cuts her loose to continue the chase.

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Iterations blur together, accreting in her memory like a mollusk building the layers of its shell. In one memory she slurps mint ice-cream, in another she swims up and up, her sister screaming below her, the station falling to pieces around them.

How many iterations pass this way? Riles loses track. She could look it up with a thought, but she'd prefer not to know. It's easier to live in the moment, and the only number that truly matters is how many restaurants are left to review.

6,452 restaurants still on the list. She

hides, jianbing in hand, wedged trembling in an electrical shaft. The canals aren't safe anymore, Milla started poisoning the waters five iterations ago.

5,978. Station security hunt her through the corridors, shock-sticks humming a deadly tune. Each iteration Milla and Riles struggle to convince security that the other is an existential threat to the station. Station security is loop-locked, and thus predictable, but it's yet another way Milla is tightening the possibility-space Riles operates in.

5,722. Riles and Milla wrestle on a kitchen floor, pizza ovens baking the air around them.

"Why are you still fighting me?" Riles asks, pinning her to the ground. "You don't have to make yourself miserable for Pan-Aafaras. Do you know how much they charge Bellayn for insurance? They'll pay you a pittance of that, then send you on another mission. Stop fighting; take a vacation for once."

Milla's writhes below her. "Give up? Like you did? I have an actual career, and I won't let you derail it with another of your weird obsessions."

But Riles is already gone, leaping up and back, out through the door.

5,255. Riles flees, mouth full of acorn-squash dumpling. The restaurant

explodes behind her, throwing her into the air. She's been planting explosives, sacrificing parts of the station she's already dined.

Riles loses count. She floats in the void, stars all around her, body swelling, moisture evaporating, mind drifting.

She remembers the day she started her transition. A small pink pill, a glass of water, the table spread with potluck snacks, her merp friends there to celebrate. She mostly doesn't remember the surgeries. The pain of recovery is small compared with the feeling of fear and hope transitioning into certainty and peace—the glorious *rightness* of her new self. Nothing more right than the cool water on her gills, nothing more perfect than knowing she could live within the water forever and ever.

Eternity swells out before her. She returns to the present, sitting across from Milla. Smoke hangs between them. The station is burning, a small fire compared to the impending antimatter flame, but no less deadly to the station.

"Riles," Milla tries to sit up, slumps. "I... can't do this anymore. My team... we all have LP. I held them off as long as I could, but..."

"You're going to kill the station." Riles knows about the railgun on Milla's ship. She knows that Milla could have done this

at any time.

A titanium slug, fired precisely, piercing the station's heart. Milla might get lucky; it might only kill a few hundred souls between the outer hull and the engineering office. It might only disable the mem-backups. Riles would awaken at the start of the next iteration—no memory of her struggle to save the station, her failure, or her culinary salvation. All her reviews, so carefully compiled, lost forever.

There is also a chance the titanium slug hits the anti-matter reactor—or any of the subsystems that keep it stable. The emergency reversion system *might* fire, or it might not, depending on exactly where the slug hits, and what it damages. The station might be annihilated instantly. The loop would end. Nine million lives would be gone, forever.

Riles has lived so long within the safety of the loop. A gamble like this is unthinkable. Nine million souls. Her own sister. Though perhaps the thought of destroying Riles's merp body is a plus for Milla.

Riles slumps, "You always were stronger than me."

"You lasted longer loop-locked than I did. You're tougher than I thought. Your team—I've never gotten them to betray you. They trust you so much—respect

you, love you. I didn't know—”

Mem-backups hit them both at the same time. Riles will have one last iteration, one last chance.

“I'm sorry. Mom was... a lot, and I should have stood up for you. I should've listened,” Milla says, her voice cracking from the smoke, or perhaps the pain of that admission.

Riles is stunned. “I'm sorry too. I should've let you try to help when you first got here,” she says, then pauses. What else can she say? There aren't words that will revert the damage between them, and they've already been backed up, so neither will remember this conversation.

“I wish...” one of them says, and then they die, hope being no match for antimatter.



Riles awakens three days earlier, knowing this is her final loop. She has maybe five hours before Milla's ship can take the shot.

One last meal. Riles sits on a chair at the center of Bellayn's Hexagonal Gardens. Here amongst the reeds, in the transition between water and ground, below the stars, is the best merp-food joint on the station. Passed down from master to

apprentice for five generations, it has existed in one location or another since Bellayn was a tiny merp-run entrepot.

This place—wet and full of life, smelling of comfort food—is her favorite on her station. Riles had been saving it for last, and now—with her work unfinished—she is here for her final meal.

She greets the owner with a kiss, as she has done many times before. They've prepared a multi-course meal, a full exploration of Bellayn's merp-cuisine. Around her sit her friends, merps and non-merps, co-workers and lovers. They all came when she called.

First course is a pureed cauliflower dip, accompanied by raw cucumber and broccoli. Second course is a beet and leek soup, seasoned with dill. In the early years of Bellayn, the station was mostly water, the crew mostly merp. They couldn't afford fancy imports, and ate a simple diet of what they could easily grow in rickety aquaponics rigs.

Third course is tilapia, poached in a ginger-tomato broth. Tilapia is a hardy fish, hard to kill, like the community Riles found on Bellayn.

Fourth course is boiled brine-shrimp, with a basil and sweet-vinegar dipping sauce. Riles's comm pings, Milla telling her she has just two hours left.

Five courses later, and Riles is full. Thirty minutes until the end. She spends ten minutes writing her last review. Above her, Milla's ship's drive-plume flares orange-bright through the plasglass. One last sip of rice wine, and then she activates the program she wrote.

Her mem-backup rips her brain apart, preserving her memories. It only takes a moment, just a few hours of her favorite foods and her favorite people.

When it's done, she slumps in her chair, sliding lower and lower until she's fallen into the brackish water. She floats, watching the stars, waiting for what will come next.

Deep in the station, her program runs. It compiles her memories, all of them, all the way back to the first loop and all her life before that, and it sends them to Milla's ship, along with a message.

This is Riles's surrender. She tells Milla she won't fight back, and she'll do what she can to help her fix the station. She's attached all her notes from the year of hell, everything they tried and failed. Maybe Milla's team and the equipment they brought can solve the impossible, maybe not. Riles asks for a few hours each iteration to work on her reviews, but this isn't an ultimatum. Riles is placing herself at Milla's mercy. There's no going back from this. Milla could disable Riles's mem-backup and work without her. Or

she could take Riles's hand and work towards healing the damage to the station and their relationship.

But whatever happens, it will be an end. And after thousands of loops, Riles could really use a vacation.

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Two years later, Riles and Milla share a meal—their first together since the loop ended. Fried crawfish, smothered okra, dirty rice, laid out on a scuffed plastic table in a cramped commissary wedged between two bulkheads. Milla's only passing through, a few hours before her ship departs.

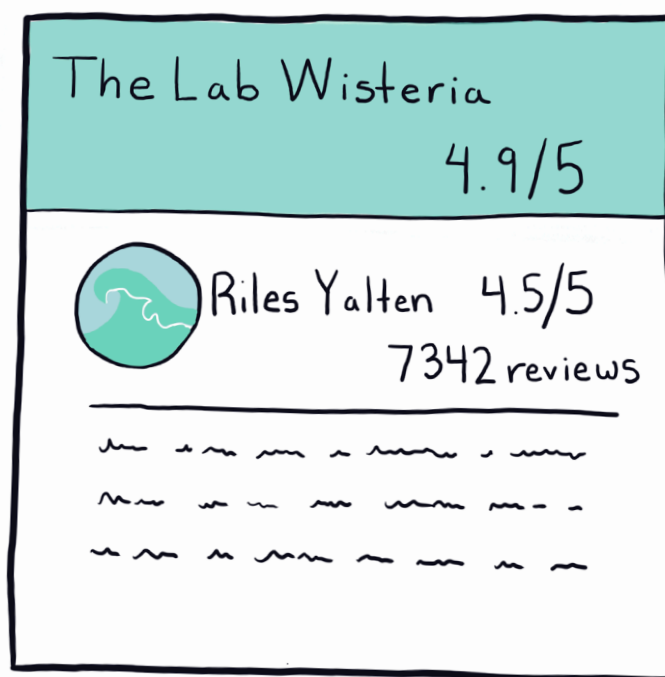
Riles attracts a few glances from the other diners. She has a sort of local fame: from saving the station, from her almost-complete restaurant guide, from her newly-won spot on the city council.

The last two years were rough for Bellayn. They never did fix the reactor. Fifty-three iterations they tried, till even Milla admitted defeat. Desperate, they used parts from the railgun in Milla's ship to launch the reactor as far from Bellayn as possible. Three-hundred people died. The station survived on emergency power for over a month, during which another thousand died. The PAIA inquest lasted a single week; the agency absolved all parties—including the original faulty baffle vendor. The rich fled, taking their

neo-minimalist cuisine and seats on the city-council with them.

Riles tells all this to Milla, who mostly stays quiet. They've been messaging each other across the light-years. Their relationship still awkward, but Milla is listening, and Riles has hope that something new will grow between them.

Riles never did finish her restaurant list. In her spare time she eats, filling in the gaps, but she's made peace with the fact that she'll never truly finish. She knows that her and Milla's relationship will never be what either of them truly wants. Instead, she'll try to enjoy the infinite space between here and there, one meal, one conversation, at a time.



my boy,
 where I come from, life molten;
 we do not envy the presence of air.
 my father said life lost meaning
 at the sight of the sands

but i disagree.

for, your body, it reminds me of wars—
 of times my father sank his trident
 into the chests of men who will
 never visit home again.

my gills harden at the sight of you,
 but note — I am not Ariel,
 i will not fall for you.
 I will not trade my tail
 for hairy fingerlings

just to be with a man,
 who can one day,
 choose another land maiden.

but I admit, i regret culture
 for every moment I spend inside this water,
 craving the air in your lungs

where at night, palm trees will dance
 & under the sheets, our bodies will follow.

my boy, there is a rift between my tongue and pride
 shuffling my heart, like a magician, before you,
 is pretty tricky

& if it means having to watch you
 at evenings
 while you load your boat

so be it.

