

IRIS



A MAGAZINE OF NEW LGBTQ+ WRITING FOR YOUNG ADULTS

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I Heart Rainbows
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EDITORS' LETTER

WELCOME TO THE FIRST ISSUE OF IRIS!

Six months ago, we decided to embark on this project because we felt that there was a real need for YA fiction and poetry that speaks to you, the reader, about what it is to be growing up LGBTQ+. We based this not only on professional observation, but on personal experience: one thing that was lacking in our own coming-out journeys were books that featured characters that were going through struggles similar to our own. So, we put the idea out there on Tumblr, and *you* responded. Your notes, comments, and asks made us realize that you saw a magazine like *Iris* as much more than a fun project: you saw it as necessary.

We can't possibly choose favorites from the works in this issue, so we'll simply highlight what you'll find within its pages. There are coming-out stories; pieces that grapple with gender identity; works that remind us of the rich breadth of our rainbow. There are tales of unrequited love and some happy endings, too. There are meditative reflections and calls-to-arms. There is art to inspire and challenge you. There is so very much to make you stop and think, and there are hopefully pieces you'll want to share and talk about, because that's really our hope for *Iris*: that

it is something you'll want to share with your friends, something that you'll be proud to read, something that you'll return to while you wait for the second issue.

On a personal note, creating *Iris* has been the most amazing experience for the pair of us, and we couldn't possibly have anticipated just how wonderful, affirming, and exciting it would be. Because of *Iris* we've worked with incredibly talented artists and writers, become more active in the LGBTQ+ community, and met some of the loveliest, most encouraging people around: *you*, our readers. We're so grateful, and so excited for the next stage of *Iris*'s journey. Check out the new (and fancier!) website at creatingiris.org to learn more and to vote on the theme for our second issue.

We're really proud to finally share *Iris* with you. It's the product of countless hours of work from all of our volunteers – from our staff to our contributors – who gave of their time and talent because we all believe in the necessity of *Iris* just as much as you did at the very start. Your enthusiasm, encouragement, and support propelled us to make *Iris* a reality. It's because of you that this magazine exists. We hope you enjoy it.

Amanda Civitello & Rebecca Bennett

15 January 2014

ALWAYS A CHILD

frank adams

In the story
of my life
I am always a child.
Whenever I raise my voice,
speak my mind, or say my truth.
I am told to shut-up, calm down, or
sent to my room to think things over.
I am pushed back to silence. Loved
when I obey.

THE UNTOLD ADVENTURES OF THE MAGNIFICENT PRINCESS CHARISMA

islay bell-webb

YOU WILL NOT HAVE HEARD OF HER – Prince Charming’s older sister.

It’s a shame, because by all accounts she was the more interesting of the pair of them. She had far better adventures, necessitated by her fleeing the magical kingdom that her brother got to rule. She met more fascinating people and had better friends and frankly, her name was far less silly.

For what sort of name is ‘Charming’? Charisma was forever teasing him about it.

What is even more of a pity is that most of Charisma’s adventures are now attributed to her brother, because, up until recently, the people responsible for recording such things did not at all like the idea that a woman – let alone a woman with Charisma’s romantic proclivities – could have adventures at all. So they insisted that it was Charming who woke Sleeping Beauty, Charming who resurrected Snow White, and Charming who found, lib-

erated and married Cinderella.

They are wrong. Charming was too busy ruling a magical kingdom to take on half of these tasks, and Charisma was entirely better at slaying dragons than he was.

There are many stories that could be told about dear Charisma, but I will begin with the first: the adventure she embarked on a little before her 18th birthday, and the moment at which she truly began to become herself.

Like most stories from this particular kingdom, it started with a ball, which the king had decreed should be in celebration of his two children. Charisma was now of marriageable age and Charming, at 16, was old enough to be named crown prince, the heir-apparent to the throne – what better excuse for a party? Charisma was unimpressed.

“I’ve no intention of ever getting married,” she informed her father, “you do understand that, don’t you?”

Her father smiled the especially patronising smile he reserved for his daughter when she was being silly. “I’m sure you don’t, dear.”

(Some years later, Cinderella would change Charisma’s mind about marriage, but that was probably not the sort of wedding that her father had in mind for her).

Charisma rolled her eyes and left the king’s study. Her cheeks were burning rather more than she would have liked and her eyes were beginning to sting. Charisma did not often cry and

was loath to let her father see it.

It was not simply that he was co-opting her eighteenth birthday in order to advertise her availability for a marriage she had no interest in making. It was that he was using the occasion to finally disabuse her of all hope that she would ever rule their kingdom ahead of her brother. Her father was about to name Charming heir apparent, before the entire kingdom, at what was meant to be *her* birthday party. Being publicly disinherited was not exactly what Charisma had had in mind when she had envisaged such festivities.

The injustice of it made her itch with the sort of anger that might only be expelled with a good, long cry. Which she did, in her chambers, when repeatedly stabbing a practice dummy in the swordsmanship yard had not sufficiently quelled her upset. And when she had cried until she ached, she went back to the practice yard, and continued to murder the dummy as thoroughly as she was able.

“If I had been born a boy,” she told Captain Goldrush, who was the only other woman at court who frequented the yard, “I would be crowned instead.”

“But then you would have to be king,” Goldrush replied, with the wry, feline smile she often sported, “and where would be the fun in that?”

Charisma felt herself flush, although she wasn’t at all sure why – Goldrush was always saying things that left her feeling

wrong-footed, somehow. Still, when the Captain was in the practice yard, wielding her cutlass, the young squires left Charisma alone instead of standing about to gawk distractingly, so Charisma was glad of her company.

“The fun would be in getting to rule,” Charisma retorted, “in being allowed my birthright, instead of being paraded about like some – prize sow.”

“There is no fun in ruling anything, believe me,” Goldrush told her. “You’d have a better time running about on your own.”

“A princess does not merely ‘run about’.” Charisma did her best to sound haughty, because she did not like to take advice from anyone.

But Goldrush only laughed, and told her to correct her parry. Charisma threw down her sword and went inside, still in a thoroughly foul mood. Who on earth was this pirate to be teasing her?

Of course, no one called Captain Goldrush a pirate in front of the royal family – Goldrush was a ‘free merchant’, whose enormous wealth and penchant for dragon slaying made entrance to a royal palace relatively easy – but word got around. She was also rather more beautiful than was decent for a pirate, with her golden brown skin, amber eyes and thick chestnut curls. The leather breeches, scarlet dragon-hide greatcoat and jauntily-cocked hat only ever made her look more glamorous, however much such clothes on a woman should have seemed ridiculous

amongst the fine, bejewelled ladies of the court. Goldrush simply carried herself with such authority that no one ever dared laugh at her fashion sense. Charisma wasn't sure whether she admired Goldrush or envied her – perhaps why the other woman could so easily set her teeth on edge.

The ball was the following day, and Charisma almost decided not to attend out of spite.

But, truth be told, she rather liked attending royal events, no matter her father's tactlessness. Like most princesses, she enjoyed fine gowns and dancing, and, despite never intending to be married, she harboured not only a belief in true love, but a conviction that such a thing might readily be found at a royal ball. It happened in all the stories, after all. She certainly enjoyed seeing all the other pretty girls in their best dresses, although she had yet to gather the courage to do anything more than look. So she swallowed her pride and determined to attend.

She wore a gauzy, lavender gown accented with silver beads – under dim lights, it made her look as if she carried the twilight in her skirts. She also tucked her favourite dagger into the garter of her left leg, its cool weight comforting against her skin; the blade always made her feel a little more in control of things.

Charisma tried very hard to look pleased – or at least tranquil – whilst Charming was crowned in her place. But her stomach clenched so tightly that she felt dizzy when he knelt and

a crown was placed on his head, and though she managed to smile at him when he stood and the hall erupted into rapturous applause, she could not clap.

Afterwards, she ducked away as quickly as was decent, into the palace gardens. Most of the ball's attendees had yet to make their way there so early in the evening, and Charisma found herself blindly making for the rose garden that had been planted in her mother's memory.

There she hid herself on a stone bench near the back of the little courtyard, feeling sick. The air smelled sweet with the roses, and she reached for the nearest, yanking it from its stem, showering herself with white petals in the process and taking momentary, vindictive pleasure from destroying something beautiful.

“My, well, that seems a waste,” Goldrush remarked – for Goldrush had followed her, at a quiet distance, from the palace. Charisma gave the woman a sour look. “I'm sure one won't be missed.”

“I'm sure,” Goldrush replied mildly, although it still felt like a reproach, and Charisma was in no mood to be reproached by anybody.

“What concern is it of yours?” she demanded. “These are my mother's roses, not yours.”

Goldrush took that as a dismissal, bowed gently and left, and Charisma felt very, very angry with her, although for what, she had absolutely no idea. She got up and strode after the Cap-

tain, because she was quite determined to shout at someone and Goldrush appeared to have made herself available. How she came, instead, to end up kissing Goldrush around the back of the palace stables, remains a mystery to everyone involved – Charisma later blamed Goldrush for being so inconveniently good looking.

“Do you feel any better?” Goldrush enquired, when Charisma had finished kissing her.

“I’ve no idea what you mean,” Charisma replied, stubbornly. “I was perfectly fine to begin with.”

Goldrush laughed. “I’m sure,” she said, and Charisma blushed.

“Have you ever been disinherited?” she asked the Captain, sounding plaintive even to her own ears. “It’s wretched.”

“Pirates tend not to have such problems,” Captain Goldrush shrugged.

Charisma sighed and leant back against the cold stone of the stable’s outer wall, her face downcast. She felt a little disappointed. She was not in love with Goldrush, however nice she was, and this was the first time she had ever kissed anyone, and though it had been pleasant enough, she had thought it would be more momentous.

Were women such as she allowed true love? Or was she doomed only to kiss pretty pirates behind stables when she was angry? No love, no crown, no kingdom – what on earth was the

point?

Goldrush gave her a gentle nudge. “Princess,” she said, “would you perhaps like to accompany me on my next voyage?”

Charisma frowned at her. “What? Why?”

“Why not?” Goldrush shrugged. “It would seem you’re wasted on your father’s court. And what right does the king have to keep you here, if he does not intend to teach you to rule?”

Charisma considered. “Why would you offer me such a thing?”

“Because you are very pretty,” Goldrush told her, with another enigmatic grin, “although you needn’t take that as a proposition if you don’t want it to be one.”

Charisma was not at all sure what she wanted from Goldrush, except, perhaps, for another kiss – the first had been rather pleasant, after all – but the offer was certainly an intriguing one. And she was not above enjoying being told that she was pretty.

“My father won’t like it,” she said, cautiously, “and if I leave without his permission, he will accuse you of kidnapping me.”

“I’ve been accused of worse,” Goldrush replied, breezily.

“What would you like to do, my dear?”

She would like to go with the pirate, Charisma thought, and could tell by Goldrush’s grin that the Captain knew that perfectly well. Had she swept other women away like this? Did Charisma especially care?

Perhaps true love was out there, elsewhere - not at Goldrush's side maybe, but somewhere.

(Actually, it was closer than she thought, for Cinderella was only three miles from the palace, at that very moment asleep on the kitchen floor of her step-mother's house, dreaming of a kinder world – but they were still some years from meeting).

“Alright,” Charisma told Goldrush, “but you must make room for my dresses.” And Goldrush laughed.

