



# mermaids monthly

Issue #7 - July 2021

**oops! all selkies!**

Alice Pow  
Andi C. Buchanan  
Benny Kim  
Cherry Potts  
Cislyn Smith  
Elsa Sjunneson  
Eefje Savelkoul  
Jennifer Bushroe  
Jennifer Mace  
Julia Jeffrey  
Phoebe Farrell-Sherman  
Priya Sridhar  
Rhys Hughes  
Tehnuka  
Vicky Bowes  
Wilda Morris



# mermaids monthly

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

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

As soon as we opened up to submissions in January, we received a number of questions about whether we would accept mermaid-adjacent stories. Lots of people find the Selkie resonant: a woman who can be a seal in the ocean and then literally shed her skin to take a human form on land is a powerful transformation

idea, but it also comes with a price, and that price is vulnerability.

In this issue you'll find six poems, six short stories, a comic, and two illustrations that range from rage to whimsy. There are space selkies, heist selkies, and of course, a number of queer selkies.

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**Cover Art** by Julia Jeffrey

**Interior Illustrations**  
by Eefje Savelkoul  
and Vicky Bowes



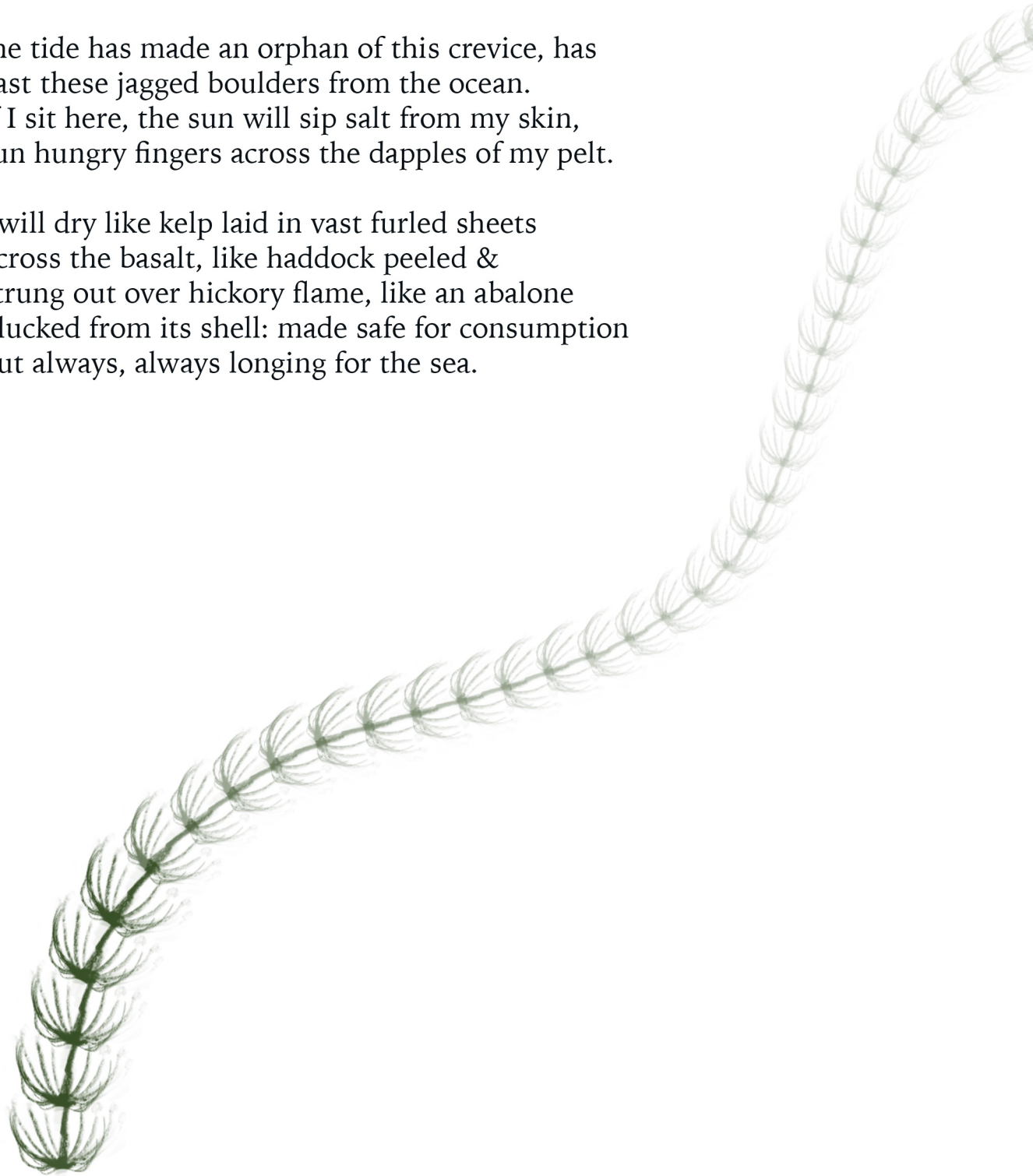
# seal bride

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by Jennifer Mace

the tide has made an orphan of this crevice, has  
cast these jagged boulders from the ocean.  
if I sit here, the sun will sip salt from my skin,  
run hungry fingers across the dapples of my pelt.

I will dry like kelp laid in vast furled sheets  
across the basalt, like haddock peeled &  
strung out over hickory flame, like an abalone  
plucked from its shell: made safe for consumption  
but always, always longing for the sea.





# This is How You Make Selkie Skins

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by Priya Sridhar

1. Screen social media posts for potential customers. Selkies often post ads online, seeking someone to replace the skin their no-good husbands stole, or worse, burned. Other times, college fraternities steal them from stone beaches as part of their initiation. If you have photo evidence, report these men to their admissions department. Selkies are a protected species.
2. Set your prices upfront, and ask for a deposit. You can do charity if you like—and I will not judge you if you do—but never accept a life debt from a selkie. It won't pay the rent, and they can twist the deal so that it's your great-granddaughter that ends up receiving the favor. In the time of global climate change, cash is more useful.
3. Never ask a selkie to prove her identity. There are human women who want to know what it's like to dive into the Atlantic, but one must not presume. Many boys and men also have dust-covered skins hidden under their mattresses, taking them for a dive. Obviously, warn other coat makers about habitual liars if the liars don't pay.
4. Don't let anyone guilt you into making a selkie skin for them. Guilt means imperfect skins, and being invited on hunts. Make them out of compassion, or even pity.
5. Never repair a torn or burned selkie coat. That requires an expert, and no one is an expert. Not even you.
6. Use a simple cloak pattern; kids' Halloween books have examples. Don't waste your money by buying a pattern. You already have more important expenses.

7. Go with straight stitches for the seam, and zigzags for the collar. If you have to make allowances for disabilities, then plan the seams ahead of time.
8. Ask for measurements. The tail size is especially important.
9. If using a sewing machine, set it to high tension, tiny stitches, and “heavy upholstery” mode. Your sewing machine will hate you for months. Sew on the reverse side. If the stitches show, the seal will not be very happy. You may lose a hand, and they won’t drive you to the ER.
10. Material may vary. Sealskin is not readily available; faux leather will do, provided you treat it for water. If a selkie offers to provide the material, make sure it’s not her damaged coat.
11. Test how the coat fits on her. A drowning selkie is a bad omen.
12. Never accept an invitation from a selkie for a swim. They dive deep, and into the coldest waters. When they hunt, they are fast and graceful, cornering their prey.
13. Never dance with a selkie, even if you are friends. See above.
14. Not all selkies are hunters. Even so, the ocean will finish the job. So don’t. Just don’t.
15. When going to meet a selkie in person, wear a wetsuit under your clothes. Hypothermia isn’t a joke.
16. If a selkie curses you for assuming they will hunt the coat maker, show them your left arm. The one missing a hand. Then ask them how their coat fits.



# The Land Wife

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by Phoebe Farrell-Sherman

*Content Note: This poem depicts an abusive relationship*

There's hell at the top of the world  
and it's as bright as gold and colder  
than the sea in the heart of winter.

I've been there, and I remember the smell  
of land-beasts, the dust on everything,  
washing every night before sleeping and never feeling clean.

I remember how her skin gathered sweat in the sun,  
licking her arms, her cheek.  
Every meal was bread as dry and bland as gravel, and sticky  
animal flesh.

When I complained, her hand would make circles on my  
back,  
and comb through my hair,  
and she'd tell me how deeply she loved me.

I stayed because I loved her too.  
What hell could be worse than loving a land wife?

