



I am not your Sophie

Erie Mitchell

You see her across the room. Interlaced plastic thread wrapped around her Adam's apple. The gay people in her phone make her laugh, bright red lips widening around crooked teeth. Bobbed hair flexes as her head tilts. Growing it out would do wonders for her, but that takes time and you know she's getting impatient. The bob looks great of course, framing her face in an undeniably feminine way. You pretend to glance at nothing in particular, while secretly snatching glimpses of her recently shaved legs, visible between her skirt and her blue and pink socks.

She's alone. This works for you. She's all yours. You will saunter over with the confidence of a thousand suns and hit her with an opening remark, alluring yet casual. Remember, she wears makeup but that tragic male socialization means she talks like your friends from high school. You run through the talking points—"you know I saw the TV glow too?" No, that's from an independent movie, she might not be that well versed in underground queer art. Come on, flip through that Rolodex. Shit, she saw you staring, you gotta walk over now.

You nod, she nods back. You've met a few times, your relationship has advanced to saying hi whenever you see each other. As you walk over

your mind is working in overdrive to think of what to say. Everybody likes Brat. You've already asked her pronouns and made a point of mentioning your own to show understanding and relatability. Think, think.

You've got it!

You thread your way through the groups of people who seemed to make it their mission to block your path and stand next to her. She's still sitting, but this works for you, she's a bit tall when standing. You exchange greetings and vague positives about your day, and just when uncomfortable silence is around the corner, you come in with the kill-shot.

"You look really pretty today!"

"Thank you!"

"No really, you remind me of that hyperpop artist Sophie. I love her music."

Not a single muscle moves on her face. After making the connection to the legendary hyperpop artist, you had thought of a number of different ways to take the conversation. A few more compliments to administer, or some of her songs you could talk about. But not this. The silence builds, and mercifully she thanks you and starts asking about what music you've been listening to recently. You go to respond, as you've been down a few Spotify rabbit holes this week, but find that your face can't move a muscle either.

In fact, everything stops. People shouting over the din find the next word stuck in their throat. Partygoers freeze as they lean back in self-preservation mode. A drink hovers mid-spill, individual drops of the champagne or beers glisten three feet in the air, an air that suddenly hangs thick and dry. Everyone is as still as a statue, except for their eyes. Emotions ring out through them: fear, confusion, anxiety.

Suddenly a mighty voice rings out, seemingly bellowed by the walls themselves.

"I am God, master of the above, the below, and the here. I exist within the nucleus of every atom in your bodies, and view your tiny planet from my throne at the pinnacle of the universe."

Pupils quiver, now as wide as saucers.

“Let it be known to the sapient citizens of Earth, that I have decreed this day to be the Day of Judgement. I have stared into the minds of every human on this planet and have assigned your souls either to Heaven, an endless party in the clouds where wine glasses never run out and no one will ask you to turn the music down, or Hell, where you will be flogged with jagged whips in a pit of fire for all Eternity. I say this planet, for those poor fools in the International Space Station have



already made their choice when they believed themselves above my perfect life-giving Earth. They are already in Hell, where so much pain is inflicted so quickly that every second feels like a thousand years.”

Some pass out from sheer shock; their eyes become glassy and unfocused. Others’ roll back into their skulls, having seen the last light they’ll ever see on Earth.

“Fear not, humans. For I am a benevolent God, and understand that Evil is less of a material reality than a shortsighted view of a contradiction in perspectives. You are flawed, yes, but well-intentioned, making the most of systems beyond your tiny human brains. The vast majority of you will be welcomed into the pearly gates, and will be joined by your pets and other lesser animals that have brought joy to your life.”

Tears well up across the room. Unable to run down people's faces, they settle in layers across the ducts of humanity. Beams of pure light descend, marking everyone for passage into the heavens.

You are still staring at her. Emotions have been playing across your face, mostly terror, but now total bliss. Her offbeat beauty will be the last thing you see before you ascend to the afterlife. Who knows, maybe the two of you will be reunited in the great party in the sky. It already feels like the room is just you two now, all that matters in the world.