Charisma fled from the palace the following morning, and stayed on Goldrush's ship for six months. Eventually, in a furious attempt to retrieve his errant child, the king did indeed accuse Goldrush of kidnapping her, and Charisma returned once more to roll her eyes at him in his study. Then she left on a second adventure by herself. Goldrush turned out to have been an excellent choice for a first lover, but by then Charisma had grander plans than to spend her life in the company of a pirate merely to punish her father.

She had decided to resurrect Snow White, and after that to awaken Sleeping Beauty, and in general to devote her time to extracting other princesses from the dull existences to which they were condemned by the stunted imaginations of their fathers, or brothers, or husbands.

There were many, many adventures to be had over the coming years, and when, in her late twenties, she returned to her father's kingdom for another summer ball, she would find a gen-

tle, dark-eyed girl with bruises beneath her fine gown and rare glass slippers on her feet, and that would be another story entirely. But on the night of her brother's coronation, Charisma decided to run away with the pirate Captain Goldrush, and never once regretted it.

TO BE DETERMINED

allison fradkin

Congratulations, Mommy.

You are the proud parent of a–

Wait a minute.

Is this really necessary?

–bouncing baby boy.

I'm sorry, that's incorrect.

Bouncing baby girl?

I'm sorry, that's inaccurate.

Bouncing baby?

Yes, that's right.

Leave the sex blank, please.

Or write

Undecided.

Not applicable.

To be determined.

To be determined?

By whom?

Well, it's not up to the doctor.

It's not up to the nurse.

It's certainly not up to the lady
with the alligator purse.

It's up to her.

It's up to him.

It's up to hir.

It's up to ze.

It's up to

You.

REFLECTED PERCEPTIONS

anders scott

WAIT PATIENTLY, as you are very capable of doing, until everyone else leaves the house. Parents off to a date night. Siblings off to socialize. You had invitations for tonight, but you want time to yourself. Oddly, you are tired of having a muddled head, lost in a haze of crowd of other people. No, tonight you need to think. To sort things out. You can always join a party later. It is time to lay down the cards and look at your hand. Let us see who is bluffing.

Once the house is cleared, wait ten minutes for someone who forgot something to come back home. No one does.

Shower for a long time. Turn the water up as hot as it will go for several minutes then clean yourself. Is this your attempt of swimming against the tide or with it? You can't tell them apart anymore.

You have stolen your mother's scented soaps for the process--vanilla, flowers, and honey. Lather, rinse, repeat. And again. The steam filling up the room makes the scent linger in

the air. You cough once as the smell of you is muffled in the heat. A line of brushy stubble on your legs and under your arms is shaved down to a smooth finish with a couple of nicks. It has been a while since you have done this. Then comes the picturesque line around the joint between your legs. You run your hands down your shaved skin, checking for that perfect smoothness. Did you remember your knees, ankles, and toes?

You feel perfumed as you step out.

Put on a mask and clean your nails. Trimming, filing, pushing back cuticles. Rinse off the mask then work on your eyebrows. Your mother taught you how to do them years ago. With these genes, you'd need to pluck them. Girls shouldn't have bushy eyebrows.

You pause at that memory, then finish plucking.

The scented lotion goes with the scented soap over legs and bikini bumps, and you now smell like a store for bath products. Try this. Try this. This scent will make you feel like a new woman. You'll have to beat all the guys off you. Heteronormativity is the new scent of the season, and we sell it as perfume, lotion, and soap. Buy it together and save 30%.

Next come the clothes. Clothes you do not like wearing, but are thrust upon you anyway. The v cut brings out your cleavage. The purple brings out the sparkle in your eyes. A short skirt shows off your legs. Aren't these shoes just effing adorable?

Wipe off a foot by foot of mirror to apply makeup. Unwrap

several packages you received in your stocking last Christmas, breaking seals along the way. All the right colors, your mother masquerading as Santa claims, and a zip-up, pink-plaid, plastic lined bag to hold it all in. It's exactly what you needed.

Eyeliner. You poke yourself in the eye. Mascara clumps. Eye shadow in a shade of rich. Is rich a color, or some type of description? Concealer over your zits, then compact powder from a mineral base. Sheer cheek gel--you thought it was called blush. And then the lip gloss you apply too thickly, but fix by gumming a piece of toilet paper. This is how your mother does it, and she seems to know what she's doing.

Last, put on an elastic headband. Your hair is too short. This will make you more feminine. All of it will.

Packaged in pretty, you step out into the hallway, and take a breath before looking up. God, that girl is beautiful. The kind of girl you'd buy a drink, if you were old enough, even if she did not give you a second glance. That's what you do with pretty girls, right? She would be worth it.

There is the lie you tell yourself over and over: she would be worth it. You can paint yourself a second face on top of another, but you will always know it is painted on. Even if it is an inch thick and the world reads it as your own, you cannot convince yourself, no matter how much you may want to, that she is worth it. You know better than that.

Yet here you are, again, in an otherwise empty house. Who

are you trying to fool?

The smile in the mirror cracks. You no longer see the girl. You see you. In makeup and a skirt. In those ridiculous heels that make you stumble over yourself.

You slump over and scream in utter and complete frustration. This. Is. Stupid. Your voice echoes in each room. Finish and exhale. Good. Do you feel better now? No, not yet. But you will.

You apply toner from cotton swab after cotton swab and remove the constructed face that never has and never will be your own. Then, you rinse off again, using your own soap, lamenting the smoothed skin you crafted in a fit of masochism, looking forward to when your hair will grow out again.

You flee to your room, keeping your head down to avoid the mirror, and fetch the back brace you bought from the drug store. It isn't perfect, but you've read enough posts online about the horror of bandages to know better. With a shirt a size up and an undershirt beneath it, you make it work.

A pair of briefs. That one pair of jeans you love. As you put on a t-shirt, you feel the headband slide down your skull and land around your neck. You lift it off, fold it up, and stuff it down the front of your pants. You exhale and approach the hallway mirror again. You look and grin in spite of yourself. No, not in spite of yourself; in spite of everything but yourself. And that makes you, the real you, the awkward and far too self-aware guy who knows he is a guy, smile all the more.

Believe in yourself! Your day will come!



Self
MVEssick

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "MVEssick '13". To the right of the signature is a small, stylized gear icon. The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted font.

THE PAINS OF BEING A PANSEXUAL PUNK

travis mamone

“SO DOES THAT MEAN YOU’RE ATTRACTED TO PANS?”

This is usually the first thing I hear whenever I tell someone I’m pansexual. As if being queer in a small town high school wasn’t hard enough, try adding onto it having an identity no one understands. The first thing people assume is that I’m attracted to cooking pans and other inanimate objects.

“No,” I say. “Pansexuality means I can love anyone regardless of gender.”

“So it’s basically the same as bisexuality, right?” they say.

“No, because bisexuality usually refers to being attracted to two genders: male and female. I, on the other hand, can love a girl, a boy, or even a non-binary gender person.”

“Non-binary what?”

“Non-binary gender person. That’s someone who doesn’t identify as either fully male or fully female.”

“You mean you like she-males? Gross, dude!”

At this point I usually walk away. I can’t stand talking to homophobes and transphobes—which pretty much describes most

of my classmates.

If it’s not the clueless classmates, then it’s usually the Jesus Freaks that try to get me to “repent” of my “homosexual desires.” Last year this kid named Andrew, whom I’ve known since elementary school, came over to my table during lunch carrying a Bible. He flipped open to this one passage where it says queer people aren’t allowed into Heaven or something like that. He said, “Trust in the Lord Jesus, Boog [my real name is Blake, but I prefer people call me Boog], and he will save you.”

“If I’m going to Hell,” I said, “I’ll send you a postcard when I get there.” That pretty much ended the conversation.

There are some cool kids here, like my friends Steve and Nikki. Steve’s a straight Christian, but he has a gay sister, so he doesn’t try to convert me or anything. Nikki’s a lesbian, so she understands what I go through. I used to hang out with this guy name Max. We used to date actually. I don’t really talk to him anymore, though, ever since he started dating this girl from another school.

But most of the kids here think I’m a freak. That’s why I’m a punk; I figured since I’m queer and I was literally born outside of the norm, I might as well make a statement. On any given day you can find me walking in the halls wearing a punk band t-shirt, black skinny jeans, black boots, a chain with a padlock around my neck, and my hair spiked. A lot of the other kids look at me funny, but I don’t care. I don’t want to be like everyone else. Last

year in English, we read an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson where he said, “Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist.” Emerson knew what he was talking about. In order to make it in this world, you have to say “Screw you!” to the norm and do your own thing.

My mom says I shouldn’t let the other kids bother me, but I’m a senior now and I’m pretty much done dealing with their crap. Some people actually tell me that pansexuality doesn’t exist, and that I have to be either gay or straight. A gay kid even told me that once! I guess pansexuals are just mythical creatures, like unicorns or mermaids.

Of course some kids don’t care how I identify myself. To them, I’m just a faggot. Even when I’m listening to my iPod, I can still hear them shouting slurs at me while I’m walking through the halls. I pretend I don’t hear them and just walk away. They’re looking for a reaction. I won’t give them the pleasure.

Although I did say something once.

It was last week while I was walking through the halls before classes began. I was listening to my punk mix and walking around to kill time before first period when I passed David and his gang. David is one of those guys who wears a backwards facing cap, a wife beater shirt, and loose, saggy jeans. In fact, all of David’s friends dress like that. They all think they’re thugs.

Anyway, I walked past him and heard him yell, “Queer!”

Now normally I would try to ignore him and just keep on walk-

ing. But on this particular day, I’d had enough. I was sick and tired of ignorant jerks like him. I was tired of the name calling, I was tired of people calling me a freak, and I was tired of people saying my identity didn’t exist. I turned around, took the ear buds out of my ears, walked right up to David and said, “Take your stupid homophobia, and stick it where the sun doesn’t shine!”

David stood there for a second, not sure how to react. Pleased, I walked away. Just before I put my ear buds in my ears, though, I heard him say, “No homo, dude! I’m not into that.” All of his backwards cap-wearing friends laughed. I just walked away. Now I don’t walk around the halls before class anymore. I just hang out with Steve and Nikki before first period.

Steve tells me I shouldn’t let people get to me, but that’s easy for him to say because he’s straight. He doesn’t have people telling him he’s going to Hell for being straight. Nikki understands my situation more, and she keeps telling me it gets better, but when? When will I stop having to deal with these idiots? I’ll be graduating soon, so hopefully that will help. But what about college? Will the homophobes follow me there, too? Maybe Dan Savage was wrong. Maybe it doesn’t get better.

When people fail me, though, punk rock is always there. It knows exactly what’s going on inside my head. It gives me the permission to not follow the crowd. There was a Danish philosopher that said, “In the crowd, there is untruth,” and that’s what punk rock says. Don’t follow the crowd. Be yourself. And that’s

what punk rock means to me.

After my confrontation with David, I was pissed. I felt like I could punch someone in the face. I pulled up the Black Flag song “Rise Above” on my iPod and listened to it:

Jealous cowards try to control.

(Rise above. We're gonna rise above.)

They distort what we say.

(Rise above. We're gonna rise above.)

Try and stop what we do.

(Rise above. We're gonna rise above.)

When they can't do it themselves.

(Rise above, We're gonna rise above.)

We are tired of your abuse.

Try to stop us, it's no use.

It was the song I needed to hear. Henry Rollins' words became my words. Even if things don't get better, I'm going to rise above. I'm going to rise above the homophobes. I'm going to rise above the haters. I'm going to rise above the Bible thumpers. No one can bring me down. Go ahead and try.

