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Mari Ness - Marla Faith - Nelly Geraldine García-Rosas  
S.R. Mandel - Toshiya Kamei - Ursula Vernon



mermaids monthly

# mermaids monthly

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

Mermaids Monthly, P.O. Box 748, 9245 State Route 22, Hillsdale, NY, 12529

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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).

# Table of Treasure

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<b>The Rime of the Midwinter Mermaids</b> Kelly Jarvis	<b>3</b>	<b>The North American Wombat's Guide to Random Sea Creatures</b> Ursula Vernon	<b>44</b>
<b>What to Do After Receiving a Starlit Pearl</b> Mari Ness	<b>4</b>	<b>Merbraids</b> Amal El-Mohtar Caitlyn Paxson Jessica P. Wick	<b>45</b>
<b>Mermaid's Hook</b> Liz Argall	<b>7</b>	<b>Magdalena the Mermaid</b> Ana Merino Toshiya Kamei	<b>49</b>
<b>Which Inland Waterways Merfolk are you?</b> Nelly Geraldine García-Rosas S.R. Mandel	<b>14</b>	<b>The Space Mermaid's Garden</b> Beth Goder	<b>50</b>
<b>Mermaid Care</b> Jonathan Crowe	<b>18</b>	<b>How to spot a mermaid</b> Emily Fox	<b>57</b>
<b>The Catfish Sisters</b> Lisa M. Bradley	<b>21</b>		

# The Rime of the Midwinter Mermaids

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by Kelly Jarvis

When white-bearded winter wanders through frozen seascapes  
And stirs salt waters with his icy hands of death,  
When his frigid breath blows across the frosted tips of waves,  
And makes icebergs creak and moan with pain and grieving,  
The midwinter mermaids return.

They rise, two by two, toward the misty moon-shine of the surface  
To gulp the Arctic air which curls around emerald chunks of heaving ice.  
They weave shimmering drops of crystal into their long, dark locks of hair,  
To reflect the radiant beauty of the dancing Northern Lights  
As they begin their symphony.

They sing of solemn seasonal stillness, lingering darkness, never-ending night,  
And their voices haunt the sea fogs that tremble over the deep.  
They sing of ceaseless seaborne secrets, a return of warmth and light,  
And their glittering notes rise reverent to the red stained east  
Where the sun is born again.

Their frosty aria ebbs and flows like a tide in modulating key,  
Pulling the paused earth back into the embrace of the endlessly moving sea.

# What to Do After Receiving a Starlit Pearl

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by Mari Ness

1. When the starlit pearl arrives, place it against your skin immediately.

*Do not take it off, for any reason.*

2. Find some way to secure the pearl against your skin. Potential methods include soldering gold and silver bands that can be fastened to wrists, ankles, and necks to the pearl, a technique that should only be attempted with the assistance of a partner, to avoid the risk of severe burns; holding the pearl in a tight fist, trusting that you will remain awake – or be able to maintain the fist during sleep; or cotton bandages, leather straps, and silk cords, with the understanding that such materials may change their shape once submersed in water.

An enchantment to hold the pearl may well be effective, but unwise. The seemingly simple solution of glue should not be used: not only is this a potential skin irritant, it will invariably place a barrier between the pearl and you, with potentially disastrous consequences.

3. Pack carefully; you will not be allowed to bring more than the contents of one medium-sized sack – with the definition of “medium-sized” determined by the Holt. Most occasions in the Nacre Holt are informal, with no particular dress required. You may, however, be invited to a formal banquet, which will require somewhat more elegance. The upper floors of the Nacre Holt contain delightfully warm waters and abundant light. The lower floors, however, are near freezing. Mortals are advised to bring wetsuits; others should consider preparing enchantments against the cold. Wearing furs of any kind – natural or synthetic – may be misinterpreted. Be prepared to lose every item you bring, and test your clothing in a pool before leaving, to ensure that you will be able to swim in it. Those with allergies to seafood are advised to bring any appropriate medications.

4. Head to the ocean sung to you by the pearl. Do not rely on past accounts, or recent dreams: the Nacre Holt shifts on a regular basis, and is rarely in the same ocean for more than a few months.
5. Touch the pearl *lightly* to the salt waters, and wait on the shore.
6. If necessary, take some anti-nausea medications or enchantments.
7. When the song arrives, step upon it firmly.
8. Of *course* it's safe. It's a *mermaid* song.
9. As long as you keep the pearl against your skin, of course.
10. And as long as you don't fall off.
11. Try not to think of everyone who has drowned beneath the salt-waves.
12. Keep your eyes closed against the rush of salt water.
13. When the song stops, open them.
14. Do not panic. Keep the starlit pearl against your skin.
15. Do not try to take a deep breath. You do not want to clog your throat with salt.
16. Remember, their eyes are up there. It is considered inappropriate at best to focus on the iridescent tails and hands, however mesmerizing their beauty; highly offensive at worse. Unless, of course, one agrees to take you as a lover. In which case, allow your eyes to wander wherever they wish, once in the privacy of a coral chamber. Before that point, be cautious.
17. Do not look too closely at the coral structures, especially the structures that resemble cages and mortal skeletons. You cannot risk showing discomfort.
18. Be cautious when eating. Any dish that resembles fish or seaweed will probably be safe for consumption, but many foods will be laced with toxins – both the natural and supernatural kind.

19. Do *not* scratch your neck or the base of your spine.
20. We repeat: do *not* scratch your neck or the base of your spine.
21. Do attempt to attend at least one of the musicales; the sound of the members of the Nacre Holt singing through their instruments of coral, urchin shells, and sea nettles is not to be missed.
22. Ignore any bones in the bedchamber that you are escorted to.
23. Again, *do not let the pearl lose contact with your skin.*
24. Do not attempt to race any members of the Nacre Holt. But do accept any other invitations that they may extend: this may well be your only chance to dance with beaked whales on a seamount bathed in the light of bioluminescent corals, an opportunity that even the greatest of the faerie Courts on land cannot offer.
25. Do not panic at anything you may see on your skin. Remember: light behaves oddly beneath the salt waves, and what you think you see may only be a pattern created by swirling water, or a passing school of fish.
26. Try to give a gift each day to your hosts. This need not be physical: the members of the Nacre Holt delight in poetry, music and images of stars. If you are capable of using an underwater electronic device that can display photographs, you may be able to extend your stay for several moons.
27. When you are dismissed – and you will be dismissed; the Nacre Holt has never allowed anyone not born in the Holt to remain for long – do not argue. Instead, consider what wonders you can see, now that you have gills deep within your neck, and fish scales on your skin.

# Mermaid's Hook

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by Liz Argall

*Content note: This story depicts slavery and humans dying in bondage during transatlantic crossing.*

*This story originally appeared in Apex Magaizen in 2013.*

She caught treasures from the ship with her sisters; dangerous, exotic objects that plummeted through the water. Metal not yet rusted; fractured glass and timbers not yet smoothed by the sea; woven filaments as delicate as jellyfish, and as treacherous. Curiosities from the world above to be dared, caught, examined and discarded.

She found him falling. He fell fast, tangled in chains, his shirt billowing up around him, shedding bubbles in all directions as his body tore through the water. She surged towards him, caught him in her arms, then paused. Here was no special prize. Normally they would let humans sink to the bottom and serve as bait for delicious crabs and tastier morsels, but this one still struggled. His urgent desire to live evoking something almost forgotten; an electric hum on the back of her tongue of land-life never known, but bone-remembered. She hummed low and chirruped in surprise, "Who are you? Why are you in my arms?"

He spasmed for a moment, his convulsions almost knocking him out of her grasp, the whites of his eyes flickering through half opened slits.

Her sisters hummed, "Why are you playing with the land-thing? Wait for the crabs to come."

"I think it's alive."

"Don't be silly, they can't live down here."

"Then I shall put it back."

She cradled him in her arms and swam to the surface with strong swift strokes of her tail.

"You're not god, you know!" shouted her sisters. She smiled to herself and did not look back.

She burst from the crashing sea, a plume of water reaching high up into the air, the



force of her arrival rocking the man violently. Her gills flexed from the side of her neck, fanning out on strong muscles. The breathing felt so thin up here, sounds crashed against her skin chaotically, without the measured gravity of water to modulate the sounds. Her back slapped against the surface hard, and she flicked her tail to keep herself and the man above water. The ocean crashed around them, grey churning salt water, fierce winds and a sleet filled sky. A wave grew next to them, undulating and white flecked, broken planks in its maw. She leapt again, pushing hard against the now towering wave, leaping for the sky. She crashed through the crest, an explosion of sound and force, and into the next wave. She swam up and over mountain range after mountain range, trying to keep the creature in the air and find some place to return him to. The gritty wind bit at her gills, drying and scratching them, making her gasp for breath. She folded her gills close to her neck when she could, only flaring them out to grab quick moments of breath between tearing waves.

The man was slippery and difficult to carry, even after she untangled the chain around his legs. Sometimes she held the man by an arm, sometimes by the shoulder, but he was slippery, limp and awkward. The man was smooth in both directions, like a whale, and did not have the bite of scales to get purchase. Her own torso, shark skin silky in one direction, shark skin teeth in the other, tore his wrappings. She did not hear him

cry out over the clamour of the ocean, but she felt him writhe as she cut into his flesh despite her best efforts.

She threw him, belly first, over her shoulder where her scales were broader round plates and less punishing, and there he bounced like a rag doll. She battled the waves and kept as much of him out of the water as possible. She wasn't sure where his blow hole was placed and hoped it was somewhere sensible in the upper half of his body. The man's ribs and diaphragm clanged forcibly against her shoulders and she winced, worried that the impacts would break such a delicate animal.

She feared she had broken him entirely when he made an awful gargling sound and warm water fell from his mouth and down her back.

"Don't die!" she chirruped against the storm, her voice reedy and insubstantial. The man made strange gasping sounds and thrashed against her, slipping from her shoulder into the sea. He made the frenzied motions of a dying creature and she pulled his face out of the water. His breath was hot and laboured, coming from his mouth in a large O. He made keening sounds, too many sounds, and without them resonating in her body she could not begin to comprehend them. A curious creature, all flat face, blunt teeth chewing at the air and strange eyes surrounded by white circles like a dying humpback whale.

He churned the water and pushed up and away from her, trying to swim up the waves by himself. She followed close, ready to catch him if he fell into drowning again. He made sounds like Mer in mourning and frightened birds. He turned every now and then to see if she was still close, like an anxious sea pup, and when he saw that she was close and ready to catch he would turn and labour against the waves with renewed confidence and energy. His swimming was worse than any creature that wasn't strangled by a net and he made little progress. He swam for only a few minutes before his open mouth was wave-crash filled with water and he started to sink again.

She sped towards him and pulled his double-purposed mouth from the ocean. She marvelled that the poor creature was still alive with one mouth to serve for sound and breathing, but at least his head was easy to keep above water. The man, in his confusion, beat his hands raw on her chest, and came perilously close to harming her face and ripping her gills. She lashed out at him, claw sharp and instinctual. The man cried out and held his hand against his bleeding skull. She flattened her precious gills tight against her neck, holding her breath and ready to fight.

She wanted to let him drown, hold him under and tear him apart, but she could not. He was her responsibility now, she had played god and had to see it through. God did not build things and stop half

way through; only sorcerers made the incomplete and misshapen – the egg half made, the deformed child. Though she longed to drop him in the water, to start and not finish would make her less than Mer. As god was in makings, so true Mer must be in action; she was no sorcerer. She gritted her teeth and held him tightly, his arms crushed to his sides. He was confused, he was swimming badly and his dangerous movements would stop.

In time he stopped thrashing and threw up several times. Her gills unfolded in relief and she loosened her grip.

“Thank you for the gesture,” she hummed, uncertain of human customs, but imagining it was a gesture of apology and kin. “I am not hungry or injured, you should save it for yourself.”