When we first started dating,  
she asked if she could borrow my jacket, and I didn't think  
much of it.  
Her hair was so brown, her body so warm,

that the white jacket looked cream-colored like foam on her.  
We danced on the beach together,  
my legs so new that walking felt like sinking.

Hell could be charming – for a month  
I did not miss home at all.  
I sang for her friends and they laughed. I learned to cook white fish

from her father, and in the evenings, after she ate,  
she would listen to my poems with her eyes closed.  
She told me she wanted to know me inside and out.

Everything was so still  
on land, and it pricked me and wore on me.  
When I began to cry at night

she held me and I could see how it hurt her,  
her eyes round with worry, begging me to love her world,  
to show her I was happy to belong to her.

I took to walking alone while she was working,  
crying a little when the sun stung my eyes.  
I would go by the cliffs where the spray could touch me.

She saw me once walking into the waves,  
invasive, feeling heavier than before, wanting to put my head under.  
Her shouting tugged me back again, her grasp on the back of my shirt,

and I was sorry to see her cry, and so annoyed to be held as before, so  
still.

She said she had always known I would leave her.  
I said I never wanted that, it's what I needed to do—

She said I hope you will never need to do that again,  
and my heart sank out of sight.

Suddenly every breath I took was gritty like mud, hellish.  
I tasted her tears on my face. Her tears felt like my tears,  
saltless, bitter. I dreaded everything in existence.



Deep in hell, it is common to think  
that hell is all there is. Hell was inside me,  
and I thought it could become the land wife,

but when I broke open, I found no wife,  
instead my hell slipped out,  
streaming all down my face and my lungs, my legs,

pulling my jacket from a hook,  
I heard her call to me from the bed,  
How could you leave me after everything I learned about you?

How could you leave me  
just because it feels bad?

I put on my jacket  
with her sweat stains in the pits.  
I called up a great wave to soak that dusty place and leave it altered,

I swear, I left my mark on hell and then I swam  
and swam, deep into my homeland,  
and I did not look back.

# Clutch. Stick. Shift.

---

by Tehnuka

There's a story about the truck with an empty driver's seat that they say patrols the East Coast.



My Alli was born on a new moon night, on the soft sealskin in the back of the black pickup truck, right where she was conceived. We'd barely made it halfway down the rough farm track before I stopped and clambered into the back to help deliver her.

She was held tight in her mother's arms while I navigated bumps and turned onto the highway to reach the city hospital. Next morning, when they sent us home, we parked by the grey-sand beach where we'd met, watching the waves while our daughter slept in her second-hand car seat between us.

After Alli came, we needed more of a future than mustering sheep for Mr McEwan. I borrowed money from my brothers overseas. Her mother found a suit in a charity shop, combed her hair into a neat bun, and sweet-talked a bank

manager. Mr McEwan lent us the rest in a charitable mood after a few beers. Even before Alli could walk, we threw everything we owned in the pickup and moved far inland to our little high-country farm — to dusty dry summer days where the hills were scorched gold, and to icy winters that left feathery frosts on the truck windows. The two of us shared the work, and we'd find a couple of boys from the township to help during lambing. Alli's mother yearned for the ocean, but here we could make a proper living and, one day, repay our debts.



Alli did her part too, once she was old enough, but she was restless. On the bus to see her friends in town. Riding the farm bike, mustering the sheep and taking them across to the far paddocks with her collie Sooran. Up the mountain for a run. In the water, too, whenever she could, though there was little enough of it in the high country: collecting pebbles from rocky braided rivers or long hikes up in the Southern Alps to find a tarn. When she turned sixteen, we started teaching



her to drive. She itched for her full license, to get out on her own, on the open roads.

If I worried about others blasting their horns and speeding past, it was she who reassured me. “It’s a Pavlovian response to the learners’ plates, Appa. But they don’t care if you drive badly, as long as you don’t drive slowly.” And she never drove slowly.

We offered to buy a small automatic, less of a petrol guzzler, but our daughter was never more at home than when she slid into the drivers’ seat of the battered pickup. Its grinding transmission gentled, the gearstick moved smoothly only for her. And she reciprocated — she was always in good humour behind the wheel.

I remember once, with her mother leaning out the passenger side window as I half-dozed in the back, Alli said playfully, “Stick your hand out like you’re waving, Mama. Now bend down your fingers. First the little one, now the ring finger, the thumb, the forefinger.”

Alli’s mother complied. The car tailgating us dropped back with a furious honk before she realised she was flipping them off. Because even after eighteen years, ours was a foreign world to her.

)-€

### *Clutch*

One morning, the winter after Alli turned sixteen, the three of us rose early and drove all the way to the beach. Her mother kissed us both in the blowing sand, put on her dark, sleek, sealskin, and vanished into the tingling cold ocean. I still see, in my mind’s eye, Alli clinging tight, pleading in hiccupy sobs for her to stay.

### *Stick*

I could understand why she returned to the sea. But for all that they seemed identical in temperament and nature, Alli could not.

“Mama loves you. She’ll come back one day,” was poor consolation for a girl whose mother had left her. Alli had never been a stereotypical teenager until then. She began to sulk in her room, sleep late, forget her chores — or claim to. It was weeks before she could be coaxed out for a driving lesson. For the next months, those were the only times I saw her smile, and so I took her out whenever I could.

That’s why she got her license that spring. I baked a soggy carrot cake to celebrate, and we stayed up remembering family stories. I told her about her uncles across the Tasman, how we’d left our parents to flee the war to find refuge in colonies of the Empire we’d only read about in

books. I didn't need to tell her that, after eighteen years, this land still felt foreign to me, too.

Alli retold stories her mother had shared with us both. In the dull lamplight, listening to our daughter's low voice, I closed my eyes, tried to imagine nets of white sunshine falling through clear water, the taste of salt, wild waves and rip tides of the East Coast, deep dives into the breathless cold.

### *Shift*

The next day, Alli and Sooran were gone, and so was the truck. The boys who'd come for lambing said they'd seen it heading towards the road, collie on the passenger side but no-one in the driver's seat.

I guess Alli takes after her mother in more ways than I thought. Now, she searches the coast, perhaps awaiting her mother's return, or a way to join her. I wonder what she will become as she learns the freedom her mother once believed she had found on land.

Here in the hills, caring for the ewes and their shivering newborn lambs, I must remember that leaving is freedom, for her, as it has been for all of us. I must remember that she has chosen this, that she is older than I was when I left the first of the many homes in my lifetime. I cannot go back to most. But there are

debts to pay before I leave this one.

Some of us always live in our skins. Some have the privilege and tragedy of a skin they can remove, that lets them move between worlds. How can I resent those I love for changing forms, for seeking lives that make them feel complete? They'll remember me. One day, I hope, they'll return to me — or I to them.

# Three Magic Seals

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by Rhys Hughes

## With a Loving Kiss

The bottle  
contained a message  
but the message wasn't a letter.  
No, this message was a drawing  
rather better  
than one might expect.

It depicted a seal in a bikini  
blowing a kiss  
and underneath this  
a caption said 'self portrait'.

And I gazed awhile  
with a wistful smile  
before replacing it in the bottle.  
Clearly it wasn't intended for me  
so I returned it  
to the deep blue sea.

Sea  
Seal  
Sealed  
with a loving kiss.



## The Bedroom Seal

I think of my bed  
as a raft adrift on the ocean  
and in the starlight  
I wait for you to join me.  
The splash of your flippers  
in the depths of the carpet  
means you are surfacing  
and soon will climb  
onto the mattress next to me  
and be mine again.

Then I will tickle you  
and in mock fright that  
is more than half delight  
we will play-fight with each other  
using the bed as a trampoline  
(a trampoline of dreams)  
until at last you jump so high  
you catch a blade of the ceiling fan  
and spin round and round  
shouting, "wheeeeeee" before  
letting go and flying out the window  
into the pond below...

Yes, you are a bedroom seal,  
slippery as an eel,  
and I'm an indoors sailor.

## I Feel

They have  
no knees, if you please.  
Therefore I feel  
that to see a seal kneel  
will mean  
it's the silly season again.

# Moving In

by Alice Pow

Moving In



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# It Wasn't a Mermaid

---

by Wilda Morris

*This poem originally appeared in Prairie Light Review*

*... Whether it was a reality or a dream, I could never  
entirely settle. ~ Ishmael in Moby-Dick, by Herman Melville*

I never know for sure if it was real  
or did I dream I swam once with a seal  
whose half-articulated wailing cry  
was ghost-like, haunting all the Pequod's crew.  
She sought the pup she lost in days gone by.  
Is this a memory I can't construe  
or did I dream I swam once with a seal?  
I never know for sure if it was real.

