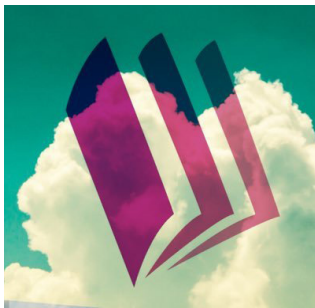


Celebrating 10 Years of Outwrite





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Introduction

This past year has been unlike any other. With the COVID-19 pandemic, our lives became smaller, closer-to-home. We went into quarantine, isolation, social distancing from each other to keep each other safe. Our libraries shuttered, bookstores closed, open mics ceased, writing workshops and festivals were postponed.

In a time of uncertainty, grief, and fear, we witnessed and experienced increased police brutality, historic protests affirming the Black Lives Matter movement, staggering increases in anti-Asian violence, work-from-home situations provided to maintain social distancing measures, decades after disabled activists called for this same accessibility. We've seen communities come together for mutual aid and support.

During all of this, we held the 2020 festival virtually, for the first time. Writers from around the country and world joined us. They read from books debuting during a pandemic, shared work written in response to the events from the past year, spread joy and a love of queer literature, and we all joined from our laptops and phones. Our community found a way to keep literature — especially queer, trans, and BIPOC literature — alive and thriving. The 2020 festival was even nominated for the 35th Annual Mayor's Arts Award.

We're now planning the 2021 festival. It's likely that we will have to return to a virtual platform. But we now know the possibilities available to us via virtual programming, the increased accessibility, and that our LGBTQ community of writers and readers will be there with us.

OutWrite wouldn't exist without you. We wanted to create this journal to uplift, to celebrate, to honor your writing, your perseverance, your diversity, your strength, your beauty. The stories and poems inside pay homage to OutWrite writers from the past 10 years. As we enter a new epoch of the OutWrite literary festival, we, as Co-Chairs, will do all we can to further the mission of this festival: to create a home for the literature of our trans/queer community, to honor our vast diversity, and to connect readers craving LGBTQ work with those bravely writing it.

We hope this journal helps you celebrate the existence of the OutWrite D.C. LGBTQ literary festival. We're so excited for the next 10 years, and more!

—OutWrite Co-Chairs, Marlena Chertock and Malik Thompson

Quailing

Rasha Abdulhadi

Wrap now the last
rose of faith
and bury that flower
to ferment. For you,

now rapt in dread,
know the soft quail alone
eludes the wagon
slips the wheel and
threads the hollow embrace
of the brush. Be there,

disappear, disappear,
be safe, be small
be hidden to all
but those who love you.
Be conjured only
by necessity, by needful
nearby summons
scrawled in the letters
of your name. Sow
strangeness where you pass,
leave feather down, cleave
earth with cutlass claw
so small this tiller.
Just for a season, or
for a generation,
go to ground and
survive and multiply.
Keep your succulent skin
to yourself, to yourself.

Rootbound

Paula Molina Acosta

Elibet carried the lavender with two hands, close to her chest. The stalks drooped. The plastic container bulged, roots straining against it. She trudged behind June, who listened for the scrape of her half-melted sneakers against the dirt path. June stopped every so often for her to catch up. The heat had started bearing down on them from above, and had seeped in between the folds of her clothes, settling in the crooks of her knees and the small of her back. It trickled into her lungs and made it hard to breathe. The handheld radio, inherited from June's nephew, a former Boy Scout, was stuffed into an outer pocket of June's pack. It gargled at them as they trudged onward.

"Can I turn that thing off?" Elibet asked from behind her.

"No," June said. "What if someone tries to get a message out?"

"It's not two-way," Elibet grumbled. "We can't talk back."

"What if it's the government?" June countered. "Or the military? We have to leave it on."

The sweltering air got stuck in her throat and her lungs. It was getting harder to breathe, and June looked back to see Elibet lagging, drenched with sweat.

"We should rest," June murmured, looking around at the houses that lined the road. There was no movement in any of the windows. On a nearby, yellow lawn, a leafy tree cast a wide shadow. "Over there," she pointed. They trudged across the road, and by habit June looked both ways before crossing. There was no one. The lawn, dry before its time, crunched like dead leaves beneath their feet. They pulled out their water bottles, and sat side by side against the tree trunk. The last of their water, sloshing at the bottom of their bottles, was warm, like drinking soup.

"We should have left with everyone else," June mumbled. "We're moving too slow." She checked her watch, then her phone. Both were still dead. She pulled out the map. "We're gonna need more water." She traced a path along the faded lines of the map, biting her lip where the well-worn creases interrupted the markings. "We can follow this road until the state border. Hopefully we can find somewhere along there to stock up on water. It's not the fastest way, but when they send help that's the road it'll be on." She rubbed her eyes. "We could steal bikes? I don't know how safe biking at night is." She looked at the other woman. "Elibet?"

Elibet scooted closer, draping a leg over June's and curling into her

side. Her other hand was still glued to the lavender plant. She hummed a drum circle song, the kind they sang beneath the trees at festivals, where the Michigan ferns grew past their waists and kept the soil cool between their toes. June looked back at the map. Michigan was so far ahead of them.

“There’s a cricket in the berry patch tonight,” Elibet hummed. “And it hasn’t learned to swim,” She smiled at June. New freckles smattered her cheeks, collecting in the curve of her dimples. “Sing with me, Juney.”

“El, it’s too hot for this,” June groaned.

“There’s a cricket in the berry patch tonight,” Elibet sang. She leaned her head against June’s shoulder. In the damp heat, dark strands of her hair clung to the flushed skin of her cheeks. June sighed, and let herself lean back against the tree. Elibet coiled up beside her. Her skin was sticky and warm where it met June’s, and she had to relent. They finished the verse together: “And the storm is coming in.”

A foreign clashing made them jump. In the pocket of June’s pack, someone was gargling over the radio.

Every hair on June’s arms stood straight up. Still tangled into Elibet, she lunged for her pack. They crashed to the ground, slamming into each other as they hit the yellow grass, a pile of limbs collapsing into itself. Aching all over, June pushed Elibet away and scrambled to her feet, snatching up the handheld radio. She pressed the contraption to her ear.

“June!” Elibet cried out behind her. “Oh no!”

June whirled. In the fall, the lavender plant had been knocked out of her hands and thrown to the ground, bursting open. The plant itself lay limp, a casualty of war. Beside it, the plastic container trembled, a gash tearing it open. Potting soil littered the ground. Elibet hunched over the scene, frozen. The plant’s roots had grown tightly into each other, weaving round and round the base of the pot; in the collision, the bound soil had exploded into a mess of black flesh and white, shredded veins.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” June snarled, turning away and pressing the radio back to her ear. The same static was back. She cursed and fidgeted with the dial.

“I—I can fix it,” Elibet stammered. Pushing past June to get to her bag, she dug out the ever-dwindling roll of duct tape, tore a piece off with a sharp krrrrrt, and wrapped it clumsily around the slashed container. She tried to brush the scattered soil into a pile with her hands. “I think I need more soil.” Her head swiveled, searching. She leapt to her feet and took off. June fiddled with the dial, turning it back and forth in increments. All she got was empty, grinding static.

Elibet returned, her hands brimming with stolen earth. With gentle hands, she managed to tuck the plant into the repaired container, cushioning it as best as she could. Half the soil and roots still lay on the ground. The lavender drooped, the stalks flopping over each other. She exhaled, her face softening, and reached for her water bottle. There was still a little

left at the bottom.

“Are you done?” June snapped.

Elibet’s jaw clenched, her hands tightening around her water bottle. “What’s up with you?” she asked.

“Enough with that stupid plant. You’re wasting all our water and it’s gonna die in two days anyway,” June snarled. “We could be doing something useful, we could be walking or looking for more water or—”

“Getting mad at me for no reason?” Elibet demanded, her face twisted and red. “Playing with your little radio?”

June clenched her hand around the radio, pressing the plastic casing into her palms.

“Nobody’s coming for us,” Elibet said. “Nobody’s coming to get us, not the military or the government or the goddamn Boy Scouts, nobody.”

“You don’t know that,” June insisted.