The man seemed to understand and stopped regurgitating. As the man grew quiet, the storm, as if in harmony, eased and grew gentle. She cradled him in her arms like she might her own sisters, as if he were a Mer hatched incomplete and delicately forming first-scale. His head rested against her chest, his eyes closed. She could feel the soft waves of his breath grow easy and she carried him. She gazed at his sleeping face, so similar to hers and yet so different, brown skin instead of blue scale, cords of twisted hair instead of kelpy green filament.

His face was symmetrical and pleasing to look at in an alien kind of way. She saw

in his sleeping face a kind of intelligence. She hummed softly to herself, happy with her decision; humans were made for more than crab-bait.

The lull in the storm was almost over and she could feel the turbulence building. She scanned the horizon for land, for somewhere to put the man, and as she searched her body heard the chorus of her sisters, slurred by the competing sounds of above-water. She strained to hear their lament: “Come home, our sister, come home. Where have the currents taken you? Strong and swift, where have you gone? Coral light, where are you now? Where have you gone with your land-thing? Where have you gone with your crab-bait?”

She felt the comfort of her sisters’ presence, not too far away, although deep below. She saw in the far distance the white and brown shape of a ship, the humans’ moving land of wood and sail. The storm started to pick up and she ducked her head to sing in her far reaching voice. Her ripples passed over the ripples of her kin and she hoped her voice could be heard from so far above: “I am here, I am safe, do not fear. I am finishing the work, I will finish the work. I will meet you below the boat when I am done.”

The storm returned with sharp-toothed gale and precipice wave. She pushed through the water towards the boat that now floundered heavily in the water, ramming into each wave and landing

heavily without grace. She saw one of the ship’s magnificent white dorsal fins rip and snap off, torn high into the air. She winced in sympathy for the wooden bone left behind.

She was so slow above water and it was infuriating to take the long way when only a few spans down a world of peace reigned. She ached from the riotous sound of above-water, knives of chaos on her ears. She would draw close to the boat, only to be pulled away. Eventually she stopped trying to reach the ship and simply held them above the water. She would return the man when the storm was over.

As she waited, she felt her sisters’ voice in her body: “Come home, dearest sister, come away. The moon is cresting, the sharks still dazzled by the storm. Come hunt with us and day-long feast on crabs. We wait under the ship, but we do not trust it. Too many fall from it, chained together like close links of bait, one man after another. We will not stay for the hook. We are leaving, we are leaving. What in the place of land and air hunts with lines of men? Be careful, dear sister, be careful. We will not wait for net like the fish, we will not tempt harpoons like the whale. Your sport is over. Come home, come home to the depths.”

She looked at the resting man in her arms, his eyes moving under the lids. “What are you bait for?” she hummed to him. She felt his warm mammal breath and tried to imagine why anyone would

chain so many together. It seemed wasteful – while creatures from above hunted many beings of the sea, it made little sense to set so much bait at once. Her sisters' fears did not ring true.

She gazed at the face that looked so intelligent and felt a small trill of excitement. What if the humans were becoming something else? What if they were not bait at all? Humans had been sinking to the depths in greater numbers...what if this were some greater evolution, taking the next step to the sea as her people once had? Perhaps they were chained together as egg purses, joined by threads so they would have kin on awakening, much like her sisters. The ocean was deep and always new. She carried these thoughts and chewed over them until the storm exhausted itself and sunset fell.

In the growing dark she trilled “Wake up. Have I saved your life or stopped you from hatching? Should I sink you with chains to join your kin? We were once of your land before wisdom prevailed, are you now wise and ready to hatch into a new kind of kin?”

The man's eyes opened, small, salt crusted slits. She closed her gills and only opened them in brief puffs, ready to drown him if necessary.

“I can find your egg-mates and drag you down to them, if you are the host of something new,” she sang softly. The

man's eyes opened fully, startling pink-white framing brown pools. He looked at her and carefully did not move. He stared straight into her eyes and croaked something that seemed like language, impulses of sound carefully chosen. He paused and made the same sounds again. She had no idea what he was saying but was fascinated by their haunting familiarity. His sounds were easier to hear in this open air space than her own, and she wondered if it was because of how astonishingly mobile and flexible his mouth parts were – they seemed to move with every sound.

He seemed much calmer now and slowly she released her hold. He kept his hand on her shoulder and she felt a steady purr in the water from his kicking feet. She blinked with approval and gently tugged him towards the dusk-lit ship. At first the man seemed to be happy, he kicked along beside her and they made slow but steady progress towards the keel. As they drew closer he made a shrill sound and pointed upwards at tattered colours high up on the dorsal spine. He abruptly moved backwards, turning and kicking in a sudden spray. She turned and followed, keeping pace easily as he clawed his way into the empty ocean.

She flicked her tail with annoyance. “But that is the moving land of your kin,” she chirruped.

The man shook his head from side to side, like a leopard seal snapping the

neck of a penguin.

She mimicked his motions trying to understand his gestures. He needed to hunt? He bobbed his head up and down as if he were swallowing a difficult fish and continued to swim further away from the ship at his painfully slow pace. Ah, he was the penguin.

“Other people are down at the bottom, do you want me to take you? I can join you to them on the bottom.” She pointed to the depths with her head in an undulating motion.

The man’s sides billowed in and out with great breaths, but he tried to move quietly, turning to look back at the boat every few strokes. She kept up with him easily, flicking her tail every now and then to shoot past him and wait. The man stopped swimming and thrashed the water with his feet to stay above it. He pointed to his chest with one hand and then pointed away from the setting sun and towards the place of sunrise. He did this several times and then continued to swim, though he was so tired he could scarcely keep his head above water.

She flicked her tail impatiently and wondered if her work was done, her action complete. She was tired and the man was obviously living and breathing above the water. She fluttered her inner eyelids. He was alive, but it was obvious it would not be for long without intervention. She opened her gills fully

to gulp a deep breath and then placed his hand on her dorsal fin. He held tight and she pulled him through the waters, away from the sunset. Part way through the night he started to slip off her fin, and she had to return for him again and again as he splashed in the water. Eventually she carried him, as she had during the storm, though her sides ached with so much exhaustion that she wondered if she too could drown.

She found land just after sunrise, the pink fingertips of dawn catching the sky and wrapping around the corners of the harbour. She felt the sting of sharp-toothed coral as she blundered over the reef, slicing her from gut to tail and clipping his foot. Their shouts of pain were so similar that they paused, looking at each other in surprise. They laughed, another impulse of surprising similarity, though she felt deafened by the constant rawness of above-water sound. She drew on the laughter, as ichor ran slowly from her deep cut and invisibly dissolved in the waves. She drew on all she had to carry him through the final spans.

Once he was beached thoroughly, his full body out of the water and kissing the sand, she lay in the shallows and felt herself mingle with the gritty water. No longer in motion, the savage pain of her cut bisected her; the pain of coral slice followed the rhythm of the ocean and in time became a noise like any other. She had no power to move her body, her eyes glazed and half open; too tired to worry

to worry about predators. She had completed her action, she was not a sorcerer, she was true Mer. She felt the waves pull and push her with their familiar rocking refrain, no longer fighting them. Her gills struggled to stay open, choked by sand, and only the waves brought fresh breathing. The tide was going out. Sound stopped and she slept without the cradle of the ocean to hold her.

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She woke to feel hands, many hands under her. She shrieked and lashed with her tail, sharp scales biting into flesh. She heard the cry of a man and a splash. She raised her head, her top half ulcerated by the sun, as a horde of men, similar to the one she carried, but with hair like small knobs of blackened coral, gathered around her. She could scarcely see them, her eyes filmed over protectively, and dizzily starved of air. She readied her claws and flicked her tail backwards and forwards as the men approached again, making gestures and sounds at each other. She dug her hands into the sand, ready to propel herself backwards and throw grit in their faces and cloud the air.

And as she did the net came down around her. Thick cords were pulled over, around and under her, and she screamed her humiliation to the sky as they trapped her like any mundane fish. She reached her arms through the holes in the net and thrashed her tail, clawing and bucking as

the net pulled her tight. She screamed her rage and cursed their eggs for a thousand generations.

She felt the shock of cool salt water, the electric zing of home and easy breathing. She felt the tug of the net pulling her deeper into the water, waves once again around her, the men keeping safe distance as they pulled her into the ocean. A limping man came towards her, she waited until he was close enough and lashed out at him. The limping man fell back, then rose and hobbled towards her again. She saw the rough grazes on his chest, legs and arms. It was her man, the man she saved. She watched him warily as he pulled the netting from her body and swished the water around her. His hands were light on her skin and, very carefully, only touched her in the right direction. When she was free of the netting he ducked his head under the water and they looked at each other, face to face, his soft mouth curved upwards.

She placed his hand on her gills, she touched her hand to his mouth, the place of their breathing, the sign of greatest trust.

She swam slow to the deep waters. Limping quiet to her sisters, fearful of shark as coral's teeth throbbed in her wound. Cut deep, but whole of action. Cut deep, but true. The trace of lips on her fingers, a memory of touch on her gills.

# Which Inland Waterways Merfolk Are You?

Nelly Geraldine García-Rosas  
& S.R. Mandel

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For the interactive version of this quiz, visit: <https://kitsune-ng.github.io/mermaids-monthly-quiz/>

Pull up a rock by this stream and listen carefully to our questions. The result may surprise you.

1. What do you think when you think about water?
  - A. Thirst
  - B. Family
  - C. Freedom
2. What are those shadows above you?
  - A. They're clouds, duh!
  - B. Big fish and boats
  - C. Death's entourage
3. You open a chest. There are three crystals inside. Which one do you take?
  - A. The blue one
  - B. The red one
  - C. The green one
4. What is under that rock?
  - A. Treasures!
  - B. Delicious bugs
  - C. Uncle Ramiro
5. You find a paddle with your name written on it. What do you do?
  - A. Take it with me. What a nice surprise!
  - B. Ask around and act depending on who it comes from.
  - C. Burn it
6. What do you keep in your scrapbook?
  - A. Memories, photos, washi tape
  - B. Plans, dried algae, squid ink prints
  - C. What's a scrapbook?
7. It is your turn at karaoke. Which song do you choose?
  - A. Something from this year's greatest hits
  - B. Whatever. As long as I'm allowed to sing
  - C. I'll sing my own song no matter the music

*See results on page (???)*

## € Which Inland Waterways Merfolk Are You? €

If your answers were mostly A: You are not a merfolk, you are a human. Learn how to address them by reading this handy press release:

The Seven Seas, year 2021 of the Human Cycle—Mermaids today announced a revised list of collective nouns that should be used from now on when referring to us. These updated, more accurate alternatives were crafted with the seaworthy folk in mind who, we assume, know about caution when dealing with brine.

We advise the discerning seafarer to listen carefully, swim lightly and speak decisively because “Names are like water, they flow and change, they give and take, they ruin and make,” said one of our sisters.

Know that we are

a gossip of mermaids to the uninitiated  
a glint of mermaids in the early dawn  
a breeze of mermaids if you're up for tea  
a burble of mermaids in the mighty rivers  
a gleam of mermaids tending to the coral  
a stream of mermaids swimming far and wide  
a giggle of mermaids in your glass of water  
a glitter of mermaids falling with the rain  
an ebb of mermaids at the empty beach  
a chuckle of mermaids who called out your name  
a glisten of mermaids sculpting the waves  
a flood of mermaids always in your dreams  
a guffaw of mermaids behind your damned back  
a glare of mermaids darkening the waters  
a torrent of mermaids pulling down your ship  
a chortle of mermaids when the air is scarce  
a glow of mermaids with a painful embrace  
an abyss of mermaids you cannot escape



## € Which Inland Waterways Merfolk Are You? €

If your answers were mostly **B**: You are The Bullhead-Catfish Folk

The Bullhead-Catfish Folk (*Ameiurus sapiens*) are a bottom-dwelling people, distributed in lakes, ponds, and slow-moving streams throughout the Mississippi Basin and Gulf Slope.

