

# mermaids monthly

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Issue #5 - May 2021



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# mermaids monthly

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

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**MER-MAID AND MER-BUTLER**

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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.

What is black and white and bold all over? The May Issue of Mermaids Monthly, that's what. In this 79(!) page issue you'll find an interview, two comics, two poems, five short stories, and a novelette! We didn't even know we published those until this issue!

To subscribe, visit [mermaidsmonthly.com](http://mermaidsmonthly.com).

Dive in, the water is delightful.

# An Interview with the Mermaid on Display at the National Aquarium

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by B. Sharise Moore

*On May 20, 2020, journalist Harley Lyons conducted an exclusive interview with a West African Mermaid (Jengu) at the National Aquarium in Baltimore, MD. The transcript can be read below.*

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**Q:** For so long, you have remained an enigma. What secrets burn from your skin?

*(She responds in a tongue as old as an odyssey.)*

**A:** Everything begins with myth. Stories are an artery of imagination. A labyrinth. A tunnel of deeper tunnels still.

**Q:** Your hair mimics a tangled garden of coral. What spells conjure this masquerade?

**A:** Camouflage is exquisite armor. A shield of shadow and cork-screwed anemone. I am more story than spell. More belief than not.

**Q:** Explain your capture. Where were you found? What arms were strong enough to pull you from ocean to shore?

**A:** First, came a haunting wave off the coast of Cameroon. Then, my skin was a kaleidoscope shorn from sunshine. A chorus of rainbows caught in a net and sold to a freak show halfway across the world.

*(Her dinner arrives: a kabob of charred words and seaweed smothered wishes. She says eating poems gives her hope and offers me a bite. I decline. She swallows it whole without chewing.)*

**Q: Humans have recreated a paradise for you inside these walls. How does it compare to your once and only ocean home?**

**A:** Freedom snatched is like the loss of a limb. A rancid wound with no hope for healing. This man-made castle of reef and spiral is a mirage. A pretty cage is still a prison even when its bars are plastered with pearls.

*As I leave this cruel exhibit, I scrap the interview in solidarity. Treasure our dialogue like the poems she eats for dinner. Hope she one day recovers her limbs.*



Illustration by AJ Hartson

# Fisherman's Soup

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by Kristina Ten

The first time a tail popped up from the depths of the soup pot, Po didn't think twice about it. She'd been hunched over her grandmother's old recipe book for a week, trying to find the perfect one to make for the upcoming potluck at Molly's.

Molly was always hosting potlucks, ever since she'd moved into that fancy new loft in Somerville, the one with the stainless steel double oven with touchpad controls. Every potluck had a theme, and this time, the theme was cultural exchange. Molly was making colcannon, black pudding, and probably at least three different Irish desserts, while everyone else was just scrambling to put something edible together. Po was putting all her chips on a book of Russian soup recipes, which she'd inherited after the death of her grandmother—Rostov-on-Don's famed soup maker, Agrafena Sergeevna—the previous year.

So the first time a fish tail popped up, she didn't think twice. She thought, *Oh, good, the ukha is coming along nicely*, and sprinkled another palmful of dill into the broth. It wasn't until the tiny sneeze burst forth, echoing against the pot's metal walls, that Po realized something was wrong. She

hadn't been making fish soup at all.

The rusalka rose from the murky broth, bits of parsley and bay leaf tangled in her hair. She scrunched her nose, sneezed again, then swam to the side of the pot, swatting the occasional potato chunk out of her path. When she reached the side, she pulled herself up, draped her elbows leisurely over the rim, and let out an enormous yawn, her sharp teeth glinting in the kitchen's yellow light.

"Tebe ne stydno?" she croaked, flicking her tail against the surface. "Your soup tastes like shit." Seeing the look of shock on Po's face, the rusalka cackled so loudly that the bubbles in the broth jiggled and burst.

In the weeks that followed, the rusalki became a constant presence. Every time Po tried to make a soup, they showed up, with their blonde-green hair and their too-long arms and their strange skin, a ghoulish, near-translucent gray that glistened like the moon in some places and in others seemed to be rotting away. These were not the mermaids of Po's childhood, who sang beautiful songs

and wore modest seashells over their breasts, who collected ordinary items from the world of men as if they were priceless treasures. When Po stuck a fork into the pot to stir the cabbage in her shchi, a rusalka grabbed hold and didn't let go until she'd bent the tines in half.

When Po made pelmeni, the rusalki batted the dumplings around like the ball in a miniature game of water polo, tearing the thin dough. When she made borscht, they slapped their tails wildly, sending the beet juice splashing out of the pot until it had stained every one of her tea towels. In the rassolnik, they looked the most like the swamp creatures they were, floating at eye level between the pickled cucumbers and carrots like gators stalking their prey. Only the rusalki swore up and down they would never eat Po's cooking.

"Ha!" they cackle-croaked. "Very funny, but our taste is too refined for that."

The more Po messed up the recipes—overcooked, underseasoned, wrong kind of mushrooms, past-date sour cream—the more rusalki appeared. On her seventh attempt at her grandmother's summer borscht, just as she realized she'd accidentally bought low-fat instead of full-fat yogurt, ten heads emerged through the surface, dripping vivid pink. They crowded shoulder to shoulder, treading water and shouting over one another like partygoers in an at-capacity hot tub. But they weren't yelling at each other—they were yelling at Po, their voices hoarse and scolding.

"Have you ever had borscht so flavorless?" one asked another, assembling a dollop of sour cream on top of her head as if it were bubble-bath foam.

"Never!" the other replied, sniffing at a wilted sprig of dill. "Ona vobshe tupaya! Agrafena would turn in her grave."

Po hadn't known her grandmother very well, but she figured they were right. The celebrated Agrafena Sergeevna, jewel of Rostov-on-Don, her father's mother, who she had met only once, on a family trip through Russia when she was just eight years old. Agrafena, whose husband had died young in a chemical plant accident and who never remarried, but who wore his pressed slacks along with her magenta lipstick every day for the rest of her life. Whose hair stayed a fiery auburn into her sixties, not a strand of gray—and, no, she didn't dye it, thank you very much, and why should anyone suggest it? Because Feefee was a good, honest woman, besides being an exceptional soup cook.

People traveled from all over the oblast for a bowl of Agrafena's sour solyanka, and even farther for her special mushroom and potato soup. Po knew this, and the rest of it, because her father had told her, back when Agrafena was still alive and he could talk about her proudly, without tearing up. Now he changed the subject every time the conversation veered even in the general direction of his mother, so the family was careful not to bring up Russia or soup, certainly not snow or

kitchens, not orthopedic shoes, nor air travel, nor hand-painted wooden ladles, nor the color red.

The last thing Po's father told her about Agrafena was that she had wanted the recipes to go to her only granddaughter, and that he would be shipping them express to Boston in the next day's mail.

There was so much Po wanted to know, so much she wished she would've asked when she still had the chance. Like was her grandmother afraid of thunderstorms? Did she like being called Feefee? Did she take the bus to work in the mornings or drive? What kind of flowers were her favorite? Did she cry at the ends of books because she was so sad they were over, that the time had come for her to be evicted from their imagined worlds? Did she floss every day? Did anyone? What made her laugh quietly to herself when no one was around to ask her why she was laughing?

None of Po's questions had anything to do with soup, yet that was all she had left of Agrafena. The book of recipes, whose faded floral cover and handwritten pages looked so out of place in Po's updated kitchen, in her small but modern apartment, equidistant between Fenway Park and the Charles. When the book arrived, she'd had to call her mother to help translate some of the scribbled Cyrillic to familiar English over the phone.

Molly's potluck was fast approaching, and

Po still had nothing to show for it. Just a pot full of jeering rusalki, who were quick to tell her when her cabbage was too stringy or her cream too thick, who were completely resistant to the water's boil and even seemed to enjoy it, luxuriating and braiding one another's grimy hair in the steam.

Molly, who had just graduated from Boston University with a degree in Irish Studies, thought the cultural exchange potluck would be a good opportunity for their friend group to share their unique heritages. Molly's nana lived in a stately brick colonial in Walpole, less than an hour away by commuter rail, which Molly had visited at least once a month as long as Po had known her. Every two years, their whole family vacationed in the Irish countryside. Molly sent postcards of immense stone castles and sprawling green lawns. One year, she'd brought Po back a short cape made of wool from real Galway sheep.

With the potluck less than a week away, Po was getting desperate. Surely, she thought as she flipped through the book, she should be able to get at least *one* of the soups right. But on top of the standard challenges that came with not being a very good cook to begin with, the rusalki added another hitch. Gray and ghoulish and deathly cold as they were, they dropped the temperature of the water around them—and with enough of them in the pot, it was nearly impossible to keep it at a boil.



“What is this, Baikal?” one rusalka sneered, shivering.

Another lifted herself onto one of the pot’s handles and peered down at the burner knobs. “Glupyha,” she said. “She probably forgot to turn it on!”

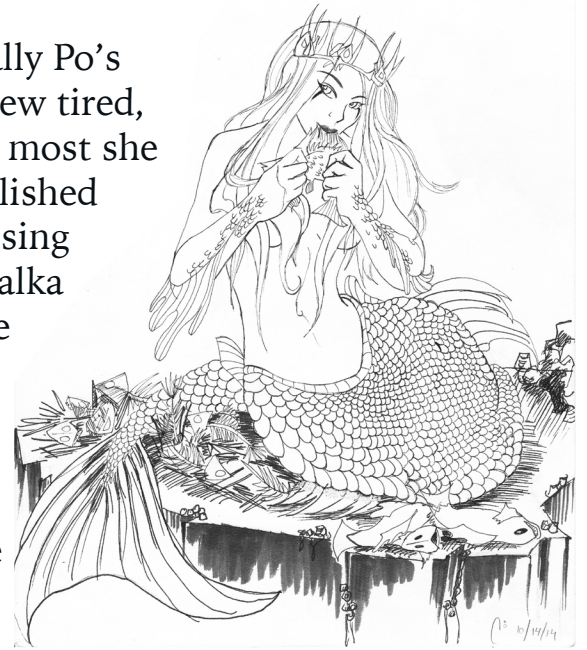
The merciless taunting. The looming pressure of the potluck and Molly’s silent, smiling judgment of each dish that came through the door. The shame Po felt at having the recipe book of the great Agrafena Sergeevna, a coveted memento so many would have killed for, and failing repeatedly to produce anything of worth. It was like she was spitting on her grandmother’s grave, and the rusalki were there to remind her that even the spit could use a bit more salt.

It was all getting to be too much. So Po decided to take matters into her own hands.

First, she tried to drown them, which she realized in retrospect might not have been the wisest extermination method for water dwellers like rusalki. She really thought she had them. Using the handle of a spatula, she stirred the water so fast, so hard, in one direction, then the other, until the rusalki were dizzy and disoriented, gripping tightly to parsnip slices like life rafts. After not too long, she had created a roiling whirlpool, and it looked like one of them might get sucked down—to where exactly, Po wasn’t sure. But no one got sucked anywhere, and

Illustration by Chlo’e Camonayan

eventually Po’s arms grew tired, and the most she accomplished was causing one rusalka to heave gobs of gloppy purple sick into the broth.



Next, Po tried to burn them out. Into the pot, she poured every spicy ingredient she could think of: diced chilis, cayenne pepper, ginger root, two-thirds of a bottle of extra-hot hot sauce, on whose label was a wide-eyed cartoon coyote with the top of its head blown off. The combination was so strong that Po couldn’t stand over it without tearing up, but the rusalki remained unperturbed. When their semi-translucent skin began to smoke, they scratched at it absentmindedly, peeling it away in long strips. All the while, they kept chatting among themselves in a slang-filled Russian Po couldn’t understand. She picked up one word every few sentences: “Molting season.” “Hopeless.” “Granddaughter.” “Red.”

Finally, she couldn’t take it anymore. With a meat tenderizer in one hand, she dove the other into the pot and grabbed

the first rusalka she could: a smallish one with a feathered tail the color of an oil spill. Then she slapped her on the counter, raised the meat tenderizer, and brought it down—

—onto the speckled faux marble, which cracked under the impact. In the time it had taken Po to swing, the rusalka had squirmed and slipped, wriggled and writhed out of her grip and was now manically thrashing her way back toward the pot. As she launched herself up the metal side, the tip of her tail flopped onto the hot burner and she let out a hollow yowl. Safely inside the pot, she was immediately swarmed by her sisters, who formed a protective circle around her and glared accusingly up at Po. At their center, the injured rusalka mewed piteously, but in her milky white eyes Po detected a snide satisfaction.

A drop of red hit the countertop. Po looked down to find the rusalka had taken a chunk out of the webbing between her pointer finger and thumb.

“Durachka,” a different rusalka hissed up at her. “Your tricks have been amusing, but we grow tired. Mind you do it again, and we’ll take hold of you and pull you in.”

The day before the potluck, resigned to her sorry fate, Po went to the supermarket and bought four cans of low-sodium Russian meatball soup, plus a cheap bottle of vodka with a Russian flag on the

front and the name written in tall letters in English. When she got home, she set them on the kitchen table, slumped down, and dropped her head into her hands.

Every time she’d made one of the soups, she’d tried to imagine how her grandmother would have done it—*had* done it, miles away and years ago. Would she have wiped the pelmeni flour onto her neatly pressed slacks? Would she have pulled a spoonful out of the pot and pursed her bright magenta lips, blowing softly to cool it? Would she have put it on simmer to keep it warm for her friends, her admirers, who were always coming over, who would take trains and planes to get a taste of Agrafena Sergeevna’s famous soup? Her friends and admirers, who had known her far better than her own granddaughter.

Po thought back on the failed soups of the past few weeks: sweet cabbage soup, rassolnik, okroshka, borscht. And she thought of her grandmother too, how all the memories she had of her were murky, clouded by time or the changing of hands—or worse, made-up. An entire life diluted. Po felt her grandmother’s once-mighty presence slipping through her fingers. How very sick she was of soup. Now, more than anything, she wished for something solid.

Po lifted her head and her gaze returned to the cans of soup on the table. Slowly, she stood, then she took the cans one by one and flung them down onto the

checkerboard tile. One took a dent right in the middle and doubled over, as if bowing in prayer. Another ricocheted onto the plush darkness of the neighboring living room carpet. Another miraculously survived the attack unscathed. The fourth can landed on the corner of its lid and sprayed a stream of clear broth onto the wall. Po sank back into a chair, breathing heavily, surveying the damage.

Suddenly, a cacophony of metal erupted from the cupboard left of the stove, like the sound of cymbals in a marching band finale.

“Polina!” a small voice croaked from behind the cupboard door. Po was short for Polina Mikhailovna, daughter of Mikhail Yurivich and Elena Timofeevna. Even on days she didn’t feel very Russian, her name wouldn’t let her forget.

Po approached the cupboard.

“Polina!” the voice sounded again.

She tentatively opened the door. Inside was a jumble of pots and pans, their handles sticking out at odd angles, the smallest one a saucepan, no more than five inches in diameter, precariously balanced on top of the pile. Within it sat an unhappy-looking rusalka, her tail tucked into her chest.

Po crouched down and delicately extracted the saucepan from the heap. The rusalka clawed at her tiny throat, and

Po noticed for the first time the set of red-lined gills on each side of that graceful neck, now frantically opening and closing. She brought the pot up to the faucet and filled it halfway with room-temperature water before setting it down on the counter.

“This is a first,” she addressed the rusalka, hands on her hips. “I wasn’t even cooking. How did I manage to mess up this time?”

The rusalka looked sheepishly in any direction but Po’s, twirling her fingers through her blonde-green hair. Maybe it was the light—in the window, the full moon loomed bigger than Po had ever seen it—but the strange creature looked different somehow. Sweet-faced. Almost beautiful.

“Well?” Po asked, losing patience. “Go ahead. You’ve never held back before.”

