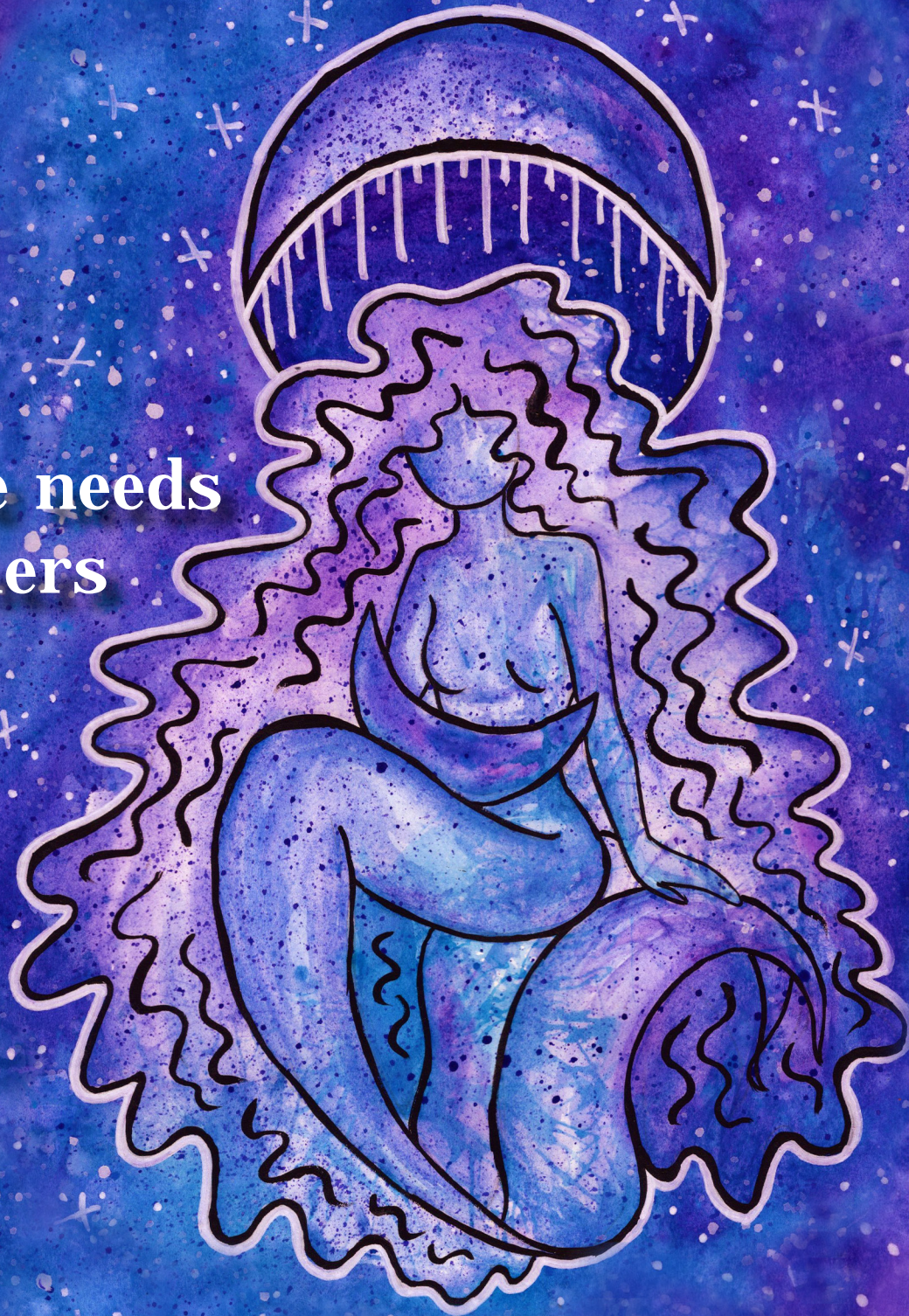


mermaids monthly

Issue #2 - February 2021

space needs
mers



Amanda Saville - Aqua Moon - Floris M. Kleijné - Fran Wilde
Ivis Whitright - John Sies - Joyce Chng
Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier - Seth Martel - Stephanie Nina Pitsirilos

mermaids monthly

it's a magazine about mermaids. that's it. that's the shell.

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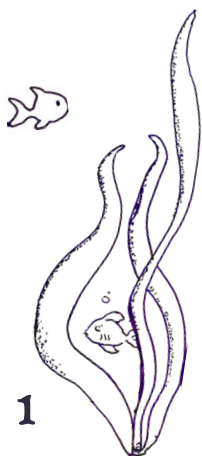
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Mermaids Monthly is a magazine all about mermaids. Happy mermaids, murderous mermaids; mermaids, merdudes, mermxs – maybe even a few highly confused manatees. Any cool aquatic chimeras that you could ever possibly think of with any and every fin color and combination. To subscribe, visit mermaidsmonthly.com.



The cover art for our February issue comes from **Aqua Moon** who supplied us with several colorful scenes of Mers in Space that we are thrilled silly to share with you! Also this month **Fran Wilde** said “both.gif” and went ahead and illustrated her own sestina while **Joyce Chng** held down the Each to Each section. Last but absolutely not least you’ll find two magical illustrations from **John Zies**, and **Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier** that kept us anchored.



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Leaving to Exist

by Ivis Whitright

inspired by Alexis Pauline Gumbs

When we tired of organizing our struggles into essays and court appeals, we packed our bags for another planet. We ventured into the dream of gender equality: chromosomes and anatomy optional to disclose. We sold objectifying pronouns for acknowledgement of life, but there was nothing transactional—it was generosity, an unconditional love affair between different and same and different again. We snapped fingers to

metamorphosize. Intelligence faded into myth along with neurotypicality. Language abandoned binary and hands returned to soil to nurture worms; we felt more at home when we admitted ownership is

impossible. We kissed with consent. We dove deep into ocean and learned parthenogenesis then returned to land to be reproductive educators. Contraception was free and no one had to justify their

existence for rights. The greatest crime was hate, punished by community service in a garden where plants sang chants from a time when transforming deities lived on winter streets. Our bodies were never hungry without knowing they would be

filled. Beauty had no standards, and self-love was learned early and rarely doubted. Life was more valuable than currency, so there was no war and no bounties. Agriculture was careful and unrecognizable except to some instinctual