“I do know that,” Elibet growled. She ran a hand through her bangs, flexing her fingers open and closed like she could tear her hair out. Fresh beads of sweat had appeared on her forehead, the back of her neck. “Because if they were, we’d have heard it on that stupid radio—”

“At least I’m trying to help us,” June said. “I’m trying to get us to Michigan, but all you seem to be interested in doing is singing your stupid little songs and—”

Elibet lunged, tearing the radio out of June’s hand. Before June could blink, she hurled the little machine to the ground. Old and flimsy, the plastic casing burst against a stone, fracturing like glass. The screen cracked. The machine’s inner, wiry flesh spilled out across the dirt. It stopped gargling static.

The women stared at the plastic fragments on the ground.

Setting her water bottle down with a solid thunk, Elibet put her face in her hands. She rubbed at her eyes, looking down at the dead and dying grass.

June watched her for a moment. Insects buzzed around her ears, but she didn’t swat at them. The lavender by Elibet’s feet waved its limp stalks, bits of soil trickling out of the container where the duct tape hadn’t quite sealed the tear.

After a moment, June stepped over the broken radio and sat down beside Elibet. Though it was painfully sticky, she put her arm around the other woman. Elibet let her. She sniffed.

June nodded at the lavender.

“Is she gonna be okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Elibet said, wiping her cheeks, then her forehead, the underside of her neck, the bags beneath her eyes. She sniffled, then cleared her throat. “She just needs space to put down some roots.” Elibet sniffed. “Did you hear what the radio said?”

June shook her head. “No.”

Elibet nodded. She found her water bottle and held it up, sloshing its

remaining contents around. She took one last swig, and poured the rest of the little lavender plant. The soil turned black where it welcomed the moisture.

“Come on,” she murmured. “Let’s go find some more water.”

Two tongues, but not two loves

I.R. Belletti

Why is it okay
if my tongue shifts
from Italian
- hard sonorous orange open air
to Spanish
- sweet and heavy creamy rough wood

But it's not
if I hold his face in my hands
and I tilt his head back,
slipping my hand in his pants,
follow the waves of his body
trace the edges of his muscles
drink his poison
and swallow his confession

And it's not
if I smile at her soft chest below me
hair shiny in the dark,
clinging to me
as if I was a boat
and she was drowning

Why do you praise my two tongues
but despise my two loves

A New Jersey Bar

Laken Brooks

Pink rims from a clear glass scar the table
Veneer
Swish of liquid in her mouth, eyebrows pulling
Together
Then apart when she spits. I want to pour
“Stop”
And “Sorry” in her mouth all at once,
Liquor
Burning through the Massachusetts vineyards
Where
We met, I in my borrowed dress and she,
Well,
What does that matter now in this pub in
New Jersey?
“Whiskey’s stupid”
Falls
From her lips. “Is ‘stupid’ a taste-testing
Word?”
Her fingers graze mine.

If my hips were younger, I would do the
Salsa.
I never did try, but my 50-year-
Old
Hips have time to learn to paint the stars here,
Big Bang
In a hole in the wall, stench
Of
Smoke, as when God’s hips swished the world to life.

Spring

Laken Brooks

The snow clung to the windowpane despite
My thumb scratching on the glass, against white

Flakes that must have been daffodils in last
Month's parade, weaved in the braids of chaste girls

Who spun in the town square like falling buds
From my pear tree. Its bark hunched into mud's

Embrace, brown sinking into brown: rotten,
Cracked flesh watching the dance of new cotton.

A winter passed in gales, in cold rages,
And the Plessy girl -- youngest? -- engages

The tall Smith daughter from downtown, a pear split
Between their hands, changing seasons, spring knit

In the green bumps rising sleepily from
Trees, when we feared the warm would never come.

Your Head is Older than Your Feet

S.K. Brownell

Technically, she says, our heads are always moving faster than our feet.

Technically. Unless you're walking on your hands, says Julia, and she flips herself upwards into a handstand to demonstrate. She's never been stable enough to actually walk, actually pick up one hand and put it down in a new place, even for one step (is it a step if you're walking on your hands), but Tally is laughing at her legs wobbling through the air, first a V, then the splits, then like superman, one leg bent and foot to knee. That is good enough for the joke.

Julia slams to the floor, never good at engaging her core. She doesn't believe in the controlled fall. She just falls--all out. And Tally, too. It's a thing they talk about, feeling talented, not understanding that one day they will wish they had built up their strength when they were younger.

But for now, their bodies take the shockwaves with delight, plenty of cushion and cartilage and fast to heal. Their bodies are still too light for their liking, too little for gravity to grip. Nothing feels enough except too much.

Too bad you're not very good at that, says Tally, flipping herself upside down and taking one, two, three halting steps of the hands before she has to stop and rebalance, tightening her core even though she does not yet know that this is called tightening your core. She straightens, takes two more steps, and says, you could slow yourself down. Then she falls.

Maybe it has anti-aging properties, says Julia, in a headstand now, static. We should patent it and sell the program to our mothers.

How much faster do you think our heads are going? says Tally, dangling off the couch. How long do you think we'd have to stay upside down to even it out.

Probably most of the time, says Julia. We've been standing upright for eleven years.

They spend the rest of the day making plans to sleep like bats. If the pilot program succeeds, they agree, they will bring it to their mothers.

*

He says, technically, your head is older than your feet. It is her birthday and she is the oldest she's ever been, though that has not always been true. Much to her chagrin, Julia finds that aging doesn't go in one direction. One year she had a house, a car, a dog, a wife, and now, she still has the car, and the dog, but the rest are gone.

She says, then stay away from my feet you cradle robber. They laugh. They laugh because he is younger than she is, if they're going by linear time. He swipes at her foot and she flicks it away, almost kicking him. They are playing a dangerous game.

He says he wants to take things slow. I just want to be sure we know what we're getting into.

You mean you want to be sure I know what I'm getting into, Julia says.

That's when he tells her he mostly dates men.

What on earth provoked you? she can't help but ask him. To come up to me in that bar?

He shakes his head. I was only looking for a friend.

They take walks on the streets around each of their houses, feeling more conspicuous than ever. They hold hands and hear footsteps and rip their hands apart like teenagers in an overly concerned suburb. In her neighborhood, the streets make square angles and they walk up and down methodically, memorizing paths. They play math games and turn every third street, every 7/8ths, mark out the Fibonacci sequence, count steps and avoid cracks. At his place, the streets meander, and so do they, walking ten miles in an hour and two blocks every three days.

One day they stop under the oak tree that lives in both of their neighborhoods, so old its arms can stretch through time zones. I don't know who is supposed to be in charge, he says, and she asks him, should we kiss?

They stand together for a while, face to face and hands clasped.

The tree has the right idea, he says. It'll always be the same age if it just keeps growing up.

*

You know when weird things happen in movies? Like something is just slightly out of place? That's the kind of thing that always made me feel normal.

Tally is sprawled across two kitchen chairs, her neck lolling off their edges. Julia can see her from the corner of her eye. Her t-shirt is imprinted with a drum set even though neither of them is in any way musical. It rides high on her waist, bunched towards the ribs, weaving in and out of the spokes on the chair.

Tally cranes her neck up, a forty-five degree angle from the floor. Like not like wizards and stuff or aliens, but just like that jam jar falling off the counter.

Julia pulls the sharp lead of her mechanical pencil perpendicular to the lines of her notebook. The lead snaps, as it has seven times already. She clicks down the eraser to reveal more lead, but, like a reflex, she always clicks twice. Now too much is exposed, its bare neck too thin to support the pressure. She holds down the eraser and slides the stick back in, clicks once, deliberately, and sets her thumb aside. As she tries to write,

the blunt edge of the plastic makes squeaking sounds on the paper.

Tally needs validation, even though she's sure Julia will understand. You know? she asks, running her fingers back and forth over the spokes of the chair like a harp.

That calendar flipping pages, says Julia by way of example.

Exactly. That broom flying across the room.

Julia knows what Tally means, and in another moment she might find it compelling, but in this moment she is still trying to access the perfect amount of lead from her pencil. They are sitting at the kitchen table doing homework--or meant to be. Julia is sitting. Tally is sprawled. Tally is doing acrobatics as Julia is doing math. Julia isn't bothered by Tally's restlessness. Tally is always restless and it's never bothered Julia before. So Julia isn't bothered today either, except that this pencil just is not on her side. Always too much or too little. The whole idea was to make things easier. No more sharpening and sharpening. But still, so much broken lead.

Julia isn't bothered--not by Tally's restlessness, or what her mother would call her impolite posture, or that Tally usually just copies Julia's work. But what they are meant to be doing is studying, not imagining magical things like jam jars flying off of counters, calendars turning pages, or Tally's shirt inching higher and higher up her chest.