The rusalka dropped her hands, the hard line of her jaw softening as she met Po’s gaze. “Polina,” she said finally. “You could have asked us. We would have told you.”

Po said nothing, confused.

“About your babushka,” the rusalka explained.

Po felt her face grow hot. “How would you know anything about her? You’re just a bunch of...what are you, anyway? Wannabe food critics? Going to pan me in the *Globe*?”

The rusalka sighed. “We *know* because we were *there*, *malysh*. In Rostov-on-Don. In her kitchen. Which was really quite small and dark, as I remember. It’s much nicer here.” She smiled gently up at Po, who narrowed her eyes in response.

“We know,” the rusalka continued, “because she once made mistakes with her recipes too. How do you think they eventually became her recipes? Oh, she was a disaster in the beginning! Sugar instead of salt, lazy chopping technique, the meat raw while the vegetables were mush. Once, she would have sliced her finger clean off had Marina not sprung up so quickly to save her.”

“Marina?”

“The little one. With the singed tail.”

Po nodded, newly embarrassed.

“Anyway, you’re a lot like her. We all think so. Totally impossible, don’t get me wrong.” The rusalka paused. “But also impossibly persistent.”

At this, Po had to choke back a sob.

“So you thought all you were getting was the recipes, huh?” The rusalka gestured toward the book where it sat on the opposite counter. “Well, Agrafena’s recipes come with, let’s call them, a few *accessories*.”

Po felt something spark within her. “Can

you call them?” she asked, as the rusalka’s tail swished playfully through the empty water. “I’ll get the stuff from the pantry.”

So the hours passed on the night before the potluck, until the night before became the day of, and the kitchen’s artificial light was pushed out by the morning sun. Po worked steadily alongside the rusalki, who were harsh as ever, but shrewd, she realized, and whose brand of love was simply sharper than she was used to, and at times harder to swallow. It was an acquired taste, to be sure, and one she knew she had finally acquired, as she added the onions and fat cubes of perch to the ukha: the final recipe in the book, traditional fisherman’s soup. The onions made Po cry, and the peppercorns made Marina sneeze, and between the heckling was the occasional blissful silence or the humming of an old Rostov song Po could almost remember.

The ukha she would bring to the potluck wouldn’t be perfect. Maybe Molly and her other friends would like it, or maybe they wouldn’t. What mattered was that it would be hers. And not only hers. It would belong to her, and to Agrafena, and to all of them. To her father, to Rostov, to Boston, to the vast oceans, to the driven snow.

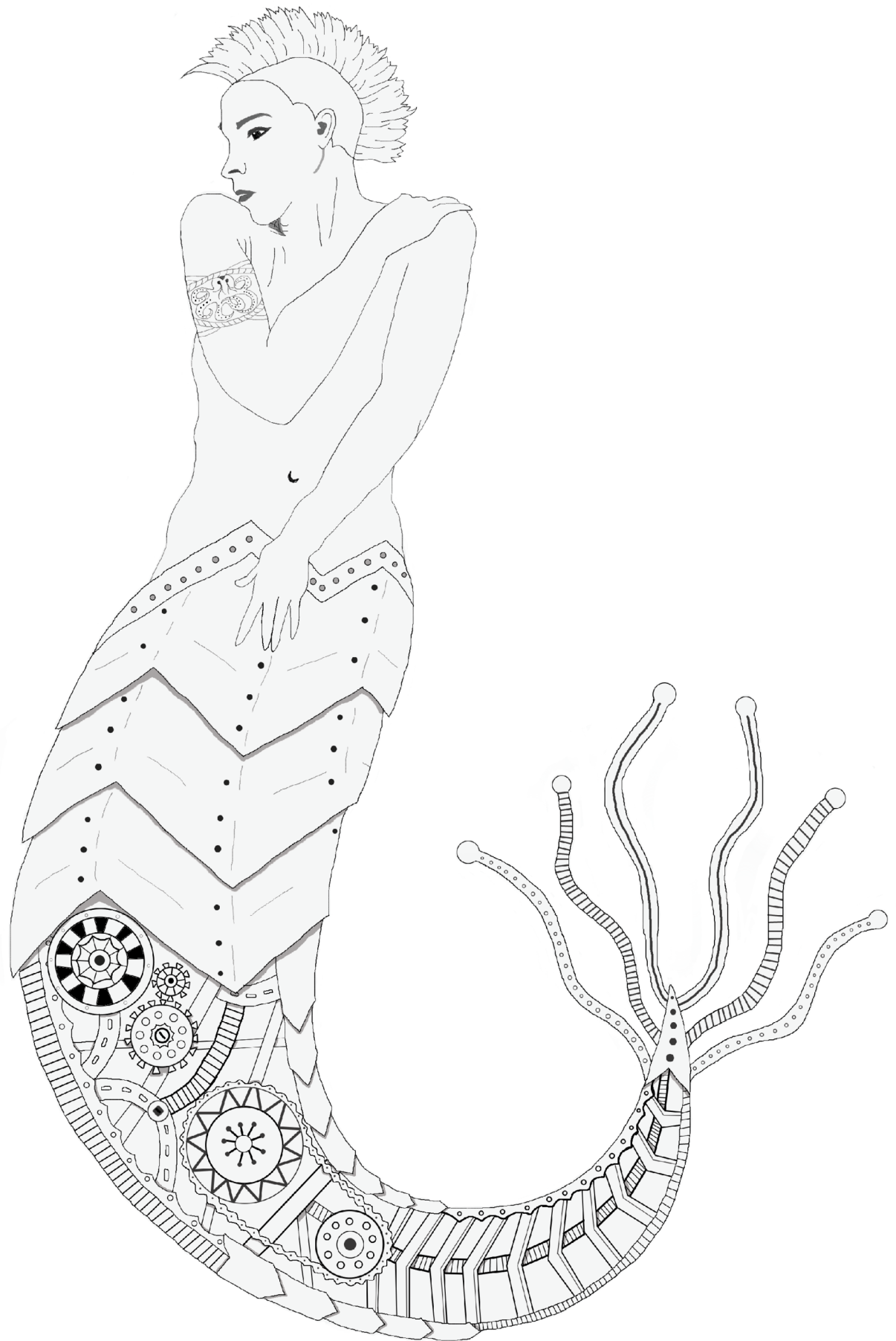
And even though, weeks ago, the rusalki had scoffed at the thought of eating Po’s cooking, when she came back to the stove after having her back turned, she swore one of the perch cubes was missing a bite.

# Walk on Water

---

by Yvette R. Murray

Once upon a time on vacation I met a beautiful conch shell  
     My mind tasted conch fritters/conch salad  
 My mind danced with sweet carols of the Caribbean. But  
     it sought my ethos,  
     watered the rhythms within my soul  
     My mind then heard urgent African dialects:  
 beautiful Hausa, rhythmic Igbo and exquisite Yoruba  
     A reckoning touched my genome  
 The fourth generation removed is loud whispers  
     My mind captured all these burning words  
     understood all the messages:  
     The only way back is the way we came,  
     Queen Ocean, full of death, blue and deep.  
     Queen Ocean, full of death, blue and deep,  
     the only way back is the way we came  
     A mind must understand these messages  
     A mind must capture the words  
     Hear its own loud whispers  
     Within feel reckoning/hear  
 beautiful Hausa, rhythmic Igbo and exquisite Yoruba  
     Water the rhythms within its soul  
     Command its ethos  
 A mind can dance with sweet carols of the Caribbean  
     taste conch fritters/conch salad  
     when it meets a conch shell on vacation



# How to Bind a Sailor's Heart

---

by Jelena Dunato

*Content Note: This story contains mentions of bloodletting and mutilation.*

So you've fallen in love with a sailor. If you asked me for advice – which you are emphatically not doing – I'd tell you to find yourself another sweetheart. A fat butcher with a murderous gleam in his eyes, a silk-clad merchant aroused by the clinking of coins, a cunning innkeeper who turns water to wine. Anything but the man whose heart was stolen by a mermaid frolicking in the foam, with her seaweed hair, coral-red lips and a voice that enchants mortal men.

You insist? Yes, child, I understand: she enthralled him and you want him back.

You've heard about the pogača, of course, and you want the recipe. It is a powerful, deadly thing. Do you think you are the first girl desperate enough to row to my lighthouse in the middle of a winter storm, hair plastered to your head, your dress a sodden rag stretched taut over your swollen belly? There have been others, all drowned now. Let me warn you –

No? You've made your mind up?

All right, don't weep. I understand. I once sailed to the Last Lighthouse in the storm, mad with despair (look for it on a clear day and you won't find it, every child knows that). Go ask my husband to tell you the story, he's the old man quarrelling with the waves outside –

What? Hurry up? You're not interested in an old hag's ramblings? Suit yourself, child.

This is the recipe for the pogača, the fish pie that will bind a sailor's heart, scrape the salt off his skin, drain the blue out of his eyes, silence the song of the waves in his ears.

Prepare the dough first.

Firm base, hard crust, that's what you need. Four cups of flour. Fat, golden wheat grown on the rich dark soil untouched by the sea winds. A stone from his mother's grave, small enough to fit into the palm of your hand, and ground into fine dust, to remind him that the land loves him. An acorn from the tree his father planted beside the house he was

born in. And a sailor's bone, to warn him that the sea is deadly. Under the Vulture Cliffs, there is a Roman galley lying on the seabed. Plenty of bones, picked clean by the fish, white and brittle.

You'll need something to make your dough rise. Hope? Yes, hope is good but yeast is better. Find the oldest ship in the harbour and sneak into its galley. No, don't look for bread, they only have hardtack. Look for the little keg of beer the cook has stowed away for himself. You'll find some lively yeast there, ready to rise and whisper about the long lonely days, rolling, rolling.

Liquid, yes, you need that too. Sweet spring water will do, but if you find a sailor's widow and collect her tears, their bitterness will greatly improve the taste.

No salt, remember. Your sweetheart is salty enough.

Knead the dough, let it rise. Prepare the filling.

Onions are a no-nonsense vegetable: tough, sharp, and resilient to bugs and blight. They won't rot in the ground or shrivel on their vines, they won't freeze or wilt or betray you. No, an onion is a sensible friend who might make you cry but will always, always tell you the truth.

Slice the onion finely with a sharp knife. Wipe your tears when you're done, wash your hands. Put on your best Sunday

dress and walk the narrow streets of your town, your eyes hard, your chin high up in the air. Never let them see you cry.

I never cried, not even when he killed my

—

Never mind.

Next, you'll need three large tomatoes.

What is love? A sweet and sour concentrate of the summer sun: heart-shaped, scarlet and bursting with life. You'll need the ripest, juiciest, most intensely red fruit if you want him to remember the taste of your love on his tongue.

Blanch, peel, and sauté them with the onion. Add blood.

Whose blood? Why, your blood, girl. Cut your wrist, let it drip into a cup till it's full. I never said this would be painless.

Add fish.

This is the tricky part. You need to find the mermaid that enchanted your sailor. How? Well, I already suggested you should go and talk to my mad husband outside, begging the sea for forgiveness. It was he who followed me to my secret cove where I used to kiss my sharp-toothed lover on the smooth white pebbles. He grabbed her silky teal hair and tore her out of my embrace. He plunged his knife into her breast, spraying



her cold green blood all over my face.  
Then he dragged her body to his boat, cut  
and deboned her tail and baked it into his  
fish pie.

If you want to bind your sailor's heart,  
you'll have to do the same. Remember to  
add a cup of anchovies: mermaid's flesh  
tastes of dark water and regret.

Roll out half of your dough and line  
your pie dish with it. Pour your  
filling in and cover it with  
the remaining dough. Steal  
your sailor's boat under  
a full moon and chop it  
into firewood with all the  
resentment you harbour for  
the sea. Light a fire and  
bake your pie.

What will it cost  
you? Nothing.  
Everything.

Go ask my husband  
what it cost him to  
bind the heart of a  
sailor. Ask him if I  
ever loved him. Ask  
him if I ever forgave  
him for killing my  
beloved monster.

Or better yet, don't  
ask him anything.  
The monsters who  
enchant us, the  
monsters who  
save us – who can tell who we are

supposed to choose, when love feels like  
enchantment and enchantment feels like  
love?

Bring your sailor home or the mermaid's  
love will kill him.

And pray the pogača makes him  
remember his love for you.



Illustration by Liz Aguilar

# Sirens of the South

---

by Gee Pascal

She had found something that would mean she'd never be poor again - but there was a catch - she would never step foot on dry land again.

The sirens of the south had offered her a home, a brand-new life that she had always wanted. Sirens were just fleeting hearsays in the ports and were usual topics of drunken sailors' morbid tales, but she knew what she saw at the port at the crack of dawn that day. Their enchanting melancholic voices were full of pity directed at her, but they also sang of promises of a new life for her. Living life as a beggar in different ports, asking for food or for a couple of shillings, was never really her life.

Now that she knew such creatures actually existed in this world, and being offered something that she greatly desired, there was simply no way that she would let this opportunity slip from her hands. Dry land and humans had never given her the chance to truly live. Of course, what they had offered might never even be certain, as sirens were known to be deceptive creatures, but she had nothing to lose.

With a final glance to where the waves met the sand, she took the outstretched hand of one of the sirens that she had seen early at dawn today, never really thinking of all the life that she would leave behind. She did not think twice and swam with them towards the great abyss.

Down and down they went, to the uncharted depths of the Antarctic ocean. Cold and dark, she had never expected this. For a moment, her life played right before her eyes, everything that had happened to her that day a ringing memory. Doubt consumed her; had she really made the right choice?

At the horizon far below, was a faint glowing light, like a gold coin struck by the first rays of daylight. And right then she found a struck of hope; maybe this would really not be that bad for an old beggar girl who had known nothing but the ports, and the ships who went out and came back in a couple of months, the travelers, the sea farers, the stories of pirates, and of sirens, which she had encountered, and which were now currently bringing her where they promised they would.

The faint light was now a glare of white; her eyes were hurting because of it. It seemed like she was dying and yet at the same time rejuvenated. And as she glided gracefully towards the light, everything felt warm and light, her life on dry land like a faint memory that she would never take a hold of. Shining blue scales then slowly covered her hands, and her feet now became an enchanting tail. She then excitedly swam through the light, never to be seen nor heard again.

Illustration by Caitlin Cheowanich

## Want more mermaids?

When we opened for submissions in January we were eager to see what treasure we would find, and we were amazed at just how many magical mermaid pieces we found in our form. Originally, we thought we'd share six or so pieces a month, but the work we found has convinced us to do more. We ended up accepted just over 10% of the January submissions (check out Julia's Submissions Report on

page 70 for more) and we'd like to share even more with you! To do this, we need more money! If you're reading this for free, please consider becoming a Subscriber through Paypal or Patreon. Both options get you early access to all of this magic content, delivered right to your inbox. You can leave the treasure hunting to us!



# The Donkey and the Mermaid

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by Panchita Otaño

“You shouldn’t swim through there,” I say, growing tired of having to repeat myself. My tail threads the warm, Caribbean waters as I float above the colorful corals, just before the darkness that is the Borikén trench. I’m beginning to think it is the reef that encourages a false sense of security for what lies ahead.

Darkness. Death. The monstruo.

“Who made you the canyon police?” The merman rolls his eyes as he swims around me, heading for the steep-sided valley cut so deep into the seabed, not a single merperson can see its depth. As my Abuelo used to say, “Mija, you don’t want to know what’s down there,” and it’s true. I don’t. But the gringo merman probably thinks he knows better than my mer-tail, even though I’ve lived here all my life.

“It’s your funeral, Northerner,” I shrug.

I mean, I did try to warn him — just like I tried to warn the previous seven sárganos. It’s always the same story, too. They ride the currents down to the islands for the spring and then try to use the trench as a shortcut back.