WHEN

akhil katyal

When all the gay boys get their shit
together, go to the gym and get fit
together, I sit and generally complain
about the weather and all that,
she says - That is why you're fat!
Now, now, I say, what's the hustle,
have you had a look at my arm,
lately a tendon threatens to look
like a muscle, so be calm, and by
the way, I am very good health-wise,
twice a day, I think about exercise.

Thanks to Pramada Menon



Your Hand in Mine
Rebecca Bennett

CALL THINGS AS THEY ARE

amanda civitello

THE SUN GLINTED DULLY ON THE GRAY-TINGED SNOW as Sarah pulled up to the St-Clairs' house. She really liked this part of town - close enough to the University so she could walk, if she wanted to and the weather was cooperating, but still far enough removed so as to feel quiet and secluded. The only downside was that the lake wasn't visible from the house, but that was a small price to pay for the pretty historical brick that was home to her thesis advisor and her wife.

Sarah hoisted her bag onto her shoulder and balanced the box of pastries she'd picked up earlier that afternoon from Nora's Bakery on top of the car and bent to check her appearance in the window. Today she wore her ashy brown hair tucked beneath a red beret, the band more or less restraining her bangs. Her lips seemed terribly prominent, traced as they were with lipstick she wore only rarely; she licked them to take some of it off, her mouth filling with the metallic taste.

"Hello, Sarah!" Catherine called, her voice startling Sarah

from her reflection.

Sarah smiled, first to herself, then to the older woman waiting on the stoop, a shawl wrapped around her shoulders against the chill. "Hi, Madame St-Clair," she returned, and Catherine smiled. It was odd to address Catherine St-Clair any other way, even though Sarah knew that Catherine's French was conversational at best, even if her accent was very good. She'd tried calling her "Mrs. St-Clair," but it somehow didn't sound right, and Catherine didn't seem to mind one way or the other.

In truth, Catherine was what Sarah enjoyed the most about borrowing the St-Clair library. She was warm in a maternal way, and she was interested in whatever Sarah wanted to talk about. Her meetings with H el ene St-Clair, her thesis advisor, were entirely professional, but once they were finished, Catherine would call her into the kitchen for tea, and Sarah would catch her up on whatever she had been doing. Other days, she'd call her into the living room, where Catherine would play piano while Sarah tapped away on her laptop, and H el ene would wander in, usually with a book, kiss Catherine on the cheek, and sit with Sarah on the couch. She'd keep one eye on her book and the other on Sarah's screen, making comments here and there. Once, H el ene had motioned Catherine up from the piano and had pulled out some sheet music, and they treated her to an impromptu concert. Sarah loved the comfortable intimacy they shared; it reminded her of the kind of life she wanted to one day make for

herself – *and if they thought it was strange, the way that she enjoyed spending time with them*, Sarah thought, *after today they'd understand*.

Again Catherine's voice shook Sarah out of her reverie. "Hélène's not in at the moment, Sarah, but please come in! Here, give me your bag - my, you've got so many things today!" Once Catherine had bustled Sarah into the living room, she noticed the box from Nora's.

"Oh Sarah, you've brought pastry! How nice, thank you. Let's put on the tea, and perhaps Hélène will be home in time to join us."

They sat together at the kitchen table while they waited for the water to boil. Catherine leaned forward, propping her chin on her wrist.

"So, what's new, Sarah?"

Sarah considered her for a moment. Catherine was wearing little makeup; her hair was gathered into a loose bun at the top of her head with the bangs she was growing out falling around to frame her face in various shades of silvery blonde. She was wearing stretchy pants with a knit shawl thrown casually over a tank top, which she kept pulling up to cover her shoulders. The deep red of the sweater complemented her fair complexion well. She looked as if she'd been enjoying a quiet, leisurely day, and Sarah wasn't sure if she wanted to disrupt it. Yet, for once the music in the house had fallen silent, and with Hélène out, school-

work wasn't a distraction.

Sarah began to fiddle with the fringe on the tasseled placemats Catherine had set out. She flicked her eyes up to Catherine and caught a look of concern cross her face before she schooled back to its normal placidity.

"Can I ask you something personal, Madame?"

Catherine smiled. "Sarah, I'm not one of your professors, even if I do happen to be married to one of them. While I certainly expect formality when we're both on campus, when we're here, please call me by my name."

Sarah nodded. "Can I ask you something, Catherine?"

Catherine nodded. Sarah squirmed in her seat, and returned her eyes to the placemat.

"When did you know you were gay?" Her voice sounded like a strangled whisper.

Sarah kept her eyes squarely on the table, tracing each thread of the fabric, imagining the look of surprise that had no doubt come over Catherine. When Catherine remained silent, Sarah began to think that she'd been impertinent.

"I - I'm sorry if that was out of line, Catherine," she said in a low voice. A touch of Catherine's hand on hers drew her eyes up from their inspection of the décor.

"Sarah, you asked me a perfectly valid question, and I promise I will give you an honest answer. But let's go sit inside, hmm? Where it's more comfortable?"

Catherine poured their tea and set it on a tray. “Why don’t you bring in the pastry, dear?”

They settled themselves in the living room, Sarah stretched out on the floor, leaning against the coffee table, and Catherine seated cat-like on the couch, her teacup balanced on her lap. Sarah couldn’t stand the silence, even though Catherine appeared placid and unperturbed. She busied herself with the box of pastry, fiddling the twine off and breaking the tape. “I wasn’t sure what we’d be in the mood for,” Sarah heard herself saying, “but there’s the almond-raspberry bar you like, and there are brownies and cookies, too.” She winced. She could hear the strain as she spoke, the way her words sounded stretched and reedy, so tense that she expected her voice crack and betray her.

Catherine smiled at her general direction, though whether at Sarah or the treats from Nora’s, she didn’t know. She took a long sip of her tea and set it down on the coffee table. There was something elegantly mesmerizing about her movements, in the way her finger caressed the rim of the teacup before finding its way to her hair.

“So, Sarah, you wanted to know when I knew I was gay. The short answer is 18, 19, during my freshman and sophomore years of college, but the long answer is that I didn’t recognize it until then, but when I think about it, I always knew I was different from my girlfriends.”

Sarah nodded, but Catherine continued. “Is that all you wanted to know?”

No, Sarah wanted to shout. No, that’s not all, no, I want to know more, because I can’t talk about this to anyone else, and you’ll understand. Instead, she shrugged, and cut herself a generous slice of brownie.

Sarah felt Catherine’s gaze on her. She’d heard H el ene’s colleagues gossiping about her from time to time: sneaky smart, they said, and she knew what they meant: Catherine exuded an air of flightiness, of artistic vacuity, and yet was possessed of a searingly perspicacious frankness. She was more dangerous in her stealthy intelligence than H el ene’s fiery brilliance. Today, however, she was quiet.

“I don’t quite know what that means, Sarah,” she said after a moment, “but should I wager that you have more questions for me?”

Sarah’s silence was noncommittal, so Catherine kept going, getting herself a small sliver of the raspberry-almond treat. “Are you curious about how H el ene and I became a couple? You needn’t be so shy to ask, dear, we’ve never hidden it from anyone.”

Sarah shook her head. Clearly, Catherine was going to make her say it. She took a deep breath. “Well, yes I am, actually, if you wouldn’t mind. But what I meant to say was how did you know you were gay?”

Catherine smiled at her encouragingly, and spoke slowly, in a measured tone, though Sarah couldn't imagine Catherine ever raising her voice."I didn't have a name for how I felt until I went to college. Being in New York opened my eyes to lots of things, about politics, of course, but mostly about me. When I was younger, in high school, I did have more girl friends than boy friends, which wasn't out of the ordinary. But I sought out female role models from my teachers, and found myself daydreaming about them instead of boys. I paid attention to the actresses in films, and didn't really care about the actors one way or another. I began to think that there was something wrong with me when I didn't want a boyfriend, unlike my friends. I had special tutorials with my English teacher to work on my senior research project, and I looked forward to those afternoons like my girlfriends looked forward to their dates. At the time, I'm sure I was convinced that my teacher didn't know a thing about how I felt, but in retrospect, I'm not so sure."

She laughed suddenly. "How embarrassing if she did! She was so kind, though, and patient, and if she did suspect, she didn't let on. As for New York, it was exhilarating. It was like being at the center of a hurricane; so many exciting things were happening all around me, wherever I looked. It didn't take long, being immersed in that culture, for me to finally put a name to how I was different from my friends."

"So that's it? It's that easy?"

Catherine smiled sadly at her. "No, dear, it's not that easy. Or actually that is the easy part, figuring out how to call what you feel. It's hardest to say it to yourself - to say out loud for the first time, 'I like girls. I am a *lesbian*,' and harder still to make yourself believe that it's okay. I stood in front of the mirror in our suite's bathroom, with the door locked, one night after my shower. I left the water running because I was afraid one of my roommates might hear. I said it to my reflection until it stopped being new. The more I said it, the more I realized it was true. And when I accepted it for myself, then I knew I could tell other people."

Sarah pulled her legs up and leaned her head on her knees. "So then what?"

Catherine reached for her tea."Well, I waited until the next year, when I was living off-campus by myself, to tell my old roommates. They were understanding, because I think they had guessed. Or at least they certainly knew that I was trying to figure things out for myself during my sophomore year, even if they didn't know exactly what about. I told my parents over the summer, at our summer house up in Wisconsin, one sunny afternoon on the pier. They were older, which made me a little hesitant to talk to them, but I knew them well enough to know that they wouldn't have the knee-jerk reaction that caused so much strife between my friends and their parents." Her voice faltered on 'friends,' fading out to a breathy whisper, the rest of the sentence an afterthought.

Sarah smiled at her, even though her eyes were shining. Catherine tilted her head and returned her smile, but her gaze was piercing, as if they saw something Sarah was trying to hide. “Sarah,” she began, her voice turned lower and serious, “I don’t want you to worry about or feel sorry for H el ene and me. We’re fine. Life might have been hard when we first became lovers but things have changed, now. We’re all right.”

Sarah shook her head. “That’s not what I meant.” She turned her attention to the pastry, studying the way the powdered sugar clung like snow to the almond streusel on top of Catherine’s untouched dessert.

“Catherine?” she asked, even though it wasn’t really a question, and winced at her small voice. “I think I might be gay.” All of a sudden, her head felt uncomfortably full, and her ears echoed with her own words: *I think I might be gay I think I might be gay I think I might be gay.*

Catherine rested her hand on her shoulder; she hadn’t even heard her move. “Come here, darling,” she said quietly, and Sarah hugged her gratefully, allowing her tears to hide in Catherine’s sweater. She felt Catherine loosen her hair from its elastic, and soon enough, Catherine’s fingers sifted lightly through her hair. After a while - how long could it have been, really? - Catherine took a deep breath, and when she spoke, it was so quiet and muffled by Sarah’s hair that she had to struggle to hear her.

“Are you sure, Sarah? Because it’s okay if you’re not.” Sarah

nodded. She sniffed, and would have rubbed her eyes if it didn’t mean pulling away from Catherine, from the softness of her skin and the scent of her perfume. She exhaled deeply.

“I’m sure, Catherine. It’s just like what you said, about learning to call things what they are.”