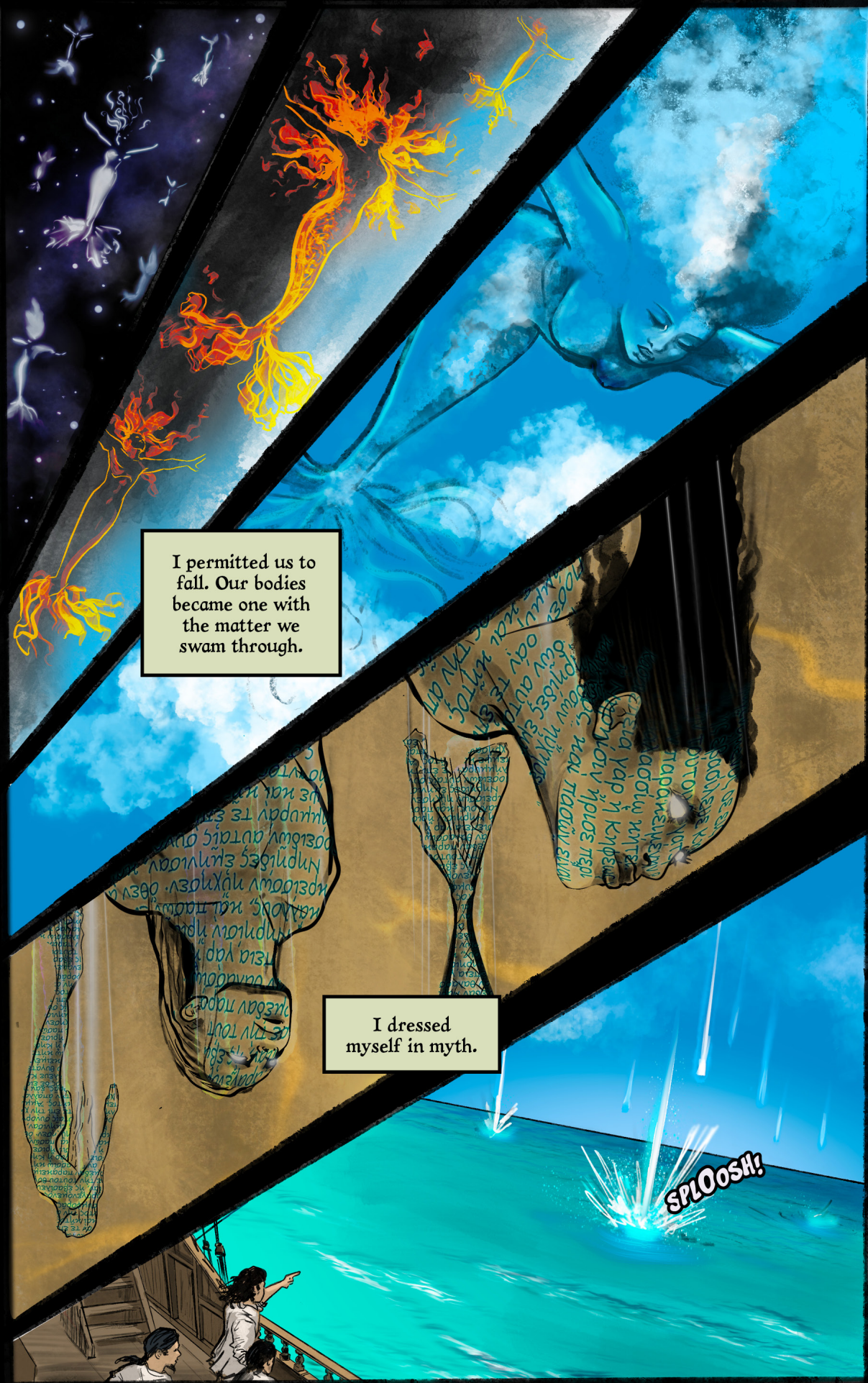
spirit within us. When we stood still long enough, mosses hugged our bodies, and we squeezed back by breathing.



Andromeda

STORY: Stephanie Nina Pitsirilos
ART + LETTERS Seth Martel

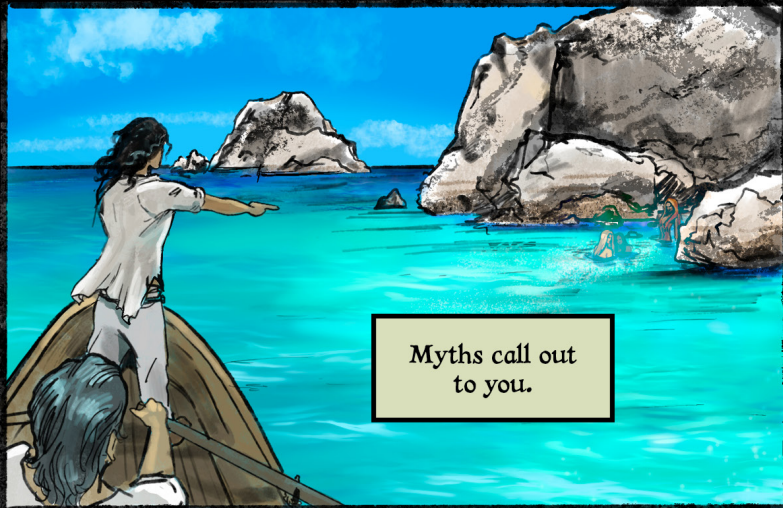
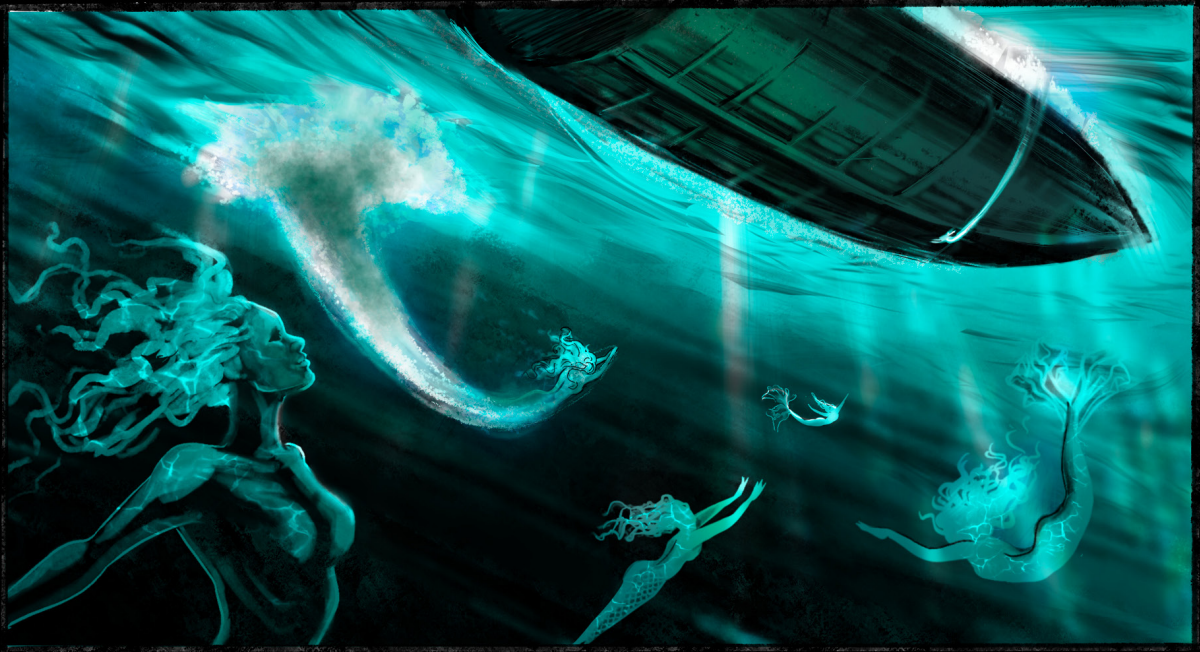




I permitted us to fall. Our bodies became one with the matter we swam through.