Then your mind begins to wander. Do I really find her attractive, or is she just the only vaguely feminine person in your up and coming tech city that you have a chance to get with. She barely has boobs, there's no way she's had the surgery. In Heaven, she'll just be a weird man-thing. All social order as we know it will be completely different and identities will be shattered and reforged. You don't have to be put into the boxes that have defined your adult life. Nerd. Awkward guy who can't talk to the opposite sex. Brandon Sanderson fan. If you play your cards right, you can finally have all the real women you want. And she'll still be in the corner, on whatever Heaven's version of Twitter is, alone.

You become dizzy, overwhelmed by the endless possibilities. Several thoughts, however, emerge from the swirling haze and become corporeal. You weren't imagining things, you and her really are the last two people in the room. Everyone else has been sucked up, with human-sized spaces in the air where bodies used to be. And where is your beam of light?

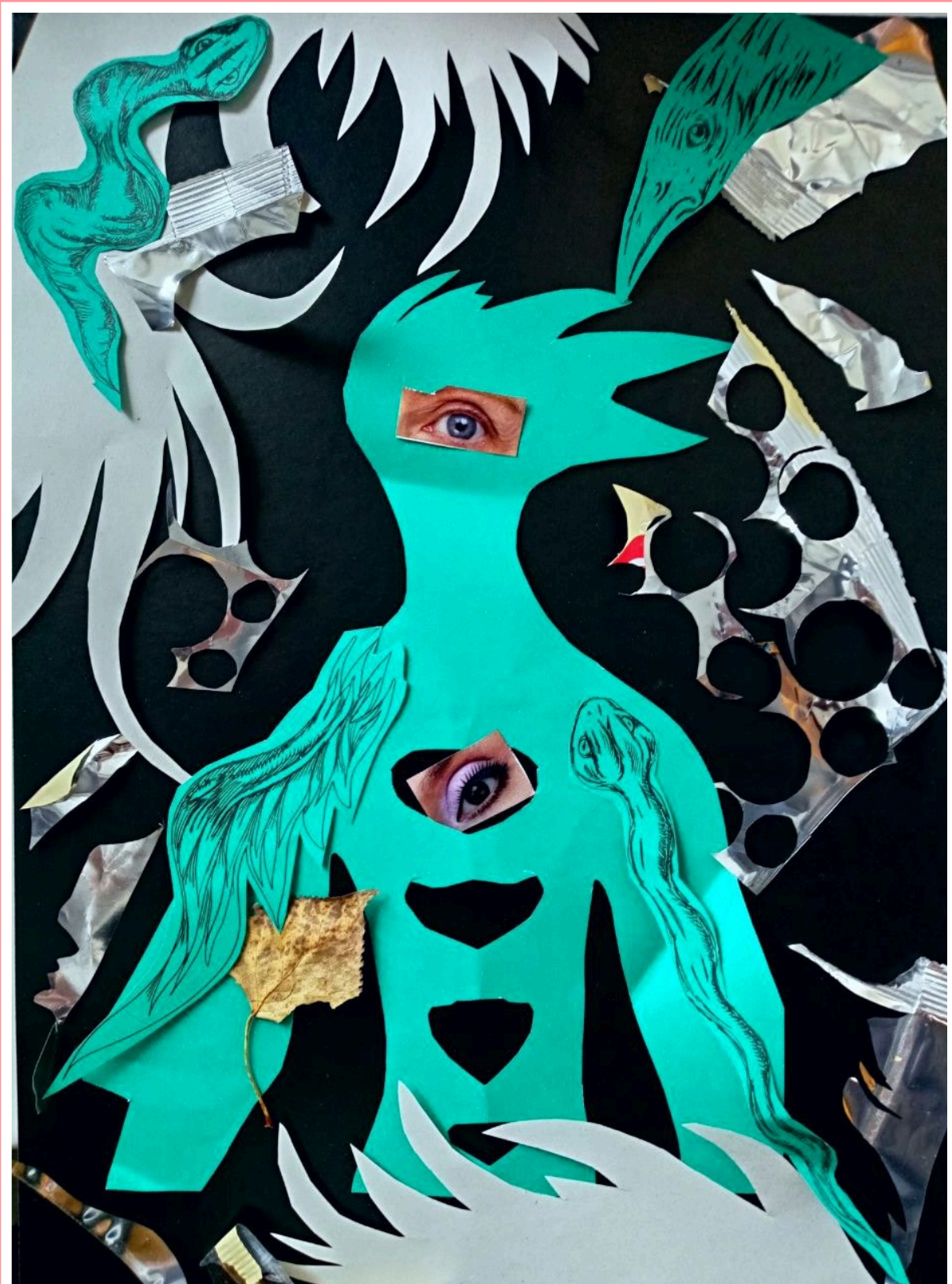
That voice, the voice that comes from everywhere and nowhere and can ring across galaxies, suddenly channels all that power into your head and yours alone, each word connecting with a sonic boom.