—but i will give you fish. **An elegy for voices Ariel traded for legs**
 Agwam Kessington



mermaid life

by Susmita Ramani

you ride through storms on
the backs of dolphins,
laughing into the wind

savior of the drowning,
explorer of shipwrecks,
adventurer into secret
underwater caverns
salvager of flotsam, architect
of shimmering, invisible
sea-floor kingdoms--

you have a weakness
for humans, akin to your
love of caviar -- a superb
light snack in the romance
department

Mystery of the Deep

by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

She said yes.

I met the Sirena at a beachfront bar in Mazatlán. I was there with my older sister Wendy. We had decided to vacation together, her to get away from her husband for a week, and me to find out whether my sister and I could still be friends.

When we were girls, she was my best friend, though I was a bratty and argumentative little sister. Now that we were in our twenties, Wendy was domesticated, and I was still wild.

The air was hot and humid. Sun lit the pale sand of Playa Bruja and flashed on the wet bodies of adults and children playing in the surf. Someone was grilling fish in the bar's kitchen, and it smelled delicious. We were in our swimsuits, mine a black one-piece, and Wendy's a flowered bikini. She wore a lacy coverup. She was telling me about her ten-year-old son's obsession with dolls. I sat with my back to the bar, watching the kite-surfers skim over the waves and occasionally fly short distances before they dropped

back to the water.

Then the goddess walked out of the sea, sun flashing on her brown skin. When she first stood from the water, her legs shone silver. Then she took a step and they changed to dark bronze. Her hair was long and black and hung down to her waist. She wore a wrap around her torso that looked like seaweed. As she walked closer, I saw it was patterned cloth. My breath caught as I watched her come across the sand toward me.

She looked up from the sand and our eyes met. I tried to swallow. My throat was tight. I sipped my Pacifico beer to loosen it.

She came straight to me. Wendy, noticing that my attention had wandered, turned toward me, then looked where I was looking. She stopped talking.

The goddess smelled of salt water and fresh fish. She stopped in front of me and smiled.

"Cerveza?" I asked.

“Sí.” She pushed up to the bar right next to me, took the bottle out of my hand, and drank. The movement of her throat as she swallowed was a poem. She set the bottle down and gripped my head between her palms, then drew me close and kissed me. Her tongue pushed into my mouth, waking heat that shot from my head to my center. She tasted salty, musky, and wild.

She drew back, and I gripped her head and pulled her to me, lip to lip again, tongue to tongue.

I met my match without words, without knowledge, without guile or planning.

Later, I wondered if it was sorcery. If this was a spell, I didn’t want to break it.

Our wedding happened at twilight, at the edge of the ocean, with only Wendy watching. I gave my love a rose, and she gave me a mother-of-pearl shell, then pressed our hands together against the thorny stem of the rose so each of us shed blood. She put the rose in her hair and pressed our bleeding palms together so our blood mingled.

In this way, the ocean entered me. When she pulled me under, I could still breathe. I couldn’t see, though. I had to trust.

i want a story
about a fat mermaid
who is pretty,
but isn’t limited to her beauty;

she is smart and affectionate
and brave and she can fight
her own battles and protect her
friends and family-

and if she finds love
it is with someone who appreciates
her for who she is,
not someone who tries to change her
and make her thinner or prettier because
she is perfect as she is;
i want a story about someone
like this

-more fat mermaids

by Linda M. Crate

because all my life i have been told to lose weight
whilst simultaneously being told that i am beautiful, but the insults stick to me more than the compliments because it is hard to think you’re lovely
when society is a shrine of thin women who are celebrated
even if they’re terrible and mean people.

Waking Dream

by Kim Coleman Foote

Umbrella, you shelter me from prying eyes.
Metal spines arcing in claws. You shade
me, erase me, make me float in the sea of
a parade: the busyness of bodies in Union
Square.

Then you are upside down, bobbing atop
murky Hudson water, drifting towards the
Atlantic. I stand shakily upon your seams,
praying you're indeed waterproof and won't
rip from my weight.

Weight dragging me to the bed of the sea
where shadows reach. And further still,
where unnamed beings glow, phosphorescent.
Some greet me in their own way: mouths
bulging, or blowing bubbles where there are
no mouths. Others spew ink that seeps into
my pores—a warning to retreat.

I'm afraid I've never learned to swim.

Until my legs fuse into a fin with indigo
scales, my feet an udder. Slipping through
opaque salt. The current pushing me higher,
where there is light—a sun under water, its
beams splayed by rippling waves.

My hair breaks surface. Heat crinkles my
curls into ringlets carrying magic. I taste salt
in the breeze. Sense the banana boat before
my eyes do.

They watch me in wonder, these men who
make me wonder as well—NYC tourists long
lost and forgotten, with scraggly beards and
dirty shorts. Hair on their chests. Hunger in
their eyes. Have they never seen breasts?

They gasp as I flip, arc my behind, wave my
fin. Dolphin-like. Dodge the spears they
throw. Catch them like Zeus does lightning
bolts. Crack them between my teeth, harder
than diamonds.

I bewilder them. Make them shiver not from
desire but from fear. Dare them to enter my
ocean.

It's only salt, I tell them. Salt and H₂O. Gives
you all you need.

We grow fins if we want to. We don't have to
extinguish our lives adrift on boats, lost at
sea, letting the wind take us where it pleases.
Be your own captain—jump. Let me take you
to the deep dark blue where the creatures
speak, so like me, you can birth yourself
anew.

*in honor of Mami Wata, Erzulie, Yemaya, and all
other Sirens*

*This piece originally appeared in **Black Mermaids: In Vision and Verse**, the
catalog for the City Gallery at Waterfront Park exhibition, "Mermaids and
Merwomen in Black Folklore."*

He was the kind of guy
 When people told him
 You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar
 Said, well actually, you don't,
 And managed never to get the point.
 If his words didn't work, he added more vinegar.
 He put it in a spray bottle and aimed it at his targets.
 Now he's up to a water-pistol.

So when he hooked a mermaid, out rock fishing,
 And instantaneously coveted her
 His first words to her were
 Yo, Fish-Bitch!
 Wanna come home with me?

She couldn't, of course;
 But she stretched an arm in his direction
 Yearningly.
 He unhooked her and off she swam
 With many a backward look.

He sold his Daly City home
 And bought a condo off the Great Highway
 Near Ocean Beach.
 People wonder what he's up to
 When he clambers around near Seal Rock yelling,
 Yo, Fish-Bitch!

Often she appears,
 Leaning her arms on the spray-wet boulders
 Amid sun-bathing seals, her long hair
 Dripping about her shoulders in the sunshine.
 She sings a wordless song recalling whales.

He sits on the rocks and talks about himself.
 He brings her offerings and gifts:
 Pearls, coconut candy, and a sparkling hair-brush.
 She toys with these things while she's with him
 But leaves them behind her when she swims away.

One day he'll go out there on the rocks
 When it's foggy and the surf is high,
 Knowing he shouldn't but not able to stay away.
 He'll slip. She'll be waiting.
 Fish-Bitch knows all about honey and vinegar.

Honey and Vinegar and Seawater

Keyan Bowes



valerie herron

The Sea King's Second Bride

by C. S. E. Cooney

March is blowing wet and snowy when I stumble on the Sea King
Where he's washed up from the water, all his nakedness like heaven
With his hair so lank and heavy, green and black as sodden seaweed
And his harp of kelp and pearl cracked to pieces on his knee

"What ails you, my Sea King?" I ask this creature, laughing
I love him — how I love him, immediate and sudden
The way you love a rainstorm, the Milky Way, a leopard
That reckless love of wild things after years pent in a city

"My bride Agneta left me," says the Sea King like the thunder
Like the salt and surf and thunder
"She has left our seven children, and our castle made of coral
She has gone back to her father, to his bright and airy kingdom
Has maybe found a lover — some brawny freckled farmer
She left me for another."

"But tell me, pretty sea-thing," I tease the lonely Sea King
"What motivates this horror? Perhaps — because you beat her?
Or threatened sharks would eat her? Or treated her with seven sons
Got upon her one by one, and not a year between them?
That might just be a reason, if reason's what you're after.
It's a basis to be bitter..."

(And no wonder! Poor Agneta!)

His Majesty grows maudlin, how he glances
How he glistens! So cunning, yet so awkward
On these sands that bloat and bleach him, in this shape

Akin to man-shape, gills agape and fins aquiver
How the Sea King's skin is silver, like lightning under water!

"Agneta was my daybreak," mourns the Sea King on the seashore
"I never knew a morning 'til the morning that I met her
When I stole her from her father, leaving only dew behind us
I cried to her, *Come under! Come beneath and be my consort!*
She said she feared the drowning, but I covered her in lilies
A crown of purest lilies, white as beeswax, soft as velvet
I combed her hair with sea-shells, and fed her from my fingers
Her slightest wish I granted with the mightiest of magic
I played this harp of pearl, and it swept away her memory.
She did not mind forgetting.
I thought I made her happy."

The Sea King's eyes are dark and wide, like otters slick with oil spill
I poke his spiny ribcage and the silver fish that dance there
He jumps — perhaps it tickled? At least he can be tickled!

"Cheer up, my doughty Sea King!" I shout in manner bracing
"For I sicken of this city, of its traffic lights and taxes
Of the emails and the faxes, and the work and wage and worry
So, tell you what, my darling: you take me to your kingdom
And I'll romp with all your children, spin them stories by the daylight
Sing them lullabies at nighttime
And when they're sound and sleeping, I will creep
Into your bower, to your bed of bright anemone, where
I'll comb your hair with seashells, pour my palms in perfumed oil
By and by I'll take you deeper than ever Sea King ventured
We will scour off what's rotting, all these thoughts of sweet Agneta
Do you think we have a bargain?"

The Sea King does not answer
But he shrugs his flashing shoulders
And I take this for a yes!

It wasn't like a marriage:
No broom or blood or bonfire

But he made a few adjustments for my sub-aquatic breathing
Taught his certain way of speaking, like a whale when it's singing
And a kind of seeing clearly through the brine and murk and current

And when I see him clearly, see my Sea King underwater
(He isn't much to look at — until he's underwater)
Then madder do I love him, love his glimmer in the gloaming
Like a tooth or moon or treasure
That you wish might be a knife-blade so to wed it with your flesh

Sure enough his children love me, seven princes crowned in lilies
We are happy in our frolics, and they giggle at my ragging
At my bad jokes and my chitchat, and the way I tease their father
At breakfast we are raucous, and at dinner most uncouth
At supper, always laughing — well, the kids and I are laughing
But the Sea King sits in silence and recalls his wife Agneta

“She heard the church bells ringing — and she left me, never caring
For my soreness or despairing
Forsaking all her children
Forgetting her beloved.”