Catherine held her tighter, just for a moment. “I’m proud of you, Sarah. I know how hard it is, I do.” She paused, and Sarah knew this was when she ought to pull away, the moment when Catherine alluded to her bravery. She sat back on her heels and touched her hand to her face. Catherine passed her a napkin from the table. Catherine smiled at her encouragingly as she dabbed at her face.

Sarah excused herself to wash her face. She stood in front of the mirror, trying to do what Catherine had done when she first realized that she was gay, but the words sounded silly, echoing as they did against the pink tile. Then she inspected her face, not so much to see if it was free of streaky make-up, but more because she expected to see something different, as if her face would reflect the relief she felt at finally talking about it. She looked just the same, and Sarah couldn’t decide whether to be relieved or disappointed.

for Rebecca, always Rebecca.

STRANGE MEDICINE

philip ellis

DOUGLAS HEARS THE FAIRGROUND before he sees it. Laughter, applause, the satisfying thud of boots against sun-baked earth, echoing music that borders on the eerie as it rises from giant phonographs. He feels a thickening in the air as he nears the crowds, turns a bend in the lane... And there it is. The gate to the field is wide open, and a colourful, curlicued sign has been thrown up over it, welcoming all and sundry to the Baptiste Brothers' Paradise Roadshow. As Douglas passes under it, he imagines Ivy at his side, clutching his hand and huddling into him, mimicking girlish fear and excitement. But his fiancée is confined to bed on the other side of town, their Sunday evening plans scuppered by a fever.

"Read your palm, sir?" asks a woman with beautiful kohl-rimmed eyes. Douglas smiles and shakes his head before walking on; God only knows what secrets a gypsy such as she might coax from his heart line.

His thoughts are coloured with concern for Ivy, but a deeper concern keeps trying to surface. A niggle, a worry that he keeps trying to prevent from coming up for air. The truth, he supposes he should call it. The truth that however worried he might

be about the state of Ivy's health, it doesn't equate to the love that the world imagines it sees when they are together.

Douglas pushes the thought back into its box and focuses his attention on the card tricks being performed to a small crowd by a pale man in evening dress, before continuing his amble among the tents and stands, passing a bearded lady and the tallest man he has ever seen before running into a miniature tribe of jesters.

The clowns are diminutive and rambunctious; it is impossible to determine whether underneath their harlequin makeup they are children or little people. They prance and cartwheel right past Douglas, vanishing into the heated throng. As he watches them go, someone wanders into his eye-line. There, in the crowd, is Harry Baker. He's with a group of friends, laughing, enjoying the carnival like everyone else. The bearded lady has struck up a conversation with Harry – no, not a conversation, a flirtation, one which Harry in his unfailing good nature is returning. Douglas grimaces to think how he would have reacted in the same situation. When he sees Harry and his cohorts moving in his general direction, he looks away quickly, burned, and dashes into the nearest tent, where a bespectacled gentleman in a bottle green coat is extolling the virtues of his latest creation.

"This is no mere tonic," he bellows to the crowd. "This will alleviate the most downtrodden person of any ill feeling." Douglas's ears practically prick up at the sound of this. Perhaps a

dose would do Ivy the world of good. “Bad dreams? Anxious? Stressed? No more! This elixir will embolden you, strengthen your natural constitution, cure you of your deepest troubles.”

Then again, perhaps Ivy isn’t the one who would benefit the most from a sip of this magic potion. Douglas stands back and considers the sign behind the man in the green coat, as everybody else in the tent pushes and shoves to get their hands on a bottle. The sign reads:

Abraxas Theodore Carmel: Doctor, Diviner & Diabolist.

Once all the other spectators have got what they wanted and are on their way, Douglas approaches the entrepreneurial Doctor Carmel.

“Is it true what you said?” he asks nervously. “About what this elixir can do?”

“My good son,” the man replies in a more ordinary tone of voice, as if the performance has taken a lot out of him, “every word I say when I stand under this banner is true.” Then he leans forward conspiratorially, and Douglas sees him fall back into his mystic hyperbole. “The experiments I have conducted to reach this point! The hardship, the metaphysical *terrors* I have endured... To answer your question, yes. Anything which may afflict you –”

“*Anything?*” Douglas interrupts, wishing he could tell this

odd man in spectacles exactly what it is that ails him, the way he would complain to an ordinary doctor of aches and pains. Carmel gives him a knowing look, as if he can see every detail of Douglas’s inner life mapped out across his face, and nods.

“Take it from a magician,” he says, winking as he hands Douglas two bottles. “I’m never wrong.” Carmel has long, tapering fingers and impossibly broad, white palms. They are the hands of a trickster, an illusionist. A charlatan. But Douglas wants to believe, and so he does.

“Thank you,” he breathes, before handing over his money and leaving the carnival.

He purposely walks home the long way so he can drop off the elixir for Ivy. She is too ill to come to the door, and Douglas doesn’t want to bother her, so he leaves the small bottle with her mother. “Such a thoughtful boy,” she says to him warmly, before he continues his journey home. He is almost at his own house when he draws out the second bottle from his pocket. He stands there at the side of the road as he slowly removes the stopper, gives its contents a quick, curious sniff, and then downs the whole thing.

For a moment, nothing is different, other than a brief, metallic aftertaste. Douglas shrugs, and approaches his house. He reaches into his pocket for the key, and it is sliding into the lock when he feels the elixir’s effect. The crickets that inhabit the undergrowth up and down the street seem to have multiplied

tenfold, such is the volume of their conversational chirping; the streetlights somehow shine brighter, hum louder. With an unfamiliar clarity, Douglas removes the key from the lock, places it back into his pocket, and turns around. As if possessed by a will all of their own, his legs carry him at a brisk pace across the town. When he arrives at the small house on the edge of Coldwater Lane, it is with the utmost surety that Douglas knocks on the door. Harry Baker answers.

“Douglas?”

He says nothing for a moment, simply stares at Harry and thinks of the effortless courtesy and charm with which he treated the bearded lady at the fair. And then the words rise up, buoyant, like minims from a phonograph.

“The one I love is you,” he says, clumsily, the truest thing he has ever said. He watches Harry absorb this, and when he holds out a hand to welcome him inside, Douglas feels no trepidation like before, no urge to run. He takes Harry’s hand in his own (*read your palm, sir?*) and follows him into the little house.

Morning comes and the carnival is already on its way, leaving nothing but a cloud of dust and trail of trampled flyers in its wake. When the town is not much more than a speck in the distance, Abraxas Theodore Carmel, just plain Abe when not in front of his adoring public, looks back from the window of his caravan and thinks of the young man who came to see him. Abe knows what he’d wanted curing. He may not be a bona fide

sorcerer, but you don’t travel from one end of the world to the other without learning a thing or two about the human animal. Of course, the elixir holds no magical properties; a harmless solution of drugstore bric-a-brac and good intentions which does little more than clear the head and regulate one’s bowel movements. The innocence of the young man’s request, his sheer naivety, makes Abe laugh.

“What’s so funny, doc?” Perdita enquires from the small bed, their bed, at the bottom of the carriage where she languishes like a mermaid. The bearded lady will have been his companion, his sideshow sweetheart, for seven years next month.

“Oh, just these country folk,” he replies. “They’ll believe anything.” A cure for love? He snorts. “Ridiculous. Now why don’t you sit a little closer, my love.”

Perdita sidles up to him and lays her head on his shoulder. Doctor Carmel puts one arm around her and proceeds to absent-mindedly run his fingers through her downy facial hair as he counts his earnings once again.



Amber Francis

THE TROUBLE WITH DATING

alyssa rorke

girls who like girls and girls only
don't really like girls
who like girls and boys too.
boys who like girls and girls only
only really like girls
who like girls and boys too
because they are girls who like girls.
and while this may not be true for all girls
who like girls and girls only
and boys who like girls and girls only,
it has been true for this girl
who likes girls and boys too.

FLAWLESS

nicole louise melleby

I FIND HER FLAWLESS.

Which isn't to say she has no flaws, she actually has many. For one, her arms are an extra inch too long on each side. We measured them once. Apparently your arms, from the tip of one to the tip of other, are supposed to measure out equal to your height. Hers are two inches too long.

She stresses out easily. And when she succumbs to the stress, she has a habit of taking out her frustrations on anyone close enough for her irrational rage to reach. My best advice? Stay away from her finals week, unless she has already decided to drown out the stress with Malibu. Then you're safe. She never was a mean drunk, though sometimes she enjoys the alcohol too much. I think she trusts it more than she ever trusted people.

She can never stay in one place. Which is fine, though some people view her restlessness as betrayal when she leaves one party for another. And while she's out partying, drinking with the same speed of the beat of whatever song is playing, there is the likelihood that she will drink enough, much to the guys' excitement and her chagrin, to make out with her pretty blonde friend.

I'm one of the few who wouldn't even consider that a flaw, even though it's one thing about her that hurts me the most.

She loves hard. Too hard. And when she falls and shatters her heart, she never learns a lesson. I'd blame him, but she wouldn't want that. She gave him her heart, and I don't know that she'll ever get it back. She deserves the world, but I don't think she knows that. She deserves better than him, but I don't think she knows that, either.

It's the second thing about her that hurts me the most. Because I would treat her right. I would treat her best.

I think she knows this, but I'll never confirm it.

I find her in her room after classes. She pretends to be immersed into homework, but I know she's barely focused, if the Gaga music blasting from her computer is any indication. I drop my bag, glad to be done with the weight for the day, and climb up into her bed, pulling up the Toy Story blanket draped at the foot of it. She asks me if I want a piece of gum. "*Gum would be perfection!*" I reply, which sets us off into a fit of giggles and 'Friends' quotes.

We fall into a comfortable silence that is actually laced with anxiety. She pays it no notice, as she reaches over to grab her vibrating cell phone. She flips it open, chuckling at whatever text she had just received. As I enjoy the sound of her laughter, I contemplate what I should do next. I have a habit of speaking before thinking, but with her, I think before everything.

The words enter my head with ease but get caught before they can even make it to my throat. Words that would change the course of everything we've built are rarely spoken. And even when they are, they are rarely heard.

She wouldn't hear them, even though she listens to me more intently than anyone ever has. She lets me vent when the others are too loud or too obnoxious, even though she has been friends with them much longer than she has even known me. She offers help when I find it difficult to even comprehend how I can finish the semester feeling as clueless as I often do in my new major, a major that she has grown comfortable in over the years. She knows how alone I am capable of feeling, and she knows how much of a disappointment I believe I am.

I've let her in more than I ever could, and still, she never really made it all the way through.

She breaks the silence, talking about her plans for the future. It's a subject I tread lightly. I never knew someone's happiness at freedom could cause me this much pain. But I smile as I listen to her, her face lit up at the thought of taking off for L.A. as soon as possible. If it were up to her, I believe the moment her name is called on Graduation Day, she would grab the diploma and the next flight out to California in the same movement. I'll be right there watching, happy for her, proud of her, as she prepares to leave me behind.

When she leaves, which she will, she'll wait for me to say good-bye.

But I already have.

I never even said hello.

OUR NAMES

evelyn deshane

SHE USED TO HATE HER NAME.

“It’s Naomi. Which is ‘I moan’ backwards. Some boy in sixth grade reminded me of that fact and I’ve hated it ever since.”

“So what do you want me to call you?” I asked, trying to hide my smile. I wasn’t laughing at her. I was laughing at her face, the way she scrunched up her nose when something offended her. I tried to relax, to make myself invisible, but she always saw through my guise. She turned away from me in the school hallway, so much that I had to try and catch her before she went into the girl’s bathroom. She knew I hated going in there – I stopped dead in my tracks, as if it were a force field. My jaw tightened.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized. “Please, tell me your name. I want to know.”