Though saddled with a fearsome reputation, these are in fact a sociable and gregarious folk. They live and travel in multifamily groups, and enjoy gossip and social occasions. While their staple diet consists of leeches and clams—hunted collectively using trident, net, and spear—they also have a taste for insects, and have been known to mount top-hunting expeditions by lake or river edges to secure their favorite prey: the wily grasshopper.

It is a notable oddity, sociologically speaking, how many people in the U.S. say that they fear the Bullhead Folk. To begin with, the name is of course misleading: only the folk's grown men have bulls' heads, while women, naturally, possess the large-eyed heads of cows, and the children are no more prepossessing than veal calves.

Second, their reputation for violence is quite undeserved. Despite the rumors, no evidence suggests that they have any taste for human blood.

Third, a bizarre and persistent piece of folk wisdom insists that the Bullhead folk enjoy hunting assaulting, dismembering and eating young human men and women. We invite you to rest assured that this is as untrue as it is unlikely, if only because the Bullhead Folk never grow to be more than 20 inches long.

## € Which Inland Waterways Merfolk Are You? €

If your answers were mostly C: You are The Charal-Silverside Folk

The Charal-Silverside Folk (*Chirostoma sapiens*) are endemic of the fresh water tributaries along the Lerma river basin in Mexico, as well as lakes like Chapala and Pátzcuaro.

Researchers from the National Autonomous University of Mexico, have found archeological evidence that the Charal-Silverside folk used to be more than friendly to the ancient human habitants of that region since they had trade agreements, cultural exchanges, and even interspecies marriages as depicted on Codex Cavendra. However, this friendliness ended with the great massacre of 1521. Out of the original lineages, only twenty-three families remain.

Although their bodies look like resplendent silver, they are not made out of that precious metal, except for one single scale. It is well known that people who have tried to steal that unique piece of their bodies, have disappeared mysteriously. Folk tales from the colonial period narrate instances in which witnesses heard them chanting on the shores:

*If you touch my silver scale,  
you will never see tomorrow.  
For your heart is up for sale,  
may you only taste the sorrow.*

The Charal-Silverside folk only started singing when they were taught how to do it since they had no knowledge of music before. Songs were introduced to them in the 1700's when a displaced mermaid from lake Texcoco showed them how to play a seashell conch. From then on, they have been known for using everything they find as a musical instrument: from pebbles to bones, from rope to teeth, from human hair to plastic bags.

# Mermaid Care

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by Jonathan Crowe

Few activities are more controversial than the keeping of mermaids (*Atargatis havfruensis*) in captivity. Despite being listed on Appendix I of CITES, their protected status in nearly every jurisdiction in the world and their extraordinarily challenging care requirements—to say nothing of the risks they pose to their keepers' safety—they continue to fetch exorbitantly high prices on the black market.

Conservationists are divided on the ethics of providing care advice for this critically endangered species. One school of thought holds that mermaids should not be kept, full stop; providing information only encourages mermaid keeping. The other argues for harm reduction. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates the number of mermaids in private collections at between 200 and 500 worldwide. Most are kept in dangerously substandard conditions. Providing basic care information would therefore go some way to improving the quality of life for those mermaids yet to be found and recovered by the authorities. Publicizing the substantial care requirements may also dissuade prospective keepers from acquiring a mermaid in the first place. We subscribe to the second view. A brief précis of mermaids' captive care requirements follows.



## Capture

Mermaid sightings in the wild are infrequent. Solitary and pelagic, mermaids seldom congregate and rarely approach boats or the shore. Most mermaids enter the exotic animal trade by way of rocky islets and skerries, where they are occasionally found in what collectors have described as a state of repose, combing their long tresses.

This vivid image is a staple of the enduring mythology surrounding this species, but it's anthropomorphic nonsense. Mermaids are teleost fish. Their "hair" is a mass of several kinds of epithelial cells that collectively serve as both gills and sensory organs;

they're the mermaid equivalent of a lateral line. Mermaids stranded on rocky islets are simply suffocating: unable to breathe or return to the sea, they groom their "hair" with their unusually humaniform pectoral fins in an attempt to expose more of their gills' surface area. This state of distress makes them quite tractable at the point of capture (as does the use of cobalt chloride), but contributes to their poor survival rate in captivity.

It's unclear why mermaids strand themselves: is it accidental, or the result of some unknown self-destructive impulse? One possibility is that human activity in the oceans has been disrupting mermaids' unusually delicate sensory organs, much as shipping noise has been found to disrupt whales' communications networks: mermaids strand themselves because they can no longer bear the overstimulation. More research is needed to confirm this hypothesis.

## Enclosure

Extremely fast swimmers, mermaids travel thousands of kilometres of open ocean in search of food sources (see below). Mermaid keepers consistently underestimate, by several orders of magnitude, just how immense the enclosure must be. While Olympic-size swimming pools have been used as makeshift holding tanks by mermaid rescue organizations, they do not represent even the barest minimum enclosure size; only the largest aquariums, with tanks holding more than five million litres of seawater, have had any success in terms of short-term survivability.

But simply providing a large volume of water is insufficient. For a mermaid to thrive, dissolved oxygen, pH and salinity levels must be calibrated precisely. Currents must be artificially generated: mermaids do not last long in stagnant water. Because of mermaids' profoundly sensitive "hair," electrical, chemical and auditory disruptions often prove fatal. In sum, mermaid requirements exceed even those of great white sharks, a species whose failure to thrive in captivity is well-known in aquarium circles.

Which is to say that the floor-to-ceiling aquariums installed in many keepers' bedrooms—the so-called "boudoir aquariums"—provide only a fraction of the space required for a healthy mermaid.

## Diet

Mermaids are active hunters, preying on most species found in the epipelagic zone. Staples include oilfish and smaller scombrids, as well as pelagic sea snakes. In

captivity, live food must be provided; a varied diet is essential to avoid vitamin B1 deficiencies. Wild mermaids also occasionally supplement their fare with seabirds: a mermaid is capable of breaching three metres into the air to catch birds on the wing. This is aided not only by their unusually humaniform pectoral fins, but also by extraordinarily strong teeth and jaws; a mermaid's mean bite force of 3,000 newtons is one-fifth that of a saltwater crocodile and is capable of shearing off human fingers—or any other appendages brought near the mouth.

## **Reproduction**

Mermaids' anterior resemblance to humans is an accident of convergent evolution. Their reproductive cycle is entirely piscine, with one caveat: mermaids are believed to be parthenogenetic. Only female mermaids have ever been captured. Poor survival rates have prevented observation of a complete reproductive cycle in controlled conditions, but on the three occasions when mermaids have spawned in captivity, the spawn emerged already fertilized.

It goes without saying—or it should—that, despite urban legends and several unverified (and long-debunked) accounts on the internet, human males are not a necessary part of the mermaid reproductive cycle.

## **Relationship with Humans**

Mermaids are solitary creatures that have little need for social contact with one another, much less with human beings. They prefer to avoid human contact. Humans, for their part, bewitched by centuries of myth and fairy tales, do not share that aversion. It is important to emphasize this fact: mermaids are wild animals. They are not mythical creatures. They do not wish to be taken from the sea. They do not look for princes to fall in love with. They will certainly not fall in love with lonely rich men who install fish tanks in their bedrooms. They have no interest in human males at all.

You're thinking of sirens.

# The Catfish Sisters

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by Lisa M. Bradley

*Content Note: This poem contains racism and racially based violence*

*Mississippi, 1874*

## I. Blood in the Water

The Catfish Sisters, those blue  
barbeled twins, that sleek school of two  
who learned the ways of Big River at its birth  
and knew the water as they knew each other—  
intimately, tasting with the whole of their  
sneaky, scale-less bodies—those queer kin  
who sometimes surfaced in full moonlight  
and stepped ashore as young women,

well one year, when Big River's northern banks  
slept under snow and its denizens sank  
low under the frozen slab where water still  
rolled dark and sluggish as a fall-fattened bear—  
a ritual both regular and right—these Sisters  
swam south, dreaming of that realm where  
autumn holds, where water oaks still weep  
golden leaves and cicadas grieve summer's retreat,  
where cargo-toting steamboats leaf Big River  
with lamplight medallions and the plash  
of paddleboats moonwoven with steam whistle and horn  
soothe the shore like Big River's very own hush and snore.

But near that Louisiana bend  
that shoots north into a thin-fin curve  
before turning toward the sea again,  
a strong scent invaded the Sisters' dream—  
not the expected brine of their beloved birdfoot delta,  
but a loathesome effluvia assailed the Sisters' ultra-  
sensitive skin. Downstream, something more  
foul than sediment rucked up by bridge-building  
or boat traffic, but not so caustic as  
the chromium salts cast off from  
leather-working tan-yards, but neither as  
sweetly rich as slaughterhouse runoff...  
instead *human* blood corrupted Big River—  
not so unusual since the war, but here  
in a quantity too great to ignore.  
Speeding up, seeking the poison's source,  
the Sisters met a wave of River Folk  
fleeing in the opposite direction,  
but none would stop to answer any question.  
So the Sisters swam on, bounding 'round the thin-fin  
curve, and plunged south into tragedy.

Oh the death throes roiling the waters!  
The gauntlet of bleeding, thrashing bodies!  
Sick with the flavors of blood and terror  
flooding through their fishy flesh,  
singeing their synapses,  
the Sisters came face to face with  
a gamut of human shapes,  
all ages and sizes, that seemed to have but one thing  
in common: the dark color of their  
dead or disfigured skin.  
Whatever had stricken them,  
the Sisters surmised,  
was not aquatic, and those who still survived...  
could they be saved?

Already, the panicked turbulence waned;  
soon the victims' endurance too must fade.  
So thinking, the Sisters rushed to catch  
on their backs a sinking child with braids.  
They pushed the small form to the surface,  
praying to hear some cough or struggle for  
smoke-sharpened air,  
but the child breathed no more nor moved,  
except where the water played with their hair.

Big River carried them all several miles  
as the Sisters streaked from one body to the next,  
exalting when they guided a person, still breathing,  
to shore, grieving as eelgrass claimed many more.  
Finally only a young man, weakly treading water,  
remained. One Sister slid under each arm,  
and, large as the Sisters were (the biggest  
blue catfish the man had ever seen),  
they easily lifted his chin above the waves.  
A lucky thing! Otherwise, his alarmed gasp  
might've been his very last.

The young man, just old enough to bear  
a beard, favored one arm and when they  
shifted it, they must have unknit  
a healing wound, for blood bloomed  
from his shoulder. The Sisters, exhausted  
overcome by the surfeit of blood  
surrounding them,  
succumbed as if to a spell:  
skin filtering but untasting;  
eyes open but unseeing;  
barbels touching but unfeeling.  
And who knows how long they might've drifted  
in that odd half-life,  
had the man not sagged unconscious



and starting slipping from their backs.

Now, close as the Catfish Sisters  
always swam alongside one another,  
they did not, as some legends swore,  
share a rib, but perhaps they shared a mind,  
for as one they seemed to decide,  
“Damned if we can wait for night,  
simply to be hidden from human sight.  
And what does it matter if this area is  
country or town? The man’s fought too hard  
for us to let him drown.” Thus,  
they lifted him again and propelled him toward  
a stand of scouring rush and, with mighty effort,  
heedless of who might see the shift,  
they grew legs to climb the riverbank  
and arms to haul him clear.

## II. The Sole Survivor

The man woke with a start,  
bleary eyes darting about  
the small camp hidden among black gum trees  
and curtained by purple woodbine.  
As he tried to rise from his leaf litter bed,  
a wrenching pain reminded him  
of his wound. He cried out, but his throat,  
raw from purging river water, emitted  
only a strangled vowel. Nevertheless  
the sound summoned from the shadows  
his saviors, who came forth shushing  
to ensure he didn’t lose the poultice  
of yarrow and plantain plugging his shoulder.  
He recoiled, clutching his bloody shirt,  
draped over him like a sheet,

when the weak campfire  
revealed his nurses to be two women  
so white under mismatched attire,  
they looked nearly blue and at first,  
he was too terrified to speak.