His wet blanket on our banquets
Somewhat dampens the hilarity, somewhat chisels at my charity
And the boys slink off for climates more conducive to their gaiety
And I tell their father gently, with what kindness I can muster
That our memories are fragile, that we cannot help forgetting
And that precious poor Agneta — please recall, my dearest Deep One —
Had been practically lobotomized by all his fell enchantments
So please strive for some compassion!

“Agneta!” cries the Sea King, “Agneta!” and “Agneta!”

And even though I love him, there are times I'd trade his kingdom
(Yes, his castle made of coral, and his princes crowned in lilies)
For a single good harpoon

By late April I am brooding

And by May I'm truly scheming
And in June I hatch a plan half-conceived in idle dreaming:

"Oh, the bells, the church bells ringing!"
I groan unto my Sea King, rending small strategic punctures
In my robes of pearl and seaweed

"The steeple bells that scream matins — the sound of papa weeping!
In waking or in sleeping, every night and noon I hear them
As if I stood just near them!
Oh, the bells, the bells — I weaken
At their tintinnabulations!
Won't you let me, dearest Sea King, break to surface and behold them!
An hour, just an hour, but one hour I do beg you!"

Well, the Sea King doesn't like that.
Does not like that.
Not at all.

He is roused to indignation, which in turn ignites to fury
He is bright as any blizzard, he is cold and white and wondrous
And his bare feet stomp a tidal wave that would have swamped Atlantis
(If Atlantis weren't already swamped from when Agneta left him)
And he blusters and he thunders, and he coaxes and he wheedles:

Don't I like his coral castle with its turrets neat as needles?
And its grottos and its bowers and its gardens and its mazes?
Don't I love to love his children, am I not content to stay here
Like the lampreys and the stingrays and the sharks who come to play here?

How he sulks and how he scowls, how he pleads and how he howls!
But — "The bells! The bells!" I mutter, growing slack and wan and fainter
'Til he grants me what I ask for: "Just an hour, mind — ONE HOUR!"
And up he swims me, grimly
And he doesn't see I'm smiling

My father's at St. Agnes, where he's often found on Sundays
With his choir, and his piano, and the band that plays on Sundays

And I sit with the sopranos, and I join in at the descant
And my father smiles a little, even winks a droll good morning
He is busy with conducting and he's maybe even praying
Thus I stay the hour allotted me, through Eucharist and homily
But — all in all I'd rather be
Fathoms down beneath the sea, with magic and with mystery
My seven heathen darlings
And a very cranky Sea King

When the bells have ceased to ring, I kiss my father swiftly
He tells me that he's missed me
I let him know I'm happy
(Even lacking crowns of lilies)
(Even sopping wet and smelly)
I say I'm truly happy.
It's all he ever wanted.

When he sees me rushing toward him, arms out-flung and smile kindled
The Sea King looks astonished, quite bewildered and bedazzled
Like he's never seen my likeness

"Your hair is bright as goldfish! Your face is sweet as morning!"

Taking up his silver hand, I vow as how I've missed him
Missed his scales and his spackles and his webbed and clammy skin

"How choking is the incense! How blinding are the candles
After months spent in the darkness of your castle made of coral.
But it's nice to see my father! Let's go visit him this autumn!
We can introduce the children."
Like a man who's given manna when he's begged for stale bread
He cocks his head and murmurs through the tousles and the tangles:
"I never brought you lilies."

My goblet runneth over, so I scold him, rather sternly:

"There is time enough for trinkets —
Time immortal, time forever, time for starfish in my bathtub

Time for flowers and a foot rub, time for tokens meant
For me alone — and not some ghostly maiden, be she
Ever pure and pious, be she pretty as a lily
For you see, my doughty Sea King, I am from a doting family
And I know that you've been lonely, and I know I'm no Agneta —
But I'm warm and I am willing
I can offer what I offer, but it will not come to begging
Do you want me for you lover? Or pine for one who left you?"

The Sea King pauses, pondering
(I almost punch his face in)
Then he smiles like a dolphin, like a green wave clean and leaping, and he
solemnly incants:

*"Come down with me, come under!
Come beneath and be my consort
I will tell you all my secrets, I will let you take me deeper
Where no Sea King dared to venture, where Agneta never wandered
You will whisper your desires, and together we'll uncover
All the fire in the ocean."*

Then I give my awkward Sea King
This small thing that I've been saving
For a moment like this moment when both he and I are ready
First a kiss and then a promise, then a topple and a tumble
It is frantic, it is frenzied, and we finish in a fever
Come unclasp'd in joyous moisture
And he leads me to the river
Where we hear the children singing.

Self portrait as an ocean bed

by S. Rupsha Mitra

I am afraid of such nights,
dimming skies
Burrowing as an open wound,
I never know how this happens, transforming the self - mud soaked,
Tainted, stained with green beads, sea plants, fists of grassy shards
of time hollowed in the belly of an ocean.

I lie, drowned and flattened in the spread,
water above,
a deep longing beneath battering the senses into surrendering,
There is life, there is an unknown darkness brushing by
as strokes of ravaged remembrances,

I am refaced again,
I know nothing other than
the shelled pearls, schools of mustard fish,
a wavering mass of wondrous creatures wandering,

All in the galloping waves,
I remain,
bruising and healing, stilling and parting, as the shattered crystal pieces of ruined love.

Mami-Wata

by Tony Ogunlowo

This story previously appeared in African Writer

There had been another sighting of a mami-wata, mermaid to you and me, somewhere in the Cross Rivers State. The social media sites were going crazy with purported eyewitness accounts of a half-woman, half-fish being seen sitting on a rock by the creeks. Some even suggested there was a YouTube video.

I've searched but can't find anything.

I sat across the desk from my editor.

"Chris, if I had somebody else I wouldn't send you".

"Can't Features cover it?" I protested.

"Features are in Abuja covering the movie awards".

"Lifestyle and Fashion?"

He gave me a funny look. Of course I knew Lifestyle and Fashion wouldn't cover something like this and neither would I. I'm Politics and there's enough going on in the political arena to keep me busy for eternity.

"Look..." he began, "I'm begging you. All the other reporters are tied up. I can't even get a correspondent in Cross River. You know we don't normally cover this sort of thing, but it sells newspapers..."

"So you want me to go to Cross Rivers State to cover a story about a mermaid seen by a few people probably drunk on ogogoro?"

I've drunk ogogoro before. It's an illegal gin that packs a punch. A few shots of the stuff and anything's possible! Seeing mermaids wouldn't be amiss.

He pushed an airline ticket over to me. "Look at it as a paid holiday. Go down there, talk to a few people, take a few pictures, file a report and take the rest of the week off."

I was won over. I needed a break anyway and if it was being paid for, so why not?

I took the ticket and left.

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It took me nine hours to get there.

An hour's flight from Lagos, a four hour road trip and to complete my journey, a four hour boat ride from the mainland to the coastal island in the Bight of Biafra Bay. I didn't mind the flying or the bumpy road journey, but if there's anything I can't stand it's boats and water. I'm the kind of person who'll be seasick before the boat even disembarks!

The sea was mild and the boat was reasonably comfortable but as soon as we docked I couldn't wait to disembark and throw up in a corner.

"Sir...you okay?" I heard a voice from behind me say as I threw up my guts.

I turned around. There was a young girl looking me up and down. I was obviously in a state and she looked concerned.

"I get you some water." And she ran off.

I was sitting down trying to regain my composure, taking deep breaths and watching the other passengers disembark. They ignored me altogether, more concerned about offloading their goods. They were mostly traders coming back from the mainland with supplies. The dock was full of people who knew somebody who had just got in. I was the outsider nobody came to welcome me or knew.

I looked around me; a few thatched huts, a church of some sort, market and some other structures. Not much. The way I saw it, I could get this story and be out of there in a few hours, probably on the same boat I had come on. I was just about to get my bearings when the girl came back with a bottle of cold water and something wrapped in banana leaves.

"Thank you," I said, taking the bottle from her and downing the contents. Water, always an elixir, flowed down my throat, filling a stomach I had just emptied out. She opened the banana leaves to reveal a whitish kind of herbal root.

"Chew this," she said offering it to me. "It make you feel better."

I was a bit apprehensive. I didn't even know who she was and here she was offering me things. Hospitality of this sort normally comes at price.

Seeing my reluctance she threw the smaller piece of the two roots into her mouth and began to chew on it. I took the other piece and did the same. It had a funny taste. As I chewed, first it was bitter then it was sweet, like saccharine. I felt the juices go into my blood stream like a powerful stimulant. I began to feel my head clear.

"What's your name?"

“Nkechi...you are not from the village are you?”

“No, I’m not. I’m from Lagos.”

“Lagos?” she repeated.

I nodded.

“One minute nobody knows us...now everybody dey waka come here” she said offhand. Her command of English was good even though she mixed it with pidgin.

“Excuse me, I don’t understand.” I really didn’t understand.

She pointed to a group of men, too sharply dressed to be villagers, in the distance talking to some elders. “You come to see mami-wata?”

It was more of a statement than a question.

I guess I did look out place. I had a backpack on, carried a laptop bag and had a camera dangling from my neck. Top that up with my attire – designer jeans, T-shirt and trainers and I definitely looked out of place.

“Yes” I said. “I’m a newspaper reporter from Lagos.”

“Is it true newspapers pay good money for pictures of mami-wata?” She asked with a

mischievous look in her eye.

Here we go, I thought. I’m not even off the jetty yet and I’m being hustled.

“Y-e-s” I replied slowly, wondering how much I was going to have to part with for an ‘exclusive’.

“Good!” she exclaimed triumphantly. “I show you everything and then you pay me!”

I smiled. You have to admire her entrepreneurial spirit. This is a remote offshore island that doesn’t get many visitors. So when a bunch of city slickers, money in their pockets, turn up out of the blue, why not fleece them?