I dressed myself in myth.

SPLOOSH!



Myths call out to you.



Myths are what you want.





I am ~ we are ~
what we swim
through.



But...



I leave a
vacuum.

SIRRAH?



A loose
thread of
untethered
atoms, the
signature
of where
we left.



You experience
yearning.



MIRACH!

VERITATE!

SIRRAH!

BUNA!

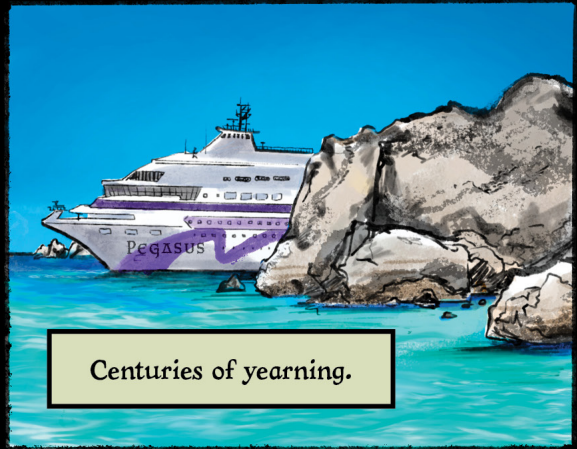
ALMACH!

STERRENNACHT!

TITAWIN!

ADHIL!

NEMBUS!



Centuries of yearning.



Yearning has morphed
into something with
purpose.



You have a quest.



Art by Aqua Moon

Surinla

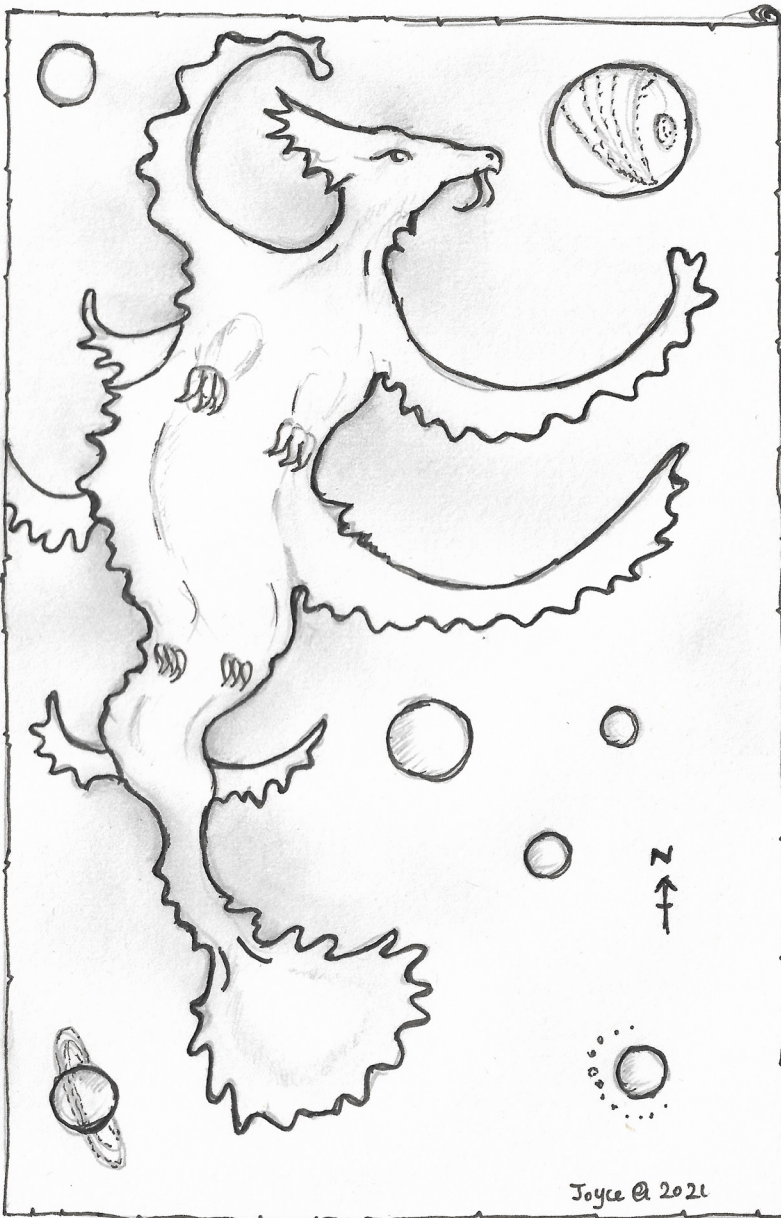
by Amanda Saville

The night the fireball crashed into the sea, the stars were dazzling. Even the aquin families living in the deepest caves noticed their brightness. The next morning, everyone swam out to see what had landed in the water.

She was all flame and angles, burned and beaten, unconscious and partially buried in sand and rock. She hadn't drowned the way things from the land usually did, and they found that curious. With careful hands they dug her out, marveling at the gills blossoming on her neck. They bandaged her wounds and fed her bits of fish when she was lucid enough to eat.

When she truly awoke, sharp-eyed, she snarled and snapped, but was too weak to strike out. Instead of yelling harsh commands, they spoke quiet, patient words, teaching her their language. Her angles softened. Soon, children visited, distant at first, but growing bold. She learned to play their games. She had never known laughter before. Her wings curved like kelp fronds. They gave her a name. A real name. Surinla: "Beloved Star." Her clawed back legs became a powerful tail.

The night the stars flared again, even brighter than before, Surinla looked toward the sky. "I must go," she said, "I won't let their war reach this world." She silently thanked the aquin with her now-gentle gaze, and returned to the stars, her purpose clear. Surinla, once Adaptive Draikh Soldier #992352, was no longer a blade, but a shield for the planet she now called home.



In the Sky, an Ocean

by Amanda Saville

They said we couldn't do it. What they were really saying is we *shouldn't* do it. After all, why would merfolk want the sky when they had the whole sea to themselves? Wasn't yearning for the land enough?

No, it wasn't. We wanted more. We wanted to see the stars. They tsked and said it would be impossible. Carrying a capsule full of air breathers was hard enough. Did we expect to bring a piece of ocean with us into the sky? There were more sensible things to do, like farming algae and singing.

Spite, it turns out, is a powerful motivator. We ignored their protests and grew our ships, great creatures strong enough to push off the planet. We called the first one Breacher.

My mate was part of Breacher's crew. I wanted to go with her, but it was our bond that would allow us to stay in contact with the crew. I twined my fins around hers the day she entered Breacher, not wanting to let go,

knowing I had to.

I'll never forget the sound of Breacher leaving the ocean, the terrific roaring as it pushed through the air. I couldn't hear my mate's thoughts over the chaos, could only watch Breacher's bulk become nothing but a dot in the sky.