I had never really thought about the name Naomi in that way before, but I understood how the insults could make it unbearable. I really could. My smile faded as I realized how much I wanted to protect her from those boys who made her uncomfortable. The same way she wanted to protect me from my family who still saw a darling little devoted daughter, and not the person who I knew I always was instead. Ever since the first day I met her, she knew

my name wasn’t really what I should be called. And when I told her that in my head I called myself Frank, she nodded and said it back to me. This was my chance to repay the favour. I waited and waited in the dark hallway, my feet hurting from tensing and standing taller than I really was, until she answered me.

“Om,” she stated. “Like the prayer, inner serenity. Peace. Complete and utter zen. Yeah, that’s what I want my name to be. That’s what I need to achieve,” she said the last part with a roll of her eyes. She walked away from the bathroom and down the hallway again towards class, where we both felt safe again.

“Om,” I said, repeating her words to let her know I was serious. “I like it. It suits you.”

She rolled her eyes at me, but I could see that same smile etch its way across her face. I knew that smile – it was recognition. Elation. I said her name to her again, and she answered me with my chosen one.

“Frank and Om,” she stated.

“Frank and Om,” I repeated.

“It has a nice ring to it.”

Eastern religions, or anything out of the mainstream really, had always interested her. She carried around her biography of Ghandi for a week after her name change, followed by the Laz Tzu and a bunch of other names I could not pronounce. I was pretty sure she latched onto them, mystic men across the world and history, because it was something beyond herself to focus on,

especially when she got sick.

“I need to calm down more, just calm down. I have such bad nerves,” she always said to me. She used the term ‘bad nerves’ like a 1950s housewife, though we were making our way to a new century when we first met. All the books she read were classics – and she, too, wanted to be thought of in that timeless era. Instead of eating to really fix the problem of these nerves, she’d read more books about zen masters and how they managed to ‘just calm down.’

When I asked why she wouldn’t eat, she told me that Buddha – and Ghandi – had fasted. “To be who I really am. To cut through the superficiality of a body, and get down to what is really important.”

I nodded again and became quiet. I could not fault her for leaving the body behind, especially when I always heard “she” and “her” indicate my own vessel. Sometimes I’d join her in lunch time fasts, only to give up and eat my sandwich while she called me Frank to make me feel better.

The month before, she had stopped eating because she was working on a novel and it would take too much time away from her mind. If she ate at all, she only ate what the characters were eating. She cooked veal that month because the book was about a hunter and she wanted to see what it was like.

“I hated every minute of it. It was the worst day of my life.”

“Then why did you do it?”

“Sometimes books have sacrifices that are more than insomnia and paper cuts.”

At sixteen, this was the most profound thing she – or anyone – had ever said to me. It was more enlightening than when I had looked up what the word *trans* really meant. Not the whole sex change and Harry Benjamin crap. That’s science and medicine

trying to make sense of it, people trying to put into words something that never really feels right at all. The Latin word *trans* was what I had looked up, and the dictionary told me it meant across or beyond. That was what I felt – across or beyond my body, beyond that name I had been given and the family I had been born into. I understood what Om

That was what I felt – across or beyond my body, beyond that name I had been given and the family I had been born into.

was doing when she wanted more than paper cuts. I wanted more than surgery to my legacy – but her revelations always felt deeper to me. She was able to deny her body, instead of dwell on it. She really believed in every single word she said. She lived her mottoes day to day to day to day. And I watched her weight go down go down go down.

The month before she was Om and decided that zen masters would help her, she became the characters in the books she read. She stopped eating because she wanted to feast on words. She

wanted to know things – to look and find something she hadn't seen before. She would walk to the libraries all over our scattered grid of a city and take out all the books she could find. She'd hover in the documentary section and browse through philosophy. Then, because she felt like it, she went into zoology instead and made me watch a documentary on the sloth with her. I traded up and gathered my own knowledge – and I made her research into the parrotfish with me, the fish that changed its sex as a way to survive. We read about male seahorses and how they were the ones to become expectant fathers, denying the male's legacy as an absent figure.

The month before that, Om had stopped eating because she wanted to paint. To bead things, make bracelets. She took up weaving hemp, crochet, and needle-point. It was July then. She wanted to feel the summer heat on her skin and be a child again. I wanted to peel back the time with her, live my childhood as a boy without anyone telling me otherwise. We bought children's clothing – because she fit into them by then, and because the boy's stuff fit my smaller frame anyway. While I tried on skate shorts, she swam in her small t-shirts with flowers embroidered on the sleeves. She only ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with apple slices if she ate at all that day. She beaded until she went cross-eyed and did hemp until she got calluses on her fingers. Her skin burnt from walking everywhere and spending every minute outside. She got a farmer's tan. Her belly was the only place that would ever stay

white, and I was the only person she'd ever let see it.

“You're the only person I'd let do a lot of things. You're the only person I'd tell a lot of things too,” she confessed with a grin. I smiled back at her and returned the favour. She saw me without the clothing I hid behind, without the clothing that I used to make sense of what lay underneath. And she still called me Frank when she saw me like that, when I saw her, and when we merely laid in bed together. Without anything on our bodies, not clothing or fat – we became just bones and our names. In those moments, I really believed we were going to be okay.

I was the first person who really listened to her, I guess. Her parents were never around and no one wanted to talk to the girl who always wandered from place to place too fast, her nose in a book, and her head not really in reality. I would have liked to have been known as her boyfriend, though everyone – if they noticed us together at all – just thought we were two best friends ignoring the world together. Two girls experimenting, being rebellious and temperamental. Though I knew that interpretation of our bodies was wrong, I would grasp at straws trying to explain anything else.

We were more than the high school love affair that burned too quickly and ended too messily. Even though we were just sixteen and still so naive and idealistic, we were so much more than boyfriend and girlfriend. We were more than most couples we saw. We didn't spend our nights going to the movies, getting drunk after, and then screwing around in the backseat of a car. We went

to poetry readings and drank too much coffee for our own good. We stayed up all night talking or walked around the city until our caffeine buzz wore away and our feet hurt too much. We took ourselves way too seriously, and then laughed at our efforts. We never had sex like the movies, but that didn't mean we weren't in love. I never wanted her the way the other boys did, and she hated most guys my age, anyway.

"They make me feel uncomfortable," she stated. When she started to lose the weight and more boys started to notice her, it made her even more upset. "I hate it when they say things to me. Even a look. I hate it when boys check me out." I used to wonder why she'd let me stick around. I used to check her out too, I supposed.

"No, no, Frank. Not you. Not ever. You look at me. That's it." I never understood what she meant and I worried in my own way that she didn't see me as a guy because of it.

Then one night, when I was combing her hair in the mirror, I watched as it slowly fell to both our feet in small clumps. In our reflection, I watched as my eyes went over her and the expression on my face. She was right - I didn't 'check her out'. I looked through her. I looked beyond the surface, beyond skin, beyond bones that were protruding, and everything material. I looked at her as she looked at me. I had worried my entire life that I was wrong – but Om had never solved it by telling me I was right. When she saw me, she didn't see trans man or trans person. She saw across that

mirror and beyond it, too. She made me into something normal, in body and mind, as I always tried to do the same to her.

We were forever, not Laura and Naomi, but always Frank and Om.

Inside the mirrors we had always avoided, we could look at the other and like what we saw. We could talk and listen together as we each confessed to the other how scared we were. We knew that in order to keep our reflections together and our names on the other's lips, we needed to preserve what we had. If we could see the other person clearly, then maybe other people could, too.

In the morning, we called home. We introduced ourselves in full – and then we asked for help.

I HATE BASEBALL

frank adams

I wanted to tell the coach
I hate baseball. But, I am sure
he already knew I'd rather be home
reading a book. After all, I didn't
actually play baseball. I occupied
a patch of ground so far out
in the outfield that I could sit down
throughout the game. I never
had a turn at bat. I never played
a real position. I endured the "fat-boy,"
"sissy-boy," "queer-boy," humiliation
of only occupying space. Of staying
out of the way and doing as I was told
while the "real-boys" played the game.

THE MAN IN MY ROOM

matt cresswell

HE TOOK ME TO THE BEACH ONCE, bought me an ice cream, all the things a father is supposed to. It was the longest time we ever spent together—seven hours and fifty-three minutes. I remember him looking at his watch like always. Not impatiently, or in disbelief. And then, as usual, he'd turned sadly and said, "I've gotta go. I'm sorry."

I was fifteen. I have other memories of him, some darker than others. I remember waking with a start at some dead hour of the morning to find him at the end of my bed. He just sat there in silence, watching me sleep, until I sat up. Then he just carried on staring, eyes resting on the rising welt above my left eye.

He was there on the day of my father's funeral too, but that story comes later.

-1-

I found him in my room, the day before my thirteenth birthday. He was just there, lying on my bed, reading a maga-

zine. He was wiggling his socked feet, his black boots discarded by the door. The boots had inch-thick soles and I wondered where he'd bought them.

He looked up from my magazine and beamed. "Happy birthday!"

I slung my schoolbag in a corner and kicked off my own shoes. "It's not my birthday till tomorrow."

"I know." He shrugged. "Close as I'm going to get, though." He catapulted my magazine onto a pile of junk in the corner. I looked at him. He made an exaggerated motion of looking back. He was wearing jeans like the ones I'd been nagging Mum to give me the money for: black, with red and silver stripes near the seams. They look better than they sound, honest. The sharp point of a tattoo peaked out furtively from one sleeve of his t-shirt.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Hmmm—I dunno." He sat up. "Let's just say I'm your guardian angel." He bounced on the edge of the bed, and glanced at his watch. "I've gotta go. I'm sorry." He strode to the door, and ruffled my hair on the way past. If my father had done that I'd have shrugged him off.

-2-

Miserable October rain had soaked my uniform through, and wet leaves stuck to my shoes. Mum shouted at me up the stairs to leave my wet things on the banister. I got my shirt and tie stuck on my head as I yanked them off. The knot grudgingly

gave way and I emerged to find him sat on the window-sill, politely looking at the ceiling.

“Why do you wear your tie like that?”

Cos I'd be a loser if I didn't. “I dunno.”

He grinned. “Cos it's ‘cool’? I remember ‘cool!’” He jumped off the sill and paced. “I remember the tie thing too. Couldn't be seen with your tie done up properly. Or your shirt tucked in.” He jabbed a finger in my direction. “What about your school bag? Straps down to the ground? And if I recall... you're only allowed to wear it on one shoulder? Otherwise you're what? Gay? Loser? Oh wait... it's coming back to me... a dildo! Ha!”

His brown eyes were fixed on me, and I became aware that I was topless. I yanked open my wardrobe door, pulled a t-shirt out without looking and dragged it over my head. My trousers were soaking but I didn't want to take them off in front of him.

“It's all crap.” I looked sideways at him. He was rifling through my CD collection. “Coolness. I give it... four years? Then all those bloody cliques will seem stupid.” I studied his back, imagining wings unfurling, ripping through the black t-shirt.

“Yeah, well.” I shrugged, unsure of what to say. I knew he was telling the truth, but I didn't believe him.

“I know, I know—that's all useless right now, isn't it?” He smiled conspiratorially. “Not going to believe a word I say. If

there's one thing I remember it's that it all seems so important at the time.”