The Sisters asked simple questions  
in several tongues, 'til finally  
the man calmed and croaked out  
his name and hometown.  
Tendrils of the Sisters' blue-black hair  
drifted about their faces, as if lifted by  
the breeze of Jacob's breath as he told how  
his people in V\_\_\_\_burg had been attacked  
by white folks who couldn't accept  
a black man as sheriff.  
The Sisters blinked their wide-set,  
pale button eyes, perplexed  
by the notion of a sheriff  
and the punishment of many  
for the actions of one.  
Jacob closed his eyes a moment,  
suppressing pain and impatience,  
before explaining.  
"They go by the name White-Liners  
but it's the selfsame Klan.  
They're beside themselves now  
that black folks are voting, same as them,  
and worse—as they see it—winning.  
They're shamed by the mere idea  
of a black man holding power over them.  
You think they cotton to the reality  
of Mr. Peter Crosby, Sheriff?  
They won't abide the election.  
They can't even stand the sight  
of black folk who don't suffer

every single second of their lives.”

Seeing a glint of grim understanding  
now kindled in the Sisters’ eyes,  
Jacob wondered who these soft-jawed,  
drift-haired women were,  
that he had to connect every dot.  
“The war,” began one Sister,  
“is not over?” said the other.  
Jacob snorted. “Not in Mississippi.  
Maybe on paper, maybe up north,  
but the South simply declared  
a new enemy: Reconstruction.”  
With the blood he’d lost,  
Jacob had lost all memory too  
of being saved by twin giant catfish,  
but just now he remembered  
the general wisdom of keeping his mouth shut  
around white women.  
Then again there was that bit in the Bible:  
“for some have entertained angels unawares.”  
And there was surely something strange,  
about these too white, too quiet ladies—like all  
the languages they knew  
and the recent events they did not.

So, fiery, Jacob forged ahead. He said,  
“These angry white people, so many!  
Some from other counties, some from other states,  
they came to grab us off the streets.  
They dragged us from our homes and beds,  
our very own businesses!  
Some of us escaped. The rest, well, we got  
the same as ever.” He pointed at his shoulder.  
“Lynched, whipped, shot.  
The White-Liners were on the rampage

for ten days. Only when Governor Ames  
sent General Grant our way with reinforcements  
did their madness fade. And only because  
how were they, the good citizens of V\_\_\_\_burg,  
to explain all those corpses?  
They wanted blood, but not the blame. So  
to hide their shame, they set torches  
to our side of town: 'Shop Fire Sparks Tragedy'  
the papers said. Those of us too stubborn  
for death? Too far to drag to the flames?  
We got tossed in Old Man River."

"In what?" asked the Sisters,  
and seeing their shared look  
of consternation, spooked by  
their query in unison,  
Jacob quickly replied,  
"The Mississippi,"  
and the Sisters nodded, satisfied  
with the Anishinaabe title.  
But by now Jacob had remembered  
the book of Ezekiel and just why  
angels might appear in disguise.  
And as he'd told his tale, the grim  
enlightenment in the women's eyes  
had blazed to full-fledged wrath.  
Not, he thought, directed at him,  
but on his behalf, or perhaps that  
of all V\_\_\_\_burg's victims.  
Not being the target of their ire  
made it no easier to endure, especially  
when the Sisters paced 'round the fire,  
one clockwise, one widdershins,  
their pallid skin slickening  
despite the cold and bits of blue-black hair waving  
about their faces like the barbels

they actually were (unbeknownst to him).  
Although his aches were as an anchor,  
Jacob struggled from his low bed and begged  
to be released. Of course, he was neither  
prisoner nor captive, but the Sisters had history  
with humans and chose not to hinder  
his sudden hurry. They merely handed him  
more yarrow, advising he search for a healer  
who'd once lived in Dewberry Hollow,  
for even if she'd long since gone to rest,  
surely she'd have trained an apprentice.  
Jacob thanked the Sisters profusely  
but his every drop of sweat, each pained breath,  
radiated primal fear, so the Sisters  
nodded only once, then mercifully  
turned their backs on him.

Once his footsteps faded, the Sisters  
doused the campfire  
and slipped away like smoke.  
Much as they itched and wished  
to shed their stolen  
clothesline attire,  
they remained dressed, lest they court  
even more danger hiding  
in nude human form near the shore.  
Amid trees shaggy  
with cold-withered creeper,  
they watched for the right moment  
to run for Big River.  
Sun was halfway through its daily stroll,  
and though few humans staked claim  
to this stretch of Big River,  
those who did moved nimbly among  
their rugged nests and nature.  
There the Sisters waited

and over the hours, betwixt the two,  
a plot wordlessly emerged.

### III. A Great Debate

The River Folk were disturbed  
by the Catfish Sisters' explanation  
for why Big River had turned  
into a mass grave. "Surely there must be  
blight or famine," a walleye hypothesized.  
"Some incredible strain for the humans  
to turn on their own kind?"  
"Alas, no," the Sisters said.  
A long-nosed gar pointed out,  
"If they were truly starving,  
wouldn't they eat one another?"  
Agreement rippled through the Folk,  
many of whom had already fed  
on the dead, believing, "If we let  
them go to waste, we're just as bad  
as the human race." Next a paddlefish spoke  
for the lamprey on his back,  
"But it's ridiculous! You, Sisters,  
have walked among the Grounded  
and told us how wide their realm stretches,  
how high it soars. There must be room enough  
for all the Grounded. Why must humans be  
so absurd?" A mudbug, recently molted,  
unearthed herself to blurt,  
"Didn't they just have a war about this?  
I thought they'd gotten sorted."  
"Hear, hear!" rang from all quarters.

The Catfish Sisters rattled

their pectoral fins for order.  
“It’s unwise to ponder  
human behavior longer  
than strictly necessary,  
lest we too fall out of harmony.  
Kin, we cannot trust V\_\_\_\_burg humans  
not to poison Big River with hate again.  
Nor do we believe they should benefit  
from this sacred source they’ve profaned.  
We should punish this port city  
by moving Big River away.”

The River Folk gaped in awed silence  
at the suggestion of a course correction,  
all except for a late-migrating eel, who  
finished her feast of glass shrimp and said,  
with mucilaginous sneer,  
“If I remember right, the humans tried  
to divert Big River just so, years ago,  
and you fought them tooth and scale.”  
She slithered away, ignoring a carp’s retort:  
“That was different! We won’t be moved  
by war!”  
A spectaclecase mussel, roused  
from hibernation by the great debate,  
took up the old chant:  
“Grant! Cannot! Canal Us!”  
but most Folk were undeterred  
from debate. A softshell turtle  
paddled up to say,  
“We worked awfully hard to preserve  
Big River’s thin-fin curve, even when  
currents and sediments seemed content  
to take the shorter route. Now  
you want us to do the reverse?”

*Illustration by Cameron Harvey*

The Sisters said, “Then we could not bow to human force. They were using Big River to move their munitions. We couldn’t allow them to turn the river itself into a weapon.

But did you know, V\_\_burg was a problem even then?

Grant’s Canal was intended to bypass the town’s cannons. Were it not for their warlike ways, we wouldn’t be in this position not once, but twice!”

Timidly, a waterdog remarked, “But up north, Big River sleeps. to shift course without consulting all may be unwise.”

“Indeed,” agreed a pumpkinseed sunfish, drawn from weedy shallows by the fervor of debate.

“If Big River moves, how many will you leave gasping, flapping, in a shrinking puddle in your righteous wake?”

“It needn’t be a sudden shift,” opined a river redhorse, his kind increasingly rare. “And some of us can’t survive much more poison. Really, it isn’t fair.”

Two sturgeons sucking leeches from the river floor were asked for the wisdom of their years. The elder of the languid century fish solemnly said, “Big River’s power flows south. None up north will care about a slight deviation unless we cause flooding upriver,





and we can avoid that with sufficient preparation.” The second sturgeon added, “Even if we all consent here, we must alert those downstream, lest we behave as irresponsibly as those wretched human beings.”

Moved by the Folk’s sagacity and fears, the Catfish Sisters declared, “We hear and understand you.” With no need to confer, one Sister said, “One of us will swim south with our proposal. The other will stay here to address your concerns.”

The other Sister said, “Come spring, we will reunite here, before heading north to announce our plan.”

At this stunning declaration, the River Folk gasped so vastly, sucking in so much water, that Big River’s surface dropped several inches.

The Catfish Sisters, those interlocked twins, would willingly split for this cause?

The legendary shifter Sisters would endure seasons apart?

Shocked, fearful of what such separation might portend, the Folk assured the Sisters they needn’t take such drastic measures. Rather, they vowed to rally their neighbors and achieve accord, to prepare and surge into action the moment they received the final word.

So it was that the Catfish Sisters spent the little Fall left and winter, too, working toward the sea, telling Jacob’s story to all

and entreating their southern kin to agree:  
a detour 'round that devil town of V \_\_\_\_ burg  
was downright necessary.  
They reasoned. They argued.  
They wheedled and cajoled.  
Truth be told, they spent half their time  
two-legged to secure  
some delicacy or bauble  
they might use to sway  
reluctant members of the fold.

Meanwhile, otters and raccoons,  
incensed by the suggested territorial changes,  
hired their own advocate to reach  
Big River's southernmost ranges.  
This surly, yellow-crowned night heron  
harangued the Sisters throughout  
the birdfoot delta, decrying the course shift.  
Fortunately, few southerners seemed persuaded  
by his claims of great injustice.  
Could clipping such a minor meander,  
they asked, really make much difference?  
The southerners, blessed with an abundance  
of waterways and shorelines, assumed the  
riparians could always migrate.  
Besides, the southerners said,  
it wasn't their concern what occurred  
miles upriver. They probably wouldn't even  
notice, what with the commotion of Gulf  
commerce and travel. In any case,  
one afternoon the riparians' advocate  
so annoyed an algae-masked alligator,  
hitherto hanging in the water  
like an invisible anchor,  
that she launched herself into the reeds  
and devoured the bloviating heron,

and thereafter  
the Sisters met little resistance  
to their plan.

#### IV. The HEAVE-HO

The Catfish Sisters, those blue-  
veined spinsters, that strange school of two  
who knew the Mississippi's curves like kin,  
like the fish-belly fair skin on the backs  
of their twin's hands,  
they returned in Spring,  
their skirts hitched up to their ankles  
and their feet squelching  
in the muddy creek that would soon be  
the new route of the venerable Big River  
and alongside the maidens in their  
mismatched, clothesline-snatched finery  
snapping turtles marched over ground,  
helping carve a sharper path through the swamp,  
and the usually solitary creatures amassed  
in such a swarm that their clashing shells  
beat a military drum  
and startled the shy map turtles,  
resting in their likewise migration,  
off their logs and into the boggy shallows.  
From the red-winged blackbirds,  
the Sisters learned  
that the skunks and weasels,  
though complaining bitterly the whole time,  
had for now vacated the surrounding woods,  
lest they be drowned  
when Big River flexed and turned.