Tally cranes her neck up again, pulling it away from the floor and the magnet of gravity that even she is beginning to feel. She looks at Julia. Julia looks back. What? Julia says.

Tally smiles. I can see up your skirt.

Later that night the raspberry jam jar jumps for joy, but slips and falls off the counter. The jars and cans in the pantry band together the way cylindrical containers know how to do and make a ladder of their bodies to help the raspberry jam jar back up. In the morning, the jam jar leaves herself in a slightly different place, but no one notices.

Low Tide

Sarah Fannon

Dating a mermaid was running up my water bill. Coralia slept in my full bathtub at night after I went to sleep. She'd get under the sheets with me to be the big spoon until she heard me snore. I never told her, but I always woke up to the sound of water from the faucet. I'd be up for just a moment, long enough to listen to the splash of her slipping into the tub; long enough to trace the scale indents she'd left on the back of my thighs and feel the thrill of something tangible.

In the morning, she'd be in bed with me again as if she'd never left. I don't know why she thought she had to protect me or my feelings, as if I didn't understand her basic needs. But it was a joy to wake up to the smell of brine on my pillowcase and to turn and toy with the seashells in her hair.

Before Coralia, I had gone on so many exhausting first dates with men and women I met on dating apps that I had almost given up. Or at least that's what I told my friends and coworkers at happy hour and lunch breaks. I was too proud to admit that I was so desperate for that unknowable thing that I had seen people wear like blush to ever stop seeking it. I didn't even care what shade.

We met on my birthday. I'd invited my friends to my favorite bar and told them to bring a few friends of their own to mix things up. I eyed their offerings: men in relationships and straight girls I didn't have time to pine after; the story of my life played on repeat for some god's amusement. But there was one single man, a target with his harmless features and his patterned, button-down shirt, the sleeves rolled up deliciously.

And so I spent the evening shamelessly touching the arm of a man I was only remotely interested in, just to hold on to the idea of someone, of having something. I laughed loudly at jokes that weren't that funny. I teetered from vodka cranberry, stole sips of his IPA just to put my mouth where his had been. He was a fleeting lifeboat, carrying me on those tumultuous waters from twenty-nine to thirty. As he spoke about the most recent political book he'd finished, because that was the only kind he read, I thought that a compromise could be to raise our children on fairytales about governments that behaved well.

Over an hour later, my whole body magnetized in his direction, he did that fake, social sigh that announced he was about to go, but in a way

where you might believe he regretted it. I'd gone and wasted my birthday celebration hanging onto someone who had zero interest in me; who simply tolerated me as a party leech.

He said goodbye and I followed him out to wait with him while he called for a car.

"It's almost my birthday," I said.

"I know, that's why we're all here."

"That's why I'm here too. The day I was born. That's what my birthday did. It brought me here."

"Sound logic."

"If you stay a little longer, you can kiss me at midnight and I promise I won't even turn into a frog. I'll just turn thirty."

"I don't think that's a good idea," he said, eyes searching the streets as if the car would pull up and whisk him away before he had to finish this conversation.

"Why not?"

"I'd like kissing you," he said. "You're a pretty girl. But then I'll get a text from you to hang out and I'll say no and feel guilty about it."

"I don't even have your number."

"You'd find it. Mary would probably hand it over."

"You sound pretty confident for a man who just met me. How do you know what I'd do? How do you know we wouldn't make a good couple?"

The car appeared like a chariot and he raced to slide into the leather backseat. "I'm just not looking for something serious."

"Maybe I'm not either," I said, throwing my hands in the air. "You didn't even ask."

"I don't have to," he said with a pitying face before closing the door.

The beach was just across the street. I stumbled through the sand until I found a spot to lay down, then stared up at the stars and held on tightly to the resolution not to cry. I imagined the man, whose name was already slipping through my mind like the sand in my hands, was en route to a better offer. The world was a charcuterie board and I felt like a Ritz cracker. Good, dependable, but nothing to roasted meat and cheese wheels.

I tried to imagine what this potential woman might look like, what she wore to bed as she waited for him. In my head, she was better looking than he was because that's always how it seemed to go. Before I could play anything out, I heard a splashing sound and bolted up. A dark and shimmering head popped out of the water and I was afraid someone was drowning. I rushed towards them and stripped down to my underwear and bra, my body already shivering at the idea of jumping in.

But I jumped in anyway. I hadn't thought it through, how my body was so floaty with alcohol that I wouldn't want to work to stay above water. My arms crawled with goosebumps. Then someone put their hands

around my waist and pulled me up. Bleary with ocean in my eyes, I looked into a round face that instantly relaxed me.

"I came to save you," I said, spitting water out of my mouth.

"Pretty sure I just saved you," she said, running a hand through my waterlogged hair. When she let her hand drop, it brushed against my hips. "Can I help you to shore?"

"Yes," I said in a daze.

She scooped me up and swam to land. My arms were linked around her neck and I felt something hard in her hair jostle against me. It was a sand dollar. Other things seemed to glitter throughout her hair, but I figured it must have been the moonlight playing tricks.

Pressed against her skin, I realized with embarrassment that she wasn't wearing anything. I had flailed in and ruined this girl's skinny dipping.

When we reached shallow waters, she let me go so I could get up myself. I turned around to thank her and realized her whole body glistened. I could see wispy fins flitting in and out of the water.

"You're—"

"Yep, let's skip that part."

"Okay." I paused a moment, opened my mouth, and then closed it.

"Do you want to say it?" she asked with weary amusement.

When I nodded, she gestured for me to go ahead. "Mermaid," I said with a wonder I hadn't felt in years. It'd been wrung out of my childhood.

"The very same. Human," she added, pointing at me. "I'm Coralia."

"Heather," I said breathlessly.

We spent an hour exchanging stories. We faced each other, her in the water and me on the sand. Coralia had seen and talked to humans before, usually ones who swam out past the buoys, but never for long. My stories about school dances and road trips felt so mundane coming out of my mouth, but she looked at me the way people watched glass spinners.

When there was a lull, I said, "It's my birthday, you know. Well today wasn't, but tomorrow is and it's tomorrow now."

I apologized if I sounded drunk, but she told me she didn't know what that meant, and I enjoyed her awe as I explained we had drinks to turn us to fools.

"Brave fools sometimes," I said, brushing sand off my kneecap. "Ones who ask mermaids if maybe they want to hang out sometime."

She grinned. "Like a date?"

"Do you do that? Date?"

"Yes, but I've never dated a human before."

"Would it even be possible? Can you leave the water?"

Coralia explained that she could move on land like a sea lion, her tail propelling her while she used her arms. She just needed to refresh with water every few hours. I got the sense she hadn't done it much before.

It was getting late, so I told her I'd visit tomorrow night at the same

spot. And that's how I spent my real birthday on a towel whose edge got wet from the tide spooling in and out, and how I went home with the taste of salt in my mouth from a mermaid kiss.

One date we had soft serve cones by the beach, and she took bites right from the top without flinching. She told me stories about sea markets and sharks. Coralia never offered anything about her family, and nothing much about her friends. I presented anecdotes of my own, like the year my brother unwrapped all the presents on Christmas Eve and then rewrapped them, but ended up mixing the labels up in the process, so that the lavender scarf I got for my mom ended up in my dad's lap instead. My dad insisted on keeping it and put it around his neck on windy mornings to this day. I hoped telling these stories would make Coralia more comfortable to share with me, but she had tight lips. I couldn't tell if she didn't want to open up to me or she just didn't have anything to say about them. I didn't know which was worse.

I took her to see her very first movie and her nose crinkled at the taste of popcorn, but the cavern of her mouth and the tips of her teeth were bright red from the cherry slushie she gulped down. I chose a movie I'd already seen so that I could pay more attention to her viewing experience, the way her mouth was slightly agape the whole time, her hand resisting the urge to reach out and touch the movie magic. Afterwards she was bursting with thoughts, talking about the characters like they were real people we might run into at a restaurant.

"And you can do that every day?" she asked with an ecstatic look on her face. "Buy a ticket and watch a story about people's lives?"

"You can even watch movies at home."

She clapped her hands together. "Can we do that one night?"

"Of course," I said, poking her nose. "I've got an old Disney movie I'm curious about your thoughts on."