I froze. Waiting. Straining. Hoping.

Then, I heard her, and I cried her words to everyone, triumphant. "The stars! It's an ocean of stars!"

We don't need the land. We have the universe.

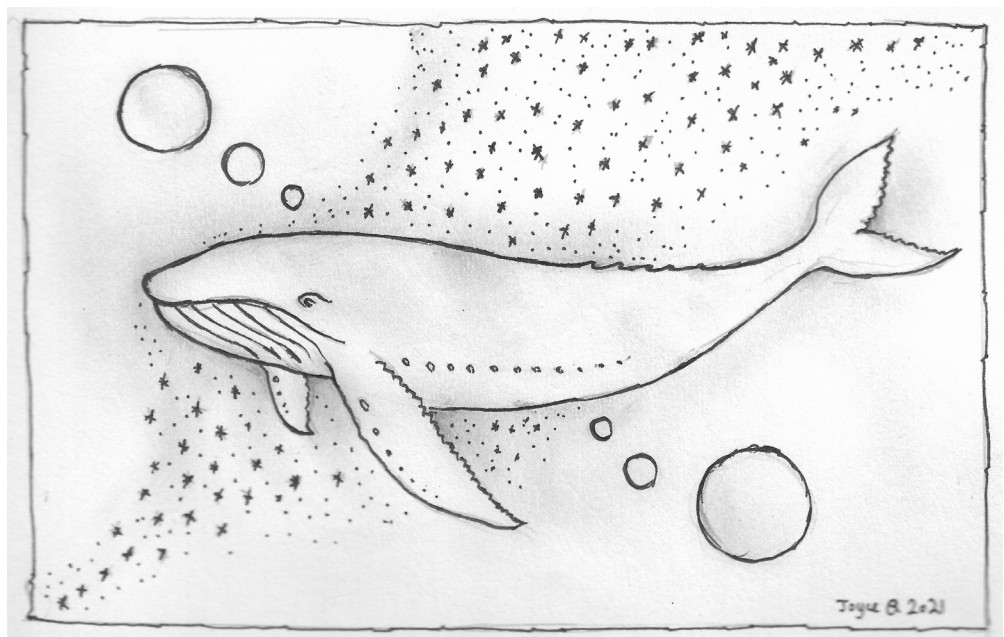


Illustration by Joyce Chng 12

Diamond Sharks

by Floris M. Kleijne

This story originally appeared in Leading Edge Magazine in 2008

“Has anyone explained the anatomical details to you yet?” the surgeon said, as the two gowned and masked assistants shaved and disinfected my entire body. Turning my head to my right, I could see her through the reinforced glass, but her mouth was open to the water on the other side of the glass and her lips weren’t moving. Instead, her voice—or rather a synthesized approximation—came from the teletransponder mounted over the glass. She was floating in a vertical position, her perfunctory white coat billowing with each rush of exhaled water. Because I was lying on my back and looking to my right, my whole perspective was tilted by ninety degrees, and her voice seemed to come from the transponder mounted to her left. The effect was disorienting.

I shook my head. I didn’t care about the details, though they had been explained to me at length in the admission procedure. All I knew was that I wanted the transition; I wanted this brave new life for myself.

Or for her.

The surgeon took my shaking head as an invitation to explain once again.

“We’re going to fit you with a set of custom-grown septals. There is a number of known basic design plans available in nature. We’ve found that the septal design is best suited to the human rib cage; the ribs and intercostal spaces correspond neatly to the structures you find supporting the septals in Earth sharks. It’s also a design that is relatively easy to hook up to the pulmonary arteries. As a matter of fact, I have the same design myself.”

I doubted if the surgeon was aware that I had no idea what she’d just told me. Like most medical professionals, she just liked to hear herself talk about her specialty. But the details really weren’t important to me. I knew what I was getting into. I phased out her explanation as one of the assistants hooked me up to an IV drip and the other connected the EEG and EKG electrodes.

I tuned back in to the surgeon’s voice when her tone changed from pedantic to serious.

“Now there is one final formality for the record, Mr. McDonald. You’ve read and signed all the necessary forms, but because the process is irreversible, we are required by law to give you a last chance to change your mind.”

“I’m not going to back out now.”

“Of course, but still... Mr. McDonald, are you absolutely sure you want to undergo the procedure?”

I sighed.

“Yes, I am.”

“Very well. Susan, Achmed, final prep.” The blonde assistant moved towards a panel of valves and switches on the far end of the OR, while the other one bent over me.

“Hello, Mr. McDonald,” he said through his mask. “You have experience as a scuba diver, yes?” I nodded. “Good. I need you bite down on this regulator. You will breathe through that until we get the intravenous oxygen up and running.” I accepted the mouthpiece into my mouth and sealed my lips around it. Achmed mumbled “Good luck” and retreated. I heard the waterproof double doors hiss softly closed.

“Here we go,” Susan said with grating cheerfulness. A switch clicked, she spun a wheel on the panel. The hiss of the door closing behind her was drowned in the

bubbling white noise of water flooding the OR.

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There was water everywhere. My mouth was full of water. Water ran cold and invasive down my throat. Breathing was impossible. Water pressed against my eyeballs, filled my ears. Water leaked between my ribs, warm water mixing with the colder water around me. I should be drowning.

I tried to gasp, but everything felt differently, worked differently. I inhaled water. Mortal terror drove all thought from my brain. I inhaled faster and faster. More warm water shot from my ribs. Dizziness closed in.

A soothing voice spoke in my head.

“Relax, Mr. McDonald. You’ve been breathing water for hours before waking up.” The voice had no sound, yet somehow I recognized the surgeon. And the thought of the surgeon brought me back to where I was. I calmed down enough to let my breathing reflex take over.

I was lying on my back on a bed I hardly felt. Or I was floating above a bed my back just touched. All around me was clear lukewarm water. With each inhalation, water rushed into my open mouth; with each exhalation, I felt water stream from between my ribs. In between, my body

somehow extracted oxygen from the water.

I had gills.



“I’m going to Oceana,” Varma had said, seven months earlier. I could see the radiant joy behind her eyes. So this was the reason she’d taken me to our favorite Japanese place. She was leaving me, going halfway across the galaxy to let herself get turned into a fish.

“You passed?” was all I could manage.

“I passed! I finally passed their tests. Aren’t you happy for me?”

“That’s great, Varma.” I looked around us at the old rosewood and rice paper, trying to invoke some empathy, some enthusiasm. “It’s what you wanted. I’m sure I’m happy for you, but... Is it final yet? Have you signed a contract?”

On some level, I knew I should be happy for her. I knew she was sharing something with me that was very important to her. I knew I was pushing her away with the way I was responding. But I couldn’t help myself. All I could think of was the fact that I was losing her. I could see it happening.

“Not yet,” she said. I could hear in her voice that she’d pulled back from me

already. “That’ll happen over the next week or so. But I might be going as soon as two months from now.”

She saw my face fall.