As they splashed along the path

that would soon be home, the Sisters encountered  
dreamy-eyed beavers, eating water lilies  
and envisioning new empires;  
waterlogged chipmunks rushing from burrow  
to burrow with babies in tow,  
trying to outrun the rising water table;  
and consortiums of squirrels debating  
which trees were most likely to survive  
the coming upheaval.  
Farther out, skipjack, small and fast,  
carved out the creekbed without fear of  
falling prey to the minks and muskrats  
who'd already established their dens  
within sight and scent of the shore.  
The Sisters so admired the sleek swiftness  
of the skipjack, they morphed  
into mermaid form, discarding hateful  
human dress behind them on the bank  
to dive deeper into the current,  
where they discovered  
the fish Folk had transported  
their young to nurseries upriver.  
Heartened that the Folk here  
had committed so clearly  
to turning the tide on V\_\_\_\_burg,  
the Sisters hastened to the headwaters  
to make proper obeisance to the northern Folk.  
Although eager to make their case  
for the erasure of old coastlines  
and the bold calligraphy of new,  
even the Sisters were surprised by  
how short and smooth their persuasion proved,  
thanks to messages sent ahead  
by the century-old sturgeons.  
With the bite of ice ever  
in their blood, the northern Folk were as

ferocious for justice (some might say revenge)  
as the southern Folk had been laissez-faire  
(some might say lazy).  
The representative chosen to speak  
for the northerners  
was a ten-foot yellow alligator gar  
with scales like bone armor.  
Certain snowmelts, he explained, his voice  
whistling between a double row  
of jagged upper teeth,  
were being held in strategic reserve,  
and at a specific moon phase,  
those frigid waters would be unleashed  
to aid those downriver  
in accomplishing the course change.

Finally came the night  
the Mississippi River would slough  
those wretched banks  
in favor of a fresh path.  
A few lonesome boats gently rocked,  
docked at a pier south of V\_\_\_\_burg.  
On one, a hitched horse wove  
back and forth on her front legs,  
lips flapping fretfully  
at the eerie currents. A week before  
more ships had frequented those shores  
but even humans can read  
nature's broader signs and had progressed  
from whisper and worry  
to open conjecture  
about the wax and wane of the river.  
They had plans and, indeed,  
would've had time to wean  
were the river's shift natural,  
not part of a retaliatory scheme.

The purple wartyback clams began  
a cheerleading chant—  
“We’ll be loud,  
We’ll be clear,  
We don’t want  
hate dumped here!”—  
as the Folk gathered  
before the creek that soon  
would supersede the thin-fin curve.  
At the Sisters’ signal,  
the Folk knit themselves fin to fin,  
claw to shell, and in  
a single chimeric mass  
surged forward, shoving a wall  
of water fast  
before them into the channel.  
Turf was torn asunder,  
bushes twirled away like tops,  
and banks crumpled like shot horses.  
A volley of small Folk  
were flung with such force  
they swirled out the other end  
of the channel and emerged  
southerners.  
Once the wave winked out of sight,  
the mid-river Folk hurried  
back to the starting point, led by  
the Catfish Sisters, in mermaid form,  
by walleye and sauger, sturgeon and alligator gar—  
ancient creatures, mighty and strong,  
but also so deeply bonded to Big River,  
the tides kept time as much  
with the pumping of their cold hearts  
as with the moon’s ebb and flow.  
Indeed the currents sought  
to mirror their movements,

so when again the Folk gathered as one  
and plunged into the channel,  
Big River sprang after them,  
tearing new coastline  
as easily as a petticoat hem,  
ripping up trees by their roots,  
and tossing boats like toys.  
Trapped on one such boat,  
the bay mare fought  
her hitching post, hoofs  
hammering the deck as she  
squealed and snapped at the air,  
moonlight glaring off  
the whites of her wild eyes.  
Again small Folk were flung free  
of the river-moving chimera,  
but now the channel had widened  
so the yellow perch and bigmouth buffalo  
whirled over the flooded wetland  
rather than being shunted south.

Back at the starting line,  
the purple wartybacks continued to rally:  
“Heave-Ho, Heave-Ho,  
the port at V\_\_\_\_burg’s got to go!”  
Again the prime movers regrouped,  
their bodies aching from wielding  
so much raw power, their nerves jittery  
from the icemelt revenge supplied  
by the northern Folk.  
The Catfish Sisters sought to encourage their kin.  
“Onward, brave siblings!  
If you could take the halfling form we do,  
you’d see for yourselves the change  
we’ve already wrought.  
But feel, dear family. Surely you can *feel*

the difference in Big River. How the water  
wants the shorter path, how the currents yearn  
to rake new beds.

Take a moment to restore yourselves  
but do not stop. Not until Big River is safe  
and OURS again.”

While slipping among their brethren  
with this exhortation,  
the Sisters learned of the horse  
trapped upon a boat.

Horrified, they hurried to find the creature,  
hoping to spare her some misery.

By the time they found her,  
froth had spread from the mare’s mouth  
to ring her muzzle beneath flared nostrils.

Panic her blinders, she swung her head  
from side to side,

her ears pinned back tight, and  
the way she squealed and reared,

the Sisters couldn’t believe  
neither tether nor post had snapped yet.

They didn’t dare take human shape  
and board the boat, more shipwreck now  
than ship, to free the maddened beast.

Pitiful as her terror was to witness,  
they decided it best to wait

until the boat capsized and swept  
the horse underwater with it.

One Sister went in search  
of a razor-edged mussel shell;  
the other rushed to tell  
the chimera’s prime movers  
they must continue to push without them.

The clams cried out  
“No more massacres!



Big River must be pure!”  
and the very next surge of River Folk  
toppled the boat.  
The mare plunged into the water  
and at once began bucking  
and twisting, turning  
her belly to the moon in panic.  
The Sisters took on fully human forms,  
hoping to placate the horse.  
One gathered her courage and mounted  
the helpless beast. She wrapped her arms tight  
around that terror-corded neck and hugged  
with all her might, head to toes.  
Meanwhile, a great nebula  
of churned water, rucked-up silt, and roiling bubbles  
near-blinded the other Sister.  
She forded the cloud with hands before her,  
reaching for the rope that threatened  
to drag them all down with the sinking boat.  
The second she seized it,  
she set to sawing with her mussel shell,  
and when that was not fast enough,  
she snarled and grew such  
fearsome jagged teeth, the alligator gar  
would’ve gnashed with envy.  
With two savage bites,  
she snapped through the stubborn rope,  
setting the mare free.  
Who knows how long the poor beast  
might’ve struggled still, lost  
in that black looking-glass realm  
had the Sister on her back  
not gripped her mane  
and guided her to the star-splotched surface?  
But once oriented, the mare swam  
to the warbly light and from there

ploughed a marshy shore to safety.

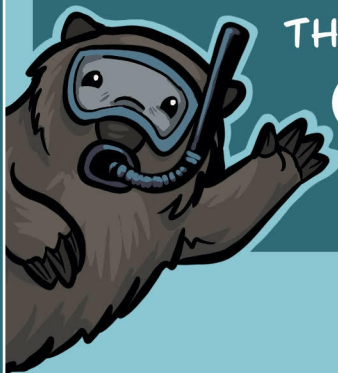
One Sister slid from the horse's back  
and the other hauled herself ashore  
and they clasped one another, panting in relief,  
their heartbeats so loud in their human ears  
that it took some time for them to hear  
the cheers of their own Folk:  
Big River had changed course.  
They looked around and saw that it was true.  
The thin-fin curve was now a mere stream  
petering out from an oxbow lake,  
and the creek that the Folk had made a channel  
was now the One Way.  
No longer would the people of V\_\_\_\_burg  
pollute Big River with their hate;  
no longer would Big River serve  
those it reviled.  
The Sisters embraced in celebration  
but it would be hours yet  
before they joined their comrades' revelry.  
For though the majority of Folk  
had joined their cause, the Sisters  
remained mindful of the quiet,  
overlooked few, and so the Catfish Sisters,  
those blue-barbeled twins, that sleek  
school of two, still had work to do.

### **Coda**

Over a hundred years later,  
long after the people of V\_\_\_\_burg  
twisted another, smaller river  
to do their bidding,  
folks in that port city still tell

of the night the Mississippi River  
jumped its banks.  
Some whisper of the two women  
spied at dawn the next day.  
Their awkward silhouettes—  
akimbo and strange, as if  
straining at the confines of their clothing, or  
aching from the effort of standing upright—  
shimmered on the shore of the oxbow lake,  
all that remained of the once mighty  
Mississippi River bend. The stories say  
those women, alike as twins,  
Sisters most certainly,  
they had blue-black hair that shone as if wet,  
but tendrils of it waved in the air,  
on the breeze you might've thought,  
except there wasn't wind enough that morn  
to ruffle the surface of the lake or tickle  
a butterfly's wings.  
Depending on who's telling the tale  
maybe they'll mention the women's ill-  
fitting muddy dresses, the bunched-up necklines  
like those ladies never learned  
how to manage buttons,  
or the obscene hemlines, like they didn't know  
ankle from calf.  
Or maybe those telling the stories  
will be too polite for such details  
and they'll focus instead on the buckets  
on the ladies' arms and how they scoured  
the puddled shore, collecting flopping fishes  
and weak mudbugs. They'll say  
it didn't seem like such a bad idea,  
to make a silver lining supper from  
that unfortunate turn of the tide,  
but then again,

the way Great-Great Granpappy always told it  
(or Grand Aunt Ginny, or Old Doc Walcott,  
there was something odd,  
lumpy,  
about those women's profiles,  
and they seemed to croon  
at their catch,  
as if greeting old friends,  
and no one could say  
just where they'd come from,  
or who their people were,  
so none of the V\_\_\_\_burg citizens dared  
join the ladies,  
Sisters, some said,  
twins, swore others,  
after all.



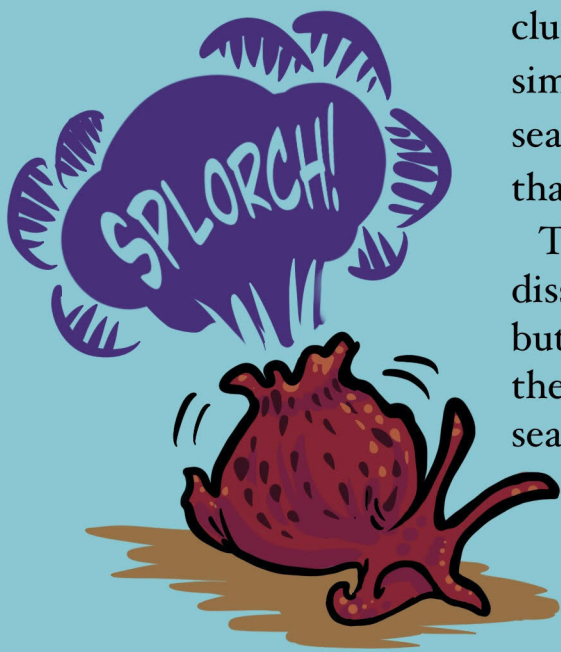
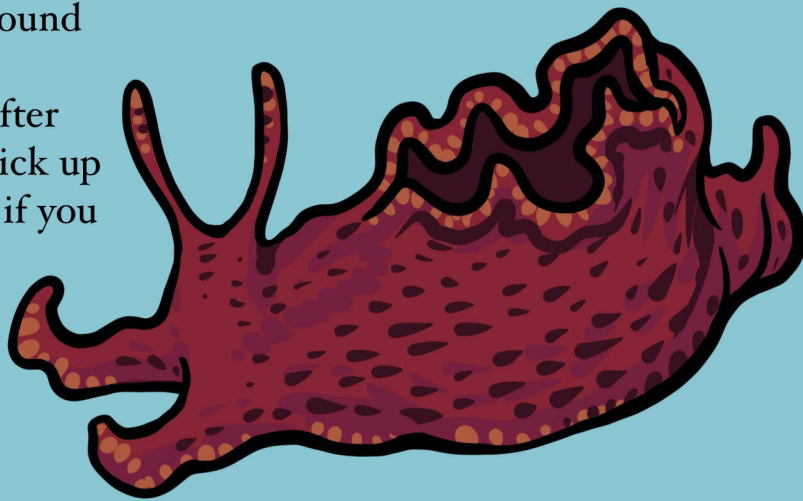
THE NORTH AMERICAN WOMBAT'S

# GUIDE TO RANDOM SEA CREATURES

## THE SEA HARE

Sea hares are large sea slugs found mostly in coastal habitats. The Romans named them “hares” after the two scent receptors that stick up and look kinda like rabbit ears if you squint.