I wave at the stranger with my fins as a school of tricolor fishes swims around me. The colorful females follow around the larger male, who, as soon as it senses the trench, sharply turns and swims away—the females following behind. I purse my lips as I hear the Northern merman’s inevitable cries. I cringe as the last of it sounds a lot like the snapping of a great white’s teeth through flesh and bones.

“He didn’t even get past the first ridge,” I lament, then shrug and continue to brush my hair, humming and singing, “El burro sabe más que tú”

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## An Incomplete List of Mermaid Books on Meg’s TBR

- ~ A Song Below Water - Bethany C. Morrow
- ~ The Girl From the Sea - Molly Knox Ostertag
- ~ The Mermaid, The Witch, And The Sea - Maggie Tokuda-Hall

# Fat Mermaid

in: **Wardrobe Malfunction!**



Story by Marie Vibbert  
Art by Grace Vibbert





Niki's Cafe?

Bernice?

Ha!

Slow down, Bea! I have just the thing.



What? Isn't it cute?

It's not SHELLS.

So?

Mermaids only wear shells.

We'll hit the craft store.

No.

They have to be from here. Mermaids local-source. It's a thing.



These bastards are why I've worn the same shells for fifteen years.



But I've never seen clams in Lake Erie?



They're extinct.

Zebra mussels.



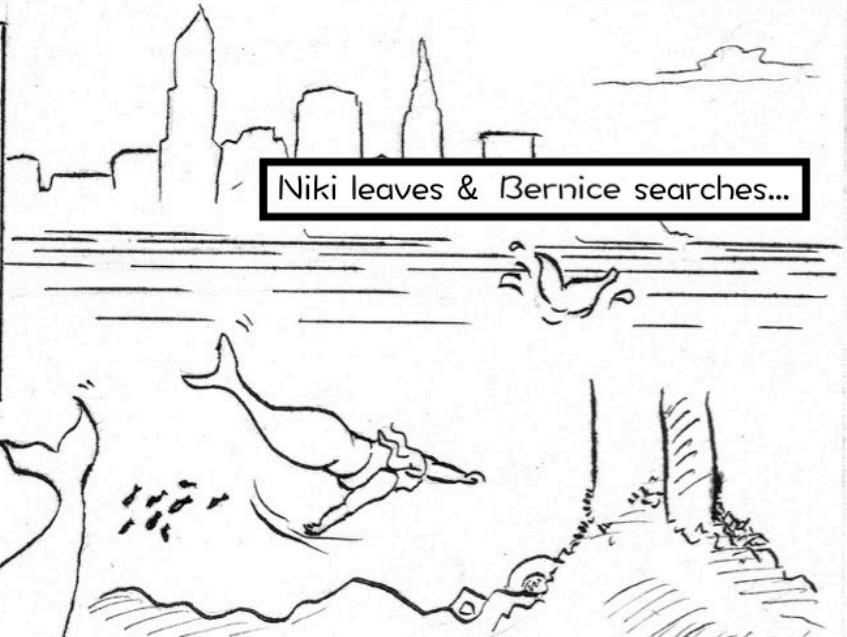
These invaders are to blame.

and they are TINY.



Niki leaves & Bernice searches...

You can't wear THIS.



...and searches

Found Them!

RING!



Researchers from Ohio State found a population of living freshwater clams in Blackwater Creek - it's a tributary of...

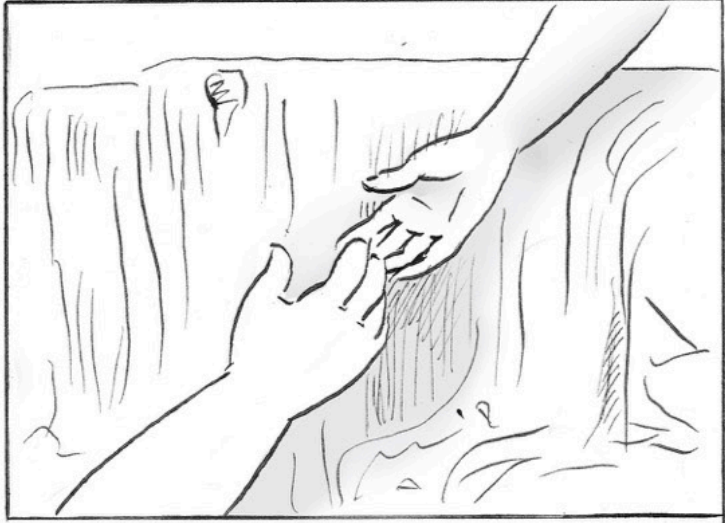


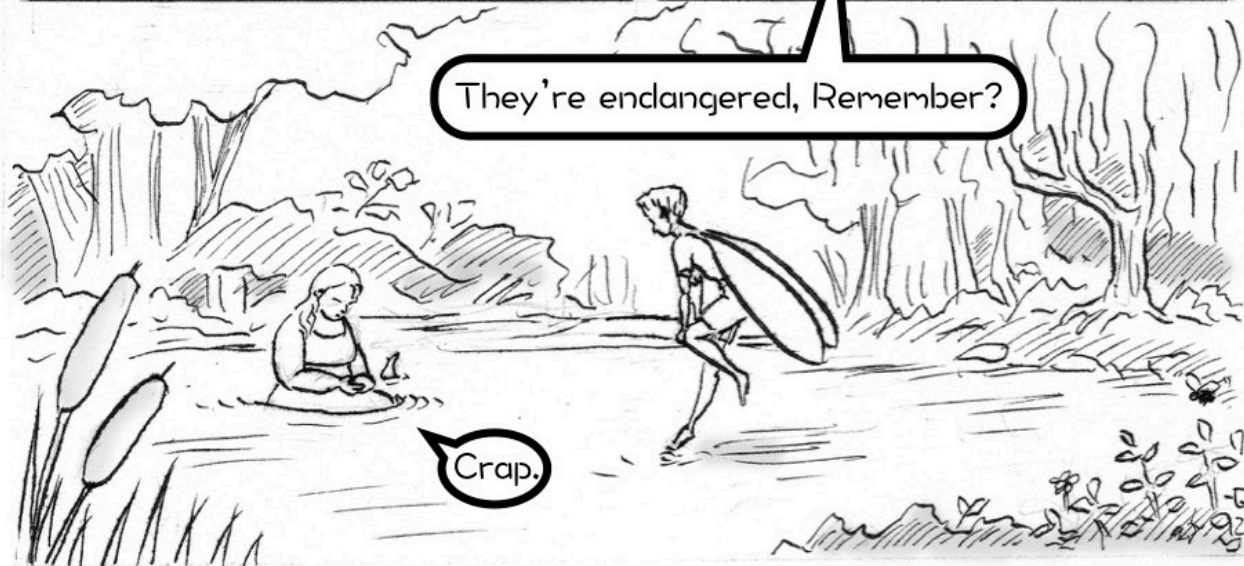
Bea?

Hello?



Crap.







It's okay, little guys.

Fashion is worth the wait.



# Sinking, Singing

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by Gwynne Garfinkle

*This story originally appeared in Not One of Us #60*

People always ask me why the Untimely Ripped never made an album. It's not because Ed and I broke up, though that's usually what I tell them.

I remember the first time I saw Thelma and the other two. It was a Monday night in the spring of 1997, and we were the second band on the bill (which was good, because I hated dragging in to work in the morning after a few hours' sleep). The first band hadn't gone on yet when those girls walked into Spaceland, the three of them, with their waterlogged goth look, and I wondered if it was some kind of a joke. Then I saw Ed staring at them as they floated toward the bar, and I had a sinking feeling. He hadn't looked at me that way in what felt like a long time. I had thought I looked good when I put on my Jackie O dress and sixties eyeliner, but now, seeing him smolder at these chicks, I felt dowdy.

I nudged Margot. "Hey, check out the mermaids."

She peered through her cat-eye glasses at them. "Oh, that must be the Sirens,"

she said. "Annie saw them play here last week."

We were standing by the sound booth, near the entrance to the club. "Colossal Head" by Los Lobos played over the PA. "Isn't that name a little on the nose? And wasn't there already a band called the Sirens?"

"That was the Screamin' Sirens," Margot said.

"I remember them." They'd been an all-girl cowpunk band. "Is that what these girls sound like?"

Margot glanced at them again. "I think they're vocals only. A cappella. They're supposed to be good."

"Huh." The fact they were a band and not just some random, annoyingly beautiful girls irked me even more. They'd dyed their long gleaming hair greenish purple to look like kelp, and their black lace dresses looked drenched somehow, clinging to their bodies. They had on motorcycle boots, which seemed to

complete the effect. “I wonder if they cover ‘Song to the Siren?’”

She shrugged. “I think Annie said they were from Boston. Or maybe New York? I guess they’re on tour.” Margot was shorter than me, and a little heavier. She looked cute with her short black hair and swirling pink psychedelic mini dress. She kept turning to look fretfully at the people walking into the club. Her boyfriend had dumped her, and I knew she was afraid he would show up with his new girlfriend. I don’t remember whether he did or not, that night. I was always telling her she could do so much better. She always fired back that I could do better than Ed. Actually I knew that.

I didn’t meet the Sirens that night. The Untimely Ripped played, and when we were done, those girls were gone, I think.



The next Monday night, the Sirens opened for my friend Chris’s band. Ed was talking to the girls at the bar before their set, and I walked up. “I’m Thelma,” the tallest of the three told me, and offered her hand. It was cool and strong. I was just her height, but somehow she seemed more imposing. Close up, her face wasn’t beautiful exactly. It was harsh and ageless. The olive skin of her bare arms glowed against the shimmering silk of her green dress. She introduced her bandmates, but somehow I couldn’t retain their names. Those two were beautiful, but less compelling.

I can’t describe their set. I mean, the three of them stood at their mics and sang in harmony. The songs had no words I recognized. I couldn’t tell if it was a foreign language or nonsense words. Thelma’s voice was husky, the other two more ethereal. The room went totally still. Gone was the usual hum of Spaceland chatter. I barely heard the clink of a beer bottle. We were transfixed. I didn’t want to be transfixed. I didn’t even want to like them. I tried to wrench myself free and think critically about what they were doing, about what had influenced them, what kind of folk music or classical music. But I couldn’t think. I just stood there at the lip of the stage—how had I gotten so close to the stage? — and listened with a yearning I couldn’t understand.

When the set was over, we clapped and cheered wildly, longing for more. “More!” we bellowed. But the Sirens shrugged superbly and left the stage, abandoning us in the void where their music had been.

“Damn,” Margot said. Only then did I realize she was standing next to me.

I nodded emphatically.

She seemed to shake herself from a trance. “I should find out if they have a CD. I could write something about them for the SoCal Weekly. But what the hell would I say?”

“I know what you mean.” I couldn’t

remember any of their songs, not a note. Only the way their music had made me feel, the long shiver that had gone through me for their entire set.

A few minutes later I saw Ed at the bar with Thelma, and I headed over. “Your eyes are so green,” I caught him telling her in an awestruck tone.

“Yes, they are,” I chimed in, trying to sound ultra-confident. Ed, busted, took a step away from her. It was true, though — her eyes were astoundingly green, like beautiful marbles. (The other girls’ eyes were blue, I’d notice later. A startling Aegean blue.) “Your set was great,” I added.

“Oh, did you like it?” Thelma asked with an odd inflection. It made me wonder what she’d thought of my band. If she’d even given our gig a second thought.

“It was fuckin’ rad,” Ed said. There was something so nakedly worshipful in his tone. Was it just that he wanted to fuck her, or what?

“Do you have a record out?” I asked.

Thelma shook her head dismissively. “Such things don’t interest us.”

“You really should record,” Ed said. “I mean, I get that for you it’s all about the communal live experience, but everyone should be able to hear your music...” He blathered on, while Thelma sipped her

drink and listened indulgently. It was embarrassing. I remembered when Ed and I first met and he rhapsodized about my songs, my singing voice, the clothes I wore. But I didn’t think he’d ever been quite so over-the-top.

“So, are you on tour?” I asked when I could get a word in.

“Our plans are indeterminate,” she said.

“Where are you staying?” Ed asked eagerly.

“The reservoir,” she replied. Did she mean across the street from the reservoir? If so, it was a pretty vague answer. Ed and I nodded as if we understood.

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The Sirens were still in town a couple of weeks later when a label rep came to an Untimely Ripped gig. We’d had label interest before, and it never amounted to anything. I didn’t really expect this to be any different. Sure, I would have liked the option of quitting my day job, but I was less and less enamored of touring with sweaty guys in a van. That was starting to get old, now that we were all in our thirties. I figured we’d end up putting out a record ourselves. Ed was really hoping we’d get signed, though. He didn’t have a steady day job and didn’t want one. The label rep was a small blonde in expensive jeans and a leather jacket. Before we went on, she told me she’d heard our live set on the radio and thought it was great.

Our set was a disaster. A couple of songs in, Ed started playing completely different bass parts that didn't fit at all. I tried to focus, but Luis, our drummer, got completely thrown off. Stan looked like he wanted to swing his guitar at Ed's head. The label rep watched us with her mouth pursed like she'd tasted something bad. After the fourth song, she headed for the bar and started flirting with the bartender.

Only at the end of the set did I notice the Sirens at the back of the room. Thelma was smiling with all her teeth. I had never seen her smile before.

We took our equipment off the stage in silence, and the next band started to set up. Standing in front of the stage, I asked Ed what the fuck had happened. I expected him to say he was on something. He didn't seem drunk. He shook his head perplexedly. "I had their music in my head," he said.

"Whose music?" I asked, though I knew.

He ran a hand through his sweaty dark hair. "Theirs. Hers."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Ed," I said.

"I'm sorry!" he said. "I couldn't stop it."

"I'm gonna kick your ass, man," Stan snarled — but Ed looked so woebegone, Stan shook his head and stomped off to the bar.

Luis pulled me aside. "I heard it too. The Sirens' music, I mean. I heard it."

I stared at him. "You did? I thought it was just Ed throwing you off."

He shook his head. "It was freaky."

I walked up to the bar. The label rep was long gone. I ordered a dirty vodka martini. The bartender took one look at me and made it a double. As I ate the olives from the swizzle stick, Thelma glided past the bar with an amused look in my direction. She headed out the door. An instant later, a desperate-eyed Ed followed her. A wave of humiliation broke over me. I drank down the cocktail, salt and burning. Then I set the empty glass on the bar and strode outside.

People smoked and chatted on the sidewalk. To my surprise, Ed was nowhere in sight. I walked up to the Sirens. Thelma glanced at her bandmates, and the two of them drifted off down the block. "What can I do for you, Lesley?" she asked.

"What the fuck is your deal?" I asked. The martini had hit me hard, and I was ready to unleash. "What do you have against me and my band? Or is it just about Ed? You want him for yourself?"

Thelma laughed. It was a dizzying sound like gulls wheeling overhead.



“What’s so funny?” I demanded.

“Ed!” she cried. “He is of no consequence. There are a thousand, a thousand thousand, just like him. His kind is so easily entangled and even more easily discarded. Really, I’m embarrassed for you. When we first heard your voice, we assumed you would be more discerning.”

“When you first heard my voice.” I tried to figure out what that meant. The Untimely Ripped show at Spaceland, the night I’d first seen the three of them? I hadn’t been sure they’d even stuck around for our set.

“We were far away then, but we heard your music on the wind, along the waves. It drew us here, to this manmade lake.” She shrugged in the direction of the reservoir, a few minutes’ walk from where we stood.

“What are you talking about?” I whispered, although I sort of knew.

“We thought you would recognize us, but you didn’t. You were too enmeshed in all of this.” She waved her hand at the nightclub. “We thought if we stripped it away, you would remember who you are. We thought you would want to join us.”

“Join...your band?” I asked, even as I realized what a ridiculous understatement that was. “You want me to sing with you?” The thought of my voice meshing with theirs filled me with a longing so intense, I almost doubled over with it.