“Brian, please! You could at least try to be happy for me!”

And I knew she was right. I knew working on Oceana was her lifelong dream, something she’d wanted since she was a little girl. She’d been trying to get in for years. I had supported her in her latest attempt, but on some level had hoped they wouldn’t take her.

But they had.

Oceana was a high-gravity planet orbiting its star about 50 light years from Earth. Almost all of its animal life was aquatic, inhabiting the giant water mass that spanned 90% of the surface. The manta whales were supposed to be incredible, vaguely resembling Earth’s manta rays in shape if not in size. Not only were they the largest living creatures known to man, their life cycle took them into the deepest trenches of the planet, where the tremendous pressures created the so-called diamond barnacles. As ill-named as the manta whales themselves, the diamond barnacles were semi-vegetable quasi-crustacean creatures that attached themselves to the immense outsides of the manta whales and sometimes contained blue diamonds of uncommon

purity.

As soon as genetic engineering and specialized adaptive surgery made gills available to humans, a submerged colony had grown on Oceana, named Toba after the pearl-diving island off the coast of ancient Japan. The colony was controlled by Toba, Inc., the company that had had the foresight to acquire an exclusive exploitation contract.

Toba employed hundreds of so-called diamond sharks, modified humans working off the cost of their adaptive surgery in five-year contracts. The diamond sharks had the job of manually collecting the diamond barnacles from the hides of the gargantuan manta whales. Though the enormous nets they spread across the creatures' backs provided hand- and footholds and thus some safety, it was a difficult and risky job. Even with their artificial gills, a few diamond sharks had drowned in the complicated swirling currents and eddies. And the creatures were known to suddenly dive into the depths of Oceana's waters, and this deep sounding cost even more lives. The danger pay alone made diamond sharking a very lucrative line of work, even with the surgical debts.

But Varma wasn't after the wealth that a job at Toba promised, or the adrenaline. Like me, she was an avid scuba diver, and her joy in the submerged world was even greater than my own. I'd been with her

in the Indian Ocean on Earth when she saw her first manta ray. I'd never seen her more moved, more in awe of anything. I'd been stunned myself. It was her dream to escape the limitations imposed by equipment and human physiology. And Toba offered to make that dream a reality.

Toba, Inc. had devised a series of harsh and demanding psychological and physical tests that had proved effective in assessing applicants' suitability for high-pressure submarine life. And Varma had passed those tests, and would be leaving me in two months to become a diamond shark.



I had experienced nothing like it. Ever. I swam through the blue-green of Oceana's shallows with water rushing through my gills, and all my senses seemed to awaken fully for the first time in my life and compose a symphony of sheer joy.

There is a deep peace to scuba diving. The weightlessness and the freedom of movement are as close to flying as an independent human can get. Sounds are limited to the rush of water and the bubbling of each exhalation. To conserve oxygen, the scuba diver moves slowly, flippers waving a lazy rhythm, hands folded serenely under the body. It's a calm and beautiful experience.

But as a scuba diver, I'd always felt an



“Part of Me” by Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier

alien in the water. The equipment on my back, the regulator in my mouth, the bubbles ascending past my head, the fins on my feet, they all marked me as a submarine astronaut, a visitor to a world I could never be a part of.

But now! No flippers, but webbing between my surgically elongated toes. No compressed air on my back. And instead of a mouthpiece delivering oxygen, I just let my mouth hang open. The ocean's water ran through me against the blood stream in my gills, delivering dissolved oxygen before escaping my body between my ribs. My thickened skin and subcutaneous fat were designed to withstand both the chill of the water and the radiation of Oceana's bright primary; a third transparent eyelid protected my corneas. I could move through the ocean at will, swiftly and silently, and hear the symphony of submarine sounds that scuba divers miss.

And the visibility! In Earth's waters, I had resigned myself to the murkiness that limited visibility even in the Caribbean. But Oceana's bright sunlight penetrated much deeper than the Earth's Sun. What passed for plankton on Oceana lived at greater depths than I needed to be. And there was very little sand and dust. Underwater Oceana was a land of bright colors and wide vistas.

I had thought scuba diving was peaceful; I could never have imagined the deep,

undemanding serenity of being a diamond shark at Toba.

)-(-

"Brian?" Varma floated in the oval opening in the rock face that formed the outer wall of her cave, and looked at me with incomprehension.

"Hey, Varma," I sent. Learning to use the telepathic organ had been harder than the gills, but by now I was fluent, if that term can be applied to telepathic conversation. "How do you like my new gills?"

She shook her head as if to clear her mind, and moved to the side, inviting me in. I swam past her with an easy flick of my feet. I floated down the hallway into her living space and let myself settle on one of the elastic nets floating in an artificial current of lukewarm water, Oceana's version of central heating. Varma took the other one. I gave her my best smile, but she didn't return it.

"It's good to see you, Varma."

"God, Brian." She shook her head again.

"How have you been?"

There was so much I wanted to say to her, so many questions to ask, and that wasn't one of them. But I had to say something, anything, while I worked up my courage.

“Good,” she said. “Brian, what are you doing here?” She must have realized what a nonsensical question it was; the procedure was irreversible, so she knew I was in Oceana to stay.

“I’m a shark like you, Varma. I have a cave about a mile downreef. I’ll be starting diamond runs in a few weeks.”

Even before she answered, a painful fear settled around my heart.

“What are you doing here, Brian? After all the... after all you said to me when I told you I got into Toba. What are you doing? Did you...? God, Brian. I have to ask. Did you come here for me?”

What could I say to her? Whatever I wanted to tell her, whatever I wanted to ask, her answer was obvious.

“You know I love diving, Varma, I love the water. I understand the appeal of...”

“Brian! Don’t. I can’t believe you’re here, that you would do this. Do you realize what you’ve done to yourself? This is not a fad, not something you do on impulse. Brian, you’re stuck here. Did you come here for me?”

What could I say? My motivations, which had never been entirely clear to me in the first place, now seemed absurd. How could I possibly tell her that I couldn’t bear losing the first woman I had ever

loved? How could I admit now that I had somehow believed Varma and I would get back together when she saw what I was prepared to do for her? Had that really been my reason to apply with Toba, to come to Oceana? Had it?

Varma took my confused silence for assent.

“Brian, I love you, honestly I do. We had a good thing. But it was never meant to last. I thought you knew that. I thought you understood I had my dream to pursue. This is... God, Brian, I don’t know what this is. But it’s wrong.”

And right then, I did understand. I suddenly and completely saw the folly of believing we’d get together again. I recognized the huge mistake that coming to Oceana, becoming a diamond shark, would prove to be if it was just for Varma. I’d been irrevocably changed; I was forever bound to this unwelcoming, aquatic, high-gravity world, forever tied to the water. There was no turning back. And the woman I had thought to win back was as unreachable as my life before coming to Oceana.

I pushed off the webbing, floating aimlessly into the centre of her living space.

“I... I should... I’ll see you around, Varma.”

With an unconscious but well-aimed flick

of my legs I propelled myself into her hallway and out of the door, into the wide, endless ocean.