All sea hares are herbivores, feeding on algae and seaweed. Some species can weigh up to thirty pounds!



Sea hares are hermaphrodites and will mate in large clusters, where they may supply and receive sperm simultaneously. (I am not here to judge. You get down, sea hares!) They then lay millions of eggs in long strands that look rather like brightly colored spaghetti.

They squirt truly fabulous pink or purple ink to dissuade predators like spiny lobsters. Types of ink differ, but one works simply by being tastier than the sea hares themselves, so the lobsters try to eat the ink while the sea hare sneaks away. Another blocks the lobster's sense organs so they can't smell the hare or anything else. They're also covered in mucus, which contains all kinds of nasty compounds, including acids. Useful if you're a big tasty sea slug in a scary world.

For once, they're not endangered, threatened, or in trouble. They're just kinda neat.

# Merbraids

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by Amal El-Mohtar, Caitlyn Paxson, and Jessica P. Wick

## Sea Siren:

Sailor, sweet sailor, why not come to me?  
Here, to the loveliest; to the wildest; to the sea.  
I will give you wanting. Don't you want?  
You want to. I will draw you down, by salt and tide,  
froth and foam, I will draw you deep  
and you will want  
to drink. With me, my lovely meat,  
you will burn: your eyes, your lungs,  
your heart—and I will rock  
your bones to sleep,  
and you will dream. Oh, warm! My sailor! With me,  
your eyes will be salt-seamed, salt-stitched  
by my own hand, and replaced  
with pearls; your ghost will see  
the wide, wide world. You will want,  
my love, I promise you,  
and you will yearn. I want you, too.

## Lake Siren:

Hear *me*, sailor, sweet  
Who rides on wine dark seas,  
Skims along the lapis waves  
And trawls the brackish deeps:

Do you not long to quench your thirst?  
Do you not long for quaff that keeps?

There's crust upon your chin -  
Telltale of desperation,

Of lips ill-kissed by salt,  
Imminent delirium.

You are soaking in a lusty brine.  
You are pickling from the outside in.

But not in my waters, no  
I would never treat you so.  
But rather wash you clean  
In my pebble-bottomed bath.

Forget the fickle ocean's song,  
Forget her beauty and her wrath.

Yes, come closer, sailor.  
Let my undertow embrace you,  
Push inside your mortal core,  
Swell your every shriveled pore.

You will take it drop by drop.  
You will gulp and ask for more.

My sweet waters are enough  
To fill the holes inside you  
With more alluring stuff,  
Make a bottle of your brittle skin.

You need only drink.  
You need only drink me in.

You will never thirst again.

**Sea Siren:**

*Listen, sailor!* It's true  
these wild seas are no quaint glass casket,  
ready to quench you; no tame mirror,  
for toothless old monsters and the lofty skies,  
which never cared for you.  
In my cold arms—and they are cold,

my darling—the land will never lock  
you, stop you. Sailor, here you will always thirst,  
never forced to run one course and desperate  
to escape each time it storms. Repetition is a road  
almost always running south; I give you more.

I have teeth. And beds; I promise to rise  
and I will give you blood and brine,  
crash and curl.  
I will give you ships,  
history, history from before history,  
I will pull for you fire from the earth's core,  
I will show you luminous creatures, glittering treasures,  
and other secrets in my quiet, constant dark.  
I will change you into a mystery, give you  
immortality, and you will claim  
more wonder than waits among the stars.

### **River Siren:**

Salt is for scouring, a lake's a still depth,  
I beseech you, sweet sailor: ask more of your death!

The ocean's oblivion; the deep lake, despair,  
But a river's a rather more supple affair—  
Ignore the sea's swishing, the lake's whine—instead,  
Come find better rest in my soft riverbed.

This sleek rippled surface of silk for our sheets,  
These moss-slippered stones for a pillow so neat,  
I'll call up cool currents to wind through your hair,  
Bend grasses to bind you and rid you of air,  
And leash you to wander the breadth of my lair!

The ocean's too large, that pond far too small,  
But my rhythms and rockings have something for all.  
There's a lilt to my silt as I come and I go,  
The best of both worlds lies in my undertow!

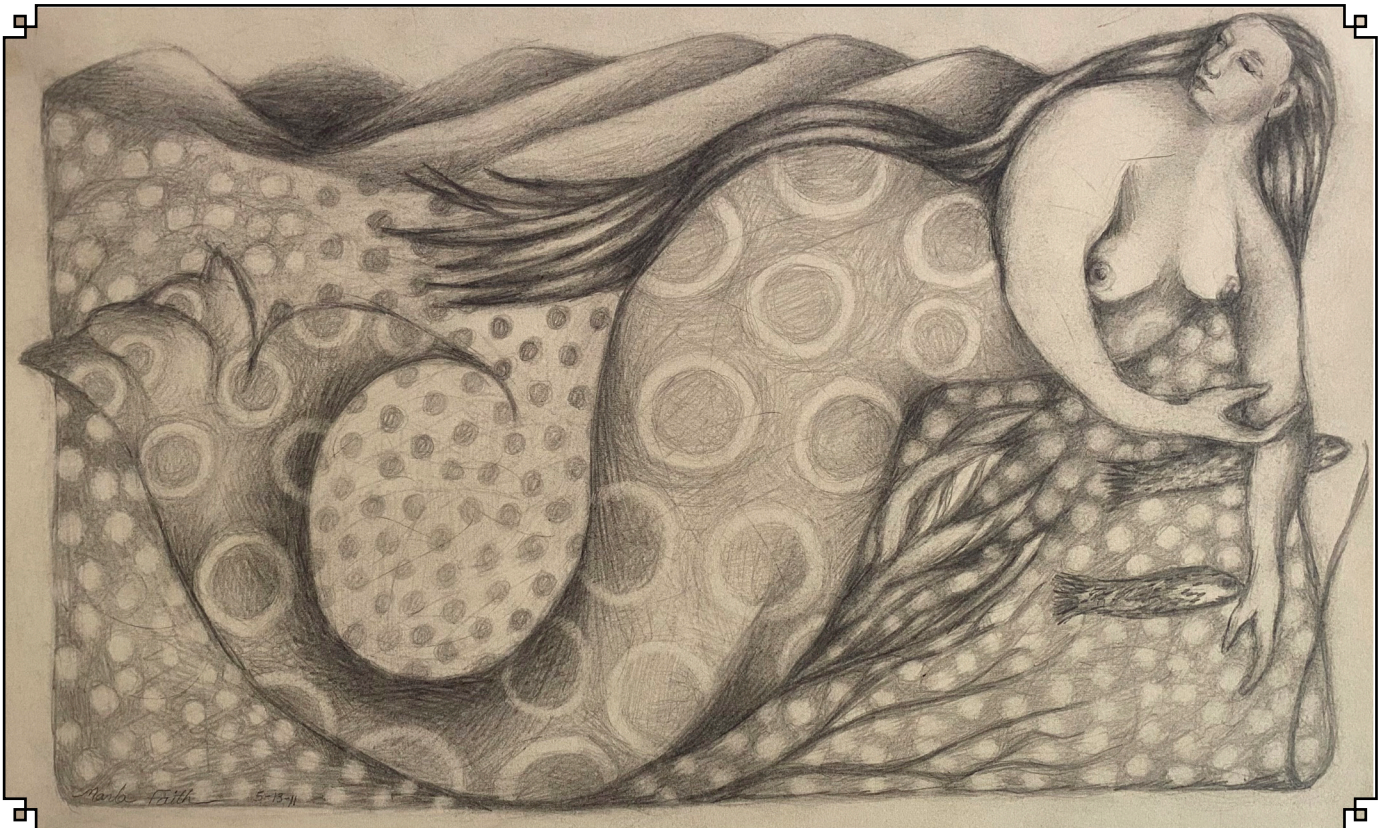


I've tides like the ocean, am sweet as a lake,  
Oh won't you give up your land-legs for my sake?  
There isn't a thirst my broad waters can't slake;  
Come to me, my sailor. Dream deep in my wake.

**Sea Siren:**

Come to *me*. I wait for you.  
I tell you the truest thing: There is no romance  
in the world that's doesn't begin with the glamour  
of the seas, unless perhaps the Moon--  
and once we have ghosts enough, I'll take that too.  
Let me take you. I want you.  
Come to me, sailor, come  
to me, sailor. Come.

*Illustration by Marla Faith*



# Magdalena the Mermaid

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Magdalena the Mermaid  
was a good witch,  
she had a white cat  
with a fish's tail  
and an owl-lobster  
who visited the coast  
while the seaweeds slept.

by Ana Merino

Translated by Toshiya Kamei

*This poem was first published in  
Trafika Europe in July, 2020*

Magdalena the Mermaid  
in the sea was the queen  
of seafood soups,  
and her stocks and stews  
were the best potion  
she could offer  
the poor sailors  
who sank with their ships  
and can't go back  
where they came from.

Magdalena cooked  
recipes full of oblivion  
to make the bottom of the sea  
less like a prison.

Magdalena prepared  
confits of joy  
so that the sailors  
could enjoy all day  
the wet world.

The sailors sing:  
their heaven is in the sea  
because the sea witch  
always cooks comfort  
for the sad drowned men  
who sank to the bottom.

The sailors sing:  
don't fear the wind  
or the sinking ships  
because the sea has a witch  
who cooks hope  
inside their minds.

# The Space Mermaid's Garden

---

by Beth Goder

*Edited by Ashley Deng*

Brill touches the floating lilies of her galactic garden, her scaled arm outlined against dark planets and white-hot stars. Zoom out, and she's a figure suspended in space, surrounded by bluebells and seaweed and the hushed, crumpled newness of hyacinth. Her magnificent tail flicks like a feather, her scaled head shines. Zoom in, deep into her body, into the pouches under her skin where she catches cosmic dust, and she's an efficient cartographer, a careful explorer, a mermaid who appreciates the work that goes into well-made things.

In her hand, a lily dies, turning back to dust. The lily loses its molecules one by one until it is only scattered parts of something that used to be whole. Brill has never seen a flower disintegrate. Her gardens are made to flourish, built from the dust she absorbs into the pouches under her scales.

Soon, her sister Yulana swims up to the garden. Zoom out, and Yulana is a blue-scaled mermaid framed against a backdrop of twelve planets orbiting elliptical around a pallid sun, surrounded

by schools of rainbow fish and pods of space whales. Zoom in, and she's a lover of good literature, an accidental chemist, a mermaid who thinks space gardens are a waste of time. But she'd never tell her sister that, not in so many words.

Brill points to the place where the lilies used to be. "Do you know anything about this?"

Yulana smooths out the scales behind her ear. "Your flowers are turning back to dust?"

"I built them well. They shouldn't have fallen apart." Morning glory vines brush her face. Pollen tickles the scales on the back of her neck.

"This system has lots of interesting stuff," says Yulana. "A group of us are looking at the chemical composition of the gas giant closest to the star. We could always use another mer to help." The offer hangs, floating between them like a water droplet in weightlessness, held together by tension, waiting for the lightest touch to decohere. Their group of thirty mers has been traveling for years, slipping beneath

the scales of space into new systems. They will return home with knowledge of other places, updated maps, new chemical formulas for durable materials. Brill does her work, which consists mostly of navigation and mapping, and then she makes gardens.

“I would rather figure out what’s happening to my lilies.”

Yulana reaches into the pouch under her ribcage and pulls out a wad of cosmic dust. She shapes a lily, pulling everything into place, until the dust turns white, until a stem twists delicately green. “Look at how small this lily is,” she says, waving her arms to encompass everything.