I steered her towards a bar across the road. It wasn’t really a bar but more or less an improvised beer parlour built out of palm fronds with benches and tables and a radio blaring away in the background.

“Why you no believe in mami-wata Mister Chris?” asked Nkechi, sipping from the bottle of Fanta I had just bought her.

An intelligent girl, she’d just turned eighteen and was on holiday from Calabar where she goes to college. I tried to explain to her that mami-wata or mermaids were just a myth and they didn’t exist but she wasn’t buying it.

“There’s got to be a logical explanation for the sighting,” I said brushing away a small swarm of flies gathering over my glass.” There is no such thing as mami-wata.”

“But I see it!”

You could see the seriousness on her face. “Okay then, tell me what you saw.”

It was early evening and a number of them had gone to the stream to fetch water. Just as they were about to start fetching water they heard singing coming from upstream and when they looked there she was sitting on a rock combing her long hair. She was young and naked down to the waist with a snake coiled around her shoulders and a tail where her legs should be.

A group of teenagers on their own in the bush going to fetch water? I’ve got two teenage nephews and I know what they get up to.

“Do you drink?” I asked her.

“No!” she replied lowering her eyes.

She was lying.

“When I was young...” I told her, “and we used to go and fetch water in the bush, we used to get up to a lot of mischief – drink, smoke, play and party. We’d go at first light and won’t return till nightfall.

We’d play, wash our clothes and then come home with water in pails balanced on our heads.”

“Okay...so sometimes I drink a little and smoke,” she finally admitted.

“So were you drinking that day?”

She shook her head.

I believed her. She probably saw something and there was a logical explanation for that.

On the way down I had googled the word ‘mami-wata’ and it threw up an interesting explanation. The African manatee, also called a sea cow, was the most likely culprit. These gentle sea mammals are known to resemble human beings from a distance with the females having breasts with teats. And if one was seen it was probably sunning itself or eating the greenery.

I had mentally finished writing my newspaper report but since I was on the island, I thought I might as well go on Nkechi’s guided tour.

First it was to her parents’ house where her father entertained me to a tale about how they had upset a mami-wata on a late night fishing trip and she had knocked over their canoe, forcing them into the water. I tried to explain to him that it was a manatee. And even though they’re slow

and timid and stay out of man's way, can become aggressive if provoked, attacking and knocking over boats.

He shook his head. "You city people don't believe anything." He said something in their local dialect and shook a fist at me.

I didn't bother to ask what he said. His actions said it all.

Next was the long trek into the bush to find the creek where the mami-wata had appeared. It was late afternoon and the sun was high in the sky. Drenched in sweat I followed my little guide as she ran a running commentary on what they did every step of the way on the day of the sighting. At the same time I had to keep an eye out for scorpions and the stingy nettles growing along the path.

There were others too and we ran into other local kids escorting visitors up and down the place. Any chance of me getting an exclusive was lost as the opposition had better equipment and cameras than me. One enterprising photographer had set up a remote camera to record everything.

I stood on the bank of the creek listening to Nkechi babble on when all of a sudden I heard the sound of tiny bells being rung behind me. Looking around I saw this elderly woman dressed in a long white dress with red headgear on. She was ringing two small bells and singing to no

one in particular. She walked to the water edge and waded in until the water was up to her waist. It was then that I noticed she had a bag and was throwing plastic combs and cans of Fanta and Coke into the water along with sweets and candy bars.

I turned to my guide for an explanation.

Nkechi explained to me that she was the local priestess and she had come to appease the mami-wata with gifts because she was looking for a human mate.

"A mate?"

Yes, a mate. She was looking for a human man to have a sexual relation with and she would kidnap somebody and take him down to her kingdom at the bottom of the sea.

I burst out laughing.

Nkechi didn't find me funny. "You don't know anything! Mami-wata can come for any man she fancies and take him away!"

That was it. I had heard enough. It was getting late and I needed to get back to civilization where everything was black and white.

We turned around and headed back to the village.

A storm was brewing far out to sea and I wanted to be on the mainland

before it erupted.

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She stood there with a big smile on her face counting the money I had given her. I gave her double what I promised her. I don't know why I did. Perhaps it was because she was a good guide and companion. I also gave her my phone number. Again I don't know why but I did. It's not as if we'll be calling each other up.

"Why you no stay tonight. The storm is coming and the sea go rough plenty plenty."

I looked at her little angelic face and smiled. Their little coastal village has no running water, no electricity and to make matters worse I couldn't even get a signal on my phone. An overnight stay for me is in an air-conditioned hotel room, with electricity and running water, a full signal for my phone, Wi-Fi and satellite TV. No! I'm leaving.

"Sorry Nkechi, I have to go."

"I walk you to the boat then." She picked up my bag and hoisted it onto her head as I led the way. It had been a long and exciting day. I came looking for a mermaid and I'm leaving more baffled than I was when I first came. The strange thing was everybody, young and old, seemed to believe in mami-wata.

The boat was the same one I had come out on. In a previous life it had been a fishing trawler but now with some clever modifications it carried people.

As the boat pulled out of the tiny dock and headed to sea I waved to her till she was out of sight and then went down to my cabin. My cabin wasn't luxurious like on a proper ocean going ship. It was all very basic, a bunk bed, a small table and locker. Not much, but at least I didn't have to sleep on the open deck top side like all the other passengers, at the mercy of the elements.

I dumped all my things on the floor, crawled on to the bunk bed and within minutes I was fast asleep.

I must have been asleep for about an hour and a half when a loud bang followed by people shouting woke me. Scrambling out of bed, I made my way up to the deck. On the way up, the engineer squeezed past me in a wild panic heading to the engine room. He was a right state covered in oil and soot.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Engine don finish" was all he said and he was gone, disappearing into the confines of the engine room.

Just as I made my way up to the deck there was another explosion and the whole of the rear of the boat seemed to

disappear in that one big flash. People started to scream and before you knew it they were diving overboard, men and women.

Half of the boat was on fire now. It was dark with just a few stars in the sky and when the captain brushed past me I knew he was going too.

“You have to jump” he shouted trying to get himself heard over the noise. I shook my head. “I can’t swim.”

“Sorry,” he said and he was gone over the railings too.

I was alone on a burning and sinking boat.

Praying the boat would at least stay in one piece and afloat, I put on one of the discarded lifejackets and ran and locked myself in my cabin hoping that God in his mercy would save me from this.

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As I woke up I had this feeling I had fallen asleep in the bath again. I opened my eyes and I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. I was bobbing in the sea amidst a lot of debris, oil slicks and seagulls screaming overhead with a lifejacket keeping me afloat.

I wasn’t alone.

Nkechi, the girl from the village, was floating alongside. She didn’t have a lifejacket on and was topless, her pert teenage breasts barely breaking the surface of the water.

“You awake?” she spluttered in-between gasps and spitting out water. “You sleep all night.”

“What happened?” I asked. I couldn’t remember much and I had a terrible headache. The sun was rising, casting its long golden rays over our pitiful condition at the mercy of the sea.

“The boat it sink.”

I must have suffered a bout of amnesia for it all started to come back. The late night boat trip...the storm...the engine room explosion...everybody jumping overboard...I, unable to swim, locking myself in my cabin, praying...the sinking...sinking...water rushing in filling the room I was in...the air pocket that saved me from drowning...Nkechi...wait a minute – she wasn’t even there.

“Nkechi,” I began. “What are you doing here? You weren’t even on the boat. Where’s everybody else?”

She smiled. “Everybody else swim...you no swim so I come to rescue you.”

That explained it then. It’s true what they say about Cross River women and water;

they can swim like fish.

It then dawned on me. The final block in my mind came tumbling down as I could now see the events of last night unravel before my eyes. It couldn't be true, could it?

We were in the middle of nowhere, far out at sea. I couldn't see land anywhere. To swim out here on your own would be a herculean task, not to talk of dangerous and suicidal.

I looked at Nkechi in awe. It was all coming back to me now...

...Looking out of the porthole of the cabin I'd seen the long silvery tail of a big fish swim by...it swam by again...and again and I could see it! The fish tail had a human torso attached to it...the upper body was that of a young girl and she was smiling at me and waving!

I must have thought it was a hallucination.

Water began to fill the cabin as the boat listed and the air pocket wasn't holding it back...I was going to drown...I couldn't breathe...the water rose above my head...water filled my mouth and nostrils...I was drowning and as I began to lose consciousness, I felt something tugging at my legs, pulling me out...

"Nkechi...you?"

It was too incredulous to be true but it was.

She smiled and nodded. She swam closer and took off my life jacket.

It was strange. I held her close to me. I could feel her bare breasts against my chest through the wet clingy fabric of my shirt. I could feel her heartbeat, her lungs breathing, her chest moving up and down. She even had a belly button.

I'd never swum with dolphins before but I knew how it would feel now. Beneath the waves I wrapped my legs around what should be her legs. Her long tail was smooth and scaly in parts. At the end my feet could feel a flipper, only this wasn't plastic like divers wore. This was real.

I must have aroused her. She clung to me even more as her sea legs entwined mine. Her eyes closed in ecstasy as she sang in high shrills and pitches in the language of the porpoises of the sea.

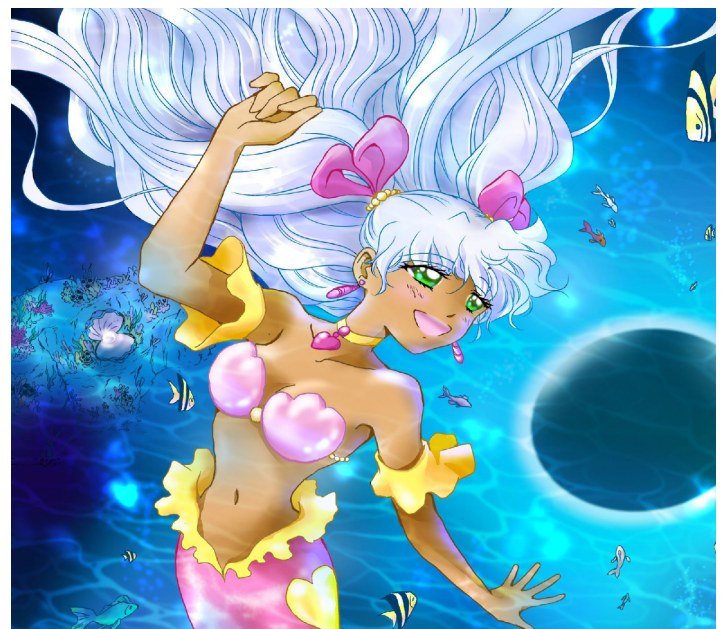


Illustration by Cito Wheelington

Ogunlowo

Loving the Other: Hans Christian Andersen and the evolution of mermaid romance in Western media

by Carrie Sessarego

Humans have always been fascinated by the notion of people who live in the sea. Mermaid romance combines the allure of the water with the irresistible tug of the unattainable and a dash of sex. Above all, mermaid stories help us work through the idea of falling in love with that which is ‘other’ from us.