Author's Note: "It Wasn't a Mermaid" is a Lil Ann poem, a form created by Carrie Quick. Although the epigraph is from Chapter 4 of *Moby-Dick*, the poem responds more directly to Chapter 126, in which the crew of the Pequod hears a plaintive, unearthly sound which many of them believe are mermaids.



# Fish-Fish

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by Cherry Potts

*Content Note: This story features a widower and refers to the death of a spouse and a stillborn child*

She has a small cloche hat pulled down so tight it's a wonder she hasn't ripped the rim. He has his hair plastered to his head so smoothly that Joel half expects beads of Brilliantine in the crease at the back of his neck, but despite this, they are immaculate, both wearing some fabric between velvet and moleskin that shimmers and tempts the fingertip to explore its textures.

Joel shows them to a booth at the back of the room, with a mirror behind them, which will allow him to keep an eye on them without quite staring. He cannot fathom what it is that draws him. They could be sister and brother they look so alike, round-eyed, broad-cheeked, flat-nosed; his wonderful whiskers the only feature that truly distinguishes them one from the other, but the way they behave with each other is not sibling-like. She gazes and gazes, her round eyes drinking him in with something like awe, and he caresses her with his glance. It is barely decent.

Joel finds himself struggling to breathe, excitement crushing his lungs. They are not beautiful, not in the accepted way, they both carry too much blubber for that, but they are smooth and shiny and look about themselves with such eagerness, when they come up for air. There is unquestionably something illicit about the relationship – they are on an adventure.

Joel brings them menus, which they do not look at. She turns her round eyes up to him and whispers

*Fish.*

*Fish, fish,* he barks, with more confidence than she.

*Fish,* Joel responds, and is about to list the cod, herring, plaice, but they continue, their voices almost overlapping, *Fish-fish* and he finds himself turning away nodding awkwardly.

He brings them Bouillabaisse, and is only slightly startled when they pick up the bowls between their awkward fat-fingered hands and drain the soup in great gulps.

He takes back the bowls and brings them sprats fried in salt on a base of samphire, his personal favourite. She claps her hands in glee, flat-palmed, noisy, and he watches as she hesitates with a hand over the fork, then picks up one fish after another and puts them head-first into her gaping mouth. Her companion does likewise.

Joel returns to the kitchen and brings them dish after dish, every fish dish on the menu. They eat everything, murmuring to each other, never touching the vegetables, not a scrap of bone or fin or skin left on the side of the plate; the shrimps eaten whole, the aioli untouched.

*What appetites*, he thinks jealously. Joel has hardly eaten, it seems to him, since he came to this little port over three years ago. He has lost much weight, and recently his hair has thinned alarmingly. His landlady has urged him to see a doctor, but it is out of the question.

He came here for love. He left the sea, and his roving of its stranger climes, to settle here, enamoured of a girl born on this shore. A girl who had died giving birth to their child, a poor sorry creature that had not thrived. None of them have thrived. A mistake, he thinks now, but his heart

has been anchored within the harbour wall since he first saw her, and the flukes are driven further in by the small stone cross in the graveyard on the headland, and he cannot bear the thought of the sea anymore.

He looks at the odd couple, paddling at each other's fingers and giggling together. This is a dry town, and he wonders momentarily if they have smuggled in a flask of something, but his offer of drinks (ginger beer, lemonade, dandelion and burdock, tea...) had been waved away with a shake of the head; and if they have something, he has not seen it. No, they are drunk on their adventure, on each other, on the appetite that has them gaze at each other and gaze and gaze.

When they leave, the bill is weighed down by an enormous gold coin. Joel stares. He has seen one of these before. He has owned one of these coins, and knows its worth. They could eat the restaurant out of fish every day for a month for this coin.

His coin lies in the cold little grave up on the headland, with his lost girl and the child who could not thrive.

Joel goes to the door and watches as they pick their clumsy way down the shingle beach away from the esplanade. He imagines they will make for the dark under the pier. He imagines they will furtively shuck enough clothes to get at each other and

He imagines a lot of things.



It is late and there is no one left in the restaurant. He turns the sign to *closed*, locks the door and wipes down the surfaces, upends the chairs onto tables, leaving the floor free for the girl who will swab it in the morning, and goes through to the kitchen to share a cup of tea with the cook and count the takings. He does not show her the gold coin. He turns it over and over in his deep pocket and wonders.

It is late and there is no one left on the esplanade. He puts his hands into his deep pockets and strolls across the road to gaze at the sea, to listen, in the near-silence, to the hush and rush of the waves sorting the pebbles. It is a sound that he can hardly bear, since the loss of his dearest girl.

There is another sound, a sort of gasping, guttural bark. It makes him shudder suddenly. He knows what it is, and his eyes search the dark under the pier, where he and his girl first knew each other completely. He resents the usurping of their first place. Ridiculous, he knows, when most nights there is some couple or other fumbling their way through the discomfort of sex on shingle in that dark damp almost-privacy with the creaking boards above them.

He hears the noise again, and again, then catches sight of them, humped together against a faint light cast through the wrought ironwork. He tries to disapprove, but all he can think of is her round, dark, glistening eyes, looking up at him, as she whispers her desires. *Fish, Fish, Fish-fish.*

As he watches they rise awkwardly, and he sees that there has been no furtiveness. Their bodies gleam in the moonlight, rounded and smooth and perfect. They walk carefully across the shingle, and he knows that hobbling, the tiny steps, the bare feet flinching from sharp stones and splintered shell and shifting, rolling pebbles. But they do not touch each other; he does not reach out to help, and she doesn't squeal as the girls here tend to as they wince their way into the sea. They walk confidently into the water, and almost at once they dive, and are swimming. His mind jolts from his pleasure in the sight of them to what he is actually seeing. The water rolls over and around them, and he find his tongue and calls out –

*Wait!*

Not the warning he had meant when he opened his mouth, but a plea:

*Don't go without me.*

They are just heads bobbing in the troughs of the waves –



*Wait! Please!*

He is running now, down the beach, casting clothes this way and that, kicking his shoes off on the water's edge.

})~€

He came here with his darling girl, on an incoming tide – he knew his tides, how not? – and explored each other in the glimmering knife-light that came through the gaps in the planks of the pier, golden and sharp. She laughed at the touch of his whiskers on her naked skin, and wept suddenly and without explanation, and they stayed longer than they should. And a wave tendrilled around his feet, and without thinking he shrugged his pelt over himself, and he felt rather than heard her gasp, as another wave crept further and the water ran off his pelt onto her naked skin, and he realised what he had done – and he wrapped the pelt around her too and waited for the next wave, the seventh, to wash them off the beach, between the striding metal of the pier and out into the harbour.

Two hearts within the same skin – he was aware that poets use that as a metaphor, but the reality was horrifying, hers beating three times the rate of his, the panic that clutched his lungs with hers – he half expected to drown, but they were out there no time, and the next seventh wave carried them safe to shore and he untangled them and she stumbled

weeping up the shingle to the high tide mark, and sat trembling in the moonlight. He followed slowly, dreaded her questions – her what are you? But that was not what had her stammering and shaking.

*We can never*, she said, shaking her head, *I can't – with you – like that – here...* and he had taken his pelt and rolled it tight and put it into her hands.

*No*, she said, angry now, *I'll not keep you here by trickery or force. You stay because you want to, or you go. Who do you think I am?*

And he had stayed, the pelt buried deep in the shingle under the pier, and his memories of the sea buried deeper, in domesticity and sorrow.

})~€

How could he have forgotten? How could he have been so beguiled as to forget this?

He pushes through the resistance of the water, the cold caress of floating weed, terrified by the speed with which they are swimming away, but then she turns back to him, and he hears, faintly, a call – harsh, deep, irresistible – and he reaches the sloping shelf where the water deepens suddenly, and plunges into the water, and lets a wave pull him out towards them.

*Wait*, he says, again, softly now, confident that they can hear, and he dives deeper, filled with a simple joy that has not been

his for – so long. His face is still beneath the surface. He opens his eyes and sees her, watching, her soft round eyes unblinking, as she turns slowly in the water, luxuriating in the way it buoys her; and he admires the silvery bubbles of air trapped in her pelt, and –his own limp pelt that she clasps awkwardly between flipper and flank. She slips away, a great pulse of muscle driving her through the water.

He catches at his forgotten pelt, suddenly lithe and beautiful beneath his reaching hands, and barks his laughter. Surfacing for a moment, he stares back at the land, at the lights of the harbour, the headland crouched above, and the feeling of something-left-behind eases.