“We want you to come with us,” Thelma murmured.

“Where? To the reservoir?”

She chuckled deep in her throat. “No. We’re ready to leave here, with or without you. Can you really live without us?”

My mouth went dry. It tasted of olives, salt as the sea. Tasted of a memory. No, not a memory, exactly. A flash of the Mediterranean, so blue it was almost purple, somewhere I had never been. “I don’t know,” I said.

Thelma narrowed her eyes at me. “Would you really turn us down for this?”

I looked around at Silver Lake Blvd, lined with trees and streetlights and cars, at hipsters smoking cigarettes and gabbing, at the black circles of ancient chewing gum smashed flat into the sidewalk. I looked up at the sign that read Dreams of LA, from back when Spaceland had been a gay disco, and at the marquee with my band’s name on it. I imagined a life of water and music and these women. Swaying the mortals with our power and beauty, with our undeniable song. I had felt a trace of that power sometimes, on stage, when the audience was rapt at attention.

“There you are, Lesley!” Behind me, Margot’s voice as she came through the door. She walked up to me, then hesitated

when she saw Thelma.

“We’ll be leaving soon,” Thelma told me. “We’ll know when you’ve decided.” She joined the other two Sirens down the block, and they walked toward the reservoir, where, I knew, they would climb the fence, heedless of barbed wire, and slip into the water.

“What was all that about?” Margot asked.

I shook my head, and a wave of vertigo went through me. I really was pretty drunk. “You wouldn’t believe it if I told you.”

She put her arm around me. “So, that was kind of a mess,” she said with a wry smile. “Are you okay?”

She meant the gig. It seemed long ago and far away. I put my arm around her. She was soft and warm and a little sweaty in her orange sleeveless dress. I loved her. “I don’t know,” I said.

Margot’s forehead was corrugated with concern. “Is something going on between Ed and Thelma?”

I started to laugh. Margot looked surprised, then pleased. She started laughing too. We laughed and laughed, drawing curious glances from the people around us.

The warmth that filled me was purely human. It cut through the vodka and the

strangeness of the night. In that instant, laughing with my best friend, I chose.

An instant later, I couldn’t quite breathe as I realized I wouldn’t see the Sirens again. Wouldn’t hear them again. I wanted to run after them, beg them to let me sing with them just once before they left. But that wasn’t how this worked.

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After the Sirens were gone, Ed kept getting drunk and crying disconsolately. It was a really swell time. “It just seems pointless to play music anymore,” he said. “We can never measure up.”

“Speak for yourself,” I retorted.

“The Sirens are true artists. You could never understand.”

I was tempted to tell him everything. Not that Ed would have believed me. I just rolled my eyes at him.

“Can I punch Ed now?” Luis kept whispering to me during band practice. “How about now? Now can I punch him?”

Stan joined another band, though he said he was still into playing with us. Then I slept with Luis, which was my way of passive-aggressively breaking up with Ed, which set him off on another round of drinking and crying. Then Ed left the band. We could’ve gotten a new bass player, but somehow we didn’t.

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I don't live in the neighborhood anymore, though Margot does. I haven't gone to Spaceland in years. It's not called Spaceland anymore, though it still has the sign that reads Dreams of LA. Whenever I drive along the reservoir, I look for the Sirens, even though I know they won't be there. The city drained the reservoir for awhile because of the drought, and it was a relief in a way, not to look for them, not to imagine them with their green and purple hair floating in the water like seaweed.

Today I drove along the reservoir for the first time since it was filled again. It was a Sunday afternoon, and the water shone blue and lovely in the sun, not as beautiful as the Aegean must be, but still. Joggers ran along the path next to the fence.

I don't miss those days, twenty years ago. People tell me it's too bad the Untimely Ripped never made a record, but I think it's okay. A couple of those songs ended up on the CD I put out myself. I care more about the songs I'm writing now, even though it'll probably be a long while before I make

another record. Between my family and my job, I don't have a lot of extra time.

Would it have been worth it to go with them? Sometimes when I feel especially tired, sitting in traffic, I wonder. Mostly the prospect seems lonely, an eternity of music in a vacuum devoid of loved ones. But maybe that's because I can't quite remember their music. What is success, anyway? What is failure? You don't get to decide what stands the test of time. Eventually it all drifts away.



Illustration by Che Gilson



**Operating  
from a Space  
of Truth**



**An Interview with  
Amy W. Bernstein and  
Michelle D. Smith**



This month we talked with two writers about their mermaid books. Amy L. Bernstein has a fantasy novel coming out in July of 2021, and Michelle D. Smith's channeled mermaid novel came out in its 4th edition in August of 2020. Below is our conversation. - Julia Rios

JR

**Julia Rios:** Please introduce yourselves and tell us a little bit about your books.

AB

**Amy L. Bernstein:** Hi, I'm Amy, and I'm excited to be swimming with the mermaids! I call Baltimore, Maryland home and I live right next to the harbor, so I guess water is on my mind every day. As an author, I enjoy writing in so many genres, I can't seem to pick just one. *Ell*, about an unconventional mermaid, is a fantasy. But my other novels coming out are speculative or dystopian with a dash of mystery, set in the real world. I began writing fiction about a dozen years ago, beginning with plays, eventually moving on to novels. I think every story tells you what it wants to "wear," whether long or short, contemporary or old-fashioned.

Here is the teaser for *Ell: Meet Ell Gossamer*: "*The instant I tell you I am a mermaid, you will jump to many conclusions, and all of them will be wrong.*"

When sixteen-year-old Ell's two mothers mysteriously disappear, she flees to a distant New England town in order to conceal her identity from those she believes must have kidnapped her parents. There, she traverses the uncertainties of friendship, and first love with a young woman who is everything Ell isn't. But things aren't what they appear. A fanatical cult that's tracked her seeks to possess the last known mermaid, while the activist group she joins makes the plight of her species public. But will public exposure protect her or serve as a death warrant?

MS

**Michelle D. Smith:** I was born in Harlem, NY, lived in Bermuda for 5 years with my Grandpa and great aunts, then returned to what has been

M8

**Michelle D. Smith cont.:** home, Baltimore for what seems like forever. The consistent theme of all my homes has been proximity to water. Here in Baltimore, I live near a park and the Jones Falls waterway. Water has been ever present in my life, I would not understand the connection until I wrote *My Life As A Mermaid*.

I am a regular person who, throughout my life, has had angelic interventions of every kind. I am a she/her but have been a they until I tamed my Gemini alter ego, who has her own name (which shall not be spoken :) ).

I began a spiritual blog (Your Spiritual Garden) after an extended illness, and several angelic messages focused on clearing my home. To make a long story short, after months of clearing, cleaning, donating, and throwing away, I finished in my attic and planned on celebrating by smudging the space. My angels had other ideas and gave me a dolphin as my first prompt.



Michelle's Dolphin

In the next few weeks, in my dreams, I was told to write a book. If that wasn't absurd enough, the title given by angels was *My Life As A Mermaid*. Trust me, I am a highly suspect candidate for this kind of spiritual message. I am not religious, but love God and her angels. I am willful and tend to do things my own way. I cuss daily and drink often. So I resisted this message. My angels were persistently annoying. I finally asked exactly WHERE would I get this information? The answer was "The Keeper" - and my adventure in channeling a past life began.

It didn't occur to me until today, this book was written 10 years ago. I self published the 1st edition in 2015. Recently, my blog visitor logs show the majority of my readers are looking for information about mermaids - it seems now is the time to share what I know!

Thank you for creating space to explore and share all things mermaids!

JR

**Julia Rios:** Wow, what a journey, Michelle! Amy, as someone who writes all over the map, what about *Ell* made you know it had to be a mermaid story? Did you find yourself dreaming about mermaids like Michelle, or was it a more conscious choice, and did the story come to you fully formed, or was it a slower build?

AB

**Amy L. Bernstein:** I guess you could call me “fantasy-curious,” meaning that this is a genre I had never expected to write in. But as I became more aware of fantasy writers’ wild imaginations and the incredible world-building that goes on, I began to think this genre made room for so many exciting possibilities. Mermaids, even after countless myths and legends, are still so ripe for interpretation. I like writing against the stereotype of the sexy mermaid seductress. *Ell* is nothing like that. In fact, she identifies as human, with a particular mermaid heritage. The main arc of the story developed fairly quickly, but bringing *Ell*’s world to life—which is really our world, with a twist—took a great deal of time and attention.

MZ

**Michelle D. Smith:** Amy, I wish I could write fiction. My life has been so strange, it just escapes my grasp. I think Baltimore, for all its bad rep, is a bit magical. The people who live here are awesome and inspiring. So many are working so hard for the greater good, it is not something I want to go look for elsewhere at this age.

JR

**Julia Rios:** Michelle, what is your channeling process like? Is this something that happened just once ten years ago, or was that the beginning of a bigger pattern? Have you written more or are you planning to write more novels that way?

MZ

**Michelle D. Smith:** *My Life As A Mermaid* is written by date. Every day, I sat and connected to my Akashic Records to access my lifetime as a mermaid. I would begin with a short meditation session, request protection and pure information, open my composition book and wait for the information to flow. I wrote in freehand, away from my computer since it was easier for me, though harder to read!

The ability to channel is available to everyone who is willing to quiet themselves enough to hear and trust the information received. This is part of the book’s message. I am highly intuitive, have been all my life.

MS

**Michelle D. Smith cont.:** As an angel card reader, (though I can do tarot) I prefer the gentler energy of the angels. In the past, I offered readings on my site, but only share information on where free readings can be found at this time. Offering paid readings was how I kept my channeling skills intact. I have quite a few grateful clients.

As for channeling another book, there is at least one more book I could channel, but have not had the heart or strength to do more than a few pages.

It is from a lifetime as a slave in Virginia, with my mom and son. I've actually had dreams about that lifetime and it is not something I am willing to pursue yet - it is simply too painful.

I am currently working on a book of my angelic interventions. It is half finished - I am struggling with format. It would read much better if I could write it as a story, as opposed to stories, but I haven't figured out exactly how to change it.

JR

**Julia Rios:** Wow, it's fascinating how different your processes are! How much about mermaids did you know before you began your books? How do you think your mermaids are similar or different to traditional mermaids from folklore and fairy tales?

MS

**Michelle D. Smith:** What do any of us actually know about mermaids other than fairy tales and horror stories?

Of course I read and loved *The Little Mermaid* - not much else exposure. Like all things fanciful, mermaids, unicorns, Pegasus, fairies and trolls get to live in my head rent free! I am that girl! My only tattoo is a black pegasus (I didn't know how painful that would be).

For instance, I wrote about how mers' living spaces were lit, and just a few years ago, found scientific research on how different corals and sea plants can create their own light, deep in the ocean. This would not be something I studied, just information received in my channeled state.

So, I had no preconceived ideas about mermaids when I channeled my



JR

**Michelle D. Smith cont.:** book. However, I did/do have preconceived ideas about dolphins! Mers consider dolphins as playmates and protectors. I've thought since childhood, if I found myself stranded in the ocean, I would call for a dolphin. I found out much later in life, dolphins are one of the few animals that will fight sharks, and that sharks offer a modicum of respect to. Subconscious memory? Could be!

AB

**Amy L. Bernstein:** I love Michelle's comment, "I am operating from the space of truth as opposed to fiction." I believe all good writing in any genre adheres to that idea. Well said, Michelle!

Before beginning *Ell*, the Disney cartoon version of a mermaid was also prominent in my conscious mind. I was also aware that mermaids had inspired countless myths and legends over centuries, primarily associated with fishing cultures. I ended up researching many of these legends and they are fascinating and different from one another. In Japan, mermaids were thought to confer immortality if eaten. In Britain, they were considered seducers who brought bad luck. And Christopher Columbus mistook a manatee off the coast of Florida for a mermaid, which he deemed ugly. (The fan-shaped manatee tail fin is vaguely similar to that of a conventional mermaid tail.)

My mermaid, *Ell*, is not like any of the myths. She is a hybrid species (part human), and descends from a unique culture, most of whose practices are long forgotten, but which are echoed in traditions handed down for centuries.

JR

**Julia Rios:** Has writing about mermaids taught you anything that you've carried with you in your land life? Do you have any mer-wisdom to share?

AB

**Amy L. Bernstein:** Oh, gosh, my land-life is truly enriched by immersion in mermaid land. From the earliest recorded mermaid legends in 1000 B.C. up through the early Victorian obsession with mermaids, sirens, nymphs, and fairies, some clear trends emerge. For example, humans have always had a deep need to believe in the fantastical, in magic, in forces at work greater than themselves. Organized religion fills some, but not all, of this need. We long to be humbled, to be awed, by forces and powers we do not understand. But there is a dark side, as well. Many

AB

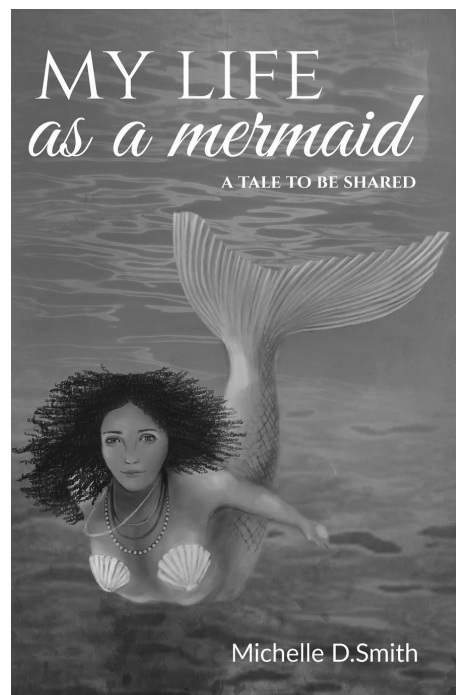
**Amy L. Bernstein cont.:** mermaid myths (and others, of course), do damage to entire groups of people by “othering” them. With mermaids, females bear the brunt of this, as many mermaid myths demonize women as evil seducers, as bad omens for fishermen, and so forth. I think one lesson is that legends can be a force for good, by inspiring our imaginations and being open to new ideas. They can also be a negative force that reinforces stereotypes that some people accept as truth. Complicated, to be sure!

M8

**Michelle D. Smith:** After channeling *My Life As a Mermaid*, I immediately put the composition book in my file cabinet. I removed it to read almost four years later. After reading my work, I decided to try to find a publisher (which failed), then researched self-publishing options.

The irony is 2011 was WAY too soon for something this fantastical, yet it seems more are open to the possibilities a decade later.

Mermaids live in a matriarchal society. Only women hold positions of leadership and sharing wisdom. It is a peaceful existence based on love, joy and purpose.



In this lifetime, I love reading (I taught myself to read when I was 5), have a wicked sense of humor, and abhor social injustice. I have been a social warrior my entire life - and that is my twitter name.

I believe in community and women. I don't consider myself a feminist. I'm a black woman and have always done what was required. I never dreamed about a wedding, or children for that matter, though I am a happy mom of two and Oona (grandma) of one. I feel this sense of belief in myself and others comes from the mermaid's vision of how society should be.

Being Human is considered the highest honor. To be veiled, and have to figure out how to live a kind, honorable life is only for the chosen few. Or in our case, the few billion we are here with.

There is an expression “We are all walking each other home” (Ram Dass)

**MS**

**Michelle D. Smith cont.:** I did not come “here” alone. I have had so many strong women who have uplifted and supported me from birth. In fact, I had my own personal Fairy Godmother, who lived to be 105 years old!

Finally, water is my healing balm. Combine water and being in New York City and I am floating for weeks, just from the direct energy charge I get going home. Bermuda offers a more chill effect. Right now, I cannot wait to get my feet on a beach, and in the water!