Coralia started to come over on Saturdays to cuddle up on the couch and watch movies. I picked her up at the beach because that was easier than having her slide her way through public transit. She could do it, but she got a lot of stares from people trying to figure out if there was a comic con in town. The clincher was the night she was on a bus back to the beach, half because she wanted to try it and half because she thought I looked too tired to drive her back, and a man stepped on her tail. He used his boot like a fork just to watch her struggle to get through the door before it closed. After that she accepted my rides and it became one of my favorite ways to spend time with her. She made up words to the tunes on the radio, singingly loudly and offkey, and she would leave her hand on my knee the whole time.

At my house we'd watch a film, often pausing to fool around when

she couldn't resist my trailing hands, and then we would go outside to drink lemonade and nap in the sun. I liked her best in the sunlight, her tail a glinting wave of lavender coins. Mr. Jenson next door didn't approve of how she sunbathed on the porch with her breasts bare. He would sit on his own back porch and harrumph into his newspaper. Anytime we happened to take our trash to the curb at the same time, although I had a sinking suspicion that he spent Thursday evenings waiting to catch me, he'd make passing comments about my "new friend."

She eventually started to sleep over and it was exhilarating to know when she came over that I wouldn't have to say goodbye until the next day. I spent the next few months treading carefully, not wanting to rock the boat that had finally idled long enough to let me clamber in. It was nice to have her over, but I had never felt my own presence more vividly than laying there with her in the mornings. After I stirred awake, I'd adjust to look at her. Her eyes were always closed, but her face often looked too settled to be anything but secretly or almost awake. I'd try to will them open until I remembered that as soon as she woke up, she'd leave. She never left while I was still asleep, but she never stayed longer than it took to stretch her arms out and kiss me goodbye. Meanwhile all I could do was soak in the look of her, eyes tracing the round tip of her nose, her eyelashes that glittered like rain, her soft tummy rolls that I like to hold in my hands. But being so aware of her, of her breathing, while never having her even turn to look at me, made me feel the weight of myself so absolutely. How heavy my need to be seen was.

She never said where she was going or why she needed to leave, and I never asked. Just once I wanted her to wake up and snuggle me closer and tell me she wanted to stay in bed all day. She'd never had waffles before and I wanted to bring them to her, wipe the chocolate chip smear from the side of her mouth with my tongue. But always, always, a kiss on the mouth and an insistence that she could get herself home.

Even as spring cooked itself into summer, and we saw each other less often as she went on longer swims to faraway islands and back, our dates still made my stomach fizz with nerves and anticipation. I wondered each time when we would sink into something deeper, but I was too happy to worry, and didn't want to push something faster just for the sake of it. Those things took time. And if I could keep holding her hand, bask in the way she belly-laughed at my jokes, and feel how much she wanted me by the fierce warmth of her mouth on my skin, I knew I had time to draw her out until we were more than a sketch.

In July, I had a ground pool installed. At night, Coralia swam through the water with palpable joy, the LED lighting casting a bluish glow across her bright features. Her fins trailed like tissue paper and her whole body

was more in control than I'd ever seen it. I would sit on the porch and watch, even when she sidled up to the edge, leaning her head against her arms to bat her eyelashes and ask me to take a dip. I always said no, lying that I was too cold. She'd smile, call me an "earth walker," and dive back in. I tried not to think of a fish in a glass bowl.

One night she flipped four times in a row, her body a seamless circle of purple and gold and shells. I was mesmerized, and I got a devastating urge to touch her, to remind myself of her figure. I approached the pool and sat on the ledge with my feet dangling into the water. Coralia emerged, her dark hair like an oil spill around her head.

"Heather," she said, and my name on her lips was the reason people even had names, to feel known by someone else. "I've been thinking."

The water against my thighs seemed to grow colder. I wanted to pull my legs out and walk backwards through time, even on shards of glass, just to be where I was only three minutes ago, a girl entwined with someone else.

"Don't think," I murmured, laying a hand to her head briefly. "It's dangerous for women."

She smiled and closed her eyes. I imagined it was so she wouldn't have to look at me while she spoke, which made her seem like a coward. "I don't think our relationship is going to be anything more than this."

This. A nebulous word. It carried the weight of shared memory.

"I don't understand. What changed?"

"Nothing changed," Coralia said. "And I think that's the point."

"Did I do something wrong?"

While the words settled into the air, I wanted to slap myself across the face. Of course I hadn't done anything wrong. That was a schoolgirl reflex, a need to be graded. A pleasure to have in class. Exceeds expectations.

"No," she said, her tail flashing above water before falling back down again. "When I think about the future, I just don't see you there."

My mind whirred through the past few days, scanning for body movement and glances and tones that would have made this moment click.

"I got this pool for you."

"I didn't ask you to."

I didn't want to look at her, but I had to search for some sense that she felt any of the words she was saying; that she felt the heaviness of the stones she flung at me. But her face was tranquil water.

I was peering into a stranger's face. No, worse than that. I still remembered that night when her face was like reading the first page of a good book. This was a distance I'd never seen on her, and I felt hollowed out and ridiculous.

"We're not in love," she said.

"I know."

"So this will be easier."

I didn't know if she said it for my benefit or for hers. But heartache wasn't reserved for being in love and I resented her for thinking so. We hadn't known each enough to be in love, hadn't peeled away enough layers to recognize each other in the dark. She didn't feel like home.

But she was my daydreaming. She was the thought I took to bed like a midnight snack, the ache in my smiling cheeks. She was safety and comfort and if not a home, a halfway house. Most importantly, she knew the warm outline of my body under her hands. That didn't amount to love, but it amounted to something more than this moment where she wouldn't even look me in the eye.

"You just liked me because I was there," I said, not knowing if I believed it or if it was just to something to say.

I felt like a body, a collection of parts to keep her warm until she decided it was too hot.

"That's not true," she said. "But I'm not going to stay with you just because you're there. That wouldn't be fair to either of us."

"Okay, I need to go inside. Take your time leaving. Bye, Coralia."
"Bye."

And just like that, I pulled myself up and went inside, numbness easing into tears like an ice cube just starting to melt. I had made space for her, and now it all gaped like an empty hallway. I couldn't look anywhere in my house without her presence knocking around like a poltergeist. Even my sheets were chosen for her.

I couldn't help it. I leaned against the kitchen counter where the little window above the sink was still open so I could hear when she left. Ten seconds. Long enough to dip under the water and resurface, cleansed of me. I stood there long after she was gone.

Weeks passed and it was infuriating that since she was a mermaid, Coralia had no social media for me to use to torment myself. I didn't even have a way to get in touch with her. The line had snapped, and she was out in an ocean with no edges, not even thinking about me.

One day when I went outside with the recycling, I could hear the familiar sound of Mr. Jenson's robe flapping against his ankles. I took a deep breath and readied myself.

"I haven't seen that lady fish around lately," he said before I could turn around. "Found some decency, did she?"

"She found something," I said, moving to show him my face.
"Something without me."

Mr. Jenson's mouth, which was heaped under a bearded snowstorm of white whiskers, turned from smug to sympathetic. He patted my shoulder and said, "Oh my dear, I am sorry to hear that."

"Why?"

"It might be hard to believe looking at me now, but I have known love before."

“I haven’t,” I said, wistful and soft as the first patter of rain. “It wasn’t love. That’s the worst part about it. I can’t feel this heartbreak fully. She didn’t even give me a chance. It feels like I’m mourning something that didn’t even exist.”

“Well, you’re young. And there are other fish in the sea,” he said, and then did a full-body laugh, and it was so genuine that I had to join in. I had never seen happiness on this man before. “I honestly didn’t mean that. Take no offense.”

“None taken.”

I emptied the recycling. “I know I’ll be fine. I know I’ll find someone else. But it’s not about that. I just want to feel like I mattered to her because she mattered to me.”

“Good luck,” he said. “And maybe find someone who wears clothing in your backyard, okay?”

“I’ll do my best, Mr. Jenson.”

One night I got drunk on an entire bottle of rosé and pulled a notebook out from my desk. I wrote Coralia a long letter about how I wish we’d gotten better closure. I stuffed it into the sticky belly of the wine bottle, put the cork back in, and smiled proudly at my message in a bottle that might bob its way to her.

I took a cab to the water and then I sat in the area of the beach where I thought we had met. But it had been months before, in the dark, while I was intoxicated, so it could only be my best guess. I laughed when I realized that the circumstances were the same this time, so I had a better shot. A poetic parallel.