His brother glides alongside, rolling him over, slapping him thoughtfully with his great, beautiful flippers, grazing him tenderly with his brisk, magnificent whiskers and more forcefully with his sharp-flexing claws.

He dives deep; rescued, forgiven, home.



# Ocean's 6

---

by Elsa Sjunneson

I dream of oceans.

The gray green water of the Irish Sea is cold. It's the frozen waters of home, the cold means nothing to me, personally - welcoming instead of a brush with death. The Baltic is a steel blue that will freeze a human in seconds. The cold still doesn't fuss me, but it's less welcoming. The Mediterranean is an aquamarine blue that feels more like bath water than the ocean.

I awaken drenched in sweat, not the sheen of salt water that drips off your skin when getting out of the sea. My legs ache to transform, stretching and twisting into muscle spasms in my sleep, trying to swim in the ocean of my dreams. It has become a nightmare to dream of the lacy fringes of the surf, because each time I wake, instead of my delicate fore-flippers slipping gracefully under the waves, I see pedicured toes.

I can't go home because that motherfucker stole my skin, and I will never forgive him.

I know, I know. Stealing selkie skins is

supposed to be romantic. All salt kisses and windswept hair. It's supposed to be about trust, and love, and the act of giving the skin back and then she forgives him. That's what all you humans think anyway. That our skins are merely a metaphor for the act of giving trust.

But it is my very real sealskin. My very physical connection to the ocean that is my home.

And that motherfucker took it.

You might be asking: why didn't you leave it locked up, instead of wrapped in a wool blanket, gently placed in a lingerie drawer?

I never wanted to be in a position where I had to place my soul behind a key and a lock. I wanted it accessible whenever I needed it, so that I could slip out the door at a moment's notice, whenever the ocean called from just beyond the cracked window in my bedroom facing the sea.

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Have you ever been to the British Museum? They have a fetish for objects that don't belong to them. Collecting objects that belong to other people was his habit - long before he discovered that he could date a cryptid, the man had spent his days working for those old colonialists who kept relics of other cultures behind ivory tower walls.

Yes.

The man who stole my skin was a museum director.

Like most of living kind, I seek connections. It is not only a human thing to want to be loved and cared for, but something that all living creatures do. Whether a selkie, or a werewolf, a Labrador or a human woman, we all crave caring beyond the bounds of our own souls.

And, as a millennial living on the coast of Scotland, I found myself like everybody else: swiping right and left on one of the many available apps, seeking out the connections I wanted to make.

His profile was charming. He liked to travel: pictures of him on some kind of expedition in Egypt, on a sailboat somewhere in the Southern Pacific (if you don't like water, we can't date.) He didn't have any attachments (Selkies are many things, but non-monogamous we are not, you can't give your skin away freely

to more than one person, you'd literally split yourself in two.) He was seeking a connection with a woman who didn't mind his long travels (the time I spend in the sea is not insignificant) and who wanted to learn more about the world and its history.

A curator at the British Museum. Back then I assumed he would share more about the fascinating history of the world, the mysteries that ancient artifacts unlock about humanity's past, not stealing things that don't belong to him from cultures that didn't consent.

My profile doesn't mention that I'm a selkie, of course.

It just says that I love the sea, that I spend more time on it than I do on land. I didn't expect that anyone would read between the lines, but Jeston did. He wooed me, he bedded me, and one day he asked me the question that I assumed no one would be smart enough to ask:

"Are you something more than human?"

We were tangled up in the sheets of his Bloomsbury flat, overlooking a busy tree studded corner of London. A short walk for him to work, a long swim and a train ride for me to visit but not an unpleasant one. I remember glancing out the window away from him, hoping that I could shield my reaction from him.

My skin pulled to me from my leather valise. A warning klaxon that I would ignore. I liked him, after all. The gentle prickle of his sometimes shaven face, the way that he always smelled vaguely of dust and pipe smoke.

I opened my mouth to speak and hesitated, the skin insisting on my silence even though I thought he ought to know.

“Whatever gave you that idea?”

“There are signs” he said, pulling me closer to him, nuzzling his nose and chin against my shoulder, pushing my nightgown strap out of the way to drop a kiss on my shoulder. “I just can’t figure out how you’re otherworldly, but I don’t think you’re human...”

I stuck with silence, pulling him beneath the ocean blue sheets that reminded me of home.



To say that a selkie is not human is part fallacy.

A selkie is not born. We are made. We are crafted from the skins of our ancestors, wrapped as infants in the sealskins that become ours, handed down from generation to generation by the women who love us. It doesn’t matter if it is a biological parent or a stepmother or a woman who loves us because we are who

we are. Each skin is a gift from family - blood or chosen.

Selkies are made by being loved so much that we are given the ocean as our home. Our mothers, our aunts, they want to keep us safe from those who would do us harm.

But there is a cost to the safe haven of the ocean: what brings us into the ocean can be taken from us. Our skins can be taken - the people we love are able to part us from the very thing that makes us whole.

I had always been careful about who I love. I was not careful enough.

After six months, I decided it was time to invite him up to the countryside for a weekend.

Mine is a small cottage. An old one. The woman who gifted me this house wrapped me in her skin when I was born. We shared the skin until she died, and when the will was read this little home came to me. It is mere steps from the waters of the small isles, and if you have very good eyes you can see the shores of Ulst in the distance.

He came in the spring. When the moss was bright and the sea was inviting. But not to him. When he approached the shore, it roared at him, and I should have known then.

But like any living creature, I do not listen to the warning signs sometimes in search of things I want.

That night the sea called to me as it often does on a full moon. The feeling of swimming in a moonlit ocean is one of the best - it recharges the skin, giving it the ability to live for another generation.

He must have felt me slip out of the bed, he must have heard which drawer I opened. He must have watched me slip out the door and crunch my way to the ocean, stark naked until I wrapped my skin around my shoulders and became a grey dappled seal.

If he had confronted me, I would have been able to tell him to leave.

But instead he kept his smug silence.

He waited until morning and while I slept he crept into my lingerie drawer and snatched what was most precious to me.

And then the bastard ghosted me.

)-€

The absence of my skin is not something I will survive. The longer that I stay out of the water, the more I wither. Yes, I was born human, but I am not human any longer. The ocean calls to me, and every time I cannot answer a part of me dies.

Every time I cry the salt of my tears reminds me too much of the ocean.

No one knows why I am so sad, because the secrets that I keep are for all selkie-kind.

So I stop crying. And I start thinking. I'm going to need to tell some truths in order to get help. I'm going to need to find allies. Because there is no way for one woman alone to get that skin back from whatever creepy vault he keeps it in.

It's time to start socializing.

As I walk into the cèilidh, a woman at the bar says: "It's such an interesting choice for the British Museum don't you think? Can the artifacts possibly be real?"

What artifacts...

I whip my phone out of my purse and google the British Museum at speed.

And there he is, in his best suit, smiling next to a case in which a grey dappled sealskin hangs on a mannequin, and is labeled "a true selkie skin." The exhibition description lists it alongside artifacts of other creatures whose identities should never be known. Vampire. Werewolf. Lamia. He has gone on a spree, stealing from the women he beds, I think.

Turning from the bar with a gin & tonic in hand I note the band is starting up a reel. I like reels. I knock back the last of my drink and slide into formation. But instead of facing a man, I am eye to eye with a woman.

She's wearing her family tartan, and spins into my arms with a wild cackle as she flies from partner to partner in the dance. The spark of joy that I feel when she slides her hands into mine is enough for me to ask her name after the dance is done.

She brushes her curls out of her face as the band pauses to turn the sheets of their music, and between breaths she introduces herself.

"I'm Elin. It's a joy to meet a partner like you."

"Lyll Gray," I reply. "Would you like to dance some more?" I ask, keeping her hand in mine.

Her smile is all the answer I need, and we go through another reel, a waltz and a Blind Scotsman before we both collapse into bar stools to get water and fresh cocktails.

"Want to nip outside for some air?" She asks conspiratorially as we clutch whisky glasses in our hands.

I nod and we go out the doors of the

dance hall toward the beach. Our hands touch, reaching out over the rocky beach and finding each other in the moonlight.

"You're beautiful," I mutter as our fingertips fully entangle, a smile edging its way onto my lips. "I just got out of... well... a situation. And he took something precious from me."

Her eyes widen.

"... and you're not ready..." She starts to finish my sentence for me but I stop her with a squeeze of my hand.

"It's not that. It's just that I'm not whole. He took something from me that can't be replaced."

I hesitate, but the ocean is calm. Encouraging. The ocean tells me it's all right to tell her.

"I'm a selkie and he took my skin."