The mother of mermaid romances is, of course, “The Little Mermaid,” a story by Hans Christian Andersen, first published in 1837. Andersen suffered from many unrequited crushes on both men and women.¹ In “The Little Mermaid,” he explores the agony of loving ‘the other,’ someone who is utterly forbidden and unattainable.

Andersen’s story is full of body horror, tragedy, and an ending that is only happy from a very specific point of view. This story has influenced every mermaid story since, but it’s easy to forget how very

horrifying much of it is. Comparing the details of Andersen’s “Little Mermaid” with other mermaid stories demonstrates how much some things have changed in the world of mermaid fiction, as well as how many things have stayed the same.

In this story, love is expressed through self-sacrifice, a concept which was consistent with both Victorian ideals of womanhood and Andersen’s experience with same-sex attraction. Andersen’s mermaid suffers terrible physical and emotional pain in her quest to earn the prince’s love. In the end, she sacrifices her own life for the man she loves. When the prince marries another woman, unknowingly dooming the mermaid according to the terms of the mermaid’s agreement with the sea witch, her sisters intervene. They make their own deal with the sea witch, one which stipulates that if the mermaid stabs the prince on his wedding night before the first rays of

¹Gabrielle Belliot, “Dear Internet, The Little Mermaid Also Happens to be Queer Allegory,” Lit Hub, July 12, 2019

dawn, and his “warm blood sprays on her feet,” she can rejoin her sisters under the waves. If she does not, then she will die when the sun rises, and, lacking an immortal soul, become foam on the sea.

Much as Andersen found himself forbidden to love another man, his mermaid is forbidden to love a human. Once she falls in love with a human, she is cut off from her family and her society. She cannot tell the prince that she loves him because she had to earn her ability on land in part by allowing the sea witch to cut out her tongue. The phrase “The love that dare not speak its name” was not coined until 1896, but in “The Little Mermaid” we already see this concept made literal. Ultimately, the mermaid ensures the prince’s future happiness by allowing him to have a more socially conventional and respectable marriage, a choice that costs the mermaid her happiness and her life.

When faced with the choice between murdering the man she loves or dying herself, the mermaid chooses the latter. However, there is a twist ending! Instead of becoming foam, she finds that she is embraced by the Daughters of Air, who promise her that because she has “suffered and borne her suffering bravely,” she can earn an immortal soul after three hundred years of good deeds. Since the mermaid isn’t foam on the sea after all and has a way to win the soul she craved all along, the story has a happy ending,

sort of. True love and true happiness, in Andersen’s world, consist of subjugating one’s own desires and sacrificing one’s own happiness to benefit others.

In the modern era, all this self-sacrificing looks less like good morality and more like unhealthy codependency. When Andersen wrote “The Little Mermaid,” women in Denmark, Andersen’s homeland, could not vote and being gay was a crime (this is a simplification, and uses terms that Andersen’s contemporaries would not have used, but is essentially the situation that Andersen faced). Since then, women’s rights movements have radically altered the possibilities open to women, and the modern discourse in the Western world is less about sacrificing for the good of one’s family as it is about self-actualization and modelling self-love as positive thing for one’s family.

In the human rights struggles of marginalized people, including women and LGBTQIA people, giving up or being robbed of one’s voice, either literally or metaphorically, in exchange for the possibility of love is associated with oppression and erasure. LGBTQIA people continue to fight across the globe for the right to live and love openly. Many marginalized communities, including women and LGBTQIA people, use terms such as “finding their voice,” “lifting their voice,” and “being heard” as rallying cries, referring to their oppression as “being

silenced.” While the mermaid’s silence is relatable, it is not considered admirable in the same sense that it was in Andersen’s day.

One of the qualities of the mermaid in “The Little Mermaid” is that she is “innocent” both in the sense of being virginal and in the sense of knowing nothing of life on land. She is fifteen years old when she trades her tail for legs, and is treated by others as though she is both a much younger child and a sexually mature woman. The prince refers to the mermaid as “his little child” and as “his little foundling.” Andersen states that the prince “loved her as he would love a little child,” although his infantilization of her does not deter him from kissing her “on her red lips,” suggesting that his frequent caresses are the result of sexual attraction.

While modern mermaid stories might not go as far as Andersen in explicitly infantilizing the heroine, certain aspects of this infantilization appear in modern-day mermaid stories. As a “fish out of water,” the naïve mermaid views life on land with child-like curiosity even as she possesses a sort of elemental wisdom and ready sexuality. *Splash*, a comedy from 1984, provides a good modern example of this character type, which critic Jonathan McIntosh calls the “Born Sexy Yesterday” type. Madison, a mermaid, appears on land with the body of an adult woman and greets Alan, the human hero, by

kissing him. The two almost immediately enjoy enthusiastic and consensual sex. Yet in her complete naiveté about human life, Madison acts like child who must be taught how to act and what to value. In providing this knowledge, the hero can consciously or, in Alan’s case, unconsciously create the perfect mate for himself from a sexually mature blank slate.

It’s remarkable how tenacious the plotline of “The Little Mermaid” is. At least one or two elements of the story are found in modern mermaid love stories with startling frequency. The basic framework of mermaid plots often involve a mermaid falling in love with a human, saving the human from a threat (usually drowning), and making a bargain of some kind, usually time limited, so that the mermaid can be with their beloved. There is almost always an element of secrecy, with the human being unaware that the mermaid is not human. For instance, in *Splash*, Madison saves Alan, from drowning several times. She then follows him to New York City, where she takes human form. She then spends the next “six fun-filled days” winning Alan’s love, while trying to hide the fact that she is a mermaid from Alan. There are many plot complications that diverge wildly from “The Little Mermaid,” but the core of the story remains intact.

As with *Splash*, Disney stepped away from the love-is-pain aspects of “The

Little Mermaid” when making their light-hearted animated movie. *The Little Mermaid*, released in 1989, kept the concept of a mermaid who is obsessed with humans and who falls in love with one, along with some basic plot points, particularly the time-limited deal with the witch. However, Disney dumped the body horror, moralizing, and tragedy and replaced it with comedy, songs, and action.

The poor mermaid in Andersen’s tale doesn’t even have a name. Disney’s mermaid is named Ariel and her beloved is Prince Eric. Andersen’s mermaid is quiet and shy, while Ariel is brash and extroverted. Andersen’s mermaid has her tongue cut out by the sea witch. Ariel’s voice is transferred to the witch (Ursula) by magic, not mutilation, and Ariel gets her voice back in the end. Andersen’s mermaid’s human feet come at the price of feeling with every step “as though you were walking on knives so sharp the blood must flow.” Not so for Ariel, whose feet are just fine. There is no ambiguity about this happy ending, although adult viewers may raise an eyebrow realizing that Ariel gets married at the age of sixteen. Ursula is killed, Ariel and Eric get married, and Ariel can still chat with her family whenever they bob their heads above the waves. Ariel is never told to back out of the deal by killing Eric, and there’s no mention of the afterlife.

Ursula’s lair is certainly horrifying and

the final battle with her is very scary, but most of this story is romantic and comedic. Instead of being a rumination on the pain of unrequited love and the importance of self-sacrifice, the movie is all about music, adventure, and romance, with a strong subtext of growing up. Ariel is sixteen years old. Eric is implied to be her first crush and, subtextually, a sexual awakening. Appearing in a seashell bikini top, Ariel is portrayed in a much more sexualized way than previous Disney princesses, despite her utter naivete about the world of humans. The movie involves her rebelling against her overprotective parent in her desire to see more of the world and have more independence, a classic component of coming-of-age stories.

Under the terms of Ursula’s contract, Ariel only has three days to win “true love’s kiss.” This implies that true love is something that develops very quickly if not instantly, and something that may be more symbolic than anything else. Eric remembers Ariel’s song, which he heard after she saved him while he was in a semi-conscious state, and he has searched for the singer ever since, associating the voice with beauty and safety. Ariel is hopelessly smitten with Eric after saving him from drowning, even though during that time he is either fully or partially unconscious, suggesting that her love for him is more of a symbol of her love for the rest of the human world than a love for him as a person.

Additionally, love in *The Little Mermaid* is about physical chemistry, and reliability. Ariel saves Eric and Eric saves her, showing that they have the capacity to help each other through difficult situations. Ariel and Eric also enjoy each other's company and have strong mutual physical attraction, as evidenced in the song "Kiss the Girl" and in a passionate post-battle kiss.

Finally, love between human and mermaid represents the breaching of barriers between countries and peoples, bringing a new kind of peace to the world. Ultimately, in this story, if any risks are taken and sacrifices made for love, the anxiety and pain will not last. The power of love resolves and heals the conflicts that exist between people from very different worlds. Even Ariel's father, who initially despises all humans, grows to accept the other and sanctions the marriage between Ariel and Eric.

The Shape of Water, a 2017 film, is a reclaiming of *The Creature of the Black Lagoon* and a Beauty/Beast romance. However, it also has strong aspects of the Little Mermaid story. The protagonist, Elisa, is introduced as a human woman who falls in love with and rescues a creature known only as Amphibian Man. Amphibian Man would seem to be the obvious mermaid figure in that he lives in and must return to the sea, but Elisa herself has many mermaid traits and is the one who has to sacrifice everything.