**JR**

**Julia Rios:** Can you tell us where to find you and your work?

**MS**

**Michelle D. Smith:** I don’t have social media dedicated to my book. I have a page on my website: My Life As a Mermaid — Your Spiritual Garden

You can find my book wherever books are sold! My direct book link is: <https://books2read.com/mermaidlife>

Should anyone really be interested, you can find me on Twitter as @Pegasus612 Spiritual Warrior.

**AB**

**Amy L. Bernstein:** Ell comes out in July through Scarsdale Publishing, and you can pre-order it on Amazon Kindle here: <https://amzn.to/37QeDyq>

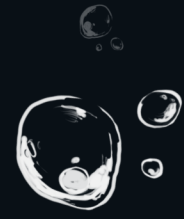
Here is all my social media info:

Twitter & Instagram: @amylbernstein  
Facebook: /wordberg  
Website: <https://amywrites.live/>  
Goodreads: Amy L. Bernstein

**JR**

**Julia Rios:** Thank you both so much for taking the time so share your thoughts with us!





# The Incident at Veniaminov

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by Mathilda Zeller

*Content note: This story contains cannibalism, violence, and themes of colonialism*

The summer had finally reached our island. We shed layers of knitted wool and sinew-sewn fur and let the wind move across our bare arms and legs — a vulnerable feeling after being perpetually covered for most of the year. Fishermen were out at all hours of the day or night. With the darkness only covering two hours in twenty-four, there was little need to stop; our people moved with the strange rhythms of the far north. From the tundra at the top of the world to the jungles in the south, this is where we had gathered. If anyone were to visit long enough, they'd notice we were different.

But no one ever stayed that long. Not unless they were one of us.

In many ways, we'd been forgotten by Civilization. Civilization lived on Wi-Fi and cell towers; we lived on diesel generators and seal blubber fires. Civilization had bars with shelves holding more different kinds of liquor than there were people in our village; we had hooch fermented in Aana Sue's bathtub, which had been forged from a Japanese submarine that had the misfortune of running aground here in World War II. Civilization had developed standards for schools, but somehow those standards did not reach our far flung fragment of Alaska, adrift in the north Atlantic. We learned to read and write in our own homes, from the same primers our

parents and grandparents had used.

We were happy to be forgotten by Civilization because Civilization asked us too many questions about ourselves, and wouldn't have left us alone without cutting us open to find the answer. When they forgot us, we developed an innocence that calcified into ignorance, and ignorance is always dangerous.

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When the cruise ship docked offshore, half the town gathered to stare. We'd often watched cruise ships pass by. The tourists, clad in puffy white coats and sunglasses, would gather on the decks to spy on wildlife, and we would gather on the bluffs to spy on them. Their garbage washed up on our beaches and we burned it, or used it, if it could be made useful. This one didn't pass us by, though. It stopped. It calved three small motorboats, which barreled towards us with alarming speed, and when they reached us, we didn't dispatch them the way the elders claimed to have dispatched the unfortunate Japanese submariners back in the day. Instead, we stood and stared when they came ashore.

They moved in on us like three wolves rounding up a herd of caribou. The problem was, they were very handsome wolves. Each operator disembarked, and

one walked straight up to me, his hand extended.

“I’m Dmitri. Have we reached Veniaminov?”

I took his hand. It was cold, which was strange, since he had just pulled it out of a glove on a warm day like this. “You have. Why are you here?”

Dmitri threw back his head and laughed, as if I had said something hilarious. “To take you to the ball, naturally.” He bent over my hand like the knight had in the primer that had taught us all to read. “If you’ll have me, lady. I can only take so much dancing with the cruise line women.”

I pulled my hand from his. “You’re a stranger.”

“I’m a Dmitri,” he corrected, “And you’re a —?”

“Elisapie,” I answered, feeling a little stupid.

“Beautiful name for a beautiful girl.”

I looked down at my blood spattered apron, then my callused hands. He was a flatterer from Civilization. “I have fish to gut.”

“Then I have fish to buy. They are freshly caught, I hope?”

His eyes were blue as the sky on a rare cloudless day. Colored eyes, my Aama would have called them. Like pretty marbles or sea glass to collect.

“We caught them today.”

“Then lead the way, Elisapie.”

He followed me back to the fishery. I suppose I could have yelled at him or thrown rocks at him, scared him off like a wild dog, but he liked my name. I liked the way it sounded when he said it. And he said it a lot.

“Elisapie, have you always lived here? Do you like the sea, Elisapie? And your neighbors, do they like it too? Elisapie, can you swim?”

He had a thousand questions, which he always started or finished with my name, as if it were a special garnish.

Joseph cleaved fish alongside me, his mouth tight, his eyes narrowed. He hadn’t gone to the shore to see the cruise ship, and was annoyed to see the Civilization had followed me back to work. Joseph had little patience for outsiders.

Dmitri refused to leave until he had fifty pounds of halibut wrapped in white paper tucked under his arm, and along with my acceptance to his invitation. Figuratively, at least.

“You didn’t have to tell him yes,” Joseph

muttered as he hosed down our work station.

I shrugged. "Maybe I wanted to."

"It's tonight."

"So?"

"The meeting is tonight."

"For the Center?" I sighed. "There's no point in making plans for something we can't afford."

"There's no point in saving money without a solid plan ready."

The center was Aana Alasie's — Joseph's Aana's — idea. She was sure that one day Civilization would wedge its nose so far into our island that we'd forget ourselves, our stories, our songs, our own identity. We'd leave our own selves behind and spend our lives, our children's lives, and our grandchildren's lives, chasing the trappings of Civilization, and becoming impoverished in the process.

She raised Joseph on the idea, and since I was always with Joseph, I grew up on it too. We were going to build a Center that would preserve everything we were, so that we could always remember ourselves.

But there was so much of us to remember, the Center would need to be a big building, something that could weather wild storms and hard, freezing winters.

"People are already forgetting our myths," Joseph said. "The kids coming up through school care more about the future and Civilization than they do about our stories."

I wrinkled my nose. I hated it when he called them myths. They were more than that, and there was a time when Joseph knew it. But his words only supported his argument. Forgetting was creeping in on all of us, like a fog off the sea, hiding from our eyes the things that should be plainly remembered,

I pressed my lips together. "It's a gala. It's full of rich people from Civilization. Maybe they'll want to donate to our center."

"Sure. They'll donate all the plastic that they normally toss overboard."

"Maybe they'll donate money. Enough that we can have materials flown in."

"They'll donate your teeth to their pearl necklace collection before they do that."

I rolled my eyes. "We won't know unless we ask."

Joseph pulled open the door to the fishery with grand pomposity. "After you, Lady Elisapie. You won't want to be late for your big debut."

I rolled my eyes and swept past him. If it

were up to Joseph, we'd be subsistence fishing and migrating with the seasons like the qalupalik.

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At home, Dad and my sister Arnaaluk were watching a VHS. We had one of the only televisions and VCRs in town. Yes, I know what year it is. I already told you Civilization had forgotten us, right?

"That Russian came by," Arnaaluk said, without taking her dark eyes off the screen. "He left you a box."

"Where?"

"Kitchen. While you're there, bring me a bottle," Dad answered this time. We've got no shortage of bottles on the island, thanks to the cruise ships. They store Aana Sue's hooch well enough to make drinking in one's own home convenient. As convenient as drinking can be, anyway.

There was a huge white box in the kitchen. It sat like a beacon of pure light against the dingy yellow walls.

"Hooch!" yelled Dad.

I brought him his hooch.

An hour later, I was ready. As ready as I could be. The box contained a dress like something from a dream. The bodice was armor for a sea goddess — sheets of luminescent nacre — the skirt, layers

upon layers of pearly white cloud. There were pearls for my ears and wrists and neck and head — a headdress like a sun's halo — and shoes that were made by someone who had never seen Veniaminov. I pulled on my mukluks instead, the ones that used to belong to my Aama, the ones my Aana trimmed with fur and embroidered with red thread flowers. There's no way I could leave my house in the pearly white heels; they would sink into the earth and die the moment I stepped outside.

A knock on the door told me Dmitri had come. No one in town would knock before entering. I slipped past Dad and Arnaaluk and opened the door.

Dmitri was wearing a tuxedo and shoes that were dying the way those heels would have done. I wriggled my toes in my mukluks, happy for a secret covered in an ethereal white cloud of silk.

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I'd spent half my life on ships, but the cruise ship was as different from our fishing boats as the earth was from the moon. I forgot to care about Dmitri's hand on my waist as we walked on red carpet through pearl and gold gilded halls. People in every shade of skin and hair were here — people from the whole earth, I bet. They wore saris and ballgowns and robes and suits; absolutely none of them were like us. I could smell the earthy



human scent coming off of them, without the least hint of the sea.

A pale old man smiled at me and extended his hand. “Dmitri! Who is this lovely lady —”

“Elisapie.” Dmitri’s hand tightened on my waist.

“Elizabeth! Welcome —”

“Thank you.” I smiled back without correcting him, wiggling out of Dmitri’s grasp. “I’m from Veniaminov, and we’re hoping to raise money.”

“Money?”

“For a center. To hold our history —”

“Yes, yes, of course —” The man’s face split into a toothy grin. “We are here to help, of course. We are here for the island’s bounteous people.”

“So you’ll help us?”

“Every last one of you.”

“Thank you!” A giant smile spread across my face in spite of myself. “Please, tomorrow come to the island, and —”

“Of course, of course.” The man waved a hand. “We’ll have it all taken care of tomorrow.”

“Are you hungry?” Dmitri pulled me toward a buffet, towering with shrimp and crab and sushi; fruits and flowers I only see in the summer, fruits and flowers I have never seen at all. I stared, and Dmitri pressed a finger up on my chin, picking up the jaw that I dropped.

“Yes,” I could barely whisper. I thought of the winters we had gone hungry, of the winters we’d gotten down to nothing but caribou, every day, caribou until I wanted to vomit just thinking about eating it. Now, and here, there was everything I had ever wanted, everything I never knew I needed. I wanted to eat it, all of it, and never stop eating, ever.

We filled our plates with a rainbow of fish, and fruits, and flowers that Dmitri insisted were edible, that smelled better than anything I could have tasted. As he guided me over to a table to eat, a hard knuckle jabbed me in the back.

I turned. It took me a moment to recognize Arnaaluk. She was dressed to the teeth in black iridescent pearls and obsidian, silk blacker than night clinging to her hips and swirling around her legs. A veil covered her eyes, obscuring them.

“Don’t eat it.” She muttered.

“What?” I glanced over at Dmitri, who had been sidetracked into conversation by a pallid old woman, whose colors were painted garishly on her face.

Arnaaluk knuckled me side again. “It changes you.”

“How did you even get here? You didn’t tell me you were coming.”

“Dammit, Elisapie, listen to me. Don’t. Eat. It.”

“You can’t tell me what to do.” I felt my voice tightening to a childish, petulant whine, as it always did when I knew in my gut that my sister was right. I looked down at my plate. It was beautiful, and I was hungry. I wished I could punch her. When I looked back up, though, she was gone.

We sat at the table, but the lingering ache of both her knuckles and her words had curdled my appetite. Dmitri frowned. “Aren’t you hungry?”

I wiped my sweating palms across the napkin in my lap. “I’m just a bit nervous, is all. Hard to eat when you’re nervous.

Dmitri’s face melted into gentle understanding. “Of course, of course. Come, let me show you something. You’re not alone, here, you know.”

“Really?” He was going to take me to a table with Arnaaluk, I was sure of it. She’d confess that her warning was just a joke, to give me a hard time, and it would all be better. I would eat and eat and dream of this food next winter when there was nothing but caribou. I smiled

and followed him.

We didn’t go to Arnaaluk. Instead, we went up the stairs, onto a mezzanine, down a hall lined with heavy swathes of black velvet curtains.

“I’ve invited you here for a reason, you know,” he said, the warmth in his voice as thick as the velvet around us. “And to get to that reason, I have a very personal question to ask, if you’ll permit me.”

Heat rose to my face; I was suddenly overly aware of how exposed my chest and neck and arms were. “Depends on what you ask.”

“Are you like them?”

“Like who?”

“Like them.”

Dmitri pulled the cord on the wall. The velvet walls rose to expose glowing aquarium glass. Fish flitted about in the cold light, seaweed waved lazily, and through it swam people. But of course, they weren’t people in the same way we were. No, not people like us, but not qalupalik either.

Qalupalik’s eyes were flat black mirrors — shark eyes. These people had dark brown eyes like mine, or round blue marble eyes like Dmitri.

Qalupalik had black eel tails, thick as a

carboy and tapering out twenty feet to a serpentine point.

These people had the scaled, iridescent tails of rainbow trout or coho salmon, barely longer than legs.

Qalupalik's hands had black ragged claws, spears of baleen, twice as long as fingers.

These people had hands like mine, fleshy and small and agile.

Qalupalik stole small children and ate them.

Some of these people were small children.

My skin buzzed from the crown of my head to the pads of my feet in vibrating rivulets. I lifted a hand to the glass.

A girl my age drew close to the glass and pressed her hand to the glass under my hand, staring hard at me. Her black hair would have fallen to her knees, if she had knees. Her skin was as warm and brown as mine got every summer. If I didn't know everyone on my island, she could have been from here.

The glass between our hands grew cold, so cold it burned, but I couldn't take my eyes off hers. She pressed the glass harder with her hand, her eyes widening with the effort. The cold shot up my arm, stabbing at my shoulder, my heart, my brain. It screamed one thought that drowned out anything else.

*RUN.*

The black velvet curtain fell, heavy enough to push my hand down, and I stumbled backwards, the one thought, the overwhelming urge chanting with every beat of my heart.

*Run. Run. Run.*

Dmitri's smile barely registered with me, his words only emerging in bits and pieces through the imperative drumbeat.

*Run. Run. Run.*

"I knew it —"

*Run. Run. RUN.*

"The rest of your island too, I'll bet —"

*RUN. RUN. RUN.*

"Could smell it on you —"

*RUNRUNRUN*

I ran.

I'd have tripped and fallen in heels, but I was wearing my mukluks, formed in the hands of my Aana and my Aama. Dmitri's shiny black shoes were plastic and slow, their soles buried somewhere in Veniaminov's summer mud. The guests were overfed as autumn bears; I slapped their hands away as they tried to grab me.

I burst from the world of gold and red to the deck where the wind screamed in my ears. I dodged one grizzly-sized man with an earpiece, then another. Dmitri's hand closed around my wrist as I cleared the railing, but I broke away, leaving him holding nothing but a broken string of pearls.

I fell seaward, relief enveloping me as sharply as the frigid water. This was why we all lived together, our people, on this island; the other people, people who rode on cruise ships and built cell towers, would cut us open to see how our lungs could breathe water as well as air, how our bodies could flourish on kelp and krill and sheefish, how we could cut through currents like greylings in water cold enough to stop human hearts.

I reached the beach and ran into town, my dress sodden and half gone. Everyone was at Aana Sue's, trying the new batch of hooch when I hurtled in, raising all the eyebrows as a curious silence settled over them.

"The cruise ship," was all I could say.

"What about it?"

My lips trembled as I formed the words that shook me to the core. "They're going to take us away."

The room burst into laughter.

Not one believed me.

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As long as I could remember, I had always been a part of this town, and this town had been a part of me. When I was born, they had wrapped me in seaweed and held me in the stream. My Aana had died, my Aama had died, but it was okay, because I had Joseph's Aana, Aana Alasie. I had all the Aanas and all the Aamas in the town, and they had me. They braided my hair and taught me to sing. When Dad was too drunk or sad to be my Dad, there were other dads. There were grandfathers. There were aunties and uncles, cousins, and cousins and cousins.

My days were filled with fishing and crabbing, reading lessons and leather sewing. My nights were filled with throat singing and storytelling, falling asleep in front of a fire, lumped in a pile of children like we were newborn puppies.

I knew who I was because I knew who they were, and because they knew me. We were us, apart from Civilization, but never apart from each other.