He trailed a hand through my painstakingly arranged hair.

“I've gotta go. I'm sorry. Hang in there.”

-9-

He was perched on my bookcase. His face was invisible in the shadows, but I had a half-sense of him watching me. I watched him back through half-closed lids. If I squinted just right, the lampshade, dim in the dark, looked like his halo. I wondered how old he was.

I could feel his gaze on the bruise on my forehead, turning from yellow to purple in the dark. Eventually, he asked, “How did you get that?”

I gave up my pretense at sleep. I sat up, the breeze from the open window cold on my bare skin.

“I fell.”

“Bullshit.” His voice, taut and angry.

“I fell.”

“No you didn't.”

“How would you know?”

“Guardian angel, remember?”

“Bullshit yourself.”

I threw back the covers and swung my legs off the edge of the bed. We glared at each other from across the room. I'd be damned if I was going to speak first.

He was shaking his head. “You really should have stood up to him.”

“Fuck you!” That surprised even me. I’d never sworn properly to an adult before. I waited for the reprimand, for a “don’t you dare use language like that, young man!” Instead he sat down next to me, and chuckled to himself. “That’s the spirit,” he said.

“Nick Yew threw a stone at me,” I admitted.

“I know.”

“Then why ask?”

“To hear you say it.”

I stared at my feet. “How’d you know?”

Barely a heartbeat’s pause. “I was there. I saw.” His head tipped in the shadow. His halo was gone now. “Why did he do it?”

I felt as if he was trying to get me tell him something he already knew again. “I dunno.”

“He said you were looking at him in the changing room.”

“I wasn’t,” I said.

He chuckled again, and said nothing. I carried on staring at my feet. Then after a few moments silence, he nudged me with his shoulder conspiratorially. “Liar,” he said, laughter in his voice.

“I know,” I said, surprised to find myself smiling along with him. He stood up and faced the black window. “He has no right

to throw stones at you though. That’s just...” his voice tightened, “...stupid.”

I shrugged. “It was only one.”

“It wasn’t. It was four. And that one on your forehead isn’t the worst one. I was there, remember.”

I hadn’t even told Mum that. I’d been careful to hide the other bruises in case she got overprotective and marched into the headmaster’s office or something. I pulled up the edge of my boxers an inch to reveal the livid bruise on my inner thigh where the first stone struck. The second had bounced off my ankle, though you could barely tell. I leant forward so he could see the third, a ragged cut hidden beneath my t-shirt, between my spine and shoulder blade. He looked at it for a long second. “Fuck,” he murmured under his breath, then smiled at me. “It looks like angel wings that have been cut off.” He looked at his watch. “Shit, I’ve gotta go. I’m sorry.” He crouched down and grabbed my hand. “Listen. Trust me. It’ll all be fine. Just don’t... God, I’ve no idea what to say. I thought I would. Just... be yourself, okay?”

I thought about that when he’d gone. *Be yourself*. Sounds easy when bloody angels say it, doesn’t it?

-20-

He put his hand on my shoulder. “It’ll all be fine.”

I turned sharply, stumbled up the fire escape steps and punched him. I’d expected him to take the punch solidly, like they do in

films. You know, the grief-stricken woman beating her fists against her strong man's chest until she's let it all out, and collapses sobbing. Instead, he doubled up with a look of surprise on his face. Gasping for breath, he pulled himself to a sitting position on the top stair.

"It *will* be fine," he repeated.

"No, it fucking *won't*." I slumped down beside him, and sat looking out at the grey car park. By the gate, the driver was leaning against his hearse, smoking a cigarette. Through the double doors were the rest of my family, full of soap opera tears. Blubbing away, prize Oscar material, and all I could think about was how he should have looked both ways when he stepped out. It's what he taught me.

"It will."

I stood up, screeching raucously at the top of my voice from the third storey of the fire escape. The hearse driver dropped his cigarette in a panic. "It fucking *won't*. I'm sick of this. I'm sick of it all. I'm sick of being me. I'm sick of being the one who hides in the bus shelter from Nick and his band of twats. I'm sick of taking the long route home in case I see someone who might notice me. I'm sick of keeping my eyes on the floor in the changing room in case someone accuses me of being gay. I'm sick of the walls. I'm sick of my clothes. I'm sick of the fucking school bus *every fucking day*. I'm sick of mum. I'm sick of dad. I'm—" my voice shuddered. "I'm sick—I'm..."

He stood up and rested a hand on my shoulder. The other tangled into my hair.

I shoved him, as hard as I could, and he grappled for a handhold. "I'm sick of *you*."

He clung to the shaky railing, naked shock on his face. His mouth flapped mutely, until, eventually, the usual. "I've gotta go. I'm sorry."

-21-

He was waiting in my room when I got home, the day before my seventeenth birthday. He was lying on my bed, like the first time. His black clothes seemed out of place today. He wasn't supposed to be just another mourner.

I lay next to him, my head in the crook of his arm. Somewhere on the walk home, my anger towards him had sneaked away.

"You said it'd be okay." I think I just stated it. I don't think I was accusing him.

"It will."

I don't believe you. "If you say so."

"Oh, I do." He rolled his head to look at me. I'd never seen him this close up before. "God, I thought I'd be better at this. I thought I'd be wise and all that. I promised myself I'd be straightforward and inspirational and not cryptic and ineffectual. I thought I'd come up with the advice that'd give you whatever it was you needed to make you who you want to be."

“I don’t know what I want to be.”

“Yeah you do. Well—” he looked at me oddly. “No, yeah, you do. You just don’t have the guts yet.”

“You’re being cryptic.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” I stared at the ceiling for awhile. The shadow from the blowing curtain made it look as if was breathing. “You know what I want to be?”

“Probably. But tell me anyway.”

“I want to be you.”

He laughed. “Well, who knows what’s in the future.”

I sat up. “I want my hair like yours. And I want your boots. And I want to be, just... not scared like you.” He watched me.

“And I want your tattoo.”

“This?” He looked down awkwardly at his arm.

“Can I see it?”

For a heartbeat or two, he seemed to be deciding—he just stared, like he always did. Then he nodded. “Okay.” He stood up, into the light from the window, and pulled off his shirt. I don’t know what I’d expected, but I was impressed. Elegant angel wings expanded over his shoulder blades and down his shoulders. The tips wound down his back into the waistband of his jeans.

“I guess I was trying to do the same thing as you. Make myself into somebody.” He grinned over his shoulder at me.

I sat on the edge of the bed and reached out. My fingertip brushed the top of the wing and traced it down his spine. The inky feathers glowed with body heat.

“Don’t.” He spun around abruptly, and stepped back. I withdrew my hand, embarrassed. “I’ve gotta go.”

“You’re sorry, I suppose.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry.”

“Leave then.” I didn’t mean to make it sound so angry.

He pulled on his shirt. “Look... this is the last time, if I recall. There’s not long left. And there’s nothing else I can tell you. You’ve got to figure it out for yourself. I thought I could help you, but I’m just another riddle to figure out. But trust me, your life will be what you want it to be, and one day...”

He tailed off.

“And one day, maybe you’ll get to be me, or somebody even better. Who knows.” He reached out and ruffled my hair. I jerked my head back, and for a second he looked stricken. “I really gotta go.” He shifted uneasily.

“Bye.”

He looked at me for a long, *long* second. “Bye.” And he was gone.

I still think about him, four years later: his cryptic advice, where he had come from, the tattoo. I spent hours doodling what it had looked like in the corner of exercise books, and my

first Christmas at university, before returning home to my mother and new step-father, I went to a pokey little tattoo parlour and had the same image tattooed onto my back. It took hours, and hurt, but it was worth it. From then on I walked around feeling as if there was a whole extra protective skin beneath my clothes.

I've often wondered what I would have said, if I'd been the one at the end of my bed, watching myself wake up with the bruise on my head. I would think of something better to say, something that would actually help me.

Still, at least he was there. How many people have a guardian angel?

But now he wasn't. He wasn't there when I left for university in my battered Mini. He wasn't there the first time I had sex, in the unheated room of my student flat. He wasn't there when my mother phoned me to inform me she was engaged. He wasn't there when I stepped off a curb in front of a car, the day before my twenty-first birthday.

They say life flashes before your eyes when you're about to die. It's partly true. My whole life didn't flash, only small parts. I saw my bedroom, as the door opened. I saw a beach, with the sun setting. I saw the stairs in my house. I saw the ceiling of my room. And I saw myself, sitting, walking, talking, looking straight into my own eyes. And it didn't flash it just... happened. And I could stop. And talk.

And all I remember saying, thrust from deep down inside my chest, over and over, was, "I've gotta go. I'm sorry."



Believe
MVEssick



SINGULAR

amber francis

Love is raw and real and sweet;
Self-knowledge rubs away regret.
We are not incomplete.

Don't marry everyone you meet.
The friends that can't be friends forget
That love is raw and real and sweet.

Each reply, a deaf repeat:
"You haven't found the right one yet!"
But we are not incomplete.

Blood and muscle, it still beats
The same as hearts in sync, don't fret;
Love is raw and real and sweet.

Humans, integers – discrete;
The null set is still a set,
And we are not incomplete.

Yin and yang are half of each,
But I already have the set.
Love is raw and real and sweet.
We are not incomplete.

THE ALLIANCE

eric gober

PETER SAT ON A BEACH BLANKET and brushed sand off his legs. He was too skinny to be out here with his sister and her new friends. The girls were curvy, and the guys were muscly. All were going to be seniors in the fall. Not him. He was only going to be a sophomore. He was too white too, like their mother, with no hope of turning tan thanks to the SPF 50 sunscreen his dad made him wear.

He shielded his eyes from bright sun and watched Becky frolic with her tanned friends in the surf. She and he spent a month every summer in California with their dad, and this year she was living out her Hollywood dreams. He'd had to tag along while she got styled at Hair by Nico on Vine Street and shopped at Ed Hardy on Melrose Avenue. Then he got dragged to Hollywood Boulevard, where she and their dad searched for hours to find Leonardo DiCaprio's silly pink star on the sidewalk. They'd hauled him to Beverly Hills and wound through town in a bumpy tourist van to see houses of dead movie stars nobody remembered. This week, they'd made him suffer through a night of Josh Groban at the Hollywood Bowl and an afternoon of Justin Bieber at a taping of *The Tonight Show*. Their dad kept vetoing

his only request—a day of riding rollercoasters at Magic Mountain—and instead took them wherever she wanted to go. Today, she was playing the role of Malibu Barbie's long lost cousin, Scottsdale Becky, who'd just turned sweet sixteen and had her sights set on her dream guy, Tarzana Ben. Tall, tanned, and already seventeen, he was sweeping her off her feet in the waves. Peter wanted to gag. He couldn't wait to return to their mom in Arizona, settle into his air-conditioned bedroom with his computer, log on as Worf the Dwarf, and mine for ores in World of Warcraft.

Becky's horde splashed out of the ocean, dashed across the hot sand, and descended on a big red cooler for sodas.

"C'mon, bro, get in the water with us," Ben said as he fished out an icy can.

Becky shook water from her hair. "He'll sink. When we went tubing last year, he fell out of his inner tube and nearly drowned in the river. His feet are made of lead."

Ben wasn't deterred. "It's easier to float in salt water. Give it a try."