Instead of shock, or revulsion, or horror, or inherent curiosity, I am enveloped in an embrace that can only come from someone who knows.

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The grand opening of *Unseen Worlds* is chaos. People who want to get in the door but can't swarm every entrance like locusts. I don't know how Elin got us



tickets - the woman is clever - but we arrive in style. Me in a navy evening gown wrapped in my family tartan, her in the kind of gown that you'd call subdued, except it wraps her body like a glove.

I hide my face in her shoulder as my ex walks past in his tux with a white bow tie. Her hand presses against the small of my back, and she whispers in my ear:

“He doesn't get to keep it. Neither do I. It's yours. You choose where it lives, and it belongs with you. We'll get it.”

I lean against her, breathing in the scent of her, remembering that this is a person I can trust with my truth and my soul and my ocean.

Because she is a selkie too.



The entrance to the special collection is covered in illustrations of creatures from everywhere. Faery, vampire, werewolf, lamia, witch... and selkie.

An exhibit intended to unmask a hidden world known only by those who live in it. A perspective breaking installation by Jeston Pierre.

Just seeing his name makes me feel a frisson of rage. Elin squeezes my hand and we move through the open doorway.

The first thing that we see makes a wave of nausea roll through my whole body. A pair of fangs, I don't know how he got them. I cannot even imagine. But the small sign next to the gruesome display says they are real vampire fangs. I wonder who he took them from. Did she consent? I can't imagine a vampire consenting to the removal of what she uses to eat.

We move through the throngs of humans gawking at wolf footprints and pressed pixie wings, and all the while a thread pulls me through the crowd. I can feel my skin, feel it calling out to me, feel it pulling me closer to the display case.

It lies on a deep blue pillow that reminds me of the Baltic, stretched out over a faux seal body shape so that the skin (which does not look like a seal when it is not wrapped around me) still mimics a shape that a human would recognize.

The label is what pushes me over the edge:

*Selkie Skin, origin unspecified, acquired by Jeston Pierre in Scotland.*

A moan escapes my lips. My skin is practically screaming at me through the glass. It wants to be in my hands and I need it in mine.

Elin's soft touch pries me away from the glass, and when I turn around I see that

I've made enough of a scene to gather attention from the crowd.

"Why don't we find a bathroom, Lyall?" Elin says, her eyes filled with concern. The crowd parts, eyes following us with curiosity.

When we reach the bathroom I run cold water over my wrists and splash some on my face. I'm hoping that activating the diving reflex will help me think.

"It can't stay," I say after a moment.

"No."

"We have to take it back."

"Yes, love."

"He must be stopped." I continue to focus on the running water over my knuckles, reminding me of home.

"Bet the other... subjects" she says that word with distaste "Might want their parts back too."

A smile crosses my face. Two selkies aren't an army. But a couple werewolves, a vampire, a Lamia, and whomever else he stole those other artifacts from would be.

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It's not hard for Elin to break into his dating profiles. His passwords

are predictable. GeniusCurator105, GeniusCurat0r, BetterThanDarwin69.

How did I ever find this man attractive?

I don't realize I've said it out loud until Elin's giggle registers with me.

"Well he did have nice pictures." She says, turning her tablet around to face me. On the screen, all of Jeston's matches are lined up. We scroll through, reading through profiles and chat histories until our eyes ache, trying to find clues to the cryptids' identities.

The first one we find is a witch. She's a librarian in Oxford. Her profile describes her lifelong interest in occult history, a vast library of "interesting books" and a cat who she jokes is her familiar. The clues are all there. I note her name and start hunting for a librarian at Oxford named Hess. An unusual name, easily found doing archival work at Magdalen College.

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Hess responds instantly when I suggest we have an ex in common named Jeston.

The cafe she invites us to is close to the Radcliffe Camera. It looks out on cobbled streets filled with stressed undergraduates in robes and bow ties. Exams are afoot. Hess is a prim looking woman in her early thirties. I don't know how she got a head

librarian job at Oxford at such a young age, but based on the way that she talks about the occult, it shouldn't be a surprise.

"Yes, he came and courted me and then stole some of my tools when I was out getting us croissants." she sips her coffee and eyeballs me. "So what did you come here for?"

"We know where your cauldron and books are." Elin says, sliding the bright purple *Unseen Worlds At the British Museum* brochure across the metal cafe table.

"That bastard put my Book of Shadows on *display?*" she snarls, after flipping through the glossy pages for a moment. "He took a selkie's skin for *profit?*"

I nod. "It's mine."

"So how are we getting our things back? I can do spells, glamours, possibly a hex? Though those can get a bit messy."

"I have a slightly more mundane question than that..." I say as she sets down her coffee cup. "Do you have access to the British Museum as a researcher?"

There's a quiet pause.

"You don't want me for my magic? You just want me for my badge?" She cackles "I think that's a first."

And just like that, we have a Face. Elin is the Hacker. I'm the Mastermind.

We still need people to do some sneaking and fighting. Fortunately I know where to look.

)-€

Chloe the vampire is lurking in a burlesque bar as a bar back. How did we know she was a vampire? The lack of legs on her "red wine" was a clue. She tries not to smile when we tell her what we're planning, but she says her fangs will settle back into her mouth once she has them.

Olivia (a pissed off werewolf) is working out her anger at a boxing gym, beating the pus out of a hapless human who doesn't know he's fighting the Big Bad Wolf.

There's another witch named Ora leading tours at Stourhead, making flowers grow with her fingertips.

As we speak to each woman, we discover that Jeston took not just what's on display, but dozens of sacred objects, jewels, and body parts all of which he's stashed away at the museum, waiting for the accolades.

And we make a plan.

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We arrive at the museum at opening.

We buy tickets to the museum like everyone else. We wait in the long line, spaced out so that we don't look like a group. Ora, the flower witch cast glamours on all of us before we walked in. I don't look like myself at all, we don't want any security guards to remember me.

Only once we're inside the entrance to *Unseen Worlds* do we gather up close. Other museum attendees grumble about our pushing and shoving, but even in non-wolf form Olivia is imposing enough to quell most overt arguments. We make sure that we step over the threshold into the exhibit as a group, and as soon as we do, it's go time.

Hess drops a sachet on the ground, a purple fabric wrapped package of herbs that explodes in dust, slamming a ward down over the entrance to the exhibit. Just like that the horde of tourists stops in its tracks.

Do you know what it feels like inside a museum exhibit before it's open to the public? The energy is electric. A quiet hum of anticipation, the artifacts waiting to greet their adoring and curious public. The quiet settles on my skin, I turn to see the tourists all frowning at the entrance, unsure why they cannot follow us.

This is where my gorgeous, slightly

terrifying girlfriend comes in. She pulls out a small device from her purse, and presses a button. The room goes dark.

"We don't have long. Go, get your stuff."  
Elin says with a smile.

There is a second of complete silence, before Olivia smashes the glass surrounding her wolf pelt and grabs it in a vicious hug.

Hess systematically places each of her books and cauldrons into a massive tote bag, double checking a list on her smartphone to be sure everything is hers. The vampire gleefully shoves her fangs back into her mouth with a sickening noise I wish I hadn't heard.

And me?

I walk slowly, deliberately, forward toward my skin. I lift the case off carefully, not wanting to damage it in my rush to get it back. I pick the dappled grey fur up off the seal form, my fingers sparking with magic as I reconnect with my skin once again. It feels like the ocean rolling over me.

But there's no time to spend on this moment now. The plan still has to move. I stash my skin in the bag I brought for it, and follow the other women out the door.

We leave, not by the exhibit entrance for guests, but by the exit for staff.



Hess removes her disguise, swaps an Oxford University badge onto her natty blazer, and leads us forward, our glances already wearing off as we step through Hess' magical barrier.

The alarms going off in the distance urge me to move faster. But I hold Elin's hand and remember that we have a plan, and that plan relies upon us being clever, and slow, and deliberate. The plan relies on us looking like we belong here.

And when we turn a corner in the labyrinthine back-end of the British Museum, we see Jeston running down the hall. Clearly the wards have broken.

Jeston stops in his tracks - shocked to discover that the subjects of his "research" and his relationships have come together.

"Hess. I'm surprised to see you here..." he says, tentatively. "With these other women... how did you meet?" terror threads through his voice. He knows he's been caught.

"University business." She replies tartly. "Re-acquiring artifacts that didn't belong to the museum."

"You can't do that!" he says with the air of a man who has never been told no in his lifetime.

"I think you'll find we already did." Hess

says, smirking.

"I'll just find new subjects." he says, his face darkening with rage. "You can't stop me from showing the world what you are."