She loves water and expresses her sexuality in the bathtub. She is voiceless and has scars on her neck that look like gill slits. Elisa is a cleaning lady, and her feet often hurt. Her teal uniform suggests a mermaid's tail. After having sex with Amphibian Man, she buys herself red shoes, symbols of sexuality from another Hans Christian Andersen fairytale. And when Amphibian Man embraces Elisa in the ocean water, her gill slits open, her shoes fall off, and she becomes an aquatic creature.

In this story, Elisa and Amphibian Man are able to find love largely by recognizing this out-of-placeness in each other. Because Elisa cannot speak, her friends tend to use her as a sounding board, talking incessantly and leaving her little room to express herself. Her disability, gender, and blue-collar job contribute to her being not only unheard but largely unseen. With Amphibian Man, who learns sign from Elisa, Elisa feels truly seen and appreciated:

"When he looks at me, the way he looks at me... He does not know, what I lack... Or - how - I am incomplete. He sees me, for what I - am, as I am. He's happy - to see me. Every time. Every day."

In both Andersen and Disney's stories, the loss of a voice impedes the mermaid from winning the prince's affection. Here, however, Elisa and Amphibian Man

communicate on a level beyond words (even beyond the sign language that they share). Amphibian Man and Elisa recognize each other's humanity and intelligence. Elisa saves Amphibian Man from vivisection and Amphibian Man heals Elisa's gunshot wounds and helps her transform into a fully aquatic creature. Love, in this world, is about healthy sexuality, empathy, understanding, and reciprocity. It is also about liberation. Elisa frees Amphibian Man from literal captivity, while he frees her from a life that she finds to be bland and stifling. This mermaid story ends happily, because both the 'prince' and the 'mermaid' recognize and devote their lives to each other.

Some writers have gone beyond Andersen's template entirely, focusing on the ideas of "love for the other" and ideas of liberation and self-determination and leaving the plot elements of "The Little Mermaid" far behind. *The Deep*, is a novel written collaboratively by Rivers Solomon with Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, and Jonathan Snipes (the members of Clipping, the band whose song inspired the novel). This novel uses mermaid lore as the basis for a radical story of love and survival. This book is rich in content and context, exploring liberation, memory, the terrible atrocities of slave ships, and conflict between responsibility to the community versus responsibility to oneself. It is a love story between Yetu, a kind of mer-person called a wajinru

-- a people who are the descendants of pregnant women who were thrown into the sea from slave ships -- and a human woman, Oori, who is the last survivor of her people.

The Deep is one of many recent romances that seeks to subvert the white, cisgender, heterosexual norms of Western-based mermaid stories in the past. Both Oori and Yetu identify as women. Oori is described as having "dark skin" and Yetu is also implied to have dark skin and scales. Both women stand outside of their own societies in various ways and both find that despite their biological differences they feel more comfortable with each other than they do to other members of their own species.

For these characters, love is about transcending the trauma of the past, as well as mutual acceptance and the ability to bring out the best in each other. Prior to meeting one another, both characters had sacrificed their lives to their communities, specifically about keeping the communities' history alive. They help each other find a better balance between responsibility to the community and responsibility towards self. They are also models of mutual acceptance, loving one another's bodies and minds and personalities wholly and without reservation.

While Andersen's "Little Mermaid" remains a major influence on mermaid

Cont. on pg 55

What Mother Failed to Mention about Dating a Mer-Man

*This poem originally appeared in the collection, A Route
Obscure and Lonely (Wapshott Press, 2019)*

by LindaAnn LoSchiavo

Don't catalogue your insecurities,
Believing he can drown unwanted pain.

Assuming he'd enjoy your local pool
Is incorrect. He's used to privacy.

All make-up should be waterproof, wet skin
Dabbed silver. Coral jewelry should not
Be store-bought. It's always inherited.
Get used to wearing sea anemones
When entertaining and freshwater pearls.

He's likely to propose if you're inclined
Towards synchronized slow strokes,
Staccatos of arousal going deep,
Involving tidal heartbeats in high tide.

Romantic mer-men saturate their mates,
Imbibing wetness, urgency, salt sweat — —
Seabedding till you surface together.

Loving the Other cont.: love stories, modern mermaid stories have the ability to explore sexuality, race, body type, gender, and self-determination in ways that Hans Christian Andersen could never have considered discussing explicitly. Modern mermaid characters are more likely to have and to use their voice and

to have unambiguously happy endings in this mortal life as opposed to in an afterlife. Andersen's story of a character in love with 'the other' remains alive in happier forms, as mermaid stories continue to challenge us to take risks for love and to reach out to those who seem insurmountably different from us.

I Want to Be Where the People Are: Disability and The Shape of Water

This essay originally appeared on Tor.com in January of 2018

by Elsa Sjunneson

The Shape of Water made me feel less human.

On the surface, there are many things to like about *The Shape of Water*. The main characters, the ones in the right, they are all outsiders. They are people like me. With the exception of *Children of a Lesser God*, it is the first time I have ever seen a disabled woman as an object of desire. It is the first time I have seen someone swear in sign in a mainstream film. It is one of the only films out there to address some of my feelings about my body or depict them on screen. Let's be honest, *Children of a Lesser God* was made in 1986. That's 31 years of film history. That's my entire life.

Spoilers follow.

In one sequence: "What is she saying?" the angry (real) monster asks on the screen.

"She's saying thank you," the woman behind our hero translates, hurriedly and incorrectly, as Elisa patiently, slowly,

and effectively signs "fuck you" to a man trying to kill someone she loves. It fills me with joy.

In another scene, a disabled woman is embraced tenderly by her lover. In a third, an abled man threatens the disabled heroine, spitting words out that I have heard in other variations throughout my lifetime. It rings true.

But below the still waters of agreement, there is the discord of being othered. The first time in years that I have seen a disabled woman sexually desired, and indeed, sexually active, and loved in a film is by a monster. Monsterhood and disability are inextricably linked in science fiction and fantasy. Characters like Snoke in Star Wars are barely human, their faces marred by scars which signal that they are evil. Disability and disfigurement are tied together as one. Elisa's scars on her neck have been read as gills by some, a hint that her disability is in fact, monsterhood all on its own.

Like *The Shape of Water*'s Elisa, I have never known a life without a disability. Both of us live in worlds where we have to have things translated for us. Elisa needs facilitated communication with those who cannot speak her form of sign language. (Elisa does not use ASL, though she does use some standard ASL fingerspelling in the film.). For me, I need a hearing aid, likely someday I will need to sign, and I need people to read things like subtitles for me if they are too small (which was fortunately not one of the problems I had with this film).

At its core, *The Shape of Water* asks us to consider what a freak is. Is a monster a god? Is a disabled woman a freak? An outsider? Can she be loved or understood by her own kind, or are the monsters the only ones who can truly understand her? Unfortunately, the answer to this movie was that no, she cannot be loved by her own kind, and yes, she is an outsider. A monster. A freak. She belongs under the water with her beloved Aquatic Monster. We don't know this for certain, that she lives—in fact all signs point to the idea that she is dying or dead at the movie's end. But if I accept that she is dead, then the film ends as all disabled films do: in ultimate, inevitable tragedy. So I choose to imagine the slightly less angering of two evils.

There is a moment in the film which caused me to cry. It caused me to cry because I was conflicted in my heart and

soul about the moment. Elisa fights with her best friend Giles about whether or not to rescue the monster from the clutches of the government, before they vivisect him. Elisa forces Giles to repeat what she is saying, making him listen to the words that so he *understands* them. It is during this speech that she talks about what it is like to be disabled. For people to gaze upon her, to see her as different. This sequence both felt true, and hurt like hell to see.

That's when she says the words. That's when she forces Giles to say out loud (without subtitles for the sign): "He doesn't know that I am less than whole."

Society says that disability makes us lesser, makes us uneven humans. The worst of humanity looks at me with my one clouded eye, and my one hearing ear. It looks at me and it says I am half of what I could be. This isn't a projection. I don't *feel* less than whole. I have had people tell me that I *am* lesser than them. That they couldn't imagine what it would be like to inhabit my body, that they would rather die than experience what it is like to live in a disabled body.

The conflict for me is here, that on the one hand I have always known in my soul that abled people see me as half of them, that they see me as less than whole. Which is why I hate that in media such as this, we can only be desired by those who don't know any better.

So when Elisa ultimately dies, at the end of the film, I'm utterly unsurprised. Of course they kill her, only to have her resurrected under the water, to join the only man who has ever desired her. Of course society would rather imagine a disabled woman living under water with the only creature that has ever loved her, rather than imagining her above the waves, being loved and desired by the other humans in her life.

I wish that I could just say, "Well, it's fantasy," and move on. But I can't. Not when I've literally never seen a movie in which a disabled woman is desired by a non-disabled partner. Not when I know that my body is seen as less than desirable. Not when I know that subconsciously this film, it means she deserves a freak like her, and not a human like her.

If desired disabled heroines were common, then I wouldn't have a problem with them being partnered with Hot Monster Boys. But we don't live in that world yet. Able bodied heroes can have all the Hot Monster Boys they want—to go along with all their able bodied human lovers. Until disabled heroines and their bodies are desired by the same frequency of able bodied to monster lovers, I'm not going to be comfortable with Only Monster Lovers For Disabled Women. Science fiction, fantasy, and horror have an obligation to do better. As writers, as consumers, as creators, we have to push

back and ask for better representation. We have to make better stories, and disconnect from societal bias. If we can imagine a world where a literal fish monster can be loved by a human being, we can imagine a world where a disabled woman can be loved by a fellow human being.

There's another problem with this film that needs to be talked about, and it's important. While the character of Elisa is disabled, the actress Sally Hawkins is not. Disabled actors are constantly passed over, disabled characters instead being presented as "challenging" roles for abled people to play. It would have been a much more powerful film had the actress been a disabled woman, especially someone whose sign was fluent and natural, a sign language that she relied upon every day to communicate, and not just for a single role.

The casting of Hawkins allows for moments like the one towards the end of the film, where—entirely out of character from the rest of the movie—we are treated to a song and dance routine in a dream sequence, as Elisa sings "You'll Never Know How Much I Love You" in a dance routine beside her beloved Aquatic Monster. This sequence reassures the audience that they are not watching a disabled woman, but an able bodied one. Hollywood must stop undercutting the performances of disabled characters by showing us their non-disabled dreams.