"I said the vast majority. However, when I stare upon you I don't see a human being. I see an empty husk, someone so angry at the simulation they've invented for themselves that they take it out on everyone around them. You see someone with an identity she's clearly grappling with and has made the world different for her in ways you couldn't even imagine, and your reaction is to reduce this complex state to stereotypes you can understand so you can trick her into sleeping with you. You are less than human, you are a blind parasite with no contribution to the biosphere and unworthy of Heaven's riches. I banish you to Hell, where you belong."

Before you can even process this, a five-foot diameter circle of flooring crumbles beneath your feet, revealing a furnace. Tendrils of fire lap at your feet, and from the inferno a mottled hand reaches out and grabs your ankle, dragging you to the depths below.

Your world becomes pain and fire. Seconds really do feel like millenia, as fallen angels of female rage claw at your flesh.

Above, she begins to ascend the elevator of light. She still can't move a muscle, but if anyone could see her they would swear the corner of her mouth twitched upward into a tiny smile.



Wanderlust

Jenny Chu

Last I checked, my body is still at home, which makes it a homebody &
my skin the backyard pebble fiending for groundwater. My mind, the movement.
The flags on the room & the anxiously answered personality quizzes.
Yes, we can talk it out. We can debate politics & go back
to school on a milky Monday. Spicy, these human rights.
This intimacy in a shared Reddit account.
Let me rough up your bad side during my stay there. Sorry I called you a slacktivist.
I've got a cold but don't worry, I'm not a landscape of sickness.
My skin's yellowing but I hope it glitters as it goes. Another man's reference.
Listen, I can be the volume & thicker ice on your two-toned television.
I can turn your world technicolor. I am worth my overdue weight in gold.
I will fight your every transatlantic terror with my shaking fists.
I want to read poetry that makes me weep.
I want to write poetry that grips the tongue.
I'm tired of seeing essays on hunger & how much you want to
swallow your grief & juice it into something akin to desire.
I'm not a lyricist but I know a thing or twelve about singing like a goddess.
Someday, I will be more woman
than myth.