I step forward.

"I think you'll find we can. Do you really want to be in a dark alley and run across any one of us?"

"You're a selkie, you can't possibly do anything to me." he says, smugness rolling off of him like fog over a deep bay.

"She might not be able to, but I will." Hess says, with a smile. "I can curse you until you beg for mercy"

Elin steps forward next.

"And if you think about harming a hair on her head, just know I have the skills to make your life very complicated." she smiles and wriggles a tablet. "I know where all your digital skeletons are buried."

A growl comes out of Olivia's throat, unbidden.

We don't wait for an answer, but brush past him. As Hess leads us out through the exit, I expect the security guards to arrive, but no one does.

We exit through a back door, out onto a brightly lit London square, and we part ways. I don't know that I'll ever hear from these women again, or for that matter, what becomes of Jeston.

But none of that matters now. We won. It's over.



The rocky shore greets us at sunset. Both naked but for our sealskins. As I wrap up in mine, my feet transform into a seal tail with flippers, my hands into forepaws, my head shrinks down, and my eyes grow big and brown.

I jut forward, sliding into the ocean next to Elin. Where I belong.



Illustration by Eefje Savelkoul

# Fluke

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by Jennifer Bushroe

<p>all the merrow wants is a human soul love marriage yet seamen row away from her storm-foretelling visage so she transforms walks on land but port merchants hide behind their wares her dripping apron and red cap giving her away such beauty not tempting enough for them to risk abduction or death</p>	<p>all the selkie wants is to be elsewhere forever cursed with discontent she longs for land when at sea yearns for the sea when on land her sealskin gifted to the man she chose mated with but her belly does not swell fast enough to overtake homesickness she walks the docks that realm of in between she cannot cross and wonders if motherhood will be worth it</p>
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the merrow & the selkie  
meet at the  
fishmonger's  
market stall both  
frowning over the  
"fresh" catch of the  
day dead in baskets  
stiff glassy-eyed and  
putrefying under the  
sun they recognize a  
fellow fey the merrow  
desiring the drowned  
sailor's soul that gave  
the selkie life she in turn  
envious of the ease with  
which the merrow returns  
to sea at will still possessing  
her cap the selkie tries it on but  
the only shift in her body is the  
pup swirling inside her womb the  
sea-maid and -matron both fathom-  
crushed between the wantings of her  
wild heart and the wantings she has been  
taught unspoken they meet at the shore daily  
the merrow sharing braided seaweed crowns  
and thirdhand cetacean gossip the selkie gifting  
soft dappled feathers and tales of human folly  
both realizing it is not a soul or a child they need  
but kinship because not every transformation is  
running away or running toward some are simply  
an attempt at evolution revolution of a body that  
once was for others but has been repossessed by  
she who will no longer obey anyone but herself



# Belachimorpha Belkie

---

by Cislyn Smith

I know a great white girl  
and she's happy on land  
shed her skin and stashed it safe  
and went for blood in the banking world  
but you know  
she never stops moving  
some things never change  
under the waves or on land  
that's not me  
I like the still waters  
the silt  
the light filtered down sparkling and soft  
through mangrove roots  
and I like you  
it's true  
and I'll give you a tooth  
or two  
I can spare a few  
but  
I'm not staying  
it's too bright  
dry land makes me itchy  
and I am tired of the way  
things unexpectedly bite  
mosquitos  
and overdraft charges  
and too-long pauses between texts  
listen though  
you figure out how to shed your skin  
the way I did for you  
and maybe  
just maybe  
we can work something out



# Below Salt-Heavy Tides

---

by Andi C. Buchanan

In the blue-tinted nights, I pull on my heavy boots and my warm coat, loop the bag of emergency supplies over my shoulders, and walk down to the shore. My wife knows I've been doing this for months, but we never speak of it; the children wouldn't understand. I step carefully down the metal staircase on the outside of our basic shared building, the one that still houses eight families of settlers, each of us in a little collection of interconnecting rooms, and onto the footpath below.

The tramlines glint in the light of Kolga, largest of our nine moons, which hangs, potato-shaped and cratered, above my head. Dufa and Unn are just-visible glows on the horizon, out across the water. There are no trams yet, nor any need for them, but the tracks are part of our sustainability planning for the new city, installed right from the start. I follow them.

We've cut steps into the cliff, one of the first things we did after erecting our shelters, more than five years ago now. I

reach out for the rope handrail and follow it down to the heavy sea.

The waves are crashing gently on the shore. To my right is the beach, all blue and silver sand, where we walk, where our children play, where we barbeque and eat together. Where we stood, all of us together, that night when the last of us arrived, shuttled down from the ship in orbit, and took in our new home.

To the right are the metal circles of the desalination pools. Even in the moonlight I can see their spectrum of pinks and turquoises. This is our planet's wealth; so many salts, different chemical compositions, just awaiting extraction from the sea, and from there broken down into their elements. Water sucked from one to another, evaporated to leave its precious salts behind.

It's not my sea. I'm not going to walk into it and become my other self, not going to leave my life here behind. I would not have even if we had stayed, not while I still had family who depended on me.

I just wish I had the option.



After work I hurry to the beach to call the kids in for dinner; keeping track of time is not one of their strong points. Now thirteen and fifteen their days are busy; mornings in school and afternoons in work placements, but as soon as that's over they run and tumble shrieking down to the sea, smearing the barrier gel on their bodies as they go, hoping to get in an hour or so in the sun.

From the top of the steps I see them and their classmates messing around on the heavy water, their bodies buoyant and unbreakable, their voices care-free and high pitched. I no longer notice the changes to their bodies - to all our bodies - to allow us to live in this new world. They barely remember looking any different. It's the childhood I dreamed of for them, untroubled and safe, part of a community.

Back in the communal kitchen, one of our neighbours - the only other one with children still in this block - fries up bean burgers. I pick lettuce from the hydroponics glasshouse next door, slice up bread, open a new jar of chutney. Five young people round the table, ravenous as always, and I'm surprised to find I am as well. We often cook meals together - if not all of us, then in groups. The house that will be ours is next on the list to start

construction; we'll be moved in by winter, all going well. I won't miss these cramped quarters, the noise, the ramshackle construction, but I'll miss times like this, seated at last, dipping hot chips in sauce and chatting with the others.

These are good times for us: I work, I take care of the family, I build a future for others.

I don't have a speciality like my wife, whose engineering skillset was specialised enough to get the whole family passage, and I'm not really cut out for the heavy work. Before we were here I taught university entrance prep; now I teach a few classes and help out with the construction project management. They're training me up bit by bit, Gantt charts and risk assessments. I'm happy to do anything really. I know it's a privilege to live here. And the children may whine for all the flavours of ice-cream they can't have and that the media we brought with us is so old and doesn't reflect their lives, but on balance? They're happy here. More importantly, they're safe.

The seas out here are not the seas of Earth, not the seas of my home. It makes no sense that I should be drawn to them.



I hear my wife's footsteps on the rocky ground behind me, rock smoothed to a pathway, see her uneasy shadow in the

moonlight. I don't turn round, but I don't walk down the steps either. I find myself a place to sit amid the rocks and she sits beside me.

"You're not happy," she says.

I look at the moonlit sky. I remember when just one moon waxed and waned in the sky; now there's a complex series of irregular orbits, moons shuffling in and out of view like an intricate dance, all factoring into a series of calculations to predict the rising and falling tides. I don't know how I can put this into words as simple as happy and sad.

In some ways this is a shared loss. We all had things we had to leave behind on earth. My children left their friends, their hopes of seeing so many cities, the chance of leaving their parents behind for noise and crowds and anonymity. My wife left an elderly father. We left family heirlooms, works of art, religious relics. My loss is no more significant in the scheme of things.

We burned my skin - my seal skin - before we left, scattered the ashes over the rocks where I first came ashore. There was a temptation to use it one last time, but I knew it would make everything harder. I could have brought it, but it would have taken up the sentimental items allowance for our whole family. I could not have agreed to that. Not for something I cannot imagine using here, on this dead planet with its beautiful dead seas.

"I miss our old home," I say at last.

"I do too sometimes," she says, but we both know it's not the same. She's a creature of the firm ground, a childhood spent running in woods and small-town streets, used to hearing her movements echo back at her, rubber soles on concrete. We all have dreams of building a better world here, but it's a better world for human needs, and people like me are only part of it so long as we are in human form.

Not that I can be anything else, with my skin burned and scattered, and light years away.