Zoom out, and this lily is a fraction of the total matter in a twelve-planet system, an amount that could be swallowed by a margin of error many times over, definitionally insignificant. Compared to this system’s sun, this lily is like an atom within a molecule within a grain of sand buried on a beach stretching out to the horizon, and the sun is larger than an ocean. Zoom farther and this sun is one of a billion trillion stars in the observable universe, stretched across distances so vast that metaphors fail, because nothing within our understanding is that huge. It is impossible to see lilies from this distance.

Zoom in, and this lily is hastily made, rough where it should be smooth, petals too symmetrically identical. The stem

is one-toned green, without variation, missing its leaves. Still, it is a made thing floating in an expanse of unshaped light, which is why Brill feels a pang when it too disintegrates.

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The sunflowers are next. Bright petals wither and break. Brill gathers the cosmic dust into her subcutaneous pouches, but she can’t catch it all.

Purple lotuses drift softly, each petal lovingly indented. Roots float outward like gossamer tentacles. Brill crafted each anther and filament, each peduncle and petal, each leaf.

Before her eyes, water ferns shrivel. Bumpy fronds caress the back of a galactic tuna before becoming nothing at all.

Brill sighs, her scales rippling in a sympathetic tremor. In times like these, it is appropriate to make a list.

#### POSSIBLE REASONS MY SPACE GARDEN IS TURNING TO DUST

1. Pests created and imported
2. Failure of construction
3. Sabotage

She takes the points one by one. Could the millions of fish or pods of whales (a whole ecosystem travels with the mers) have nibbled on her garden? Or perhaps the insectoid creatures Brill has created? Pollinators and nemeses to plants, both.

But the plants don't have bite marks, leaf galls, or any signs of such decay.

Perhaps some hidden flaw sleeps within her plants, although Brill is not in the habit of making mistakes. She examines a creeping primrose-willow for hours, running her hands along the glossy leaves and red stem. If there's an imperfection, she can't find it.

That leaves sabotage.



Brill finds Yulana swimming to the core of the gas giant with five other mers. Lustrous tails shimmer like rainbows.

"You've come to help us," says Yulana, looking so happy that, for one moment, Brill thinks perhaps she will spend the day exploring the planet with her sister. Isn't it easier to let Yulana believe that Brill has an interest in endless layers of lifeless gas? But then she thinks of her garden disintegrating before her, like rain melting into the sea.

"Actually, I just wanted to ask you something." Brill hates what she says next, but she's desperate to get an answer. "Do you know if anyone has been messing with my garden?"

Yulana stops swimming. The other mers pass by them, one of their colleagues looking back with an expression that can only mean sisters and good luck.

"You think that I had something to do with your lilies?" Yulana's face scrunches up and her voice goes dangerously low. She did this when they were kids too. Such an expression is always followed by anger.

"I didn't mean to say you did something," Brill says with an injured tone, although that was exactly what she meant. "Just that, maybe one of the others. By accident." At the look on Yulana's face, she trails off.

"I defended you to everyone," says Yulana. "Making these insane gardens."

Now it's Brill's turn to be angry. "Why do you care what I do in my spare time? I have so much of it because I'm efficient." Her cartographic excellence is well known. It only takes her two swims around a system to know it like the distinctive pattern of scales overlapping the back of her hand. In every system, after finishing her work, she has grown a garden. It is a distinct joy to shape the opening petals of a water lily, to construct sturdy rhizomes. It is simply the joy of making something.

"Stop acting like you're the only one here," says Yulana, before swimming away, light glinting furiously off her scales.

Back in the garden, Brill can't stop thinking about what Yulana said. She bypasses the remark's obvious meaning

about selfishness and pushes deeper. She's not the only one here. Neither are the mers.

When a yellowcress disintegrates, careful petals unknitting, Brill watches how the dust dissipates, too chaotically, no particle going the same way, in a dizzying explosion only obvious when she peers closely. The antithesis of a pattern.

Brill knows, then, who has sabotaged her garden.



Brill finds Entropy by slipping through the scales of space and swimming, at incredible speeds, towards chaotic twists, which light a path to Entropy like a beacon.

Like all spacefaring mers, Brill has met many of the entities that inhabit her plank of the universe. She has hesitated outside the great sentient castles of the January Islands and called to the sea beyond. She has worn the delicate shawls made by the claws of Vernitian fishers, letting the feather-soft cords slip over her shoulders, touching each fifth fisher claw as a gesture of defiance and comprehension. She has dined on molted weedworms with tall Union Carpenters, their lithe twelve-limbs glinting in the light of their dusty sun, and burned her eyelids with the melting wax of the stone people of Mald. But of all the people and peoples she has met, perhaps none are more powerful than Entropy.

Now, Entropy lounges in the space between worlds. Brill tries to swim in front of her, but it is unclear where Entropy's front might be. The only thing Brill can distinctly see about Entropy, who is constantly changing her proportions, is that she has an inordinate amount of heads.

Zoom out, and Entropy fills the space and keeps expanding to fill it. Zoom in, and Entropy is fractals all the way down. It's best not to do any such manipulations with entities such as Entropy, those infinity beings who have trouble with scale and range and limits.

"Excuse me," says Brill, feeling very small.

At once, all of Entropy's eyes are fixed on Brill. It is a lot of eyes.

"Why are you here?" asks Entropy. Her voice is like every voice that has ever existed being spoken at all possible frequencies, and also, just the tiniest bit prickly. The sort of voice that is not used to being bothered.

Brill pauses, but there's no use in waiting. "Have you been destroying my gardens?"

"Yep," says Entropy, in a way that is frankly pretty smug.

This seems, to Brill, like an appropriate time to make a list.

WHAT TO DO WHEN AN ALL-  
POWERFUL BEING WITH TOO  
MANY HEADS HAS ADMITTED TO  
DESTROYING YOUR SPACE GARDEN

1. Ask her politely to stop
2. Give her a gift
3. Compromise

“Will you stop destroying my garden?” asks Brill politely and with too much hope.

“Nope,” says Entropy. Some of the heads laugh, and others shush them.

Brill reaches into the subcutaneous pouch below her breastbone and removes a wad of cosmic dust. She shapes a needlerush because it seems like the type of plant Entropy might like, the rigid stems splaying out in all directions. “This is for you.”

Entropy does like it. “Thanks,” she says. The needlerush disintegrates into powder. “That felt pretty great.”

Brill swims around Entropy to get a better angle, but it’s not possible. Entropy has no good angles. “Why did you destroy it?”

An uncountable number of Entropy’s heads sigh. “Do you know how rare it is to find complicated things? Things shaped by consciousness? I love destroying those things the best.”

“I’d like to make a deal with you,” says Brill, moving swiftly to the third item on her list.

“Good, because there’s something I want

from you,” says Entropy. About half of Entropy’s heads smile, and since Entropy has infinite heads, this means that an infinite number of heads are smiling. Brill has to stop thinking about this before she tumbles down a mathematical chasm.

“What do you want me to do?” asks Brill. She thinks, if she closes her eyes, it might be easier to talk to Entropy, but she worries that would be rude.

“Make me something complicated. Labyrinthine. Something beautiful and intricate, with the intensity of joy you put into your gardens.” Entropy laughs, a booming echo. “Make me something I can unmake.”

Brill scrapes all of the cosmic dust from her pouches and begins to build. She shapes layers and folds, molecular temples and great, sweeping lines. Her aesthetic principles battle with the weave of her creation’s physical, tangible existence. She adds color and light and shadow. Interlocking structures and crisp, delineated shapes, whispered lines thick as subatomic particles and tessellated patterns in millions of colors. She spends hours on a sculpture no bigger than her thumbnail, which she places in the center of a structure limbed with ridged lace.

Hours melt into days; she cannot stop. It feels like she is pouring out everything she has ever thought or known into this creation.

She doesn’t mean to love the thing she makes, but she has never made anything

like this.

Brill never wants to stop, but at last, it is done.

She swims away from her creation and studies it in the dusky universe light. It is not perfect, but it is undeniably her own.

It only takes Entropy one instant to destroy it. One moment, her creation floats like a new sun, like a nebula enfolding elements in beautiful potential, and the next, it is gone.

Brill doesn't try to catch the cosmic dust as it floats around her. The thing she made, now nothing at all, is impossible to replicate.

"I cannot even tell you how amazing that was," says Entropy.

Brill says nothing. She feels as if she has to rebuild her words, one by one.

"Now for my part of the bargain. I will agree not to destroy your gardens for a period of 10,000 years."

Her gardens were never meant to be permanent. Entropy, being an entity of infinity, is a little murky on the concept of appropriate amounts of time for mortals. Ten thousand years will be more than enough. Brill nods. Then, finding her voice, she says, "Yes."

Entropy cackles. "Wow, you're really not going to negotiate. I mean, you made me

the best ever thing."

Brill is not sure if the bargain she's made was worth it, but she has made it. And unlike Entropy, she does not have the power of unmaking.

"Thank you," says Brill, before swimming back through the scales of space. Being a cartographer, Brill is an expert in vast distances. She thinks now of distances in time and space, of longevity and obsolescence and the ephemeral nature of what we make.

One image sticks in her mind: Yulana creating a lily and thrusting her arms to encompass the universe. Perhaps Yulana has a point about the fragility and uselessness of creation, but Brill thinks it's unfair to weight a lily against everything—it is an unbalanced scale. Maybe it is enough for a lily to be a lily.

As she swims, she filters cosmic dust into the pouches under her skin.

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When Brill returns, the first thing she does is find her sister. Brill explores the gas giant with Yulana, helping her take notes about its composition. It is an apology without words, but Brill says the words, too.

Her garden blooms in turquoise and green and gold. Yulana asks if they can swim to it.



“Why do you do this?” Yulana asks.  
Dozens of water lilies float around them.

Brill’s face scales ripple. “Lots of reasons.”

“Can I try?” Yulana says quickly, surprising them both. “Can I add something to your garden?”

A space garden needs minerals, bright spots of cosmic dust, the light of millions of distant stars. A space garden needs hope, for it is an impossibility, this growth from barrenness, this a miracle of green.

“Let’s make something together,” says Brill.

Brill and Yulana spend hours making a purple-petaled water hyacinth. When they are done, Yulana rests the flower in her palm. It is tiny and beautiful.

“What’s the point,” Yulana says. “No one will ever see this.”

But Yulana is wrong.

A mere 2,000 years later (what Entropy would call barely enough time to blink one of one of her many eyes), a spaceship slips between the scales of space to this twelve-planet system. The people within cannot travel in the vacuum of space without cumbersome suits, which cling to their skin. Neither can they shape matter from cosmic dust. They have no subcutaneous pouches.

The possibility of this group finding this same fragment of space is a statistical

improbability. The amount of life in the universe, compared to the vastness of unoccupied space, is minuscule. A rounding error, a grain of sand in a desert that stretches out to forever.

But yet, here they are.

To them, the garden is a miracle. They marvel at the delicately crafted leaves. They brush gloved hands against petals which are still bright. They wonder at this gift and are grateful for it, wishing they could thank the creator of this garden. They cannot, for she left long ago.



Brill, Yulana, and the rest of the mers swim through the scales of space. They are off to explore new solar systems and nebulas and asteroids, to make other gardens, and eventually, to return home.

Zoom out, and you’ll see the mers with their magnificent tails. They swim past the Vernitian fishers and the sentient castles of the January Islands and the stone people of Mald--all of the beings who live in this plank of the universe.

Zoom in, and find a pouch against the skin, hidden under overlapping scales. It holds cosmic dust waiting to be made into something.

# How to spot a mermaid

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by Emily Fox

(after Barbara Kingsolver)

Walk down to the beach  
under a full moon.  
Take off your shoes,  
let the sand shift between your toes  
like high tide lapping the land.  
Resist the urge  
to glance around  
at the gnarl of mangroves  
at your back;  
allow your eyes to soften  
over the water.  
Sieve through  
the noise  
of bird calls and crickets  
and the wind combing through leaves  
like a mother's hand at your hair.  
Take the tense  
from your muscles,  
the clench  
from your jaw,  
let the salt air tunnel its way to your lungs.  
Throw away notions of *science* and *magic*  
and grown-up definitions you don't need anymore.  
Stand soft-boned and humble  
before the wide ocean  
and believe in  
the glint  
on that dark horizon.