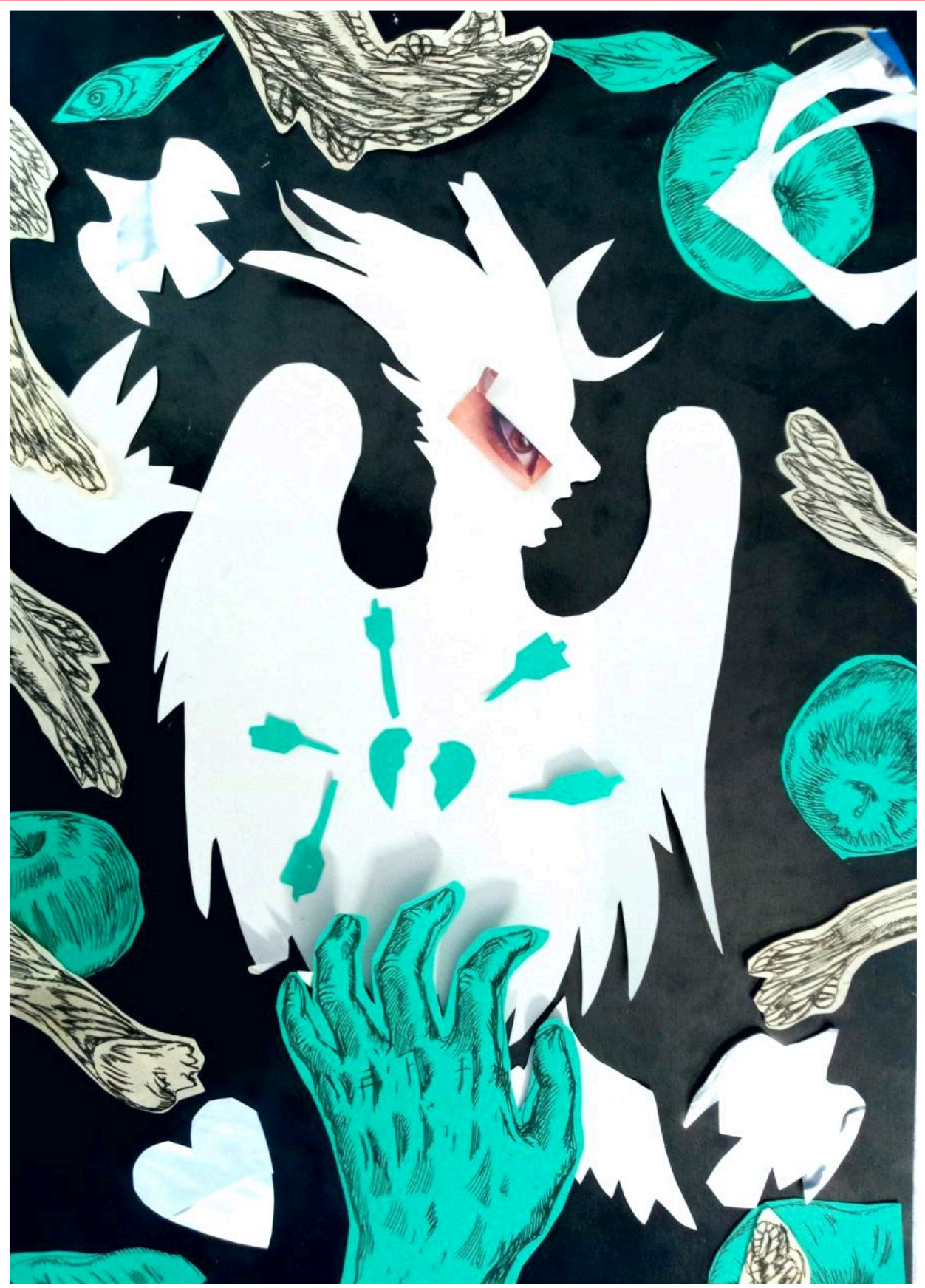




Circle Back

Simon Kaeppli

Turning to machines for help
Human contact by proxy
Pouring our sorrow into the keys
Eyes glued to the screen
Hoping for some kind of catharsis
A resolution
To put us back on our path forward
To lift all obstacles
So we don't have to bend our backs
While building invisible walls
We deepen the chasm
And call it progress
Alien within ourselves
Humanity, diminished.



female violence vi

Svetlana Rosotova

they took apart her bones,
cut open her chest,
and collected the gold and jewels
that spilled out of it.

What A Fool

Maja Urukalo

I welcomed him into my home. I offered him a beer. Some chips. He wasn't a stranger, but a friend. At least that's what I supposed. I realize that we don't always have the same perception other people have of a relationship and now I fear he didn't care at all about "friendship". He just wanted a piece of meat. My piece of meat.

I should've seen the red flags, perhaps when he offered to give me a massage and I was tired and wanted something to relax after a day of work, or when he was looking for muscles in my arms, or perhaps when he wanted to see my tattoos and I love to show my tattoos and tell the story of what they mean and where I got them. I didn't imagine there was some other reason behind it. Because I was seeing a friend, someone I met when I was beat up and broke, someone who knew about the trauma of my previous toxic relationship, he knew how I felt about my body. Someone I opened my heart to. Did he even care about what I was saying? Or was he just agreeing to get in my pants? I feel like a fool.

Why do I try to make people care when they clearly have no interest?

I told him about my emotionally controlling husband because I needed a friend, not another man who thinks with his dick.

I should've seen the red flags when he asked me to lie on the couch so he could massage me better. I was such a fool thinking that it was going to be just that. But he knew how I felt about my body, how growing up my body felt strange to me because of all the medicalization and the doctors probing, and yet he decided he was going to sexualize it, without asking for permission, without caring that I never gave a hint of being into it. But soon his hands were all over me, I would push one away and another would appear, like the monsters in horror stories, a new one spurting everytime you kill one.