This only happens with physically disabled characters. It is only ever about making sure abled audiences are comfortable. I am tired of abled audiences being comfortable at the expense of my experience.

I don't dream of seeing out of two eyes, or hearing without a hearing aid. I don't crave many things which are out of my grasp (though a car would be lovely), and I certainly can share my love with someone without having to subvert my disability in order to express it.

Undercutting her disability broke the flow of sign language, the believability of disability, and indeed, the power of her words through sign.

I wanted so badly for this movie to disrupt the ableist, freakshow narrative which I have lived with for my entire life.

It's not a theoretical narrative, either.

Over the holidays, I attended a party where a guest told me that disabled people were cast as evil characters because evolutionary psychology says that asymmetrical people aren't attractive. He said this, while looking into my asymmetrical eyes. He said this without apology. He said this because he believed it, with my husband not two seats away from me staring daggers at him. The thing is, this isn't the first time this has happened to me. It probably won't be the last. There's nobody fighting back, except the disabled people out there who want to be loved.

I wanted to feel included in the human world. Instead, the film reinforced the narrative that I belong below the surface, to be put on display when it suits the narrative.

The rumors are true: there will be a Mermaids Monthly Year 2!

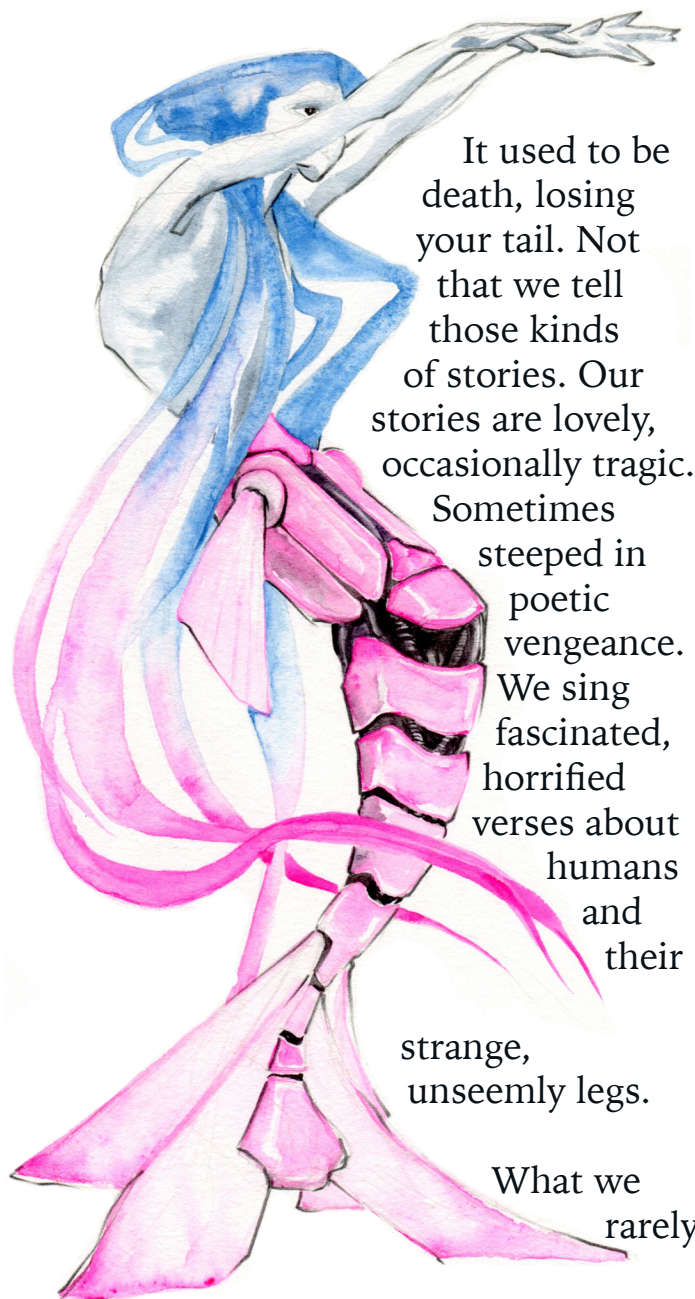
We're in the process of working with the new team to hand over the business and plan their adventure and we can't wait to introduce you to them!

In the meantime, they'd love to hear from you about what you'd like to see on next year's adventure!

What did you like? What do you want more of? Are there any creators you want to see work from again? Of course, we can't make any promises but we'd LOVE to hear your opinion!

I Am Not Your Tragedy

Story by Carlie St. George &
Art by Clare McCanna



It used to be death, losing your tail. Not that we tell those kinds of stories. Our stories are lovely, occasionally tragic.

Sometimes steeped in poetic vengeance. We sing fascinated, horrified verses about humans and their

strange, unseemly legs.

What we rarely

speak of is sharks, and the carnivorous discord within the sea. Which is a very mer way of saying that when I was twenty, a shark bit me near in half.

A century ago, I would've died, bled to death in a matter of minutes. Half a century ago, I might've lived, able to swim only through the strength in my arms. Some merfolk, conservatives, insist that's how I should live now, because they want me to be a story they can understand: tragic, traditional, easily categorized. Cyborgs are a human invention.

I reject the narrative entirely. Survival is never a tragedy, and I'm a mermaid with my tail or without. I'm whole, with or without. I am a continuation. A reinvention, too.

My new tail is long, metal. Bioluminescent. My new tail is jellyfish pink. Wondrous, beautiful, mine.

And oh, oh, what a joy it is, to swish forward, to outswim sharks.

Canto for a Mermaid

by William Heath

I

Halfway down the path
I couldn't see the house
but I could hear the sea.
The wind even brought
salt spray to my face
and, as the trees thinned,
there was the vast blue
undulating thing itself.

II

One solitary gull
glides on sickle-wings,
tilts and dips and skims
the swells, more for the thrill
than the fish (that's how I'd feel),
veers and banks against the wind,
swings out and seems to lull,
before swooping past with creaking cry,
raucous, riding the wind.

III

The sea lifts us and lets us fall,
ever-moving, remorseless, it
sings its ancient song. I can hear
the sea-surge murmur like old mariners,
whispering of solitude and sameness,
no sail in sight, only the slow
measured sweep of the sea. Who can say
when the sea's been weeping? Anybody
can stick his hand in its side.

IV

At night the sea licks
the sand free of footprints,
only a slow silver line of surf
on the moonlit curve of the beach,
the shore glows around the bay bend,
a lone sail moves to a whim of wind.
The dark hooded waves churn in,
disclose, for a second, their white skulls,
then die on the sand, dragging pebbles.

V

There is a cemetery under the sea.
The ships of the lost are sunk
beneath the plummet of thought.
The petrified ears of drowned sailors
are shoved up, like shells, on the sand;
eyes, like jellyfish, trailing nerves
like legs; guts strung among the seaweed;
skin films and floats away; teeth,
sucked to smoothness, spit out like pearls.

VI

I press a circle of glass
to my face, strap on two steel lungs,
and dive below the pellucid skin of the sea,
seeking buried treasure. I dream down
into deeper green, chuckling bubbles
and chewing seaweed. Down to touch the bones
of the lost with the wrinkled fingers
of an underwater lover. Here I discover
a maze of mermaid hair. You are the treasure.

Our Contributors

Agwam Kessington is a budding poet and an aggressive writer. He is the Author of the crime drama, *Sons of Hades*. When he's not writing, he watches anime. You can find him on twitter, @TheAgwam

Ali Trotta is a poet, editor, dreamer, word-nerd, and unapologetic coffee addict. Her poetry has appeared in *Uncanny*, *Fireside*, *Strange Horizons*, *Mermaids Monthly*, and *Cicada magazines*, as well as in *The Best of Uncanny Magazine* from Subterranean Press. She has a poem forthcoming in *F&SF* magazine. Her short fiction has appeared in *Curtains*, a flash fiction anthology. A geek to the core, she's previously written TV show reviews for Blastoff Comics, as well as a few personal essays. Ali's always scribbling on napkins, looking for magic in the world, and bursting into song. When she isn't word-wrangling, she's being a kitchen witch, hugging an animal, or pretending to be a mermaid. Follow her on Twitter as @alwayscoffee, read her blog at alwayscoffee.wordpress.com, or subscribe to her TinyLetter. Four of her poems were Rhysling Award nominees.

Ann LeBlanc lives in Massachusetts with her wife, where she writes about queer yearning, culinary adventures, and death. Her short stories have been published in *Fireside Magazine*, *If There's Anyone Left*, and *Silk & Steel: A Queer Speculative Adventure Anthology*. She can be found at annleblanc.com or on twitter at @RobotLeBlanc

C. S. E. Cooney ([@csecooney](http://csecooney.com)) is the World Fantasy Award-winning author of *Bone Swans: Stories*. She has narrated over a hundred audiobooks, released three albums as the singer/songwriter Brimstone Rhine, and her short plays have been performed in Chicago, St. Louis, Phoenix, New York City, and Taipei. Her novel *The Twice-Drowned Saint* can be found in Mythic Delirium's recent anthology *The Sinister Quartet*, and her forthcoming novel *Saint Death's Daughter* will be out with Rebellion in Spring of 2022. Other work includes novella *Desdemona and the Deep*, and a poetry collection: *How to Flirt in Faerieland and Other Wild Rhymes*, which features her Rhysling Award-winning "The Sea King's Second Bride." Her short fiction and poetry can be found in Jonathan Strahan's anthology *Dragons*, Ellen Datlow's *Mad Hatters and March Hares: All-New Stories from the World of Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland*, Rich Horton's *Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy*, and elsewhere.

Our Contributors

Carlie St. George is a Clarion West graduate with stories in *Nightmare*, *Strange Horizons*, *The Year's Best Dark Fantasy and Horror*, and multiple other anthologies and magazines. When not working on fairy tales, meta slashers, or tiny mermaid stories, she writes about movies and television on her blog *My Geek Blasphemy*.

Carrie Sessarego is the resident 'geek reviewer' for Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, where she wrangles science fiction, fantasy romance, comics, movies, and non-fiction. Carrie's first book, *Pride, Prejudice, and Popcorn: TV and Film Adaptations of Pride and Prejudice, Wuthering Heights, and Jane Eyre*, was released in 2014. Her work has been published in *Clarkesworld Magazine*, *Interfictions Online*, *Pop Matters: After the Avengers*, *The WisCon Chronicles*, *Invisible 3*, and two volumes of *Speculative Fiction: The Year's Best Online Reviews, Essays And Commentary*. She spends her time chasing her husband, daughter, dog, and three cats, as well as giving presentations and leading book clubs at the Sacramento Public Library.