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I am good at compartmentalising whatever it is that draws me to the sea - grief, or hope, or longing. Our seas here may be dead, but they hold riches for us and bit by bit we are desalinating them. There's talk of future ships bringing algae which can tolerate heavy metals; one day there may be small fish zipping backwards and forwards on the incoming tides. I can't imagine that being in my lifetime, but I can at least feel things are a little better for our presence. On earth the seas are terminally sick and broken; everything is dying. Most of my people have come ashore, with so little hope of return they did not even bother to hide their skins.

Things may still be tough out here; hard

work, and the dust in our eyes, and nowhere to go if you fall out with someone, but we are thriving, growing, thinking about the implications of everything we create. We are building and we are coming to life. We are making things better. We are making things better for our children - our smooth-skinned, human, land-dwelling children - which is all I ever wanted.

The seasons shift fast here. Summer is replaced by winter with little of a shoulder season, and the children spend their free time huddled in communal lounges with computer games and old movies. On the shortest, coldest day of the year we light a fire on the beach and watch the splinters of orange shatter into the air. There are three moons visible tonight, three moons and our fire, and their reflections make patterns out over the crashing sea.

It is then I know that I am going to swim. Not parallel with the beach, for morning exercise, or crashing and leaping playfully with the kids, but deep into whatever secrets this water holds.

})~€

I wait for summer; I am not a total fool even if my decision is foolish. I smear my skin with protective gel; though the modifications made to us before and during our long journey provide the greater protection. I am a good swimmer,

even in human form. I remember cold waters and craggy rocks; the salt in my fur, the fronds of seaweed parting in the current like forests in wind. I take long, easy strokes out, the buoyancy of these waters making my movements easy.

The land grows far in the distance. I realise how small our settlement - of just a few thousand people, and three like it elsewhere on the planet - is among the vast, grey-blue, cliffs, the shoreline that seems to grow out with every stroke I take. This planet has been mapped and surveyed yet there is so much still unknown.

I wait in deep seas, floating, not even needing to tread water. And then I see them, lights below the water. I look up, wondering if they're reflections of the lights of one of our drones, or some phenomenon of the refraction of sunlight through water.

The sky is empty and the sun behind cloud. And yet more lights are growing, lighting up and spreading out in patterns. Yellows and greens and turquoises, changing.

I know, deep down, that this is what has been calling me out. Not my restlessness or guilt, not my memories of a faraway planet.

I hear words; not ones that can be broken to syllables, maybe not sound exactly, but



enough to leave no doubt in my mind.  
This is no dead world.

I swim back, fast strokes one after the other, not allowing myself to feel the tiredness in all my limbs.

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When I breathlessly report my experience, and then retell it once, twice, three times, to a growing committee of leaders and experts, it's clear our whole lives are about to be thrown into disarray.

Anything that could be sentient life requires careful consideration, negotiation, a common understanding of terminology before we can even begin that negotiation. It is best done before anyone encroaches on their space, even a landing party, but certainly long before settlement is made. Even non-sentient life needs protection - and there are many forms, on other planets, that test the boundaries of the two, forcing us to constantly redefine them.

The long term plan for this planet is based on desalination of its seas and eventually the export of the components that make up those salts. The change to the seas is fractional, barely measurable when you take into account their size and depth, but life survives on the narrowest of margins.

We send messages seeking advice, but it will be months before a reply can be received. In the meantime we scour our

files for comparable examples, analyse the exact wording of the protocols. Our building work halts, restricted only to completing in-progress projects where it would do more harm to leave them unfinished, shedding insulation foam out into the mind. Our already small lives grow even tinier; the optimism we built our lives on is thinly spread.

This is what we come up with: to try and make contact. Learn from them. Hear what they have to say and what their concerns are.

This isn't my role at all. I'm a long way from a diplomat, as either of my children would tell you. And yet all eyes fall on me.

And I swim.

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In the deepening waters I curse myself. I made a decision; to leave the seas, to burn my skin, for the good of our children.

If I could just have stuck to a decision, one way or the other, it might have been okay, but now I've ruined the lives of thousands. I swim angrily, tearfully, but I swim. Because I may have transgressed, but I am not a coward, will not shirk my duties.

Outside the seas seem dead, buoyant and dead. I wonder if I hallucinated with the cold, wonder if it was all a figment of my

homesick imagination. I'm not sure I could face anyone, having caused such disruption, were that true, but I see none of the bioluminescence here, receive no feedback, nothing I recognise as life.

I let myself float on the water. Maybe I need to swim further. But then a movement, out of the corner of my eye. Not a light, but something heavy and yet graceful, moving through the water. Then another, brown fur slicked back. They surround me, not with hostility but with curiosity - no, more recognition, because they know I am one of them. I spin in the salty sea and watch them congregate all around me.

Seals.



I choose to believe, just for a moment, that fate has brought me here; a place where others of my kind wait, those who swim in cold waters with their thick, oily skins, layers of fat upon them, salt heavy upon the rocks, and who cast off that layer to walk among the people, upon two legs, who become human, who fall in love. Statistically it may be unlikely, but we were always creatures of magic and folklore more than we ever were of science and finely calculated statistics.

I allow myself a moment to believe I've come home.

I swim with them through the seas. I stand on the rocks and I talk softly, knowing the more I talk the more they will understand my language. Gradually I realise the truth. I have not come to a place where there are others like me; I have created others out of some form of proto life, waiting in the ocean. Something that didn't quite meet enough definitions of alive to be detected on our scans, maybe something outside our scanning criteria altogether. Something another might call magic.

I don't use that word. When your whole being is magic it becomes meaningless.

We will debate, later, and perhaps others will debate long after us, where that proto life came from - whether it lay dormant here for thousands or millions of years, whether it came on an asteroid. Others will talk about what this means for our understandings of evolution, whether it was the fact I am something not-quite-human that meant I could activate it.

That will be then. This is now: I am shivering a little seated on the rocks. I am alone - it has agreed I will be left, for now, to find out what I can.

I have done more than find out. I have disrupted this planet, its development, the life that lives upon it, in such a fundamental way I am not sure it could ever be excused; and yet the very nature of these people is to be malleable, flexible, change.

I feel sick. I want to flee to our recently finished home, shut all the doors and hide in a corner of the bedroom. Despite all our efforts, despite all our good intentions, we have done this, and maybe there was never a good way to go beyond Earth after all. Maybe we poison wherever we touch.

But wallowing in my own self pity would do nothing to fix the situation. Instead I do the only thing I can think of, the only thing I know how.

I talk to them of anything I can think of; of how we live, of our little houses and the courtyards with benches and the well-lit schoolrooms. I talk to them of Earth, of wide shade-casting trees and browned grass and red dust; of cities flooding with people and of villages around the coast eroded by the sea. I talk and I talk, not being afraid to repeat myself, and I can tell they are absorbing more and more of it. I realise that to them the land is as alien as it is to us; the lands are distant outcrops from their seas, upon which life could not even be conceived of; dead lands, far away.

I talk of the seas I swam and rolled in, long ago, and how easy it was to swim like that. I talk of large, flat rocks and steady sunshine. I talk of walking onto the land, and I talk of love.

The protocols of distant Earth cannot cover what we find so far from home.

They talk about *first contact* but not about what you do if your contact and the creation of the species are one and the same. What happens if they take your form, but that form is no longer yours because your skin is burned and gone. If they - just days old - know more about your kind than you do yourself. How you assess power differentials if you have houses and desalination plants but they have some power you cannot even begin to quantify.

And then I listen.

I sit in the afternoon sun, by the water, and let these connections with those who at once are and are not my people form, until sensations crystallise into words, until I begin to understand them.

And I sing gently, under my breath, as for the first time they shed their skins, and they walk onto the land.

# Girlfriend Jacket

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by Benny Kim

I wake up in a cave, wearing Bos' coat. Most humans would be concerned about the cave part, but as a selkie, I was befuddled that I was wearing my best friend's skin instead of my own.

The first thing selkies are taught as pups is to never let anybody take your coat. Rather, you should avoid shedding your sealskin at all lest a besotted lover entrap you in marriage. Bos and I never listened to the outdated fables. Playing human was our favorite game, especially on weekends when La Jolla's nightclubs blasted their songs and drinks poured freely. We even named ourselves after the drinks. Bos had misread the 805 on the beer bottle as English letters, the silly girl.

That silly girl's namesake is likely the reason for my current headache and out-of-body experience.

I raise myself (Bos' self?) up and scan our secret hideout for my better half. Partly in the water lay my unconscious form. I gently slap whom I assume to be Bos awake.

"Bos," I say. "You're in my body."

Bos moans and flaps her (my) flippers in the air, protesting the rousing touch. Too bad, Bos! My body, my rules. I nudge her, and my snout crunches before relaxing. It's weird to see myself like this.