Why didn't I say no? Because I'm a byproduct of two people-pleasers, afraid of upsetting others, afraid of being difficult. What I did say was: "It's late, you're gonna miss your bus," "I want to get up," "I don't feel like having sex tonight."

Is it my fault for being a confident woman who's aware of her attractiveness? I guess women cannot be whatever they want without facing consequences.

We didn't have sex, but his hand touched my butt, my breasts, it played with the piercing on my belly-button, it slipped between my legs. He was good at sneaking, I wouldn't notice immediately, too stunned to wrap my head around what was happening. My ears were ringing, thinking how I opened my heart to a man who just wanted to open my legs. What a fool.

"I like this butt-cheek better than the other," he said before leaving, as if he was judging a piece of meat to have for dinner.

Is it my fault for letting this happen?

The beer was still in the glass and the chips were in the bowl.

I lied on the couch. He texted me then. "I'm sorry for earlier. I got dragged away." Men think that they have some kind of right to forgiveness. *Hey, I'm just a poor little animal who can't keep his instincts in check, I see an attractive woman and I go all berserk. It's not my fault. I'm just a man.*

I hesitated, but then I replied: "It's fine."

I said, it's fine.

It's fine.

It's. Fine.

What a fool.

female violence iii

Svetlana Rosotova

the trail of rose petals on the floor leads to the gun.



female violence iv

Svetlana Rosotova

if you let me breathe
i'll let you stay.



for three days we're on the floor of my condo

me listening, watching, waiting for you to fuck me again and pretending it's about getting to know someone—really know someone

listening as you talk and talk and you're going in these odd patterns again. you wear this golden chain around your bare navel; it accentuates your nakedness, it rests on your hips, i want and want. your words make sense but they're wrong. sometimes there's just a string of subjects, nouns, followed by a directionless prepositional phrase and then you end the sentence with something like “that was the second time I was in jail”—that registers, and

watching as i'm rubbing your body with my hand—hoping to reawaken you and I say something like “wow.” and we remain on the floor and you tell me your mother never loved you and i'm thinking what else is new, and

waiting as i let you talk about her getting fucked by your father on the back of his bus when she was 14 and he was 22—and i'm still rubbing you and trying really hard not to think about what you just told me cause that carries so so so much weight and i don't want to, i swallow it, i will let that out later, i will let that out on my own and hopefully you let it all out someday so let's stay positive and happy and bask in that one ray of sunshine that we let in from the almost closed curtains, just enough, i want i want, and say nothing, and you'll talk more about your father, 2 fucks and 8 hours later, us still on the floor and you wearing the looped golden chain forever, forever

airport

Sea of Intolerance

Gillian Fletcher

“The man in the moon is a felon—he’s naught but a felon in chains,” my aunt’s reedy voice carried across the kitchen. Aunt Linda was clearly in one of her silly moods.

“Have you taken your pills today?”

“Be careful Derrick, you keep talking that way and they’ll send you to the moon!”

This wasn’t out of the ordinary for her. When I was bored, she would suggest things like going outside to bark at rabbits. If I were hungry, she’d offer me a glass of water and a toothpick, occasionally with a slice of lemon.

“No one lives on the moon, Aunt Lin.”

“Of course they do! Thousands of them. What do they teach you in those schools?”

“Science and mathematics. What are you talking about?”

“History. Long before the science and math you’re taught, our people faced a crisis of conscience. Rich lorded over the poor, diseases and scarcity ran rampant. Most wanted nothing more than to solve the problems before them; however, there was another faction who seemed to desire nothing but chaos and division. They saw the problems as an opportunity to put themselves ahead of everyone else. Anywhere you

tried to build a bridge, they decried the instability of the land and the need for keeping everyone separated.”

“So, they sent them all to the moon?” I laughed at the very idea.

“I agree, the solution to the problem wasn’t particularly palatable. But it was effective at fixing the problems caused by those who would rather poison the well than share the water. You see, the only way to build a society of tolerance and mutual respect is to root out intolerance. You must arrest its momentum entirely. It’s a weed, it spreads rapidly, especially when given quarter to thrive.”