I set the bottle in the water and it was only as I watched it float away, disappearing between waves and emerging again with the moon glinting against the glass as if held inside it, that I realized this moment was every moment I’d ever had. That bottle might reach the end of the world, but it would still find its way back to my feet, unopened. Closure was a wine bottle addressed to the ocean herself, the words blotting into ink, forget-

We Came

Nicole Shawan Junior

We came from all five boroughs.
Your Timbs smacked at concrete curb. A silver world at your back. Forty
off to your side. The Bridge miles away. You headed past the matchbox
frame forest and creased lawns sprouting patchy like beards. On Sutphin,
you waited for the Q6. Planes hummed high until you dipped low into the
subway. You packed a pocket seat.
Legs spread wide as your scowl.
The E train shuttled you forward.
Like a bullet through brain.

*A 20-year-old woman was hospitalized and suffered a broken spine after
being attacked by a man using anti-gay slurs, according to the New York
City Police Department. The man fled the subway system at a Forest Hills,
Queens stop.
NBC News*

We came from all five boroughs.
You walked a neck of weather-worn road. Between cast iron hedges and
towering brick. Beyond ash black rubber squares waxing ground chande-
liered by squeaky swing sets. You followed the mossy river that dandled
your nose. And headed down the hill to catch a dollar van. On the ferry,
you rode the lowest level. Sitting outdoors, you sucked smoke from the
blunt pinched where your index met thumb.
Your durag's tail wind-slapped like a cape.
The City before you beckoned.
The Uptown 1, half a harbor away.

*23-year-old Taylor De Souza had to get stitches after her Uber driver
assaulted her. "You fucking lesbian, get out my car," he said. The driver
struck her in the head. "He told me he'll chop me up and throw me in the
river," De Souza said.
WPIX 11 New York*

We came from all five boroughs.

One park away from where black boys opened high rise doors and white girls slept in Amsterdam Ave apartments, you danced along 115th Street. Your Air Force Ones pounded like palms against panderetas. Morningside Park, jampacked with barbeque grills, bumped bass at your back. The trees gave dap as you swayed along. On Eighth, you descended into the damp summer subway. Box braids pa-pap'd at your waist. You jumped the turnstile, hopped the D and, whipping your hair behind a shoulder, faced its closing doors.

You unpacked the peach gloss from your back pocket.

Pursed your lips before the reflection.

Blew a kiss at your face.

Dorceant said that Aquino punched her in the face several times and choked her, spouting anti-gay slurs. She had no way of knowing that Aquino was an NYPD officer wearing plain clothes. So when officers came running toward the altercation, she presumed they were there to "save" her. But that's not what happened. "Instead of helping me and my girlfriend and arresting our attacker, more officers piled on top of me, slamming me onto the pavement and putting their knees in my neck, shoulders, and back."

The Advocate

We came from all five boroughs.

The Bruckner a boombox of honking trucks and whizzing cars. You ambled along, past the squat groceries and dingy dollar stores. Beyond the graffiti-etched stone slabs and the rubble playgrounds of your youth. You crossed Westchester's bustle before bounding up the rusted, red-roofed stairs. On the platform you waited for the Brooklyn-bound 6. Stiff and staring out the stainless glass windows. Beyond the tarred rooftops and brick apartment buildings.

The stretch of concrete crests and clefts, a foreshadowing.

The dusty streets, an abandonment.

The silence, a prayer.

On the Brooklyn bound train, Thomas screamed, "Dyke!" He launched at them and beat one of the women until she fell to the ground unconscious. The 24-year-old was taken to a hospital where she was treated for a concussion and a broken eye socket.

NewNowNext

We came from all five boroughs.

I hurried along the Ave. A prism wrapped around my weave. Legs stretched lean by strappy heels. Each step swallowed cement. I cli-clacked past the boys who balled and baked on Breevort's red clay court. Once underground at the Ralph Avenue station, I clamored onto the C and parked myself next to a window. My eyes cast into its underground deep. Utica.

Kingston-Throop. Nostrand. The subway a somber stereoscope.
The older strap-hanger's fists clasped.
One around a hovering metal bar. The other around a pocket-bible.
"In Genesis," she snared before jutting her chin at my bonneted flag.
"There were Sodom! And Gomorrah!"

In 1994, Jane Doe – 27 years old, black and lesbian – was raped in broad daylight. Despite Doe's immediate police report regarding the assault, The Daily News called her a liar. The headline read, "Rape Hoax the Real Crime." The Daily News and NYPD launched a vicious smear campaign against Doe, charging that she made up the rape and threatening that she may be arrested. The case was dropped and her assailant went free. Twenty-four years later, however, Doe's rapist was identified through DNA evidence. At that time, he was already serving a 75-year prison sentence pursuant to several other rape convictions that predated his identification as the assailant in Doe's assault.

The Daily Beast

We came from all five boroughs.

Pushed up from rails, our hands shoved turnstiles. On Christopher Street, we saw ourselves among the rainbows draped on storefronts. At our promised land's gates, we angled past the parked police cars, smoked through Seventh Avenue's swell and hustled towards the Pier.

Each of us yearning that small slither of terrain.

Isis came from Southside Jamaica. Isis whose fresh navy Yankee brimmed above her hazel eyes. Isis whose seashell bronze skin seemed too smooth to have weathered many storms. Isis whose voice seemed too soft to have said many no's.

Fire came from Stapleton projects. Fire who walked heavy limp hard. Fire whose skin was cognac brown. Fire whose left eye was busted black. Fire whose belly jiggled above denim shorts that lingered beneath her knees. A twisted cigar saddling her lips. "Fam!" she sang. "You tryna get up on this blunt?"

Vicky came from Uptown. Her finger-nail scratched face brown as a wet oar. She danced to the radio resting in an old bicycle basket. The one parked beneath the crimson awning with white script, Village Cigars. "Where was you last night, bitch? We was out here!" she called.

Yessenia came from Castle Hill. Yessenia whose skin was pale as Puerto Rican sand. Yessenia whose curls whisked from the sides of cornrows. Yessenia whose crooked loosie dangled from her mouth's edge. Yessenia who spat, "Ay yo, Nik! Where you been?"

I came from Bed Stuy. I came looking for the woman's touch I hadn't yet found back in Brooklyn. I came for your cologne in my nose. Your fingers fistng my nape. The taste of your thighs on my tongue.

I found you while walking along Christopher's long corridor.
A pint of Bacardi lined my purse.
Our hands lanyard laced as we strolled the stretch.
Purple haze spritzed the air.

In August 2006, Chenese Loyal, Lania Daniels, Khamysha Coates, Patreese Johnson, Renata Hill, Terrain Dandridge, and Venice Brown went to the Greenwich Village for a night out. Dwayne Buckle, a DVD bootlegger, catcalled nineteen-year-old Johnson as she and her six friends walked down the West Village's Sixth Avenue. "Mister, I'm gay," Patrice responded. Buckle threatened to rape her "straight" and threw a punch. As Buckle ripped hair out from one of their heads and choked another, the young women threw fists of their own and one of them even stabbed Buckle in return. Buckle did not face any criminal charges. All seven of the young women were charged with felonies and regarded by the media as a "wolf pack" of "killer lesbians." Three pled guilty. Four were found guilty at trial and were sentenced to between 3 1/2 and 11 years.

NPR Code Switch

We came from all five boroughs.

Us, a ragtag parade.

Once we reached the West Side Highway, elbows locked into a chorus line, we sang Missy at the top of our lungs, "Oooh, I don't want, I don't need, I can't stand no minute man. I don't want no minute man!" Just open air and the spectacle of Jersey's skyline before us. Seagulls lapping at the river. The orange sun slicing into the Hudson's waves.

We danced and shimmied across the stretch of highway.

Too caught up in the familiar of us to race the time.

On the night of May 11, 2003, 15-year-old Sakia Gunn was returning to her Newark home from a night out in NYC's Greenwich Village with her friends. While waiting for public transportation, Gunn and her friends were propositioned by two men. The girls rejected their advances and declared themselves to be lesbians. The men attacked; Gunn fought back, and one of the men stabbed her in the chest. Gunn was taken to nearby University Hospital, where she was pronounced dead.

NewNowNext

We came from all five boroughs.

Horns blared and motors rumbled, Out of the way!

But the crosswalk was our stage.

The car beams, our spot lights.

The cussing drivers, our fans.