"Yeah, dude, c'mon," said another boy. He wore black and red board shorts and a glinting silver bracelet that caught Peter's eye. He was a little shorter than Ben but two inches taller than Peter. He'd hoped he wouldn't have to talk to the boy. His smile and cute surfer looks made Peter feel things he didn't want to feel. "I'll look out for you."

“He won’t get in, Jason,” Becky said. “All he does is play games on his computer.”

“Oh yeah?” Jason asked. “What kind of games?”

Peter shrugged.

Becky rolled her eyes. “Can’t you be social for once? What’s the game you play where you pretend you’re a troll?”

Jason gazed him curiously. “World of Warcraft?”

Peter nodded.

“You’re part of the Horde?”

“No. I’m not a troll. I’m a dwarf.”

“That’s cool. You’re in the Alliance like me. I’m a night elf.”

“Geek alert,” Ben teased. He shook his soda can hard, popped the top, and sprayed Jason from head to toe.

Becky’s entire horde laughed at Jason standing there dripping cola.

“Dude? Seriously?” He eyed Ben and then sprang like a level-sixty night-elf warrior. Ben went down with a thud, and Jason pinned him in the sand.

Now everyone laughed at Ben.

“Never mess with a night elf!” someone taunted.

Ben squirmed. “All right, get off already.”

“No, have some more!” Becky shook her can, popped the top, and sprayed them both.

Jason let go.

Ben jumped to his feet and chased Becky, who was already

halfway across the sand, heading for the crashing waves. The horde followed, but Jason lingered by the blanket and gazed at Peter, who felt like shivering and melting all at once. He was sure that’s how Becky and Ben felt when they looked at each other. He was also sure Jason didn’t feel that way about him, so he tried hard to push the feelings aside.

“You sure you don’t want to get in with us?”

“I’m sure.”

“All right, buddy, no pressure, maybe next time.” Jason flashed a smile and ran across the sand. In a graceful, breathtaking arc, he dived headfirst and disappeared into the surf.

#

He crossed his arms and stared at the TV. In Arizona, *Modern Family* was his favorite show. His mom let him enjoy the antics alone in his bedroom. Here, however, he wasn’t so fond of the program. He had to sit on the couch with his dad. He knew his dad wasn’t keen on “sissy” Mitch or “queeny” Cam, as he called them, so Peter didn’t laugh out loud at their follies. And to tell the truth, he didn’t feel like it, especially when he heard his dad laugh extra loud at Jay Pritchett belittling his gay son. Peter reckoned Jay would rather have had a straight son than Mitch, and he was discovering his own father was likely going to be the same way.

When a commercial came on, Peter went to the kitchen for a soda. As he opened the fridge, he heard *bloop*. That would

be his mom texting him goodnight. He fished his phone from his pocket, tapped the screen, and saw: *What's up, dwarf?*

He blinked. His phone blooped again, and he saw: *It's Jason. Got your number from Becky. Wanna hit Dragon's Den tomorrow?*

He couldn't believe Jason wanted to hang out with him. His heart pumped faster as he texted: OK.

Bloop went his phone: *Awesome, pick you up at noon.*

Peter closed the fridge. He didn't want a soda after all. He headed for his makeshift bedroom, his dad's home office. Since he wasn't allowed on his dad's computer to play World of Warcraft, he'd draw instead—pictures of a dwarf and night elf battling the Horde. His dad could snicker at *Modern Family* by himself.

#

A gallant night elf in a sleek glaive thrower—that's what Jason looked like in the Mercedes. As Peter belted himself into the passenger's seat, all he could think to say was, "Nice wheels."

"My dad's. He'd kill me if he knew I was driving his baby." As Jason pulled away from the curb, the thick silver chain around his wrist caught Peter's eye. It was the same one he'd worn at the beach. Jason noticed his gazing. "I know—it's dorky."

"It looks cool on you."

"I wish I didn't have to wear it."

Peter noticed a red symbol on the bracelet. "What's that?"

"A medic alert. I had heart palpitations when I was a kid. They stopped when I started swimming in middle school, but doctors say I have to be careful. Sudden stress could trigger a heart attack."

Pity washed over Peter. "I'm sorry . . . I hope that never happens."

"Thanks, man."

Jason got them onto the Hollywood Freeway and told him about Dragon's Den. The place was filled with board games, card games, role-playing bibles, and accessories of all sorts, like dice, battle maps, and mini figurines you could customize with flat or glossy paints. When they entered the store, Jason—like a true night elf healer—investigated all things magical. Peter, however, turned into Worf the Dwarf, a resourceful miner interested in metallurgy, gemstones, and handy tools. Every metallic object in the store caught his eye—mini silver robots, gnome-built flying machines trimmed with chrome, pewter chess pieces, bejeweled bronze-age weapons and gadgets, bottles of gold paint, and even a brassy wire clothes hanger someone had dropped on the floor.

When they exited the store, Peter opened his shopping bag and removed the figurine he'd purchased. Jason examined the bearded dwarf wielding a miner's pick and holding a gold nugget.

“He’s awesome.”

“What did you get?”

“Magic runes.” Jason retrieved a small leather pouch from his shopping bag, and as he removed a polished stone, he dropped his dad’s car keys. They fell through a metal grate underneath his feet. Jason looked panic-stricken. “My dad’s gonna kill me.”

No water was flowing beneath the grate. Peter could see the key ring sitting on dry cement a foot below. His hand wouldn’t fit through the grate’s small holes, but maybe he could fish the keys out.

“Hold my dwarf.” He handed Jason his bag. “And don’t stress, okay?”

He darted back into Dragon’s Den. When the coast was clear, he stooped and grabbed the wire hanger he’d seen on the floor, stuffed one end into the waistband of his jeans, and covered the rest with his tee shirt. Hunching slightly, he kept the outline from showing beneath fabric and nonchalantly walked outside.

He had the hanger untwisted by the time he reached Jason. With a keen eye and steady hand, he plucked the key ring from the grate.

“Omigod, dude, you’re awesome!” When Jason seized him and gave him a bear hug, he felt Jason’s heart beat against his own. He couldn’t remember anyone ever appreciating him as

much as Jason did right then. He wished he’d never let go. His touch felt magical.

#

He waited for Jason on a bench. A nearby rollercoaster whooshed, and thrill seekers screamed. He felt their excitement. He couldn’t believe he was finally here. Nor could he believe he didn’t want to go back to Arizona. Jason had showed him Los Angeles was every bit as exciting as the Alliance stronghold, Stormwind City, that he loved exploring as Worf the Dwarf. His dad and Becky no longer dragged him to The Grove, Beverly Center, or Sherman Oaks Galleria to meet her horde and ransack shops, because Jason swung by almost every day and took him on a quest. Today, they were scouting Magic Mountain. So far, they’d found tasty corn dogs in Six Flags Plaza and heart-pounding adrenaline rushes on looping and twisting tracks. Last week, they hiked in Fryman Canyon and found coyotes crisscrossing dusty trails. Saturday evening, they peered through a giant telescope at Griffith Park Observatory and found Jupiter and four tiny moons glowing in the inky sky. Yesterday, Jason took him to the Rose Bowl Aquatic Center and coached him until he discovered his feet weren’t made of lead after all—he could swim *and* float. That morning had been sweet torture. Jason had been so close to him in the water, buoying him with a hand, yet he talked about wanting to be with a cute girl who was dangling her feet in the shallow end. He finally got the nerve to go talk to her, and

for the first time in his life, Peter felt the stab of jealousy. Oh how he wanted to take Jason away from her. He wanted to cling to him in the water the way those two boys in the deep end clung to their girlfriends. But he didn't dare. The boys might come after him like level-ninety goblin rogues. Even worse, Jason might turn on him too, and he'd lose his friendship. The thought made his heart feel sick.

"Yo, sissy boy."

He looked up and gripped the bench. Two muscly boys leered at him like troll death knights about to attack.

"Where's ya boyfriend?"

"Right here." Jason bounded up behind them like a night-elf mage about to cast a spell. "You got a problem with that?"

The trolls backed up as soon as they saw him. His face was flushed with anger, his fists clenched and raised, his silver bracelet flashing a warning.

Peter's own heart pounded. He had to calm him down. "It's okay."

"No, it's not. There's nothing wrong with a boy liking a boy," he told the trolls. "Now get lost."

They hastily retreated.

As he lowered his fists and relaxed, the words he'd spoken swirled around Peter like magic dust. He looked up at his friend in awe. He truly had the brave, compassionate, mortal heart of a night elf—he'd just stood up for every gay boy in the world.

"Thank you for getting rid of them."

"No sweat, dwarf. Where're we headed next?"

Peter pointed at a perfect white loop rising high into the bright blue sky.

"Revolution it is." Jason grabbed his hand and tugged him off the bench. Peter pocketed that moment like a gold nugget. When he was ready to tell family, friends, and the world who he was and who he loved, he would remember every detail of this magical day.

#

Down the beach, Becky laughed at Ben and romped with her horde on the sand. Who would feel greater sorrow tomorrow when she and he boarded a plane in Burbank and returned to Arizona? He didn't want to think about that right now because Jason bobbed out on the ocean and waved at him to join him. A wave crashed against his chest as he waded in farther. The surf felt rough, but he felt light. Thanks to Jason, he knew he could float and would survive.



Anniversary
Amanda Civitello

BINARY

christian de mohun

It seems-
I change my identity daily
Hourly
Minute-by-minute
Because I need to fit in.
I hate to be hurt.
But ma'am, I'm being nice-
Not ma'am, not ma'am, I-
You're a guy? I'm not laughing, you're just-
Just-
You're not laughing, you're judging.
Best of both sides?
Isn't that a little greedy?
How many have you slept with?
That's a guy, you must be gay
Girl, straight
What are you?
Who are you?
Why are you...?

I am me.
Caught between two worlds
Two spheres
Two sexes
Genders
Non-binary.
Non-boxed, I don't come with a code.
I am sir, I am he,
and I love them.
I am who I should be
Who I want to be
Who I love
And you, you
You are in your narrow world
With your narrow view
Boxes
Binary
Zero-one
I am two.

THE APOLOGY

billy higgins

HE SCRATCHED THE BACK OF HIS HEAD. Then, taking a deep breath, he knocked on her door.

She opened it, which made sense, because he'd just knocked on the door. But it didn't feel right. He was standing there and she was standing there. He was he and she was she. But it just didn't feel right.

Still, he said it: "I'm sorry."

She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. It was red, straight: a little past her shoulders now. The two-litre jug of soda weighed heavy in his one hand, while the box of candles proved unwieldy in his other.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said, taking the box of candles. Her cheeks matched her hair as she moved out of the doorway, letting him enter.

"I could have handled it better," he said, mumbling.

"It's a lot to handle," she said.

"It's a lot to handle," he said. "But I could've handled it better."

"Could've handled it worse," she said, "I'm just happy to

see you."

She had a small room, little more than a closet. He sat on her bed. She did, too, placing the candles on the table at her bedside.

A comfortable silence blanketed them. There was no danger here: no danger of someone saying the wrong thing, or even of someone saying the right thing. Maybe the right things being said wouldn't work. Maybe the right things would lead only to pain.

"What's the soda for?" she asked. He held it awkwardly in his hands, too nervous to know where to set it down.

"I wanted to get you wine, but like I couldn't because age and stuff. So I bought a bottle of soda, which could be considered wine if you'd lost the ability to see, smell, and taste."

"That's sweet," she said, smiling. "You want to have some now?"

"That'd be nice."