“Brian!” I heard her send, but I closed my mind. My throat constricted, and I wished I still had the ability to cry.



The two weeks before my first diamond run went by in a desolate haze. In the first few days after our confrontation, Varma tried to contact me a couple of times, but I kept my mind closed to her until she gave up. After that, I kept hoping she'd try again, but of course she didn't, and that was even worse.

I went through the motions of training my swimming and breathing skills, my eyelid reflexes, my body heat regulation, but none of it meant anything. On some level, I could still detect the serenity and potential for joy in the swimming, but in my despair I appreciated none of it. I had beached myself on an alien planet, cut off all ties to my former life, and it seemed all for nothing.

On the day of my first diamond run, two Toba officials came by my cave to pick me up. I knew one of them, Ngala; he'd been one of the trainers who had instructed me in Toba signals and procedures. The other one introduced herself as Sah.

As we swam in the direction of the

trench, there was something odd in their demeanor. They seemed to share some kind of excited amusement, a private joy that excluded me. They didn't notice my despondency, and I was not about to point it out to them.

We swam at some speed at a depth of about 30 feet, the rocky ocean floor another 15 feet below us. It was the first time in two weeks that I'd swum any significant distance outside my cave, and despite myself I felt a vague tickling of pleasure at the feel of rushing water, the spectacle of schools of fish wheeling around us, aquatic plants waving in the current.

I surprised myself with the slowly mounting excitement I felt as we got closer to the lip of the trench. Not only could I see the ocean floor opening up some distance ahead of us, I felt it as well; a promise of wide open space, distance and depth to explore, teeming with life and possibility.

Then we swam out over the trench proper, and I forgot everything else.

I forgot Ngala and Sah, who hung back a bit; I shed the depression that had anchored me for weeks; my heartache lifted and was replaced by a huge sense of awe at the immense spectacle that unfolded beneath me.

The ocean floor dropped almost vertically

for thousands of feet of steep slope, punctuated by sharp rocks in wild and wondrous shapes, decorated with water plants. Some stood dozens of feet tall and waved lazily in the changing currents, some were shaped like clusters of balloons, others grew close against the trench wall and seemed to bloom green petals or formed arcs and pockets of glistening leaves. The opposite side of the trench, similarly covered, stood at least two thousand feet away.

And between the two trench walls swam an endless variety of what passed for fish in Oceana's oceans: giant schools of small silvery torpedoes shifting and turning as if controlled by hidden signals; winged sea snakes like flexible glider planes prowling for prey; four-clawed pseudo-crustaceans propelling themselves with their vibrating tails; bulbous and tentacled giants that reminded me of jellyfish; countless creatures in an amazing range of sizes and wondrous shapes that I couldn't compare to anything I knew.

A distance further into the trench I watched two long, lean fish-like creatures perform an intricate mating dance while they held themselves stationary against the prevailing current with easy flaps of their fins. I watched them, fascinated, as they revolved around one another, and it was minutes before I realized they were both the size, if not the shape, of a mature sperm whale. Suddenly the scale of the whole panorama dawned on

me, and all I wanted was to swim among these amazing creatures and lose myself in their unimaginable variety.

Then Ngala and Sah sent out an involuntary gasp of anticipation, and I looked into the direction their broadcast suggested.

Despite the blue haze that blurred its edges, and its giant size that made it impossible to see it in its entirety, I realized at once that the manta whale below me was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen.

The undulating giant drifted slowly into my field of vision. Its body was shaped like a zeppelin, with two triangular wings on either side to propel itself. Its tail end supported two whale-like flukes, and it had two rows of long low fins on its back that I couldn't begin to guess the purpose of. There was some kind of shifting grid pattern etched onto its back, and tiny creatures crawled chaotically along this grid as the manta whale made its slow way against the trench current.

It was only when the manta whale swam under the mating couple I had spotted that I realized the sheer size of the creature. The two whale-sized creatures fitted easily onto the manta whale's back. Then the manta whale came into proper focus and I recognized the grid pattern. It was one of the humongous nets I had seen in the central company cave. The

nets were attached to the dorsal fins and provided hand- and footholds for the diamond sharks. But that meant that the tiny creatures I'd seen were fellow diamond sharks.

The beautiful, majestic sea monster I saw floating beneath me was larger than the space ship that had brought me to Oceana.

"You do get used to them," Sah sent.

"Sort of," added Ngala with the telepathic equivalent of a crooked grin. "Do you want to meet her?"

We chose a vector that would get us above the manta whale a few hundred meters ahead of its current position. Swimming fast, we reached our spot ahead of the manta and slightly above its course. We floated there and turned to face its approach.

I understood what plankton must feel when it sees a whale approaching. The manta whale swam straight for us. It had a wide open mouth that looked large enough to park a commercial airliner. Instinctively I wanted to swim up and out of its path, but Ngala stopped me.

"We're good where we are. Just watch."

So I did, and he was right. When the manta whale was only a hundred feet away, I could tell that hangar door mouth would pass underneath us. I felt

a pressure wave precede the creature and then we were above it. A few dozen feet behind its nose was the leading edge of the net, and I could see a couple of diamond sharks clambering around its wide, curved back, between the two rows of house-high dorsal fins.

"Start swimming," Sah said. I knew what she meant, and I turned and propelled myself rapidly in the direction the manta whale was moving. It swam deceptively fast, and we needed some speed before we would be able to safely grab hold of the netting.

Under Sah's supervision, I let myself sink slowly down to the curved back until I was able to grab hold of one of the transverse cables of the shark net. I was yanked forward instantly; the rough surface of the braided seaweed dug into my palms.

"You're a natural," Ngala said from somewhere behind me.

"Good job," Sah added. "Now try and find yourself some barnacles."

For a few minutes, I simply hung on to the net and enjoyed the rush of speed, the view of the two enormous wings propelling the immense creature forward. Then I released my cable and let myself fall downstream to the next one, scanning for diamond barnacles as I drifted rapidly across the broad back.

Diamond barnacles have hardly anything in common with the barnacles I knew from Earth. Like the whales, jellyfish and other Oceanic creatures, the name was a convenience. The barnacles were soft-shelled creatures that attached themselves to the smooth hide of manta whales. With the opening in the top of their bodies, they sucked in great quantities of ocean water that they filtered for nutrients and oxygen. As long as the mouth was uncovered, it was easy enough to pinch a barnacle at its base and make it release its hold on the manta whale's skin. I should never touch the mouth though, Ngala had warned me. If a diamond shark was clumsy enough to put his hand on a barnacle mouth, the strong suction would practically weld the barnacle to both his hand and the manta whale's skin.

Grabbing hold of the next cable one-handedly, I cautiously plucked a barnacle with the other. It was empty.

"No such thing as beginner's luck," said the diamond shark to my right.

For fifteen or twenty minutes, I clambered upstream and let myself fall downstream along the giant's back, meeting my new colleagues, plucking barnacles. It was like nothing I'd ever done, nothing I'd ever experienced before. It was exhausting and exhilarating.