“Move, you dykes!” someone yelled.
“Fuh’k you!” we screamed.
We’d fought foes much more our match before.
Wearing cloaks of fortitude, we balled into a fist.
Dropped down into eagles.
And twirled our fingers into frames.

We came from all five boroughs.

Remember?

We came.

Good Bi Horses

Lannie Stabile

see.

you have been rolling the boulders back and searching the caves.
but you only need hitch a ride among our lips and tongues to
testify. we are the gift.

barn doors are cobbler warbles. cotton sheet teeth. a nudge when
sunlight can't break our eyelids. and home no longer hinges on a
mother's acceptance.

smell.

fences cannot hurdle us. we toss our beaten bodies unhurriedly.
over walls. this collagen hobbles sins. adheres to the high grime of
intolerable men. saddles them with the stench of red hands.

hear.

like a noisy river grinding into the sea, we will not be held. leather
rains tethered to cowhide clouds chatter above our fingertips.
drowned by endurance. when did we last feel dry? or safe? or
glued together?

taste.

true, though we swallow. gray lives in our long throats. but these
plains were painted rich and evocative before we could language
love.

we mourn the Nisean and Ferghana. we champion the yearlings.

touch.

when society shoehorns us into a straight death march, we pull the
steel gilding our feet and catapult it through stubborn eyes. we cry,
nay.

though you lead us into the storm's aftermath. tell us to inhale the
puddle. try to deafen us with reflections. we are not afraid of the
figures in the water. or the monsters at our shoulders. we may be
parched, but we can go a lifetime sipping thunder.

Natural Disaster

Lannie Stabile

she doesn't feel like sunshine but she's been known to fell oaks
with the blaze in her eyes her tongue is spewing out the forests and the oceans
and the ancients dropping from her mouth like hot craters

black ash birds sense shift in our molten bodies flocking toward the sun blocking
the sun like a boy who tried to outrun the walls his father built around them both let us
too be mythical and dysfunctional

this is no time to panic but she's looking like i'm the window to a world of
oxygen she's looking like she will open me wide she's looking like she will climb through
with scrolling midnight legs into a room once crammed with the memory of the time my mother
told me i wasn't pretty she's looking like she will shatter both me and that memory and as i
scramble for a way out of her desire i realize our bodies are the exit

the sheets beneath our crackling skins are cooler than the moon weaker than limbs gripped by
tinder lips kissed goodnight with fire smile i have never stepped willingly into an inferno
but let me walk this road split by the pressure of holding back a
burning current

she is titanic she is inverted she is rumbling through the streets eating the villagers
and so i would melt my wings i would plummet as a torrid star
i would grow roots in this igneous rock to call her disaster home

The Dwindling Forest of Kelp

Victoria Zelvin

The translator won't translate her name. It sounds like whale song, lilting, a melody of about ten seconds that I keep trying to hum, mostly because it makes K give a trilling laugh and flip around in her tank, embarrassed and delighted, but in the end, for brevity, we agreed on K. K, for short.

The translator isn't perfect. We make it work. K is smart, so smart. She tells me she's used to conversations that are a struggle, across great distances with low visibility, for her people (another word that won't translate) don't live on top of one another.

Sometimes she trills. Slips about her tank, over to the corner, tucking her face into her hands. When I ask why, she tells me this is intimate. Closing curtains over it doesn't really help, because she can feel her there still. K says it's just intimate. For her people, it's like lovers.

About a month in, I ask if that would be the worst thing.

K is smart, quick on the uptake. She responds with one of the obscene gestures I've taught her, but there's a smile splitting her face while she does it.

*

The distress message was made shortly after crashing, hooked up to the escape pod's solar cells to play repeating into the universe until someone came down to shut it off or the sun in this system burned out -- whichever came first. It would play even after my death, provided the cells were able to retain enough power even in blackout conditions to clean themselves. It should play through radiation, but that's a chilling thought. What good is a distress message if I'm not sitting by the radio to answer any ships that might find it?

The message plays: *SOS. My name is Specialist Julia Marsters. I am alive and stranded on the planet. SOS. My name is Specialist Julia Marsters, and I am still alive. Please respond.*

I hear it in my nightmares.

*

K can only "speak" to me inside the bomber, where the translators can hear her. It's English, the standard operating system, monotone, robotic voice, dubbed over her lips like a kung-fu film. I imagine I look as ridiculous to her, because sometimes she covers her mouth and trills, that

laughing trill, flipping her fins at me.

She looks like a spriggan, one of those old creatures my gran told stories about before bed. She was of the mind that stories with monsters were far better than those without. She, K, certainly doesn't look human. She looks hollow. She's more plant than animal, but she swims as easily as a shark. Her eyes look like little pods of bioluminescent seaweed, golden, and she's got little sparks of it all up and down her body. It's my fault she's here, trapped with me, stranded, instead of in her kelp forest. Our fault. My fault. The ships crashing from the sky are what did it, and my ship crashed too.

I wonder at the accuracy of the translator, given this unknown species, but this is what it's built for, isn't it? K and I have developed a sign language of sorts as well, though for her it is more dancing through the water than hand signs, but there's one that keeps coming up. She'll tense her whole body, hold a hand out, palm flat, fingers and fins together, frozen in the water.

"Stay," is what the bomber's AI thinks she says. It thinks she says it a lot.

*

The long and short of it is that I'm stranded on a planet made of water. The whole world is one big ocean, teeming with strange life. Nothing sapient, or at least that's what the reports said. I'm not sure anyone ever looked in the kelp. If they had, they would have found K.

The battle was fierce, the stuff of legends. Breathless pundits were no doubt debating it now, the merits, the loss of life, tales of tragic heroics for the human interest part, tales of those conscripted brave fighters dealing a blow to bandits and pirates haunting our borders. I doubt my contribution will be mentioned. My bomber was shot out of the stars early. It was a fluke of burning up in atmosphere that the hole in my engine, the hole killing me, melted into the airtight seal that saved me.

Planet ME-07 had some continents, for all that they were underwater. The tumultuous sea had eroded those landmasses down even more, to sharp chasms and trenches, but some mountain ranges remain. Close to the surface, they're home to coral reefs, small alien fish, some plant life. K's section of the forest had been surrounding it. When the sky started to fall, she says she took shelter in the coral. She thought she might've been able to swim back to her kelp when the invisible enemy started to chip away at her, started to eradicate her kelp until it was so barren that we can barely see it from our coral shelf.

I've tried to explain the word radiation to her, but I'm not sure she understands the why.

She understands not to surface. I understand it's because water is excellent at ionizing radiation and we're safest down here.

She understands to avoid the wreckage of ships like mine. I understand it's because the engines have cracked, protective shielding gone with

the power, and they're leaking invisible poison into the water.

She understands it's safe in the bomber, the section I've flooded for her. We live half and half, her with purified water and me with my recycled air. So long as the solar panels keep up, we're okay.

She understands we're trapped. The series of ships that had crashed around us totaled to being large enough and powerful enough that the minefield of their leaking radiations has formed a moat around us. She didn't need much convincing of that, for all I had to show her was the line where her kelp is and the ruins of where it used to grow. A damn near perfect circle.

She understands that we're safe on the coral shelf. She understands, though, that we have to go. That our circle is shrinking. We're not safe forever. She doesn't understand why, or how, but she knows I might be able to get us there, if I can make our home float to the surface.

K wants that. She tells me, daily, hourly, that she longs for her kelp. Bits of her are flaking off. She looks sick. I believe it, I believe she needs the kelp. Either that or the radiation is affecting her more acutely than it is me. I tell her not to get near it and she spends her time lingering, fussing, trilling at me in songs I don't understand. I try to tell her my suit will protect me from low levels, warn me before I get too close to something it can't handle, but I'm not sure she entirely understands.

If I could make her a suit, enhance mine...

But, no. I delay. We have time. She's safe in here, in the bomber, in the tank. I need the bomber. If I lose the bomber, the power cells, I lose my distress signal, my radio link. I lose my ticket home. I lose my ability to call out for help, even in the blind.

*

Our conversations are more complex than ever. Thank god for the universal translator. It's worth the extra lump of power, even if it is imperfect.

K tells me about her kelp. "Green," she says, animated. "Green, green, green, yellow, *green!*" I think that there's something lost in translation there, but I smile anyway. It's endearing either way. I've always loved to watch people talk about their passions.