Finally, Bos yawns. She blinks at the sight of me in her sealskin, then takes stock of the body she wears.

"So I am," she says. "You have so much blubber. It's much nicer than my own."

"I'm flattered."

Bos barks out a laugh. My face has never looked so mischievous. "What do you say we stay like this a bit longer? We can prank my brothers."

The fact that I consider it surprises me. The maxim had been all but tattooed into my brain: Don't let anybody take your coat. It's one thing if a human steals my skin, but Bos and I took our first steps on land together and used to sleep with clutched hands like otters.



Nowadays, she holds my hair as I puke  
after an intoxicating night out.

Bos isn't *anybody*. I trust her. Bos smiles at  
me, and I know she feels the same.

There's no need for traps when we always  
choose each other.

"All right," I say, and I feel Bos' heart  
swell with love. "Which one should we  
get first?"





# Our Contributors

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**Alice Pow** is not secretly a water spirit (wink). She is the creator of Kaiju Cuties, a webcomic about giant gay and trans monsters. She makes all kinds of things and her work also appears in *Dragon Bike* and *Geek Out II*. Find her on Twitter and elsewhere as @SummerTimeAlice.

**Andi C. Buchanan** lives and writes just outside Wellington, New Zealand. Winner of Sir Julius Vogel Awards for *From a Shadow Grave* (Paper Road Press, 2019) and their short story “Girls Who Do Not Drown” (Apex, 2018), their fiction is also published in *Fireside*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Glittership*, and more. Most recently they’ve been writing witchy stories, starting with the novella *Succulents and Spells*. You can find them at <https://andicbuchanan.org> or @andicbuchanan on Twitter.

**Benny Kim** is a nonbinary Asian writer who has previously been published in the *Case Reserve Review*. They had the pleasure of seeing the La Jolla cove seals in person back in 2019. Currently, they work as a freelance translator and editor with aspirations of writing a serial novel.

**Cherry Potts** is the published author of a lesbian fantasy epic, *The Dowry Blade*, two collections of short stories, *Mosaic of Air* and *Tales Told Before Cockcrow*, and a Photographic Diary of a Community Opera, *The Blackheath Onegin*. She also has many short stories (and one poem) published in anthologies and magazines in print and on-line. Her stories have been performed in London, Leeds, Leicester and Hong Kong through Liars’ League, and she has performed her own work at the Towersey festival, Story Fridays in Bath, and numerous other London events.

Cherry’s story “Medusa Wonders” was shortlisted for the Bridport Flash Fiction Prize 2020.

She has completed her second novel, *The Bog Mermaid*, and a novella, *A Fish in a Desert*, and is currently working on a young adult timeslip novel, and a space opera.

Cherry teaches creative writing at City, University of London as a visiting lecturer and owns and runs Arachne Press for whom she edits short stories, novels and poetry, and sometimes designs covers and animated book trailers; and is the founder and curator of the annual literature and music festival, Solstice Shorts, now in its seventh year.

# Our Contributors

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**Cherry cont.** Cherry sings in choirs for fun (online at the moment which isn't anything like as much fun) and lives in London with her wife and an adored and very spoilt cat.

**Cislyn Smith** (she/her) likes playing pretend, playing games, and playing with words. She calls Madison, Wisconsin her home. She has been known to crochet tentacles, write stories at odd hours, and study stone dead languages. She is occasionally dismayed by the lack of secret passages in her house. Her poems and stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Diabolical Plots*, and *Daily Science Fiction*, among other places. She is a first reader for *Uncanny Magazine* and *Giganotosaurus*, a graduate of the Viable Paradise Workshop, and one of the founding members of the Dream Foundry. Twitter: @Cislyn

**Eefje Savelkoul** (she/her) is a Dutch artist, illustrator, and graphic designer who specializes in editorial work. She loves painting with watercolors and spends a lot of her free time knitting or playing Dungeons & Dragons with her friends. Stories of all types are her jam. You can find more of her work on her website, instagram and etsy store.

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

**Jennifer Bushroe** once swore on a statue of Peter Pan that she'd never grow up. She fulfills this oath daily by dancing like nobody's watching, eating dessert before dinner, and writing speculative fiction and poetry. You can find Jennifer on Twitter, and her work in *On Spec*, *Polu Texni*, *DreamForge Magazine*, and more.

# Our Contributors

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**Jennifer Mace** is a queer Brit who roams the Pacific Northwest in search of tea and interesting plant life. A three-time Hugo-finalist podcaster for her work with *Be The Serpent*, she writes about strange magic and the cracks that form in society. Her short fiction has appeared in *Cast of Wonders* and *Baffling*, while her poetry may be found in *Reckoning* and *Uncanny*. Her anthology *Silk & Steel: An Adventure Anthology of Queer Ladies*, with co-editors Janine Southard and Django Wexler, may be found through Cantina Press. Find her online at [www.englishmace.com](http://www.englishmace.com).

**Phoebe Farrell-Sherman** is a poet from Seattle WA, living in Northampton MA. Some of her recent inspirations include Celtic folktales, Joni Mitchell, and the return of spring to Massachusetts.

A 2016 MBA graduate and published author, Priya Sridhar has been writing fantasy and science fiction for fifteen years, and counting. Capstone published the Powered series, and Alban Lake published her works *Carousel* and *Neo-Mecha Mayhem*. Priya lives in Miami, Florida with her family.

**Rhys Hughes** was born in Wales but has lived in many countries in Europe and Africa. He graduated as an engineer but currently works as a tutor of mathematics. In his spare time he keeps writing. He is nearing the end of a thirty year project to write exactly one thousand linked short stories. He has also written plays, poems, articles and puzzles for a variety of international publications, and his work has been translated into ten languages.

**Tehnuka** is a Tamil tauwi writer and volcanologist from Aotearoa-New Zealand. She likes to find herself up volcanoes, down caves, and in unexpected places; others, however, can find her on Twitter as @tehnuka, and her words in *Apparition Lit*, *Memento Vitae*, and the *Daily Drunk Mag*. She was a finalist in the 2020 Dream Foundry contest and highly commended in the 2020 NZ Sunday Star-Times short story competition. This is her first speculative story publication.



# Our Contributors

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**Vicky Bowes**, Spring Tide Creations: I am an artist fortunate enough to spend my days drawing and painting what inspires me the most - the natural world.

I grew up in the UK countryside and have always been enthralled by the worlds of other animals and plants - wondering about their lives, how they feel, what they're thinking, and I'm never happier than when outdoors - immersed in the wild - be it out on the water or deep in the forest. I draw and paint representations of these worlds in an effort to share the experience with others. My work has been described as 'realistic with just the right amount of whimsy' which is an observation I enjoy. I love whimsical storytelling through my work. Stories linked to nature occur in every culture throughout history.

The whimsy gives us a connection to the character and emotions of the other beings portrayed - a glimpse at the world from another point of view. This builds a relationship of love with the wild world that many humans feel disassociated with in modern times.

I hope my work brings a renewed sense of kinship with nature and helps in some way to preserve, protect and respect what is left of this beautiful planet's wild places.

And if nothing else, I hope it brings you a sense of joy.

**Wilda Morris**, Workshop Chair of Poets and Patrons of Chicago and a past President of the Illinois State Poetry Society, has published over 700 poems in anthologies, webzines, and print publications, including *The Ocotillo Review*, *Pangolin Review*, *Modern Haiku*, *Brass Bell*, and *Journal of Modern Poetry*. She has won awards for formal and free verse and haiku, including the 2019 Founders' Award from the National Federation of State Poetry Societies. Much of the work on her second poetry book, *W* (Kelsay Books, 2019), was written during a Writer's Residency on Martha's Vineyard. Her poetry is featured on YouTube videos from the P2 Collective. She is working on a book of poetry inspired by books and articles on scientific topics. Her poetry blog at wildamorris.blogspot.com features a monthly poetry contest.

# About Us

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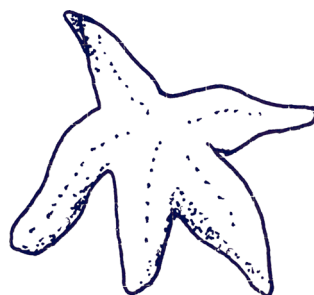
**Julia Rios** (they/them) is a queer, Latinx writer, editor, podcaster, and narrator whose fiction, non-fiction, and poetry have appeared in *Latin American Literature Today*, *Lightspeed*, and *Goblin Fruit*, among other places. Their editing work has won multiple awards including the Hugo Award. Julia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

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

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

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



- a little squished, still a star