Now, though, now — that was gone. And in its place, there was laughter. I stood before them all, burning as if a kerosene lamp had broken over my head, and they laughed at me.

"They're tourists."

“They’ll pay us too much for our hooch and beadwork and be on their way.”

“Have you been reading more Civilization horror stories?”

“We’d tear them all limb from limb before they could take any of us away.”

Aana Alasie narrowed her eyes as they raked my body. “What are you wearing, Elisapie?”

I shrank into myself, suddenly remembering my appearance. I was a glowing mass of tulle and nacre, standing before them like an overdressed polar bear. I had let someone from civilization dress me, and then appeared into Aana Sue’s bar claiming something would happen that had never happened before, a wild eyed prophetess dripping in pearls. All their eyes were on me now, and it burned. They looked at me in the same way that they had looked at Dmitri.

Larry squinched up his lower lip as he worked a lump of chaw against his teeth. “Does your Daddy know you went out to that ship?”

My mouth went dry. It took a second to find my breath, to find my voice. I shrugged.

“Did these people give you something to drink, honeybucket?”

I cringe at the old nickname. “No.”

“You coulda fooled me. It runs in your family, you know, to drink too much.”

A fire flared deep in my gut. “Shut up, old man. Don’t act like you’re not as bad as my Dad. Worse, even.”

Larry jerked up from the table. Aana Sue put a hand on his arm, but he shook it off. “You better get home,” he barked. “People respect their elders here.”

I turned and fled — more to protect him than me. Every muscle in my body was aching to fight, aching to throw itself into combat, and punching Old Larry would have only made more problems. And there were too many of them — all of them were Old Larry, staring at me, doubting me, mocking me. I had gained the costume of Civilization and lost the credibility of everyone else in the process.

I didn’t turn north towards my home. No, I couldn’t have Dad see me. They’d laugh at me too. I would lose my oneness with him, as I had lost it with everyone else. And Arnaaluk — she’d be waiting with her arms crossed and a lot of “I told you so,” smugness. Everything burned, everything hurt. I ran directly south, into the sea, lurching out of my clothes as I threw myself into the waves and kicked my body seaward. The qalupalik migration was coming, yes. There were other bloodhungry creatures in the water, yes. The sun was setting, the tide was rising, and a ship of predators sat directly

ahead of me, but none of that mattered. I needed the sea. I needed it with every inch of my skin, with every cell in my bones. I flew through the water, darkness below, starlight above, the vanity of pearls and tulle lost in my wake. I swam till the fire in my muscles was quenched, till my tears and sighs were indistinguishable from the salt water around me and the lapping of currents. I swam until I had dissolved into sea foam, as the story went, or at least until I had fallen asleep.

The sun on my face was high and bright and cold when it woke me. I had drifted into the hull of a fishing boat. Pushing off of it and rubbing a hand across my eyes, I saw that it was the SEDNA, Joseph's boat. I climbed up the nets hanging over the side, hauling myself aboard.

Joseph was asleep on a bench. I slipped into the pilothouse and wrapped myself in one of his emergency blankets before coming back out to lean over him where he lay, letting the cold droplets of water fall from my hair onto his face. He sputtered, slapping at his face, eyes snapping into focus.

"Elisapie," he breathed. "I came out here looking for you. I thought maybe you were drowned. And then I —" he looked around sheepishly — "I fell asleep."

I snorted. "You know I don't drown, Joseph."

He shook his head. "That's just what my

Aana says."

"You just don't have enough faith in your Aana."

He sat up, frowning. "Why are you naked?"

"I'm not naked," I snapped a corner of the emergency blanket at him, "I'm clothed in the finest robes your ship has to offer."

"You'll get hypothermia."

I opened my mouth to tell him that he should know I don't get hypothermia, but it would be a waste of breath. When it came to believing his Aana, Joseph would hold onto his skepticism even if the truth was dripping water straight onto his face. As much as he wanted to preserve our history, he discounted half of it as mythology--the half step to forgetting completely. He was sure Aana's stories were laced with fantasy, the product of too much traditional medicine on an aging mind. He wanted to remember our stories for sentimentality's sake, rather than history's. He didn't believe what the rest of us knew, but maybe, just maybe, that would be the thing that would save us. Perhaps that same cynicism would help him accept what no one else could.

"They're coming for us, Joseph."

"Who?"

"The cruise ship. They want us all.

They're going to eat us, I think."

Joseph frowned. "Eat us?"

"Every last one of us. They're hungry. They've got actual —" I struggled for the words. The girl I'd seen on the ship wasn't a qalupalik, and she wasn't a human. But she was like me and I was like her, only she was more of that part of me that could swim in a frozen sea.

I took a deep slow breath. If there was anyone who would believe me, it would be Joseph. "They've got actual mermaids."

It was as if a storm that had been waiting offshore our whole lives blew in. I could almost feel the barometric pressure drop with my words. I'd said the word we didn't say, I had talked about the thing we could barely acknowledge. I braced myself, waiting for Joseph's reply. His scorn. His skepticism.

Instead, Joseph turned and pulled open one of the storage benches, and began rummaging through it.

"What are you doing?" My heart began to hammer and panicked drumbeat on my ribs. Did he think I was crazy? Was he looking for a tranquilizer?

He turned around, chucking a pair of coveralls at me. "I've known you our whole lives, and I've never known you to be a liar, Elisapie Atoruk." Joseph took a shaky breath. "I'll follow you on a mission

to save some mermaids, but for crying out loud, you're not doing it naked."



Even before we reached the shore, everything felt wrong. Joseph felt it too — it was written across his face as clearly as the salt spray. We dropped anchor at the dock, where no one was out mending nets or chewing the fat.

No one was on the road into town, and no one was hanging out at Aana Sue's. A hard knot formed in my stomach as we walked through my empty house. I dug out some jeans, thick wool socks, and my favorite kuspuk — the one Arnaaluk made for me last winter. My igruuraak, hanging on the wall above my bed, caught my eye. They were a bit of normalcy a childhood toy, a weapon of my ancestors. I grabbed them and stuffed them into the pocket of my kuspuk.

The tight knot in my stomach bloomed into hot tears when we arrived at Joseph's house, starkly empty without Aana Alasie. Joseph's lips trembled and I caught sight of his igruuraak, gathering dust near the iron stove. I pressed the kuspuk into his hands for courage.

"Not her, not her," Joseph said, his fingers curling through the igruuraak's sinew strings. "Anyone but her."

"Everyone and her." Arnaaluk appeared in the doorway, chewing on something. A

foul, fishy smell rolled off of her.

“Where is everyone?” I asked, swallowing down my fear.

Arnaaluk shrugged. “Berry picking. Salmon camp. You know how people are.”

“We’re not talking about people, we’re talking about the whole village,” Joseph said, his voice reverberating off the emptiness of his house. “You’re here. You must know.”

Arnaaluk shook her head. “They’re better off away from here. Away from me. So are you.”

Something had changed about Arnaaluk, and it wasn’t just the smell. Her eyes were darker. The pupils had swallowed up her irises and some of her whites. She looked like she’d taken too much of Joseph’s Aana’s sleeping tea, but was forcing her body to stay awake. She grinned widely and set a finger to work between two of her teeth. Her fingernail was long and grayish, like a piece of baleen that had been left out in the sun too long. Her teeth, which had been blunted from working leather for mukluks, were elongated, sharper.

*Arnaaluk, what long nails you have*, I wanted to say, rewording the phrase from the storybook she’d read to me a thousand times. *What black eyes you have. What sharp teeth you have.*

Something had happened to her, and that something had everything to do with the disappearance of the town. My mouth felt dry.

“What are you eating?”

Arnaaluk shrugged, continuing to chew, continuing to work her long sharp nails in between her long, sharp teeth. “Food, I guess.”

“What food?”

“None of your business,” she pulled a paper bag from her pocket and stuck three fingers into it, drawing out a shiny gelatinous lump. Muktuk, maybe. It didn’t smell like muktuk, though. It didn’t smell like any fish I’d ever had. It smelled dangerous.

Arnaaluk slipped the lump into her mouth and resumed her rhythmic chewing, picking at her teeth. She stopped abruptly, looking, for a moment, deeply sad and conflicted. “You two had better leave this island, too, you know. It’s no good for you here anymore.”

Joseph shoved his fists into the front pocket of his kuspuk, something he always did when he was nervous as a kid. “This is our home. This is your home. Why isn’t it any good anymore?”

Arnaaluk slid another lump into her mouth and took a step towards us. “Because I’m hungry.”



“The freezer’s full of meat,” I pointed out.

Arnaaluk shook her head, and for a moment, she looked a little scared. “Not the kind of meat I want. Not the kind of meat I need.”

“What kind of meat do you need?”

Arnaaluk’s pupils grew bigger and darker, bleeding outward until they consumed all of the white. Her mouth split her face into a gaping, morbid grin, showing jagged, wicked teeth, and teeth behind those teeth.

She spread her black claws wide. “You.”



Swimming in freezing waters my whole life did not prepare me for the sensation of my blood literally running cold.

Arnaaluk advanced on us slowly, her round black eyes shining like sharks’ eyes, her lips trembling.

“I’m hungry, Elisapie. So very hungry.”

“You just ate whatever was in that bag.”

“It wasn’t enough. I need more. I need you.”

“Why?” Joseph burst out. “Why her?”

“She’s more mer than the rest of you combined. They let me have her since she proved so much trouble on the ship.”

“You’re mer too!” I shouted, the heat of my rage driving out the cold in my veins. “You can’t eat your own kind!”

Arnaaluk let out a high, mirthless laugh. “We do it every day, though. We lie and we cheat and we disbelieve and we forget. Aana Sue eats every last soul in this town with her hooch. You tried to tell them of the danger, and they ate you, too. Eating each other, it’s what we do.”

“We’re a tribe. We’re a village. We don’t do this,” I was babbling now, and the floor seemed to swell beneath me as if we were at sea.

Arnaaluk said nothing, but lunged for me. I leapt aside and bolted for the door. It was locked. My hands scrabbled for the lock, but I was shaking too hard to unlatch it. Claws closed over my shoulders and jerked me backwards, into Arnaaluk.

“You are meat, and I hunger.” Her breath roiled over me in fetid waves that made my hair stand on end.

“You are my sister,” I gasped. “My sister.”

A clanging thud resounded near my left ear and the claws fell away. Joseph stood over Arnaaluk holding a cast iron pan.

I scrambled to my feet, breathing hard. “You hurt her. You could have killed her.”

“She was going to kill you.”

“She hadn’t killed me, though, had she?”

I knelt by Arnaaluk’s side, cradling the goose egg forming on her head.

“Something’s wrong with her. The same thing that is wrong with those people on the cruise ship.”

Joseph stared at me. “You don’t have a survival bone in your body, do you?”

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be alive right now. Help me get her to the couch.”

We hauled her onto Joseph’s Aana’s threadbare chintz couch. Joseph wanted to zip tie her hands, but I refused to let him. If she came to, she would need a way to feed herself, to care for herself if no one else had returned. This island, with no one on it, would be prison enough.



Joseph and I hurried out of his Aana Alasie’s house and down to the beach. The cruise ship sat just offshore, like a white whalish death demon.

“They’re all in there, Joseph. I know it.”

“Why haven’t they left yet?”

I paced the shore, watching the cruise ship as if it would tell us the answer. I thought of Dmitri, how he had led me through a momentary madness of formality and courtship, a compressed

game of hunt and chase, teasing and playing and luring me into his trap. The horrible thought dawned on me.

“They’re waiting for us. They want us to come to them.”

The sharp sound of leather slapping on leather made us jump. Dmitri stood a few yards off, slowly clapping his gloved hands. “Well done, Elisapie. Well done.” He smiled approvingly, as if congratulating a child who had caught her first fish.

“What makes you think we’ll go?”

“You love them. You want to free them, probably. But I am here to disabuse you of that notion. You can’t pull off any sort of rescue mission, let alone the rescue of hundreds of people. But you’ll come willingly anyway.”

I glanced out at the water, calm and clean and inviting. I could outswim this monster who smelled of blood and earth, but had nothing of the sea in his blood.

“Why would I do that?”

“To prevent suffering.”

Joseph tightened his grip on my hand. I cast about for a stick, a stone, anything with which to arm myself, but there was nothing to hand. It was just Joseph, me, and the sea.

“As you may have noticed, Arnaaluk was also a guest at our soiree last night,” Dmitri went on, “and she indulged in our most decadent of offerings. The flesh of mermaids is a delicacy beyond measure. The pleasure of consuming it cannot be understated.”

I thought of the conflicted pain in that moment before Arnaaluk was overtaken by her lust. I’d seen that look before, in my father’s eyes.

“It’s addictive.”

Dmitri shrugged. “It’s such a reductive word for such an all-consuming experience.” He smiled in a way that made me want to punch him in the mouth. Repeatedly. “You yourself nearly came to know the same euphoria. You would have if you hadn’t balked at our pets.”

“They’re not pets,” I snapped.

“Your people are watered down,” Dmitri said, ignoring my outburst. “They have mixed and commingled with humans of every stripe. They’re not mermish enough, and yet they are what we have. We need them complicit and docile, and for that, we need you. You must reassure them that we mean them no harm, that we are here to save them. If they are calm for the slaughter, they will suffer less. They will be more mermish, and less human. Your job is to calm them, Elisapie. If you sing to them, they’ll listen to you, especially

if their human brains are raging and panicking.”

My mouth flooded with the taste of copper. I had bitten my tongue.

Dmitri’s nostrils flared. “Don’t tease me like that. Your time will come. Save your blood for now.”

There are times when the answer to the problem is staring you in the face, and as soon as you see it, you feel like a fool for not having seen it before. My hand at the side felt the sealskin balls in my pocket coat. My igruuraak.

I slipped my hand into my pocket and drew it out, sliding my fingers along the braided sinew until I caught hold of the black baleen handle. I closed my hand over the little black tab of whale tooth and thought of how much I had dreamed of our town hosting the Eskimo-Indian Olympics in our center, of a whole team of us spinning igruuraak before a captivated audience. They would see us and know in their hearts who we were. We would be remembered. We would carry on.

I began to spin mine. Joseph, seeing what I had done, got his out and began to spin his, too.

Dmitri looked confused. “What are those?”

I shrugged, taking a small step towards him. “A simple child’s toy.”

“We’ve been playing with these since we were kids,” Joseph added.

“They calm us, you know.” I smiled. I had long since mastered the trick of getting the two balls spinning in opposite directions, but doing so now made me feel powerful. “They calm our raging, panicking human brains, as you would say. They help me think clearly.”

I knew in the way Joseph hitched his breath that now was the time. We both dove at Dmitri, our igruuraak spinning. Mine spun around his wrists, binding them, while Joseph’s spun around his ankles. I dropped a knee onto Dmitri’s chest, pulling his bindings up tight as if he were a felled caribou.

“Our ancestors used them to hunt,” I remarked. “It’s funny, what can stay with you through generations of — what would you call it? — commingling.”

We dragged him back to Joseph’s Aana’s house and left him tied to her stoop, an offering for Arnaaluk. She would probably be hungrier than she already was when she woke up.

We walked back down to the docks, the spectre of the ship looming up before us.

“How are we going to get them back?” Joseph asked the question that had been grinding on my brain like a whetstone on an ulu.

I thought of Dmitri, trussed up like a caribou, awaiting Arnaaluk. I thought of Arnaaluk, hungry and dark eyed as a qalupalik. “We’ve got to hunt the hunters.” A horrible thought occurred to me. “The qalupalik migration should be passing us soon.”

Joseph shuddered. I knew he was thinking of the drawings, the stories, the warnings we’d spent our lives receiving from the elders. Arnaaluk was so like them, his skepticism had evaporated. “They’d just as soon eat us.”

“They’ll eat the slowest swimmers in the water.”

“It’s suicide.”