"It's how I breathe," she says. She's found some plantlife, perhaps the beginnings of the kelp, and has installed it in the corner of her area. I warn her not to leave her hatch open, that it might defeat the purpose of having insulation, but she just tells me that plants need light and that the window isn't enough. She swims over to her little garden often, about a square foot box of little wriggling greens, petting it as I would a cat. "It's my air, it's my air."

Does she mean it literally? She has gills. They throb even when she's not moving. Or, maybe, is she talking passion?

She's asked me what my air is, why my side is as it is. I say I breathe what's above the water. She flaps her hands like birds and I nod.

K lingers like a fussing mother as I swim out past out little reef. I'm wearing a suit today on top of the usual flippers and goggles. Sometimes K puts her fingers around her eyes like circles and makes fun of them, but not today. I'm venturing out into the radiation zone, which is the reason for the suit. With my rebreather and skintight suit, the one that covers my face like a ski mask ensuring no skin peeks through, I should be okay for a couple minutes. K had me walk her through it several times, sluggishly explaining in our bomber.

I have to get to one of the closer crashes. It's a medical shuttle, which means it has a generator. If I can get a generator working inside the bomber, I'd be halfway to trying to powering up the emergency flotation devices. In theory I should just have to pull a handle from the cockpit, but in practice the handle won't budge. It's probably due to something melting on entry, but regardless, I think I can power the bomber, even briefly, and surface it.

If I can surface it, I can boost the power of my distress signal.

K understands, I think. Distress signal = life. No distress signal, no life.

She still lingers. She's asked if I have a suit for her and, maybe, maybe the one I'm wearing would fit her, but it's the only one I've got. I don't want to risk her life on a maybe. It has to be me.

It takes hours. It's heavy and awkward and hard to grip underwater. I struggle with it most of the way back to the shelf, to the corner. K swirls around above me as I heft it, picking it up and trying to swim it up only to drop it and sending it crashing to the sand below. K's the only to suggest using the dead kelp. I bind it like rope and I help carry it from below as K pulls it up. She's distressed when I get back up. She puts her hands on me and it's like being caressed by smooth seaweed, and she presses her hand over my heart and her forehead to mine for a long moment, a pregnant moment, but then she turns back to the kelp. Blackened, yellow. Brittle in the leaves, even if the stalk remained. She cradles it in her hands a time and then tosses it to the current, like casting ashes to the wind.

*

It's a while before K joins me back inside. There's two hatches in the bomber, one on the bottom for me that keeps it airtight, and one on the side for her. Getting the glass up hadn't actually been all that hard, all things considered. Our halves aren't strictly speaking halves. Her half is separated not by glass but by dried gel coolant, chemically designed to be seathrough. Not sure why, maybe to help steer if you happen to have a console and not an instrument panel, but either way, it makes a good enough tank.

I've got the instrument panel hooked up to the generator. The beacon is playing in the background.

SOS. My name is Specialist Julia Marsters. I am alive and stranded on the planet. SOS. My name is Specialist Julia Marsters, and I am still alive. Please re-

spond.

“Is is making it stronger?” K asks.

“Not quite,” I tell her. “I think I can make our home float. Or, at least, get higher to the surface. The signal is having trouble breaking through the water. That will make it stronger.”

K frowns like she doesn’t understand, but she doesn’t ask any more questions.

*

It’s just a normal day. I’m waiting for the generator still, so there’s an itch to go back and check, but it won’t be ready for a while yet. Besides, a body can’t subsist on protein squares alone and K needs the sun. It’s like she’s fed through some kind of photosynthesis, but I’m no scientist and it won’t translate. We forage together. Whenever I leave the bomber, rebreather in mouth, K is always there. I don’t think I’ve swam without her nearby, circling me like an otter, plant-like skin fluttering behind her.

She helps me catch and find the little crabs the scanners say are safe to eat. She caresses me when she comes back to fill my net, sometimes just light, sometimes lingering long enough to put her forehead against mine

One of these times, I catch her arm in my fingers, stopping her. I pull the rebreather from my mouth, making her scurry forward, but that’s good because that’s my plan. I press my lips to hers under the water. She’s salty and slimy, but the smile she gives me when it translates, when it clicks in her head, is worth it.

I blow out a series of bubbles in a laugh.

Now, when she comes back, she presses her forehead and her lips to a part of me. It makes foraging take longer, but it takes my mind off the generator.

*

It’s becoming obvious that the translator is translating her literally.

“What’s your air?” she asks, after she knows already.

“I’m not sure,” I tell her. “I don’t really remember.”

K thinks on that for a while. It’s quiet. I make dinner, if unwrapping a protein square and biting off the corner could be constituted as making and dinner consecutively.

“Will there be more homes?” K asks after a while.

“Homes?”

“Homes,” she repeats. She makes a gesture with her hands, putting them together with thumbs splayed out like bird.

“More ships, spaceships,” I correct.

“Yes, homes.”

It doesn’t translate.

I drop my protein square back in the packaging, turning to face her, sitting cross legged in front of the glass that separates us. “Maybe,” I say. “Hopefully.”

K swims back. It's like a wince. "Why want more?" The English voice is monotone, robotic, but the song sounds breathy. Afraid. Her eyes are wide.

"Working ones," I explain. "Like they're meant to be. Not dangerous, not like the crashes. They'd be a rescue. They'd come to get me."

"Why?"

"That's... K, that's what the distress signal is."

"Distress signal... equals life?"

"Yes. Because they'd come save us. They'd get you back to the kelp, they'd get me off the planet."

K thinks about this for a time. "Why do you want to leave?"

"K, I can't stay here."

She shakes her head so emphatically that the kelpy bits of her sway like hair. She puts her hand over her chest, where my heart would be on her body. "Stay," K asks. I have to believe it's deliberate. "Stay with me."

I put my hand over my heart, massaging roughly. "It's -- it's not that simple, K."

Maybe that doesn't translate either, because she's nodding. I don't think she understands.

*

I make K tell me the names of the sea plants growing among the coral. Outside it doesn't translate, but that's okay. K makes it sound like a song. I hum the words back to her and she trills a laugh, nodding.

Inside, she makes me tell her the names of my plants in my apartment back on my homework. Rosemary, daffodils, aloe vera... I like a random assortment of plants, kept in different parts of the space to suit their different needs. She tries to turn those into a song too, muffled by the water.

"I'd like to see your kelp," I tell her. "Up close."

"It will love you," she assures me, tail flipping excitedly.

*

When I trigger the floats, K goes from inside to abruptly outside. I find her about an hour later hiding under some coral, shaking like a leaf. I caress her this time, I press my forehead to her until I coax her out, coax her back inside.

"It's not the surface, surface," I tell her, disappointed. The bomber won't break the surface. It's not floating in the strictest sense. It is more hovering, just a bit, above the coral, but it's close enough that there's no currents strong enough to sweep it away. "But, you know, it's closer. I think the signal's boosted."

"So... more coming?" K asks, in a way that makes the robotic voice stammer.

I offer her a smile that's more like a grimace. "They might never find me here."

K smiles like this is good news.

*

I've only seen one other intelligent lifeform in months. What would I be now without K? Five months of isolation.

K is starting to brown throughout. It's like she's fading. She's gotten worse. Whole limbs that were vibrant green are now pale yellow.

I can't help but compare myself with her, in the quiet moments. Sound is subdued underwater, but not thought. Am I starting to fade around the edges? How far into space does my voice reach? Have I been wasting time? Are they still looking for me? Did I miss the rescue window and now no one is coming to this side of space?

K smiles at me and it's soothing. It's only when I look away from her, it's only when she's not there that doubt begins to wrap its thorny vines around my throat.

*

I try to explain to K, again, that I have to go back, that I have to help them find me, but she just asks me why again and again and I don't know how to answer the first time, let alone the twentieth. I have no family to speak of, no one to really go back to...

"Stay," K pleads with me. "We will find a way, in the kelp. They will grow to love you as I do. We can make it so you can breathe, we can figure it out. Stay."

I keep telling her it's not that simple, but K insists it is. I don't know. I just don't know.

"You need kelp," K insists. "Kelp will make it better. Trust me. It is simple. I don't want them to rot you."

God help me, I don't know. What do I really have left?

*

So, here's the thing. I could do it. I could do what she wants. I could get us to the kelp. The engines are too waterlogged to run, which was why I was hoping for the surface, but since that's not happening I've got one burn in them. One full cycle, enough to propel us up and then across the surface of the water like a rock skipping on a pond. One burn, we're off the coral shelf. One burn, we're in her kelp forest. I could do it.