Clare McCanna is a freelance illustrator living in New England. She spent exactly as much time as was good for her on the waters of the North Atlantic and remains endlessly inspired by the Ocean and their creatures. These days she mostly entertains her cats and paints fantastical stories in oil and watercolour.

David Ishaya Osu is a poet, memoirist, editor and street photographer. His work has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies across Nigeria, Uganda, France, India, Ghana, South Africa, Bangladesh, the US, the UK, Australia, Canada, Austria, and elsewhere. He is an associate poetry editor with *Plenitude*, and the poetry editor of *Panorama: The Journal of Intelligent Travel*. David has an MA in Creative Writing (with distinction) from the University of Kent, and is the author of the e-chapbooks: *When I'm Eighteen* (2020) and *Once in a Blue Life* (2020).

Hugo and Word Fantasy finalist **E. Catherine Tobler** lives and writes in Colorado. Weird how that works out! Her debut collection, *The Grand Tour*, is available from Apex Book Company. Her short fiction appears in *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* and others. You can find her on Twitter @ECtheTwit.

Our Contributors

Elsa Sjunneson is a Deafblind author and editor living in Seattle, Washington. Her fiction and nonfiction writing has been praised as “eloquence and activism in lockstep” and has been published in dozens of venues around the world. She has been a Hugo Award finalist seven times, and has won Hugo, Aurora, and BFA awards for her editorial work. When she isn’t writing, Sjunneson works to dismantle structural ableism and rebuild community support for disabled people everywhere. Her debut memoir, *Being Seen: One Deafblind Woman’s Fight to End Ableism*, releases in October of 2021 from Tiller Press.

Keyan Bowes is frequently ambushed by stories and took the Clarion Workshop for science fiction and fantasy writers in self-defense. Her work has appeared online in a number of publications including *Escape Pod*, *Fireside*, and *Constelación*; and in print in a dozen anthologies including one from Flame Tree Fiction. She’s a member of SFWA.

Normally peripatetic but San Francisco-based, these days Keyan can be found online or somewhere near Puget Sound.

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Kim Coleman Foote is the 2021-22 George Bennett Fellow at Phillips Exeter Academy and the recipient of several other writing fellowships, including from MacDowell, the NEA, NYFA, Center for Fiction, and Illinois Arts Council. Her fiction, essays, and experimental prose are forthcoming or have appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Ecotone*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere. She is currently working on a story collection fictionalizing her family’s experience of the Great Migration in the South and New Jersey, and a novel about Ghana and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. She received an MFA in creative writing from Chicago State University.

Our Contributors

Linda M. Crate (she/her) is a Pennsylvanian writer. Her poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has seven published chapbooks *A Mermaid Crashing Into Dawn* (Fowlpox Press - June 2013), *Less Than A Man* (The Camel Saloon - January 2014), *If Tomorrow Never Comes* (Scars Publications, August 2016), *My Wings Were Made to Fly* (Flutter Press, September 2017), *splintered with terror* (Scars Publications, January 2018), *More Than Bone Music* (Clare Songbirds Publishing House, March 2019), and *the samurai* (Yellow Arrowing Publishing, October 2020), and two micro-chapbooks *Heaven Instead* (Origami Poems Project, May 2018) and *moon mother* (Origami Poems Project, March 2020). She is also the author of the novel *Phoenix Tears* (Czykmate Books, June 2018). She also has three full-length poetry collections, the latest being *Mythology of My Bones* (Cyberwit, August 2020).

Born under the water sign of Scorpio, **LindaAnn LoSchiavo** resides on an island, avoiding the desert of the real. “A Route Obscure and Lonely,” nominated for an Elgin Award, and “Concupiscent Consumption” are her latest poetry titles. Her YouTube channel presents her poetry as videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHm1NZIITZybLTFA44wwdfg>

Mariana Palova is an enthusiastic alchemist who, from time to time, likes to do a bit of magic. Born in Jalisco, Mexico, she decided to dedicate her life to a constant search for her own personality, which has led her to become a self-taught writer and artist.

With a special weakness for nature, occultism, folk music and a disastrous degree in graphic design, her visual work (a mixed media of photography, oil, and digital painting) has been nationally awarded and exhibited in more than fifty shows around the world.

Her first novel (*Nation of the Beasts: The Lord of the Sabbath*), first self-published in Spanish and subsequently acquired for its publication in Mexico and the United States, won the Best Fantasy Book of the Year Award by the prestigious Foreword Magazine.

Nowadays, her biggest dream is to get a comfy cabin in the woods and live peacefully happy as creator.

Our Contributors

Mila Nowak is an illustrator and comic artist from Poland. She creates fantastical art with the traditional mediums of ink and watercolour. When she's not working on art, she will be reading books, playing board games or/and drinking silly amounts of tea. Her biggest inspirations are folklore, books and nature. She's @MillaNowak on Twitter.

Nina Kiriki Hoffman has sold more than 350 short stories and several novels. Her short fiction has won a Nebula Award, and her first novel won a Stoker Award. She does production work for the *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and she teaches short story writing through Fairfield County Writers' Studio and Wordcrafters in Eugene. She lives in Eugene, Oregon, with a mannequin and several cats. For a comprehensive list of Nina's works, please see Susan O'Fearn's lovely tribute page: <http://books.ofearna.us/hoffman.html>

S. Rupsha Mitra from India loves to experiment with poetry and translations. Her microchap *Dandelion Skin* has been recently published by Origami Poems. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Mekong Review*, *Muse India* and *North Dakota Quarterly*.

Susmita Ramani's work has appeared in *Pure Slush*, *365 Tomorrows*, *The Daily Drunk*, *Secret Attic*, *100 Words*, *Six Sentences*, *50 Word Stories*, *Vine Leaves Press*, *The Drabble*, and other publications. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband, two daughters, and eleven pets.

Thomas Jones. Born in Charlotte, NC, now, Hilton Head Island, SC. Painter, printmaker, and illustrator. Living by the Atlantic Ocean for many years made an indelible mark on the subject matter, imagery and color pallet for artwork. Shows of new work, once or twice annually for the past ten years, in the Carolinas, including Boone, Charlotte, Wilmington in NC and Charleston and Hilton Head Island in SC. Published works include 5 years of submissions, covers and illustrations in *Atlantis UNC-W literary magazine*, 1979-83. Illustrations for *Lighthouse magazine* 1980's. Cover illustration for chapbook, "What the Welsh and Chinese have in Common"-1990. Two published children's books; *Alphabet Beach Club* -2017, *Animal Band Camp* - 2021.

Our Contributors

Tony Ogunlowo is a London-based writer and author of fifteen books spanning poetry collections, plays, short-story collections, novels and novellas. As a prolific columnist his articles are syndicated throughout Nigeria and the rest of the world, published on blogs, print newspapers and magazines and websites. His short stories and flash fiction have been broadcast over the BBC and Smooth 98.1 FM #thetalesatnighttime and his pidgin English poetry is studied as part of the Nigerian Open University English Literature course EN214.

Valerie Herron is a Pacific Northwest-based illustrator of the mythological, the macabre, and the absurd. She received her BFA in Illustration at Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, OR.

Valerie has created art for numerous publications, including *The Steel Clan Saga* by T. Thorn Coyle, *Night Walk* by Aeryn Rudel, as well as two Lovecraft anthologies - *The Book of Starry Wisdom* and *The Book of the Three Gates* - by Strix Publishing. Valerie has created art and content for multiple entertainment media enterprises such as RiffTrax, Faerieworlds, Privateer Press, and Pacific NorthWEIRD.

Outside of her creative practice she spends her time listening to music and podcasts, being out in nature, playing with her animals, writing, reading, gaming, and exploring a myriad of sorcerous activities.

William Heath has published two chapbooks and a book of poems, three novels, an award-winning work of history, and a collection of interviews with Robert Stone. visit: www.williamheathbooks.com

About Us

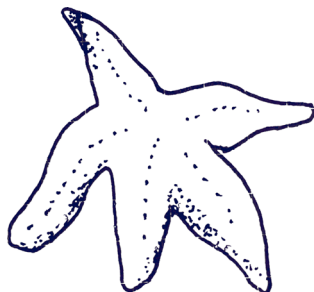
Julia Rios (they/them) is a queer, Latinx writer, editor, podcaster, and narrator whose fiction, non-fiction, and poetry have appeared in *Latin American Literature Today*, *Lightspeed*, and *Goblin Fruit*, among other places. Their editing work has won multiple awards including the Hugo Award. Julia is a co-host of *This is Why We're Like This*, a podcast about the movies we watch in childhood that shape our lives, for better or for worse. They've narrated stories for Escape Pod, Podcastle, Pseudopod, and Cast of Wonders. They're [@omgjulia](#) on Twitter.

Ashley Deng (she/her) is a Canadian-born Chinese-Jamaican writer with a love of fantasy and all things Gothic. She studied biochemistry with a particular interest in making accessible the often-cryptic world of science and medicine. When not writing, she spends her spare time overthinking society and culture and genre fiction. Her work has appeared at *Nightmare Magazine*, *Fireside Magazine*, and Queen of Swords Press and you can find her at [aedeng.wordpress.com](#) or on Twitter at [@ashesandmochi](#).

Meg Frank (they/them) is a Hugo-nominated artist based in New York. In the before times they traveled a lot and spent a lot of time looking up in museums. Currently they are keeping themselves busy with art school, two cats, knitting for their family, and this magazine. They're [@peripateticmeg](#) on Twitter.

Lis Hulin Wheeler (she/her) lives outside Boston with her spouse and child and spends her days chasing mail carriers and citing obscure postal regulations.

Find her on [Twitter](#) or [Goodreads](#) and her work at Ninestar Press and *The Future Fire*. She also serves as Fiction Editor and Logistics Manager for *Wizards in Space Literary Magazine* ([check them out!](#)) and slushreads for various genre publications.



- a little squished, still a star