“It’s all we got. They’ve got money, and a ship, and all sorts of shiny things. They’ve probably got twice as many guns as us. What they don’t have is our swimming ability or our chum.”

Joseph shook his head, wide eyed. “Chumming. Chumming during the qalupalik migration.”

It broke so many rules, rules we kept, not only from obedience, but from a bone deep survival instinct. Predators lived in the water, and we’d be fools to deliberately lure them. But what else was there for it? We had guns for bears, but bears were solitary creatures. You didn’t encounter them hundreds at a time. Bears didn’t think like qalupalik did. They

didn't hunt like qalupalik did.

I turned towards the fishery. "We don't have the firepower to take them on. But we do have chum. So much chum."

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The sun was still high and bright when we were loading the last of the chumbuckets onto Joseph's fishing boat, but I was bone tired. I was late-evening tired.

A hand closed around my wrist, jostling me out of my fatigue. The pale hand had deep red grooves along the arms and wrists, grooves where the braided sinew had bitten into his flesh. I looked up into the haggard, desperate blue eyes of Dmitri.

"You don't give up, do you?" My voice was calm, but my heart hammered a thousand beats a minute.

"I don't know what you think you're doing," he hissed, "but you'll never make it. That whelp will die the moment he sets foot aboard the ship, and you'll not be that far behind."

I glanced over my shoulder. Joseph was untying the boat from the dock and hadn't noticed Dmitri yet. I could have screamed for him, but my tongue felt swollen in my mouth.

"No one can get you out of this alive," Dmitri pressed. "No one but me."

I stared at him, torn between fear and utter, appalled disbelief. He, who had stolen my whole village, he, who had tried to get us to comply with the annihilation of my people, he was proposing to be my savior? My mind could not comprehend this level of gall.

"Elisapie," Joseph said. "Hold very still."

I didn't dare look beyond Dmitri, but I could see her in the periphery, looming in the fog. She had awoken, and she was still hungry.

Dmitri's hand tightened over my wrist, ignoring Joseph. "I wasn't kidding when I said I liked you. You know that, right? I have my own supply, I don't have to eat you. There's a rehabilitation facility for people like us in Canada, I think. We can get there, I can get better. You don't have to stay on this miserable island, you can see the world with me. There's so much out there, you know."

Bile rose in my throat. Behind him, in the mist, something was moving. It was shaped like Arnaaluk, but bigger.

"Dmitri," I said quietly, meeting his eyes. "Dmitri." I sang his name this time, holding his gaze as tightly as he held my wrist. Holding his gaze so tightly he didn't see my hand drop to the worktable behind me. "How could I trust you, when you've taken my whole island? How can I trust someone who keeps our kind

trapped inside glass aquariums? That's not where we belong."

Why was he asking this now? I stared at him and there, in his desperation, lay the answer: he thought we stood a chance. I grasped this thought with fierce hope as my hand closed over the filet knife behind me. I gripped the handle and whipped it into the top of the hand gripping mine. He screamed, and the crimson blood that flowed from him darkened to black sludge as it hit the cold air.

"We belong in the sea," I said as Joseph started the engine.

Arnaaluk had reached him now, and as ravenous as she was, she didn't eat him. Her dark claws raked him open. Upon finding all his blood to be rancid, she let him drop to the ground, her eyes rising to meet mine as we pulled out to sea.

Her eyes were still the fathomless black they had been before, but they had shifted. The sadness in them now was unmistakable.

She let out a long, slow wail that turned to wind. That wind blew so hard it pushed the water, thrusting us out to sea faster than our motor could carry us. I watched her, my heart echoing the sad cry until the fog shrouded her from our sight.

I thought of her namesake. Arnaaluk, the woman under the sea. The giantess. Of course she could move the currents.

Joseph didn't believe in the Old Gods. Most people didn't believe in the Old Gods. But I did now.

I turned to look over buckets and buckets of chum that weighed down Joseph's little vessel. I thought of the qalupalik, how the Aanas told us that they could smell blood in the water from a hundred miles away and could close that distance in a matter of minutes. How the smell drove them into a bloodthirsty frenzy that knew no limits. How they could strip a body to the bones in the time it took to open your mouth to scream.

I picked up the first bucket of chum and tipped it over the back of the boat, watching as the blood and oil and flesh mixed into the churning wake of our path.

"Here's to preserving our people," I said.

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Like a venomous black cloud, they appeared, billowing towards us with deadly speed.

I'd grown up on stories of the qalupalik my whole life. They were the kidnappers of the sea, snatching small children and sometimes even grown people from the ice when they wandered too close to the water, dragging them down to the ocean floor, to feed off their energy, devour their flesh, or raise them as other qalupalik. The stories were always different, depending on who told them, but the

point was the same: if you were caught by the qalupalik, you would lose your life. You could even lose your soul.

That is what we knew, Joseph and I, and still we poured bucket after bucket of chum into the sea, until the dark cloud of qalupalik swimming towards us stretched from one end of the sea to the other, as far back as the eye could see. I had never imagined there would be so many. I thought about all the stories of violence that just one rogue creature could inflict on a town, and here there were thousands of them.

“Almost there,” Joseph said quietly. He was feeling this same trepidation. I could see it in the stiffness of his back whenever I dared glance away from the army behind us. The sight of those dark figures in the water, drawing ever closer, filled me with a primal fear I could scarcely put words to. Visions of them launching themselves onto the deck of our ship like skeletal, humanoid demons, scrabbling towards us with their deathly white arms and their serpentine black tails, sent a shiver down my spine.

“They’ll tear your boat to shreds,” I said. It wasn’t a fear borne of my anxiety; it was a statement of fact. We were wildly outnumbered. “I’m sorry, Joseph.”

Joseph shook his head. “There’s no need for you to apologize. You didn’t bring the cruise ship here. Sometimes sacrifices need to be made.”

“I’d rather you not be part of that sacrifice, though.” This was also a factual thing; if we didn’t reach the cruise ship on time, we, too, would be torn to shreds. As little as I liked the idea of boarding a ship full of cannibals, I liked our chances of survival there much more than our chances out here, on the water, facing down a bloodthirsty qalupalik horde.

Joseph tightened his jaw and his grip on the tiller.

A bony, pale hand with claws the length of daggers, slapped wetly onto the back of the boat. I grabbed Joseph’s rifle and brought the butt of it down onto those fingers, as hard as I could. A ghoulish screech was abruptly muffled as the qalupalik disappeared back under the water. I glanced over my shoulder; we were less than half a mile out from the ship. Joseph was guiding his boat towards a ladder a pair of sailors had dropped over the side. They were expecting us. They had assumed that Dmitri’s invitation had worked.

Four hands with grappling hook-sized claws appeared this time. I pounded off three of them before another six appeared. I shuffled along the back rail, jabbing the gun against demonic white faces and sickly pale hands. If it weren’t for the claws, they’d be the hands of dead people, drowned in a frozen sea. Their screams grew increasingly outraged, the hands, and now heads, and now torsos appearing

over the back railing of the ship became too many. I considered turning the gun around and pulling the trigger, but the kickback was more than I could handle, and I was a notoriously bad shot. I'd just as likely shoot my own foot as stop one of these from advancing.

I fell back as they made it over the rail, flopping onto the deck with all the grace of landed fish, using their black tails to leverage themselves forward, pale arms reaching for me, gaping mouths screeching and wordless.

"Retreat!" I shouted to Joseph by way of warning, pulling him from the tiller.

Shaken from his task, he stared, wide eyed, at the creatures covering the deck, clawing over one another towards us. Our only advantage was that we were land creatures on the deck of a ship. Strong swimmers though we were, we would not stand a chance against them in the water.

The momentum of the fishing boat had us coasting alongside the cruise ship, drawing closer to the ladder. We ran to the fore. It was too far to jump, still. The qalupalik drew nearer, drawing their lips back from their teeth, their faces contorted with a primal, predatory ravening. They were slow on land, but the moment one claw caught hold of us, it would be over.

We were ten feet away from the ladder. Joseph grabbed a long net and held the

handle towards them. Ready to prod them off. I swallowed my fear and turned the business end of the rifle towards them, too.

Eight feet from the ladder. The nearest qalupalik grabbed the net handle from Joseph, and even as he tried to jab them with it, the creature leveraged its grip on the handle to pull himself towards us even faster. My hands were shaking as I pulled the trigger, but the gun didn't discharge. It was too wet. Joseph let go of the net and the creature fell backwards.

We had nothing with which to defend ourselves now. Six feet from the ladder. Five.

It was probably too far to jump, but we had no choice.

We jumped.

Perhaps it was Sedna, the sea goddess, who chose to save us. Perhaps she loved us. Or perhaps she hated the qalupalik, or the cannibals. Whatever it was, we caught the ladder and scrambled up it. The qalupalik poured over the whole of Joseph's fishing boat, like a breathing black and white wave of death, weighing it down, slowing its progress towards the ladder. By the time we were pulling ourselves onto the deck, a dozen qalupalik were pulling themselves up the ladder, their tails undulating and thrashing in the wind.



A ruddy faced man wearing a captain's uniform strode towards me, hand extended. "We meet again, Elizabeth. I'm so glad to have your cooperation today. Your friends and family are...overly agitated."

I stared at him, breathing hard. Did they not see what was coming up after us on the ladder? Did they not see my own "agitation"? I struggled to catch my breath, casting about the deck for something, anything, I could effectively use against the hoard that was coming up the side.

"Captain!" someone called. "We've got company!"

Shouts of alarm and calls to arms echoed across the deck as staff scrambled to find things to ward off the qalupalik. Joseph's eyes locked on mine and we both understood: we were forgotten for the moment, but we didn't have much time.

I led him into the ballroom, up the stairs to the place where that mermaid had been. I could hear the cries of dozens--hundreds--how many had they taken captive on this ship?

I ripped away the curtain Dmitri had lifted only the night before. The aquarium was packed like a fish farm — our whole town, and full bodied merfolk besides. A large padlock bolted the door that presumably allowed access to the aquarium. I grabbed a fire extinguisher from the wall and began slamming it against the glass as all

their eyes turned on me.

"Wait!" Joseph shouted over the banging. "Shouldn't we just break the lock?"

I handed the extinguisher to Joseph. He knocked the lock off and we ran inside, climbing the stairs to the top of the aquarium. The water's surface was ten feet below the top of the glass, but rope ladders hung on the walls. We dropped them into the water and our people climbed them as quickly as their waterlogged bodies would carry them. Aana Alasie came first, and she fell into his arms, shaking with exhaustion. Joseph's shoulders shook with relief, relief and anger.

"I'm going to kill them. I'm going to kill them all," he growled. "How could they have taken you?"

His Aana shook her head. "We can have our revenge, or save our people," she said. Her voice's silky low alto had somehow become silkier. Was it something in the water, perhaps, or having shared the space with all the merfolk? I didn't have time to answer this — children and elders needed help getting up the ladder quickly. We weren't leaving anyone behind.

Even as I thought this, I looked back down into the water. The mermaids couldn't climb the ladder. Even if they could, there were stairs to descend, a ballroom to cross, and a deckful of cannibal humans to fight through, only to

jump into an ocean filled with qualupalik. It was obvious, bitterly obvious why they had put the aquarium up here on this upper level of the ship; down low, perhaps, we might have found a window to break, or perhaps we could have found a way to ram through the hull. But up here--it was like being stuck in the middle of the desert.

They had swum to the surface and stared at us mournfully. The mermaid I'd connected with last night reached out her hand to me and I took it. As her hand wrapped around her wrist, I was immediately filled with unfathomable pain and longing. The water was thick with something that gummed up their voices and drowned the sharpest edges of their pain, but the pain still persisted, without end. She was a mother, and her children waited hundreds of miles south of here, if they still lived. They were all of them mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers. They deserved freedom as much as us.

I turned to our Joseph. "You'll lead them to the north end of the ship — if we're lucky the qalupalik will be so distracted with the cannibals that you'll be able to jump overboard and swim home."

Joseph shook his head. "I'm not leaving without you."

"And I'm not leaving without them. We don't have time for this." As if on cue, the sounds of qalupalik screeching and

humans shouting echoed through the dining room.

"She's right, Joseph," said his Aana. "Trust her. She'll find a way." The old woman smiled at me in a way that warmed me through to my toes. "Let's go."

Joseph opened his mouth to protest, looked at me and his Aana, and then closed it again. He squeezed my hand one more time. "Come back to us."

"I will." I looked down to the mermaid, still clasping my hand in the water. "I'm getting you out of here. I promise."

She nodded, but narrowed her eyes fiercely. It was an impossible promise to make, she knew it.

Letting go of her hand, I walked down the stairs, meaning to pick up the fire hydrant and begin banging on the aquarium glass again. But what would that do? Create a lot of broken glass over which the merfolk would slide, shredding their skin and drawing qualupalik. I punched my fist to the wall in frustration, and a metallic echo sounded. I punched it again, curious this time.

Nothing lay between us and the outside but corrugated tin. I took the fire hydrant and swung it, as hard as I could, into the wall, creating a deep dent. Ten more swings and I had an opening large enough for a mer. It was a hundred foot drop, but it didn't have to be. Not if the ship was

upside down.

Not if the ship was upside down.

I remembered the stories about the Elders, how they sang. What they did to the sea, that caused it to eject the Japanese Submarine from the water like a ball cut loose from a spinning igruuraak. That was why the submarine was half swallowed in a hillock, the skeleton of its operator still coming apart inside. The Elders did that. They say they did that, and if they did that then, surely they could flip this boat, and free these merfolk.

Outside, the clamor had quieted. I pressed a hand to the glass, and the mermaid pressed her hand to the other side. "I'm getting help," I said. She tilted her head, her expression impassive. I hope she understood.

The ballroom was hauntingly empty. There was blood on the floor, both red and black.

The qalupalik were gone, and their absence left a heavy silence. I hoped it was only cannibals who had sated them.

There was no one on the deck either, though the wreckage and carnage was everywhere. Bones littered the surface of the water, and again, that terrible dread that some of them might belong to an Aana or Aama clutched at me. I needed to find my people, and to find them all alive. I dove into the water and swam

towards the shore, so singularly focused on where I was going that I didn't see the four rogue qalupalik until they were upon me, their dark claws scabbling to find purchase in my legs.

I jerked free, causing their claws to tear through me. The heat of my blood leaving my body filled me with dread. The red cloud bloomed out, washing over the four monsters at point blank distance. A communal shriek tore through my mind as their bloodlust flared and they swarmed me, all claws and teeth. I landed punches, dropped elbows into their luminous black eyes, but it would only be a matter of seconds until it wouldn't matter anymore. In less than a minute, my body would be stripped of its flesh and I would be gone, all gone.

Two strong hands reached in and pulled me out. Screams of rage filled my head, but whoever — whatever grabbed me would not be deterred by the qalupalik's discontent. They pulled me away and swam with astonishing speed towards the island.

As we moved away from water fogged with blood and fear, I saw the black claws encircling me, the long black tail propelling us through the water. It was just another qalupalik, taking me for itself. I thrashed and fought and bit and scratched and twisted, until I caught a glimpse of the face.

The qalupalik was Arnaaluk.

Arnaaluk, the woman from the sea.

Arnaaluk, the giantess.

Arnaaluk, my sister.

We had reached the shallows. Arnaaluk set me on the rocky seafloor and let go. There was a fullness to her belly — she was sated on the blood of one kind or another — and she stared at me mournfully for a long minute before turning and disappearing into the waves.

I stood up, breaking the surface of the water. A cold wind hit me, sending a shiver through my body. My sister was a qalupalik now. It was, I supposed, what happens when our own kind eat merflesh. We, too, change. We, too, become addicted, ravenous, eternally hungry. But under the hunger, we, too, are still us. And in the end, it was the qalupalik who saved us, wasn't it?

I turned landward to see half the town huddled in blankets at the shore. They had come back to wait for me, to watch for me. I ran to join them.