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Thus began my sharking career. In the following weeks, it quickly became clear that Sah had been closer to the truth than Ngala. Though swimming into a manta whale's path, grabbing the net and moving around quickly grew to be routine, my awe and admiration hardly diminished, if at all.

It was hard to say what my favorite part of the work was: spotting an approaching manta whale far away in the trench, swimming smoothly over its head and grabbing the net in one graceful arc, the kick of discovering a faint blue glitter in a harvested barnacle, the pride I felt in the rapid teamwork of abandoning a sounding manta whale, or the easy brotherhood of sharing drinks with fellow sharks. In some ways, the best part of every day was perhaps the approach to the trench and the anticipation of that breath-taking vista.

Three weeks after my first diamond run, I was riding the webbing on a huge manta whale female. I had just spotted a promising barnacle when I heard a familiar thought print.

"Hi, Brian."

It was Varma. I was so startled I slammed my flat hand on top of the barnacle I was reaching for.

Ngala had been right. The moment I put my hand on the barnacle, I felt it being

sucked with disturbing force against the manta whale's hide. I knew from Ngala's course that my knife was the only method of detaching the barnacle. I released my hold on the cable, reached for my ankle knife and stabbed at the barnacle. A sudden ripple through the manta whale's back made me miss. The blade plunged to the hilt into its skin and broke off when the muscles contracted in pain reflex. And even before I saw the specific directional ripple in the manta whale's back, I heard the uncontrolled broadcast of one of my fellow sharks:

"Sounding! Sounding!"

I knew what was happening. I knew the net team would be trying frantically to release the netting. I knew the other diamond sharks would be grabbing the last couple of barnacles they could reach, releasing their hold on the netting, and swimming as swiftly as they could vertically away from the manta whale. I knew the manta whale was about to dive thousands of feet down into the trench. And my hand was still being sucked to its skin with terrible force.

The manta whale sounded. The shift in speed and direction caused tearing pain in my captured hand. I tensed for the netting that would soon be shooting past me, but that didn't happen. Apparently the netters hadn't succeeded in releasing it. But I was still being pulled rapidly down into the deepening dark of the lower trench.

Nobody really knew the maximum depth a modified Oceana human could survive, but I was pretty sure I would not survive the depth and pressure the manta was headed for.

It was ironic, really. The same creature that had lifted me out of my depression was now about to kill me.

Then I felt a hand on my ankle; I heard Varma tell me to grab the netting; I saw her lithe shape appear beside me; I saw her slide her blade between my hand and the manta hide. The relief of suction did nothing to lessen the terrible burning sensation, but I was free. My hand spasmed, fingers closing around something tumbling free of the gored barnacle. I turned towards Varma and nodded vigorously.

"Thanks," I mouthed.

"Let's go back," she sent.

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I knew my shivering was more of shock than cold, but I still felt I would never want to leave the blessed warmth of Varma's central heating current. She handed me a squeeze bottle of warm seaweed perfusion. I sipped gratefully.

"Thank you," I repeated. Our swim back to the shallows had been slow and silent; it was only now that I felt I had recovered

enough to speak. "I thought I'd had it. Thanks."

"Any time," she answered. "I thought so, too." Then we just leaned back, sipping our teas. My residual shock dissipated into the water, to be replaced by fondness and gratitude.

But nothing more, I realized with a quiet smile.

I kept smiling at her until she looked away.

"You know..." she began.

"Yeah, I know." And I did. My smile broadened. I knew what she was going to say, and I knew what my answer would be. It didn't matter, because I had finally understood what had brought me here. It wasn't the wonderful woman who sat across from me.

"This doesn't change anything," she said, giving me a stern look.

"It does for me," I said. "It changes everything."

The surprised look on her face was enough to send a wave of laughter her way.

"I was wrong, you know," I said, feeling the truth, the rightness of what I was trying to say. "Of course I was. How else

could I have ever passed the tests? I didn't come here for you. Those manta whales are the most beautiful things I have ever seen, even though one of them almost killed me today. I never want to be anywhere else anymore. I'm here because I belong in the water. This is my life, like it is yours."

Slow, wondering relief spread across Varma's face.

"You mean...?"

"I mean I'm in love with Oceana, and the manta whales, and sharking. But not with you. Not any more."

"So... So we're okay now? Friends?"

"Yeah, friends."

A beautiful smile curved her lips. She shoved off her webbing towards me and slammed into a fierce gill-suffocating hug.

"Then let me look at that hand," she said, pulling away from me again.

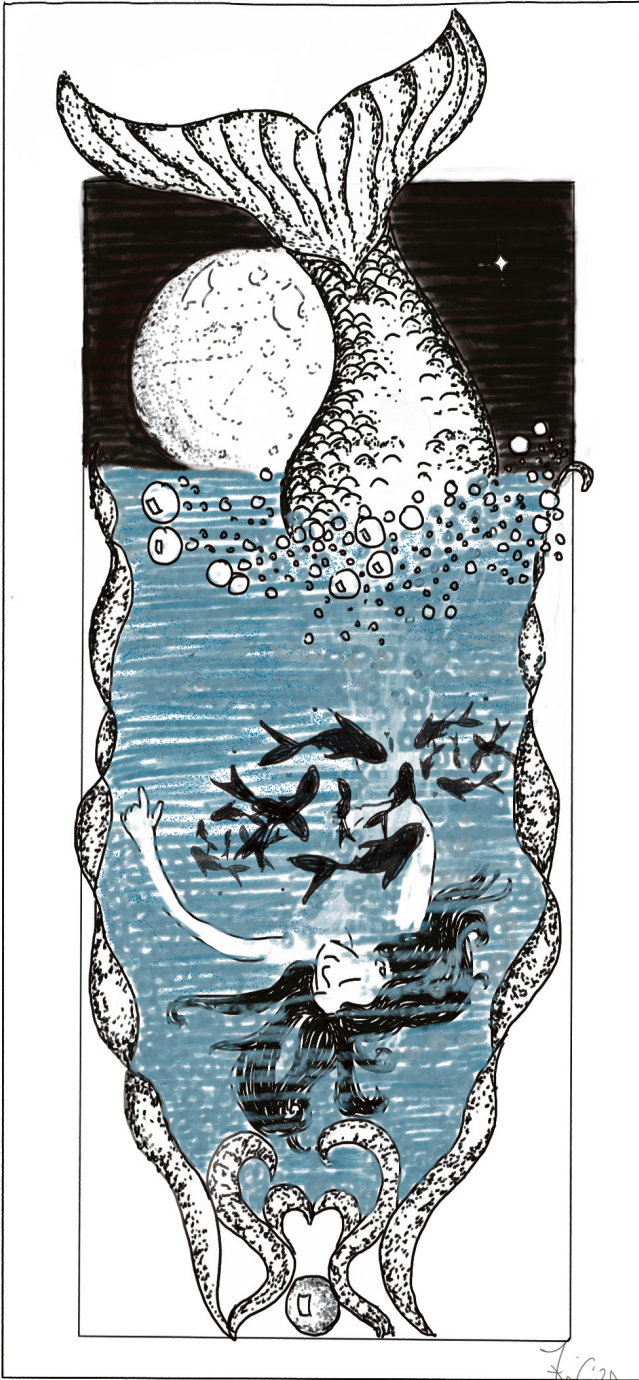
"Sure," I said. Gingerly, I uncurled my injured hand and showed her the blue diamond I was clasping. "I guess this one belongs to you anyway."