“So, tolerance is, by nature, intolerant?”

“You’re a clever boy, Derrick. As hard as it is to comprehend, yes. Tolerance suggests that everyone sees their fellows as equals, seeing past the differences to their common humanity underneath. That way of life cannot abide those who would use those same unique qualities as dividing lines.”

I eyed her suspiciously. I was used to having my legs pulled—Aunt Linda joked that’s the only reason I’ve grown this tall. Still, she didn’t have the usual twinkle in her eye that gave the away the trick.

“To put an end to the decades of culture wars, the leaders of this world put together a plan to unite the intolerant, to catch them all out and wrestle free any minds that weren’t completely closed to a better future. It was mayhem, allowing all of the worst thoughts and slurs to rise to the surface and be shared in the public sphere so brazenly. It seemed to those who believed in a new tomorrow that society was all but lost, that the bigots and militant were sure to triumph.”

“The second dark age.”

“You can deprive a fire of oxygen and it will cease to burn, but another can start just as easily as long as the air is dry and there’s a charge of electricity. Instead of trying to smother the raging intolerances, they allowed the fire to swell, hoping to liberate any who would run for safety rather than step closer to pour fuel upon the flames. As the intolerant put forward more and more wild assertions that seemed to unpick the very fabric of the natural order, masses fled their camp for the safety of reason.”

“They couldn’t tolerate intolerance anymore?”

“Exactly. Those who had the ability to tolerate were able to see the broken connections that are meant to bind us. In the abstract, it is easy to hate what you do not understand, but when face-to-face with someone in need, all of that disappears. Your hearts see through to one another and the imaginary lines fade away.”

“When I was younger, I was scared of dogs because one bit me. I thought all dogs would bite, but then our neighbor got one. It was a puppy, it was small and it didn’t snarl or growl. It licked and snuggled.”

“Not all dogs act the same way. If you corner them, abuse them, or try to hurt them, they might attack. Just like aunts,” she growled. “When scared, every creature tries to defend itself.”

“But what is so scary about people being tolerant of others?”

“The problem has nothing to do with anyone else, it’s about them just as they would seek to make it. They see their pain as the fault of others, never understanding that they keep propagating it through their actions. Underneath it all, they can’t tolerate themselves. They can’t abide to see others flourishing when they themselves remain miserable.”

“And they would rather tear everything else down than change themselves?”

“Admitting that they’re the problem is the hardest part. It’s much easier to blame a faceless group or a common ancestry than it is to examine why you yourself are unhappy.”

“Then they just, what? Shipped them all to the moon?”

“Not all of them, no. A great many woke from their stupor and saw that creating chaos and fear was a choice they could stop making. Those who returned to their communities were given a chance to think differently, but any who refused were slowly driven towards their punishment.”

“Wouldn’t they have resisted? Why would they let themselves be captured?”

“They weren’t captured at all. They went freely. They built the lunar colonies in what was once known as the Sea of Tranquility; they created a path for the intolerant to escape all the problems they decried. If they didn’t want to stay and help fix them, they could leave for the palatial residences with breathtaking views of our planet that were offered with the sole condition that they never return. A great many gleefully ran for the ships and were on their way.”

“But they arrived and were placed into prison? That’s terrible.”

“They’re not imprisoned, they have their own society up there and there is no contact between here and the moon. Given who went up there, I can’t imagine it’s a nice place to live though. Hopefully a few of them come to realize that. Banished from a world they sought to ruin, they spend their days looking down on everything they ever knew as a reminder of why they were sent away. The houses on the moon are nothing but windows, so there’s no escaping the view of the planet and the people they thought were worth sacrificing for their own selfishness.”

“And everyone born since then has just magically been tolerant?”

“No, no, of course not. Those who would seek to sing the same songs of disharmony are quietly counseled and offered the chance to

join the lunar community, but to the best of my knowledge, no one has been sent in more than one hundred years.”

“So, then how do you know all of this?”