Dad wrapped me in a blanket. "We thought we'd lost you."

It was as close as Dad would ever get to saying I love you, and for me, it was enough. He cared.

I leaned into him and he held me. I felt held by everyone. They knew now I had

been telling the truth.

"Where is Arnaaluk?" he asked.

"She's gone to sea," I said. "She'll be all right."

Dad held me tighter, his hot tears falling onto my ear.

I looked to Joseph's Aana. "Did you really force the sea to spit that submarine into a hill?"

Joseph's Aana smiled. "As surely as the sun rises and sets."

"If you could do that then, could you capsize a cruise ship now?"

Joseph's Aana shook her head. "Not alone. We Elders were young when we did that. Most of the people who helped us are dead now."

Joseph bit his lip. "If we helped you, then?"

Aana smiled. "If you helped us, we could do anything."

Joseph took her left hand, I took her right, Dad took my right hand, and soon the entire village was connected.

Aana began to sing, a long, low, rhythmic song. Within the first few notes, all the Elders were singing it with perfect fluency. A look of startled recognition came over

Dad's face, and he began to sing it, too, along with all the people his age. In another minute, I knew the song, and so did Joseph.

The waves of the sea began to rock and pulse, cradling the cruise ship in a fluid half pipe, swinging from side to side, tilting the ship further and further. We sang faster, and louder. Joseph's Aana's grip tightened on my hand, and so did Dad's. Something ran through us, a thrill riding on the momentum of each tossing rush of water that threw the cruise ship from side to side.

Finally, we hit the note — the peak of the song, the perfect singular moment when everything we'd been working towards came together. The cruise ship flipped, going top down into the water like a duck diving after a morsel to eat.

We had to do more, though. The boat was heavily weighted on the bottom. I followed Joseph's Aana's lead as the notes became slower, heavier, deeper and deeper, pressing down on the vessel, keeping it upside down, pressing towards the seafloor.

The merfolk knew what to do. Within minutes, their heads appeared above the surface of the water, leaping and diving in exhilaration at their freedom.

We stopped singing, but the ship didn't stop moving. It continued to rock and sway. Merfolk swarmed it the way

qalupalik swarmed a carcass, stripping it of metal and glass with their bare hands. Had they been that strong in the aquarium, no mortal ship could have bound them. It was the seawater, the same thing that gave me strength.

They pulled the ship apart and pushed the pieces landward. Our people waded out into the water to receive them as I stared on in disbelief.

Joseph turned to me, grinning.

"You do know what this means, right?"

I nodded. "The cruise ship people are providing us with our cultural center, after all."



# Submissions Report

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by Julia Rios

*Submissions Statistics for our first open period (submissions received in December of 2020 and January of 2021)*

## What we received for consideration:

Total submissions (via our form as well as via email): **Roughly 1,000**

We allowed simultaneous submissions and asked that submitters withdraw if they placed their work elsewhere.

Total withdrawals: **3**

## What we accepted:

14 Each to Each participants  
6 original comics  
2 reprint comics  
21 original poems  
7 reprint poems  
6 original Essays  
1 reprint Essay  
52 pieces of art from 37 artists  
16 original stories  
10 reprint stories

**Total acceptances: 145**

## We believe we accepted work from:

At least **38** BIPOC creators

At least **9** Black creators

At least **6** indigenous creators

At least **10** latinx/Hispanic/chicanx creators

At least **12** East Asian/South Asian/Pacific Islander creators

At least **31** creators residing outside the USA

At least **19** queer creators

At least **8** non-binary and/or trans creators

At least **5** disabled creators

At least **5** neurodiverse creators

At least **80** creators who had not worked with any of our team before.

These numbers do not reflect exact totals because we did not demand anyone share identity with us, and we do not want to presume for any creator who has not publicly mentioned an aspect of their identity. We suspect, at the very least, the numbers of queer, disabled, and neurodiverse creators are actually higher than we've reported.

### **Gender of Submitters:**

We did not ask people for gender, but did ask for pronouns, so that is what we will examine here.

Submitters who chose exclusively male pronouns (he/him/his): **240**

Submitters who chose exclusively female pronouns (she/her/hers): **553**

Total submitters with explicitly binary gender pronoun preferences: **793**

Submitters who stated that any pronouns were fine: **9**

Submitters who chose They/Them/Theirs exclusively: **38**

Submitters who chose they/them in addition to male/female pronouns: **44**

Submitters who chose specific non-binary pronouns other than they/them (ze/zir, xe/xir, e/er, etc.): **7**

Total submitters with explicitly non-binary pronoun preferences: **98**

Submitters who explicitly asked not to use any pronouns: **4**

Submitters who listed their name instead of pronouns: **21**

Submitters who entered other information, most likely by mistake (e.g., "I got an email" and "duotrope"): **7**

Total submitters who did not list pronouns: **32**

Submitters who tried to be funny or cute instead of or in addition to listing pronouns (e.g., "Hey you!" or "A friend, hopefully"): **5**

These numbers don't quite add up to our total submissions, but we think they give an overall sense of the rough proportions of submitters' pronoun types, which may or may not correlate with their gender identities.



## **Underrepresented Voices:**

We allowed submitters who submitted through our form to opt in on identity markers. To collect this optional info, we had a series of checkboxes followed by an open ended response box. The following is submitters opted choose identities from our pre-selected check boxes:

**BIPOC: 55**

**Black: 34**

**Indigenous: 18**

**Latinx/Hispanic/Chicanx: 47**

**East Asian: 22**

**South Asian: 40**

**SEA/Pacific Islander: 19**

**Caribbean: 6**

**Disabled: 111**

**Neurodiverse: 166**

**From a country where English is not the primary language/non-native English speaker: 105**

**From a country outside the USA: 223**

**Muslim: 2**

**Jewish: 62**

**Hindu: 18**

**Other non-Christian faith: 110**

**Queer: 195**

**Non-binary: 94**

**Trans: 30**

**Intersex: 1**

**Two Spirit: 3**

**Gay: 17**

**Lesbian : 21**

**Bi or Pan: 181**

**Ace: 60**

**Aro: 18**

## **What we learned from our open ended responses:**

A handful of submitters felt that atheism should have been included on the list. We didn't include this since we felt that atheists and non-religious people are generally not underrepresented in US publishing. At least one person seemed to feel that our faith opt-in check boxes meant that if they didn't choose one, they were going to be counted as Christian. This was definitely not how we read that situation, though clearly no system of identity cataloguing is perfect.

A handful of people wanted to tell us about their unlisted non-Christian faiths. We appreciated that and note that the ones we chose to list were what we expected were the largest non-Christian faiths. The two others that came up in the response box most often were paganism/wicca and Buddhism. Other faiths were listed only once or twice.

A few submitters told us their ages and thought perhaps older people should have had a check box. We honestly don't know if older people are underrepresented in US publishing.

A handful of people told us more about their specific types of disability or neurodiversity, and a few more let us know that they were disabled or neurodiverse but weren't sure if their disabilities and/or types of neurodiversity counted. As far as we are concerned, all



of them counted.

A few people shared that they were non-monogamous or polyamorous.

A few people shared that they were fat.

A handful of people shared that they were mixed race and suggested that we should have had a checkbox for that. We definitely see how being mixed race does present specific identity experiences (our staff includes mixed race people, so we understand this from personal experience), and though we had assumed BIPOC and the other race checkboxes would include mixed race submitters, we do think this is a good point.

Several people shared details of their geographical locations, ethnicities, and primary languages. We found all of this interesting, though we don't see a concise way to share it in a breakdown like this.

A handful of people wanted us to know that although they didn't ID as any of the things we had listed, they did think of themselves as allies.

Several people listed specific identities that weren't on the list (female firefighter, recovering addict, butch, feminist, and demisexual were a few of those).

And, finally, a couple of people used the box to scold us for collecting information, or tell us that a work should stand on its own regardless of the creator's identity. This was particularly interesting to us

since our aim in collecting this data was to get an overall sense of the submission pool, and not to police creators on their right to tell specific types of stories. Though we did certainly appreciate it when creators chose to share that their work was in some way related to their identity, we did not ever discount a work solely because a creator didn't check an opt-in identity check box.

### **How We Ran the First Round:**

We collected submissions via a Google form and used Google sheets to keep track of them. This seemed like a good idea at the start, but it quickly became apparent that we were out of our depth. Several submitters had trouble with the form, so we had a pile of email submissions that came to two different email addresses, and the spreadsheet proved difficult to navigate because of the sheer amount of information it contained. We also collected submission files in Drive, which, if someone looked at a file independently of the form response, it could be difficult to see whose submission it was.

To add to the confusion, we had multiple readers trying to comment on the same spreadsheet using the same login. This was, again, not ideal, and very much our mistake.

I (Julia) ended up sending every response email personally, one at a time, which was also much more labor intensive than it could have been.

We also made the mistake of treating art submissions the same way we treated fiction submissions. We realized that there's a very good reason art submissions are often open ended (we will keep them on file and only respond if we find a good match) rather than finite (we will reply yes or no within a specific time frame).

In the end, it took us 4 months to reply to every submission. We think we got them all, but it's possible we missed a few. This is not how we wished things had gone.

### **What We're Changing for Our Second Open Submission Period:**

For our second round, we're using Moksha, a paid submissions database platform. We are hopeful that this will streamline the process.

For art, we're dropping the practice of sending holds or rejections in favor of only sending acceptances for art when we discover it fits a specific issue.

We expect to accept a much smaller number of submissions from round two since we filled most of our year with submissions from round one. This will mean more agonizing decisions, and more instances of rejecting pieces we really like, but that is the way of publishing.

Our form letters say that we are honored creators chose to share their works with us, and that is true every time.

### **What We've Published So Far:**

Comics: 4

Commissioned Cover Art: 2

Essays: 2

Each to Each Collaborations: 6

Illustrations: 19

Interviews: 2

Novelette: 1

Poems: 12

Short Stories: 9



Illustration by Che Gilson



# Our Contributors

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**AJ Hartson** (they/them/theirs) is a queer kanaka maoli writer currently based out of Minnesota. They grew up on a steady diet of fanfic, horror, fantasy, and science fiction, and they have a soft spot for stories that push us to collectively imagine what a different world could look like.

**B. Sharise Moore** is a New Jersey native and graduate of Rutgers University. Moore's poems and short stories have either appeared in or are forthcoming from several anthologies and journals such as Chosen Realities: Summer 2020, These Bewitching Bonds, and Fantasy Magazine.

At present, she is an educator, the host of Moore Books with B. Sharise on YouTube, and the poetry editor at Fiyah Magazine of Black Speculative Fiction. Her debut YA magical realism novel, Dr. Marvellus Djinn's Odd Scholars is scheduled for release this year. She lives in Baltimore, MD with her husband and precocious toddler.

**Caitlin Cheowanich** is a humble doodler, moonlight illustrator, and California Selkie of the sea lion variety. She loves to draw, hike, dream, yoga, and go to the ocean. Her style is described to her as whimsical. She thanks her friends for believing in her art and encouraging her to submit.

**Che Gilson** is the author of three small press novels: The Light Prince, Tea Times Three, and Carmine Rojas: Dog Fight. She's an active member of the SCBWI and reviews manga for Otaku USA magazine. More of her art can be seen on her Ko-fi <https://ko-fi.com/chegilson> where she posts watercolors, acrylics, and plenty of Pokemon fan art. She replaced her Facebook with a weekly newsletter which features more art and doll photography <https://chegilson.substack.com>

Born and raised in California, **Chlo'e Camonayan** is an artist building her name in the creative community. Her work includes interior and exterior art for magazines and novels. Aside from being a published artist, she has created logos, graphic animations, and has had her paintings featured in the Chocolate and Art Show. Creating her own unique style, she is constantly learning new ways to better her work. She currently resides in Sioux Falls, SD with her 4 animals; Crescent B. Chama the corgi, Cookie Snookums the chihuahua, Gizmo, the bunny, and her ninja turtle named Squirtle. Check her out at [www.chloecamayan.com](http://www.chloecamayan.com).

# Our Contributors

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**Gee Pascal** is a frustrated writer and bookworm at heart. If she's not reading nor writing, you can find her singing her heart out acting like a Broadway musical star. She aspires to someday publish a book and travel the world volunteering for a greater cause.

**Grace Vibbert** is an artist/illustrator with eclectic interests ranging from archery and fencing to making her own paint and spinning flax on a drop spindle. By day she is a data analytics professional in Euclid, OH.

**Gwynne Garfinkle** lives in Los Angeles. Her collection of short fiction and poetry, *People Change*, was published in 2018 by Aqueduct Press. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Escape Pod*, *Strange Horizons*, *Uncanny*, *Apex*, *GigaNotoSaurus*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, and *Climbing Lightly Through Forests*. Her debut novel, *Can't Find My Way Home*, is forthcoming in November 2021 from Aqueduct Press.

**Ivor Healy** is a 61-year-old accountant and cartoonist. His cartoons have been published in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Private Eye*, and *The Oldie* to name a few. He's an Irish citizen and is married with 4 kids.

**Jelena Dunato** is an art historian, curator, speculative fiction writer and lover of all things ancient. She grew up in Croatia on a steady diet of adventure stories and then wandered the world for a decade, building a career in the arts and writing stories that lay buried in the depths of her laptop until she gathered the courage to publish them. Jelena lives on an island in the Adriatic with her husband, daughter, and cat. You can find her at [jelenadunato.com](http://jelenadunato.com) and on Twitter @jelenawrites.

**Kristina Ten** is a Russian-American writer with work in *Lightspeed*, *Black Static*, *Weird Horror*, *AE Science Fiction*, and elsewhere. She is a graduate of Clarion West Writers Workshop and a current MFA candidate at the University of Colorado Boulder, where she also teaches creative writing. You can find her at [kristinaten.com](http://kristinaten.com) and on Twitter as @kristina\_ten.

# Our Contributors

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**Liz Aguilar** hails from Laguna, Philippines. She works predominantly with pen and ink using stippling or pointillism techniques.

Liz is an artist, novelist, poet, and full-time mom to four humans and seven fur babies. She only goes to sleep when listening to the sounds of flowing rivers or breaking ocean waves. Mermaids have always fascinated Liz and is a common subject in her art. Although more comfortable using pen and ink for her drawings, she is now also into digital art and illustration. Most of her artwork is now on Redbubble under @BbCherryT. Also, check out @bbcherrytomato on Instagram to get the latest updates on her writing and art.

**Marie Vibbert** has sold over 70 short stories to pro markets, including 10 appearances in Analog. Her debut novel Galactic Hellcats - about a female biker gang in outer space rescuing a gay prince - came out this year. By day she is a computer programmer in Cleveland, Ohio. She played women's professional football for five years.

**Mathilda Zeller** loves sushi, likes muktuk, and has never, to her knowledge, consumed mermaid. She grew up on her mother's and grandparent's stories of life in northern Alaska, and is a grateful beneficiary of the Aqqaluk trust (support them, they do good work). She drinks too much herbal tea, has a low key horticulture addiction, and writes stories whenever she can. She currently lives in New England with her husband, six children, and six chickens.

**Panchita Otaño** draws her inspiration from the lush green mountains and crystalline waters of her small, Caribbean island, surrounded by very big water (Puerto Rico). She likes to write fantasy and science fiction stories about strong female characters with a sprinkle (or an entire bag) of magical realism. "The Donkey & the Mermaid" is her first publication. @PanchitaRoyal

**Yvette R. Murray** received her B.A. in English from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She has been published in Fall Lines, The Petigru Review, Catfish Stew, Barzakh, Genesis Science Fiction magazine, forthcoming in Emrys Journal and Call and Response Journal. She is a 2020 Watering Hole Fellow and a 2019 Pushcart Prize nominee. Presently, she is working on her first poetry collection and a children's book series.

# About Us

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**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](http://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.