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Art by Aqua Moon

Space Needs Mers



Art and Sestina by Fran Wilde

You're a curse-and-gather Mer,
Pulling grocery bags from your ocean
And plastic chips from your tresses while you float.
Bathing in clam-packaged moonlight,
You cram garbage in nets, clearing your space,
As, wanting something better, you shout at the stars.

From below, petroleum compounds hide the stars
And fatten the fish until the whole sea floats
And you are caught in the thick garbage moonlight
And begin to dream of better space:
A planet governed by tides and moonlight,
A place for waterbound Mers.

Still earthbound, you protest at the edge of the ocean
While they laugh and call you a delicate Mer,
Say you can't survive in their spaces.
They're right, you must dive and float,
Ducking their garbage for a clear strip of moonlight
Instead of dreaming below the stars.

Lost, you wonder what will become of moonlight
Once there's too much garbage floating,
And that's when you wonder if space needs Mers?
You already know how to navigate by stars
And though you would miss the ocean
You suspect it might feel just like space --

Weightless and perfect for fins floating
As a garbage-bound planet recedes in space
And you imagine yourself a zero-gravity Mer,
Missing your deep ocean
but delighted by dizzying stars,
A bit worried by the too-large moon.

You apply to get your helmet, your astronaut-star.
You launch away from tide-pull of moonlight,
The first and best, an explorer Mer.
And you rarely miss your ocean
(or the garbage) as you fly across space,
Your hopes of water-worlds helping you float.

Turns out, space does need Mers
Floating in the light of many moons
Across an ocean of stars.



Our Contributors

Amanda Saville does science by day and spins stories by night. When not exploring the worlds in her head she enjoys knitting, baking, and being fascinated by languages. She lives in North Carolina with her spouse, a small herd of houseplants, and her yarn stash.

Aqua Moon is an artist, writer, astrologer, and landlocked mermaid. Enjoys being near the ocean, collecting seashells from across the state, gazing at the stars, and spending time with her cats. Mermaids, dinosaurs, and art have always been her muse as she crafts them into cosmic universes through vivid colors of paints and occasionally embroidery pieces. Aqua can be found on her Twitter [@aquamoontaylor](https://twitter.com/aquamoontaylor).

Floris M. Kleijne is a member of a land-bound species of bipedal mammals with no aquatic features of any kind. He can be observed in the wild in or around a centuries-old farmhouse in the Dutch river district. Approach quietly, and you may hear him mumbling bits and pieces of prose to his computer screen. Behavioral characteristics include the publication of some forty stories in publications like *Galaxy's Edge*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Little Blue Marble*. Unexpectedly, he recently budded off his first novel, which equally unexpectedly turned out to be a Dutch thriller. More can be learned about this creature on <https://www.floriskleijne.com>.

Two-time Nebula Award-winner **Fran Wilde** has (so far) published seven books and over 50 short stories for adults, teens, and kids. Her stories have been finalists for six Nebula Awards, a World Fantasy Award, three Hugo Awards, three Locus Awards, and a Lodestar. They include her Nebula- and Compton Crook-winning debut novel *Updraft*, and her Nebula-winning, Best of NPR 2019, debut Middle Grade novel *Riverland*. Her short stories appear in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Tor.com*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Shimmer*, *Nature*, *Uncanny Magazine*, and Jonathan Strahan's *2020 Year's Best Science Fiction & Fantasy*.

Fran directs the Genre Fiction MFA concentration at Western Colorado University and also writes nonfiction for publications including *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *Tor.com*. You can find her on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and at franwilde.net.

Our Contributors

Ivis Whitright (xe/xem/xyr) is a nonbinary artist and the 2020 recipient of the Rose Low Rome Prize for best poetry by a Brown University undergraduate. Xyr work is in *Grain Magazine* and the *Bear Creek Gazette* and forthcoming in *Susquehanna Review* and *The Bitchin' Kitsch*. Follow xem on twitter [@ivis_the_writer](https://twitter.com/ivis_the_writer).

John Sies has been a graphic designer/ web designer / artist for more than forty years. In 2011, he and his wife, Mary, retired and moved to San Antonio, Texas. John enjoys creating Fractals, Cartoons, and Science Fiction/Fantasy art and illustration. More of his work can be seen at his website, www.artczar.org.

Joyce Chng's fiction has appeared in *The Apex Book of World SF II*, *We See A Different Frontier*, *Cranky Ladies of History*, *Accessing The Future*, *The Future Fire* and *Anathema Magazine*. Joyce also co-edited *THE SEA IS OURS: Tales of Steampunk Southeast Asia* with Jaymee Goh. *Fire Heart*, a YA fantasy under Scholastic Asia, will be published soon. (Pronouns: she/her, they/their)

Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier is a visual artist, writer and photographer. Most recently she's been a cover artist for Arachne Press, Pretty Owl Poetry, Wild Musette, Existere Journal, Vine Leaves Literary Journal, Gigantic Sequins, Ottawa Arts Journal and more. When she's not walking her two huskies, she's also designing with Art of Where. Karen now uses some of her artwork on non-medical face masks. See www.kcbgphoto.com to find out more.

Seth Martel is a Hudson Valley, NY based illustrator and graphic designer. Twitter: [@scmartel](https://twitter.com/scmartel)

Stephanie Nina Pitsirilos is a public health advocate and writer. Her fiction and comics appear in numerous anthologies including *COVID CHRONICLES: A Comics Anthology* (Graphic Mundi, Feb 2021); *Insider Art* (2020); *Speculative Fiction for Dreamers: A Latinx Anthology* (Ohio State University Press, August 2021) and *Elsewhere Volume 2* (Unlikely Heroes Studios, 2021). She's co-creator of the Webtoon series DR163. Many of her works have been for benefits. A Manhattan native, she volunteers as a librarian fill-in for a NYC public elementary school as Mrs. Peanut Butter. Mom to Amazons. Zines as Andromeda. www.stephanieninapitsirilos.com
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About Us

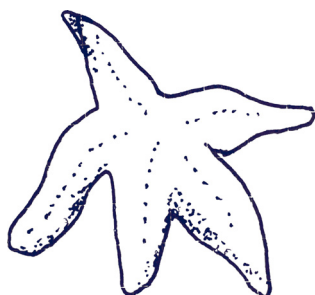
Julia Rios (they/them) is a queer, Latinx writer, editor, podcaster, and narrator whose fiction, non-fiction, and poetry have appeared in *Latin American Literature Today*, *Lightspeed*, and *Goblin Fruit*, among other places. Their editing work has won multiple awards including the Hugo Award. Julia 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