“Because of my mother and hers before that. Every night, we see the moon in the sky and we reaffirm our commitment to our brothers and sisters here on earth. Hatred and intolerance propagate when we don't talk about the pain they cause or the fallacies upon which they rest. When we fail to assert ourselves against the irrational minds that seek to divide and control, we create a space for those desires to thrive. The unfortunate cost of gaining the wisdom that comes with age is a duty to share it forward by teaching our children to love, honor, respect, and be partners to their fellows.”

“And if I were one who didn't understand?”

“As long as you tried to think better of others and yourself, you'd be welcome to stay. I might even use a crowbar if I thought your mind could still be opened,” she smiled. “But if not, to the moon with you!”

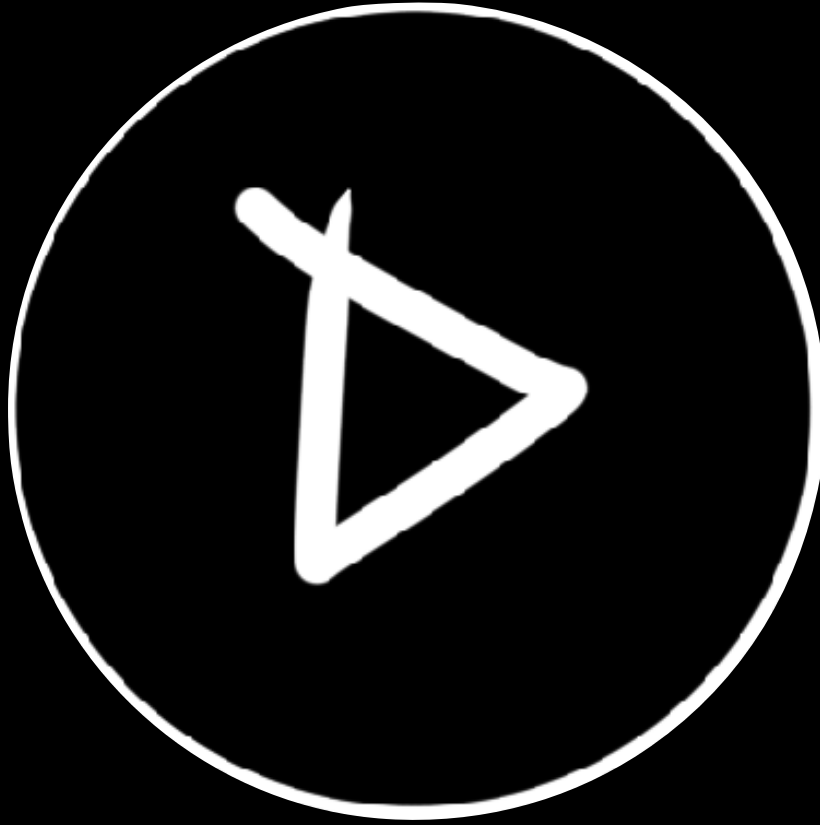




female violence ii

Svetlana Rosotova

lying open on the couch,
chest split open, heart in a jar,
butterflies eating you alive.



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“female violence: vi, iii, iv, & ii” by Svetlana Rosotova