She got up and opened one of her dresser drawers, filled with a sparse assortment of mugs, plates, and silverware. She looked at him, shrugging. "Not a lot of room."

He repeated, "Not a lot of room."

She took out his two favorite mugs, the only two she owned. One was black, with a pair of bright red lips on it. The other had a picture of a pig painting a group of lady pigs in an abstract way. The mug said, in big letters, "Pigcasso."

Pigcasso. That got him every time.

She set the mugs on the bedside table and poured soda into both of them just a hair below the brim. She passed him the Pigcasso cup, and he smiled. Comfort could be found in the familiar taste of his youth. And so, he took a sip.

“I love you,” she said. At that, he snapped to attention, surprised that she would say that now, after all he’d done. “We have a lot to figure out, and I know that’s tough. But no matter what you decide, I love you. Nothing can change that.”

He took another sip of soda. Could he love her? Was it in his nature to love her?

He said, “I thought about what I said the other day, and I see how wrong I was. You are what you are, and if you want to be a woman that’s okay, you know?”

“I don’t want to be a woman. I am a woman,” she said, and his heart nearly stopped.

“You are a woman,” he repeated. “I’m just not used to that.”

“You’ll have to get used to that,” she said. “That’s what I am.”

“You’re a woman,” he said. “You’re a woman and I’m getting used to that. It’s just weird.”

“Weird?”

“I’m unused to it.”

“But you said you’ll get used to it.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s good,” she said. “I’m glad. Thank you.”

More silence. He was even more grateful for it this time: it’s hard to say the wrong thing when you’re not saying anything at all.

“What does that mean for me?” he finally asked.

“For you?”

“For me,” he said, “If you’re a woman and you’ve always been a woman, what does that make me? Straight?”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I don’t think people have ever mistaken you for heterosexual.”

“But isn’t that what this is?” he asked. “What it was and all it ever could be?”

“Maybe. Maybe the trick is just not thinking about it too much.”

“But you can’t just change the past like that.”

“I’m not changing the past.”

“Then what are you doing? You told me you were a guy and now you’re telling me you’re a girl. You told me you were gay, but now I guess you’re straight, and you always were straight, because you were always a girl who liked guys?”

“It was high school. I was confused.”

“And I’m confused now,” he said.

“Why? We’re in college. We’re free to be who we want to be, so why can’t we just be? Live without the labels.”

He stood up. “It’s not about other people. It’s about me.

It's about my need for labels. I've been called gay my whole life. And I fought it. I told people I wasn't, and I came up with as many comebacks as I could muster. I avoided the assholes as much as I could, but you know what I found out? You know what you helped me find out? I am gay. I'm as gay as gay gets. And I'm proud of that. I earned that damn label, and I have every right to wear it with pride, because that's who I am. And like it or not, it's influenced the way people looked at me since Kindergarten. It's influenced the way people have looked at me my whole damn life."

"But it shouldn't have."

"But it did," he said. "I met you, and I finally thought I'd found a man I could love. I thought I'd found myself. But now you're sitting there, telling me I'm straight? Because surprise, turns out the only person I've ever slept with is a woman. How do you think that makes me feel?"

"You didn't come here to argue."

"No, I came here to love you," he said. "I came here to see the mugs I remembered so well. I came here to sit on the bed I remembered so well. I came to bring you candles, because I know flowers make you sad when they die. I hoped that I could give you an apology that I meant. But the truth of it is that I don't know if I can be with you anymore. I'm gay, and you're not a guy. I'm just confused. I just don't know. You're not a guy anymore."

"I never was, but that's okay," she said, with a voice so

hushed it could barely be heard. "I just want to know. Do you still love me?"

He stood there for several seconds, watching her tear up. He ignored the tears on his own cheeks, told himself that they didn't matter.

Then, leaning in, he kissed her on the forehead, "Yes. I don't know how or in what way or if it's romantic or if you're just the best friend I'll ever have. But whatever form it is, I love you because I've been closer to you than anyone else I've ever known. And I'll never forget that. I can't do anything but love you, and I'm sorry. I'm sorry I hurt you."

"Me too," she said.

"I should go now," he said, turning to leave.

"Thanks for the candles."

The tears finally stopped, and he swallowed, taking a pause. The smallest of smiles spread across his face. "See you tomorrow."

With that, he left.

Identity
Amber Francis



THE LITTLE THINGS

apolline weibel

Who falls in love with a gender?
(Do you?)

I fall in love with a chestnut eye,
I fall in love with a lopsided smile,
I fall in love with a muffled lisp,
I fall in love with the curve of a wrist.

I fall in love with a treacherous tear,
I fall in love when you let me near,
I fall in love when you talk with riddles,
I fall in love with those soft giggles.

With your hiccup,
The way your hair smells,
Your chipped teacup,
And the lies you tell.

I fell in love with our spoiled picnic,
On that rainy night,
When you hummed music.

I fell in love with the days spent indoors,
With my small fingers
Brushing against yours.

I fall in love through
Little words,
Little moments,
And little things.

And I wonder why you don't,
And I wonder why you can't-
Simply understand.

It makes me sad.

(Aren't you sad?)

-H.

KEYCHAIN

hillary hylton

I SIT IMPATIENTLY in the driver's seat of my dad's Jeep, eyes scanning the misty parking lot. The white sign of the coffee shop – “Rising Sun” – shines like a beacon through the grey morning. The store's inside is dark. I wipe my sweating palms on my black pants.

Eventually, a small white car glides smoothly into the spot next to mine. A short person jumps out and hurries to the shop's door. I catch up to her as she flips through the keychain.

“Good morning,” I chirp. She glances at me before pushing her way into the store. My nervousness is amplified when I noticed that she's *really* attractive. She has two of my biggest weaknesses: boyishly short hair and tattoos.

“Hi! Are you the new person?” She goes straight to the back of the store, leaving me standing awkwardly in front of the counter. The lights flicker on. She reappears. “Anna, right?”

“Um, yeah.”

“Is this your first day?” She's already at the register, counting the money in the drawer. Damn, she moves quickly.

“No, I worked a couple of days last week. Um, what's your... name...?”

There's a pause that lasts a couple of breaths as she finishes counting the stack of bills in her hands. “Lily,” she responds, scooping up a silver flash of change.

“Cool,” I say lamely.

I was wrong. She has three of my biggest weaknesses, the third being charisma. She's funny. By the time the morning rush is over, I feel at ease enough to ask something I'd been wondering since I first saw her: “Where did you get those tattoos done?”

Instinctively, she glances at the column of Chinese text on her right arm, but my eyes are on the dragon on her left. It's inked to look like there are rips in the skin over it. Something strikes me as odd about it. I can't place what, exactly.

“All over. The first one...” She pulls up her shirt just a bit to reveal a tree on her left side.

A tree's one of the many things I'm considering getting on my back, and I like the style. “That's really cool.”

“There's a funny story behind it, actually. It's a cover-up.”

“Oh, yeah? It's a good one. I wouldn't have noticed.”

“I was at this party, and a guy I knew offered to give me a tattoo.”

“Oh, no.”

“Yeah. I was young and stupid. So I get to his place, where he says his supplies are. And I don't want to back out, but once I see everything, I'm kinda like *ehhhh*... So I tell him to do some-

thing simple: my initials. LL in cursive. As he's doing it, I watch him. It looks terrible. The lines are all shaky. It's just bad. After I left home, I went to a professional. He did a great job." She walks over and pulls up her shirt again. "The knots on the trunk are where the loops on the L were." Even with that knowledge, I can't see the ghost of the original underneath. "So yeah, I've left all of that behind me."

The next tattoo is below her collar bone on the right side, so she has to tug at the neck of her shirt to show me. It's a sailboat on waves, old school American style. I bite my lip. "There's a shoreline on my back. This one was done at a place just down the street from here."

"Really? Luke's? I've heard about that place. Would you recommend it?"

"Yep. They were careful, and they were friendly. They also did my girlfriend's tattoo. She has a rose on her shoulder." I feel a bit envious that she can say the word girlfriend so casually to someone she's just met. I'm not even out to some of my best friends. And maybe I feel a twinge of disappointment that she has a girlfriend, even though she's probably too old for me.

"My parents say I can get a tattoo if I pay for it myself. I really want one, but I'm scared it'll hurt."

"Nah. It pricks a little at first, but then you get used to it." She pauses. "Anyway, there are things that hurt worse."

She shows me a couple more tattoos, but doesn't comment

on the dragon. I realize later, as she's handing a cup of coffee to a customer, what's been bugging me. The rips in front of the dragon aren't part of the tattoo. They're old scars trailing horizontally up her wrist. They're big, too. Scars that mean business, or did a long time ago. And instead of hiding that part of her past with long sleeves, she's covered them with a symbol of personal strength. It reminds me of a friend who drew butterflies on her wrist because she wouldn't want to hurt them. Different images for different people, but the same idea: "I am worth too much to damage."

When Lily mentions being from Virginia, I ask how she ended up across the country. "You don't want to hear my life story," she says. I let it drop because it doesn't seem like she wants to talk about it. She's wrong, though. I really, really do.

-

When I'm attracted to someone, my brain fixates on specific details – her chipped tooth, the way her eyes look like they have shooting stars in them in the right light. There are two details about this particular girl that my mind just can't get past: the dragon tattoo and her name.

Lily. It doesn't seem like it applies to her. It's too...feminine. But then, I hardly know her. Shortly after we meet, she goes to work somewhere that pays better.

After a few paychecks, I go to that tattoo parlor.

-

A few months later, I'm downtown with a couple of friends. We're late for a concert. Hurrying down a side-street, I nearly run into a girl with short black hair coming out of a restaurant. "Oh, sorry!" I say automatically before the face comes into focus.

"Hey! Remember me?" she asks. Her green flannel shirt picks up the green of her eyes.

"Yeah! Hi! How have you been?"

"Great!"

"Where are you working now?"

"Silver Bistro. Are you still at Rising?"

"Yeah, I am." I can feel Jane shifting behind me. "We're late, so I have to go, but it was great to see you!"

We start to hurry off. Lily's "Hey!" stops me. I can feel her eyes on the low back of my dress, on the image between my shoulder blades of a keychain. It holds two pink Venus symbols, the sign for female. The one on the left has the cursive initials AM.

"Nice tattoo," Lily says. Her smile is like sunlight breaking through clouds.

SPEAKING SILENCE

sia tong hua

Across the day we carry our hearts in our mouths like an old purse. The only sounds are laughter and silence and laughter and the sour throb of silence. This will be/is one of those nights. We squeeze ourselves inside persistent bedrooms when the sun sets, flushing all these unspoken words like an army of goosebumps – that is, we are shivering, we are grinding our teeth, we are shivering, we are clenching our bedsheets. “I like you, Damian.” “Lisa, I want to hold your hand and kiss you. I do, I really do.” “I have something to tell you, Mum.” Remember the mouths of our teachers, how sympathetically they O, and all the words they utter like some reassuring footsteps, when we tell a hypothetical tale that begins with “If”, with “Let’s say.” We tell vague stories. Never forget the softness of our mothers and all the tiredness set on their eyes. Never forget anyone. Our mothers smile, chime our rooms. This is one of those nights. When we gather up enough strength, we know what to do: leave our rooms, go down to where everyone and everything shall be/is, and with all the life pulsing and hidden inside our mouths, speak. Speak. And when we do, we hope, we really do hope that our words fall and ring as brightly and as savagely as new, rusty pennies.



Paper Hearts
Amanda Civitello

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