It would cannibalize my power, though. I'd have only the solar panels for the distress beacon and so far that hasn't been enough. I could use that one burn, that one cycle, to send my beacon up like a rocket. If I hook it up to the weapons system, angle the tube skyward... it would break atmosphere.

But, then, we're trapped. We're not exactly floating where we are. The bomber is too heavy, even though it is by all accounts technically floating. Only the top has broken the surface, and that's only sometimes.

*

The choice is made for me when K shuts her eyes and won't open them. Maybe it was never a choice at all. She just sort of slumps outside, the yellow encroaching on her face now. She starts to sway in the current

before I swim to her, wrap my arms around her.

Maybe it was never a choice at all. Maybe it was just an illusion of a choice. I can't get back up there. I can't break atmo. I can't guarantee they're even looking for me or if getting the beacon out will bring the right kind of attention. I did what I was supposed to, I put it up. It's playing. The solar panels will keep it playing. I was fooling myself if I thought I could affect an outcome.

So, I get K inside her section of the bomber. I then circle around and detach the distress beacon, one of the floats, and one solar panel. The thing floats right to the surface and bobs there, happy as can be. Transmitting. It'll keep transmitting.

There's nothing proactive I can do to help myself. I can help K, though.

That's the mantra circling my brain as I strap K into one of the side seats in her section. That's what I'm thinking when I climb into my cockpit. That's what I'm telling myself when I hit the burn button and the ship slams forward.

It's the last thought in my head when my forehead hits the dash when we hit the kelp, tangling in it enough to come to a very, very sudden stop.

*

It's like crashing again. Waking up after, sore, trying to parse out how I am alive. There's deep bruising over my shoulders, my chest, and the bomber is at a forty five degree upward angle. Kelp. I'm looking up at the sun through the water, through a thick layer of kelp. We made it. When I get my bearings enough to be dizzy, I look back. The tank has broken. There's water along the back of the bomber. K's plants are hanging limply in the air, stretched back toward the water they need.

"K?" I call. I can't see her. There's no response. "K?"

There's a knock on the glass above me, enough to make me jump as the echo fades.

There, above me, is K. She's returned to green, but it's more than that. There's bioluminescent veins running through her, pulsing, glowing bright yellow. When the kelp brushes her it lights up too, like lightning. She knocks again, giving a small wave, lips open. I hear a song then, but oh, no translator. My instruments are dead. The power's dead. Might be fixable, but to do that I'd have to leave this seat and here I am, transfixed.

K trills. Puts her hand on the glass.

I put my hand on the other side, matching hers.

Contributor Biographies

Rasha Abdulhadi is a queer Palestinian Southerner whose work is anthologized in *Halal if You Hear Me*, *Super Stoked*, and *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia Butler*. They edit fiction at *Strange Horizons* and are a member of *Justice for Muslims Collective*, the *Radius of Arab American Writers*, and *Alternate ROOTS*. Their chapbook who is owed springtime is forthcoming from *Neon Hemlock press*.

Paula Molina Acosta is a writer from the Maryland side of the DMV. Her poetry and fiction have been published in *Stylus* and *Metro Weekly*, and are forthcoming in *Sinister Wisdom*. Her lesbian speculative fiction chapbook, *When We're Done Here: Stories at the Edge of the World*, won the *OutWrite 2020 Fiction Chapbook Competition*, and is available now from *Neon Hemlock Press*. You can find her at @paumolaco on Twitter.

IR Belletti is a bigender and bisexual undergraduate, currently studying American Literature. Her previous publications include two poems on *Adanna Literary Journal* and *Scorpion Mag*, and a sci-fi short story for *StayAleeve*. When she's not writing, she writes books about queer people being heroes and trains to become as strong as *Killua Zoldyck*.

Laken Brooks is an English PhD student at the University of Florida where she studies sexuality, folklore, and health. She's often inspired by Appalachian traditions and remedies. Readers can find her creative and nonfiction writing in outlets such as *Lambda Literary*, *CNN*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Yahoo! News*, and other outlets.

S.K. Brownell is a writer, artist, and educator from Wisconsin, whose writing has been awarded the *National Partners of the American Theater Playwriting Excellence Award*, *Editor's Choice in Solstice Literary Magazine's Summer 2020 Contest*, and a *Sewanee Writers Conference scholarship*, among other honors. Their work has been published or is forthcoming in *Speculative North*, *Decoded Pride*, *Great Lakes Review*, *Punt Volat*, and elsewhere. They teach writing at *GrubStreet* and create with *Artists Theater of Boston*.

Sarah Fannon is a graduate of GW's Honors English and Creative Writing program and she continues to live in the DC area. Her work is featured in the *LGBTQ+ horror anthology*, *Black Rainbow*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and others. You can find her online at www.sarahfannon.com, on Twitter @SarahJFannon, and on Instagram @ampersarah.

Nicole Shawan Junior is a Black Queer Femme and justice-impacted counter-storyteller who produces literary art and healing spaces intended to embolden Black people to get free. Nicole is the executive director of Roots. Wounds. Words., a literary art revolution for BIPOC storytellers. She's also the editor in chief of Black Femme Collective, a quarterly digital archive that amplifies creative nonfiction crafted by Black Queer Femmes.

Lannie Stabile is the winner of OutWrite's 2020 Chapbook Competition in Poetry; the winning chapbook, "Strange Furniture," is out with Neon Hemlock Press. She is also a back-to-back finalist for the 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 Glass Chapbook Series and back-to-back semifinalist for the Button Poetry 2018 and 2019 Chapbook Contests. Find her on Twitter @ LannieStabile. Good Bi Horses and Natural Disaster were first published in Prismatic Magazine.

Victoria Zelvin is a speculative fiction and freelance writer living and working in Washington D.C. Her work has appeared in various magazines and anthologies, to include Daily Science Fiction, Flash Fiction Online, Luna Station Quarterly, Shoreline of Infinity, the Broken Metropolis Anthology from Mason Jar Press, and others.

Tahirah Alexander Green is a literary artist living in their hometown of Washington, D.C. They are committed to creating art that nourishes, heals, or disrupts. As a writer, they're passionate about celebrating Black queer weirdos in their work. Tahirah is a firm believer in the power of art for social change—stories matter, and sharing our stories to effect change is a crucial component of movement work. Tahirah is represented by Patrice Caldwell at New Leaf Literary.

Hannah Chertock is a multimedia artist exploring concepts of pain, bodies and medical technology. Her inspiration is fueled by her experience with Spondyloepiphyseal dysplasia, a bone condition that causes short stature, chronic pain, and other joint related issues. Her intricate, hand-cut layered paper creations include metallic and glitter renditions of organs. Chertock graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Photography and Certificate of Product Innovation in 2016. Her work has been featured at Dupont Underground and Children's National Hospital in Washington, D.C., Adah Rose Gallery in Kensington, MD, and The Anderson Gallery in Richmond, VA. Find her at hannahchertock.com.

Marlena Chertock has two books of poetry, *Crumb-sized: Poems* (Unnamed Press) and *On that one-way trip to Mars* (Bottlecap Press). She uses her skeletal dysplasia as a bridge to scientific poetry. She is queer, disabled, and a 2020 Pushcart Prize nominee. Marlena serves as Co-Chair of OutWrite and on the Board of Split This Rock, a nonprofit that cultivates poetry that bears witness to injustice and provokes social change. Her poetry and prose has appeared in AWP's The Writer's Notebook, The Deaf Poets Society, Lambda Literary Review, Little Patuxent Review, Neon Hemlock Press, Noble/Gas Quarterly, Paper Darts, Paranoid Tree, Washington Independent Review of Books, WMN Zine, Wordgathering, and more. Find her at marlenachertock.com and [@mchertock](https://twitter.com/mchertock).

Malik Thompson is a Black queer man proud to be from D.C. A bookseller, anime fanatic, and workshop facilitator. Malik has worked with Split This Rock, The University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Moonlit DC as a workshop facilitator. He also organized the Poets In Protest poetry series at the Black queer owned bookstore Loyalty Bookstores. Malik's work can be found inside of Split This Rock's Poetry Database as well as the mixed media journal Voicemail Poems. You can find Malik's thoughts on literature via his Instagram account [@negroliterati](https://www.instagram.com/negroliterati).

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