# Our Contributors

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**Amal El-Mohtar** is an award-winning writer of fiction, poetry, and criticism. Her stories and poems have appeared in magazines including *Tor.com*, *Fireside Fiction*, *Lightspeed*, *Uncanny*, *Strange Horizons*, *Apex*, *Stone Telling*, and *Mythic Delirium*; anthologies including *The Djinn Falls in Love and Other Stories* (2017), *The Starlit Wood: New Fairy Tales* (2016), *Kaleidoscope: Diverse YA Science Fiction and Fantasy Stories* (2014), and *The Thackery T. Lambshead Cabinet of Curiosities* (2011); and in her own collection, *The Honey Month* (2010). Her articles and reviews have appeared in the *New York Times*, *NPR Books* and on *Tor.com*. She became the Otherworldly columnist at the *New York Times* in February 2018, and is represented by DongWon Song of HMLA.

**Ana Merino** is a Professor of Hispanic Studies at the University of Iowa, where she founded the MFA program in Spanish Creative Writing. She is the author of several collections of poetry, including *Preparativos para un viaje* (winner of the 1994 Premio Adonais), *Juegos de niños* (winner of the 2003 Premio Fray Luis de León), and most recently *Los buenos propósitos* (2015).

**Beth Goder** works as an archivist, processing the papers of economists, scientists, and other interesting folks. Her fiction has appeared in venues such as *Escape Pod*, *Analog*, *Clarkesworld*, *Nature*, and Rich Horton's *The Year's Best Science Fiction & Fantasy*. You can find her online at <http://www.bethgoder.com>.

**Caitlyn Paxson** is a writer, storyteller, and performer. She lives on Prince Edward Island, where she manages a haunted historic house museum. She reviews books for *NPR Books* and *Quill & Quire*, and her writing has appeared in a variety of places, including *Tor.com*, *Shimmer*, *Stone Telling*, *Mythic Delirium*, and *The Deadlands*. She was an editor at the poetry quarterly *Goblin Fruit*, and was nominated for the Rhysling Award for one of her own poems. You can find her at [caitlynpaxson.com](http://caitlynpaxson.com) or @caitlynpaxson on Instagram.

**Cameron Harvey** is a sculptor, illustrator, and cartoonist. He owns Cameron Harvey Gallery LLC- a sculpture and water fountain gallery. You can find his work on [www.harveygallery.com](http://www.harveygallery.com) or at HarveyGallery on Etsy. His cartoons have appeared in such magazines as *The New Yorker*, *Barrons*, *Harvard Business Review*, *The Oldie*, and *Philosophy Now* to name a few. He lives in Pennsylvania with his wife and son. You can follow him on Instagram under [metalsculptor](#) to see his most current work.

# Our Contributors

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**Elaine Ho** is a Singaporean-American author and artist currently living in Los Angeles. Her work is influenced by Renaissance and Baroque mannerism, and she's drawn to themes of the broken and the beautiful.

She holds a BA in Psychology, and nearly sent her application off to law school before pivoting into art. She previously worked as a concept artist for the Universal Studios theme parks and Disney VR. Her work has been featured in *American Illustration*, *Spectrum Fantastic Art*, and *Infected by Art*.

**Emily Fox** writes from Queensland, Australia. When not writing, she works in a university library, reads submissions for *Aurealis Magazine*, and spends quality time with her dog. Her work has appeared in *Lightspeed Magazine's Women Destroy Science Fiction!* Find her on twitter @byemilyfox or at byemilyfox.com

**Jessica P. Wick** (<https://jessicapwick.com/>) is a writer and freelance editor living in Rhode Island. She enjoys rambling through graveyards and writing by candlelight. Her poetry may be found scattered across the internet. Her novella *An Unkindness* is in *A Sinister Quartet* from *Mythic Delirium*. She has never lived far from the sea and highly recommends Mollie Hunter's *The Mermaid Summer*.

**Jonathan Crowe** blogs about maps at The Map Room. His essays and reviews have been published by *AE*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Tor.com*. A former historian, civil servant, snake breeder, reporter, and fanzine editor, he lives in Shawville, Quebec. Visit his website at [jonathancrowe.net](http://jonathancrowe.net).

**Kelly Jarvis** (she/her) teaches writing, literature, and fairy tales at Central Connecticut State University, The University of Connecticut, and Tunxis Community College. Her previous work has appeared in *Enchanted Conversation* where she works as the Special Projects Writer. She lives with her husband and three sons who bring her on frequent trips to the shore to collect seashells and search for mermaids.

**Lauren Raye Snow** is an artist and designer from South Texas. Her work explores intangible, uncanny visions and feelings – and the anxiety that this obscurity can cause.

# Our Contributors

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**Lauren Raye Snow (cont.)** She currently serves as Art Director for the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA), where she led their brand redesign in 2020 and has art directed each Nebula Conference since (and one Worldcon for good measure). She is inspired by the Symbolists and the Pre-Raphaelites, by the Catholic and Indigenous religious icons of her native South Texas, as well as speculative works of horror and beauty in literature, myth, and music.

You can find Lauren sleeping in a moss-covered, hollowed-out log on the outskirts of a field upon which sits a crumbling, haunted manor house. Actually, you can't find her there – she's disappeared. You can try Twitter and Instagram, though, but no guarantees.

A queer Latina living in Iowa, **Lisa M. Bradley** writes everything from novels to haiku, usually with a speculative slant. Her work has appeared on the *LeVar Burton Reads* podcast and in *Uncanny*, *Strange Horizons*, *Fireside Fiction*, and *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, among other venues. Her first collection is *The Haunted Girl*; her debut novel is *Exile*. Recently she co-edited, with R.B. Lemberg, the Ursula Le Guin tribute anthology, *Climbing Lightly Through Forests*. On Twitter, she's @cafenowhere. Read more at [www.lisambradley.com](http://www.lisambradley.com).

**Liz Argall's** work can be found in places like *Uncanny Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Apex Magazine*, and frequently on the stage with Pulp Diction. She's worked on roleplaying games like Geist 2nd Edition and 13th Age, and creates the webcomic [thingswithout.com](http://thingswithout.com). She lives in Seattle, but her heart misses the big silly birds of Australia.

Other work by **Mari Ness** appears in *Tor.com*, *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, *Nightmare*, *Uncanny*, *Apex*, *Fireside*, *Diabolical Plots*, *Translunar Travelers Lounge*, *Strange Horizons* and *Daily Science Fiction*. Her chapbook, *Dancing in Silver Lands*, won the 2021 Outwrite Fiction Chapbook Competition. Her poetry novella, *Through Immortal Shadows Singing*, is available from Papaveria Press; an essay collection, *Resistance and Transformation: On Fairy Tales*, from Aqueduct Press; and a collection of tiny fairy tales, *Dancing in Silver Lands*, winner of the 2021 Outwrite Chapbook Competition Fiction, from Neon Hemlock Press. For more, visit [marikness.wordpress.com](http://marikness.wordpress.com), or follow her on Twitter at @mari\_ness. She lives in central Florida, where she does not visit the ocean nearly enough.

# Our Contributors

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**Marla Faith:** I grew up in Chicago and then went to Bard College and Kansas City Art Institute before receiving my BFA in Painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and my MS in Museum Leadership from Bank Street College in NYC. I've directed art education programs at The Art Institute of Chicago, The Guggenheim Museum, Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, NY, and Cheekwood in Nashville. I have loved teaching art in public and private schools since moving from NY to Nashville in 1990. In Nashville, I've had one person exhibits at The Parthenon, the airport, & Williamson County Enrichment Center; several two person exhibits, and been included in many juried and invitational exhibits throughout the states.

In 2017, Sheriar Press published my book of art and poetry, called *Listening to the Bones*, in 2020 OmPoint Press published my book *The Diver and the Pearl*, and under my own label Ladders of Light Studio Press, I published *Art of the Divine: Buddhist, Hindu, and Earth Gods and Goddesses*, which contains my art and poetry on these subjects.

Art and writing have been my spiritual path, healing journey, psychological mirror, and a way of being a conduit to bring more beauty into the world. My art usually has a narrative thread that comes into being through playing with color, light, and form to achieve harmony and balance. My poetry is intuitive, as if I am channeling messages from a higher self. Please view my paintings, drawings, and collages at [marlafait.com](http://marlafait.com), and read my poetry on Facebook at Marla Faith Poetry. My books can be purchased from my website, Sheriar Books, Barnes and Noble, and Amazon.

**Nelly Geraldine García-Rosas** is a Mexican immigrant and a graduate of the Clarion West class of 2019. Her short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, *Nightmare*, the World Fantasy Award-winning anthology *She Walks in Shadows*, and elsewhere. She can be found online at [nellygeraldine.com](http://nellygeraldine.com) and on Twitter as [@kitsune\\_ng](https://twitter.com/kitsune_ng)

**S.R. Mandel** is from San Francisco, Boston, and Philadelphia, in that order. She has lived and worked in France, Japan, and the Middle East. Her writing has appeared in *Apex*, *Strange Horizons*, *The Massachusetts Review*, and *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, among others. She is very interested in things that manage to be one thing and also another thing at the same time. Find her online at [@susannah\\_speaks](https://twitter.com/susannah_speaks) or at [www.srmandel.com](http://www.srmandel.com).

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**Toshiya Kamei** holds an MFA in Literary Translation from the University of Arkansas. His translations have appeared in venues such as *Clarkesworld*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and *Strange Horizons*.

**Ursula Vernon** is the author and illustrator of far more projects than is probably healthy. She has written over fifteen books for children, several novels for adults, an epic webcomic called *Digger* and various short stories and other odds and ends.

The daughter of an artist, she spent her youth attempting to rebel, but eventually succumbed to the siren song of paint (although not before getting a degree in anthropology.) Ursula grew up in Oregon and Arizona, went to college at Macalester College in Minnesota, and stayed there for ten years, until she finally learned to drive in deep snow and was obligated to leave the state.

Having moved across the country several times, she eventually settled in Pittsboro, North Carolina, where she works full-time as an artist and creator of oddities. She lives with her husband, an elderly beagle, a redtick coonhound and a small collection of cats.

Her webcomic *Digger* won the Hugo Award for Best Graphic Story (2012) and the Mythopoeic Award (2013.) Her short story “Jackalope Wives” won the Nebula for Best Short Story, the Coyotl Award, and the WSFA Small Press Award (2015.) Her series *Dragonbreath* won the Sequoyah Award for Children’s Literature, and her series *Hamster Princess* has been nominated for the Texas Bluebonnet Award and made the Amelia Bloomer List for feminist children’s literature. Her stand-alone novel *Castle Hangnail* won the Mythopoeic Award for Children’s Literature in 2016. Her novelette “The Tomato Thief” won the Hugo Award for Best Novelette in 2017.

Her current project is the *Hamster Princess* series of books for kids. She also writes for adults under the name T. Kingfisher.





# About Us

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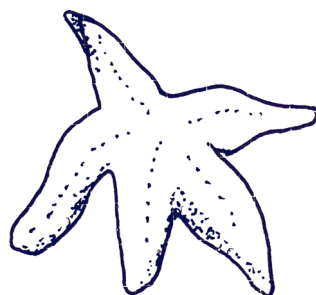
**Julia Rios** (they/them) is a queer, Latinx writer, editor, podcaster, and narrator whose fiction, non-fiction, and poetry have appeared in *Latin American Literature Today*, *Lightspeed*, and *Goblin Fruit*, among other places. Their editing work has won multiple awards including the Hugo Award. Julia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