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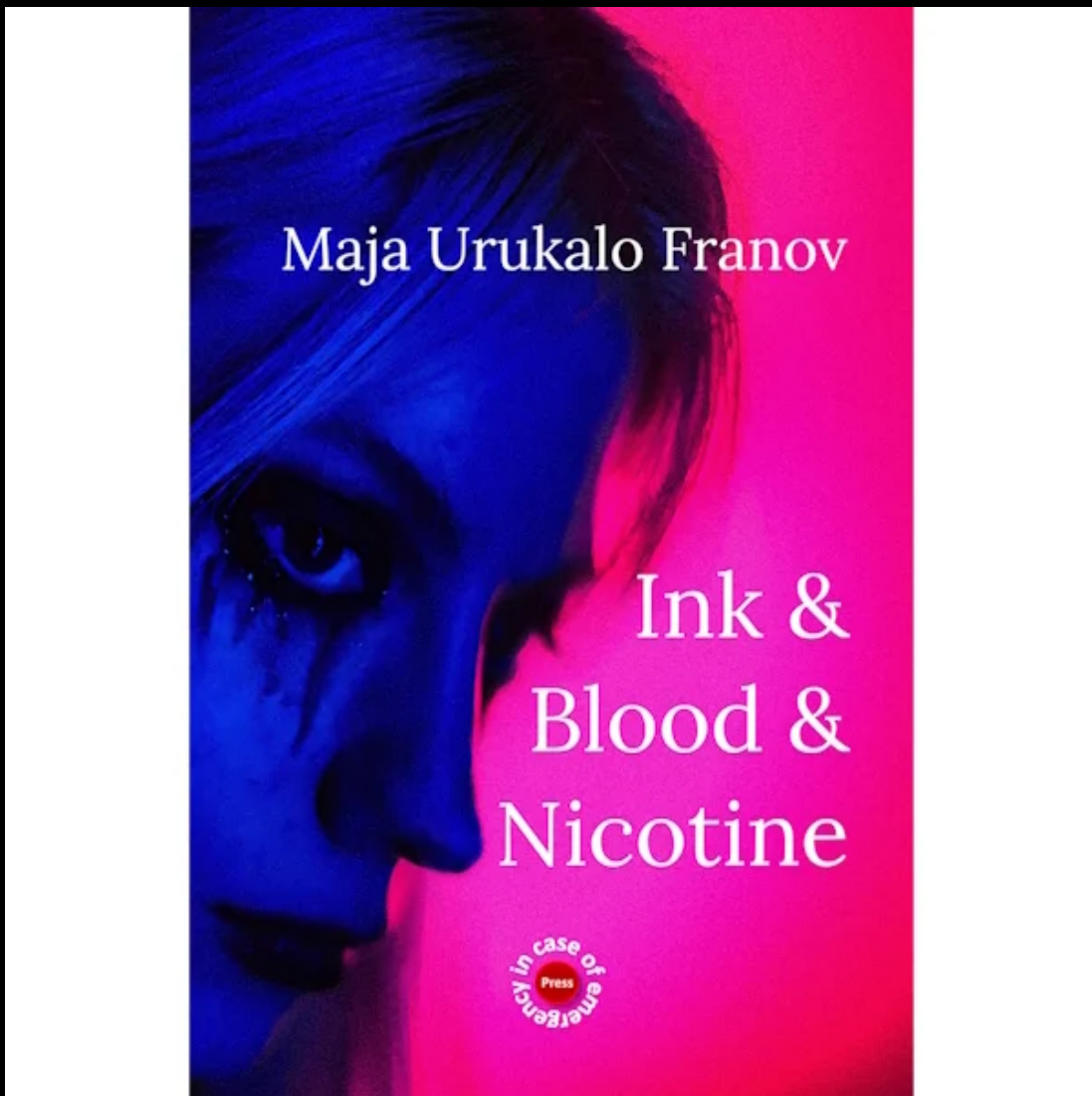
“Sea of Intolerance” by Gillian Fletcher
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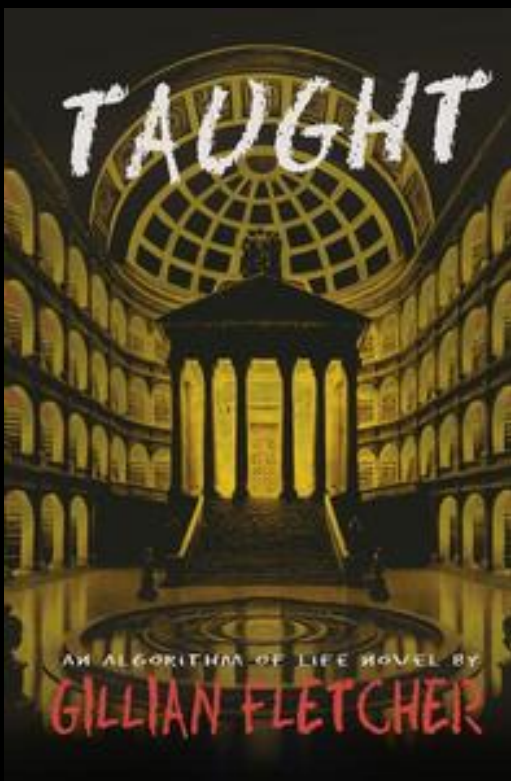
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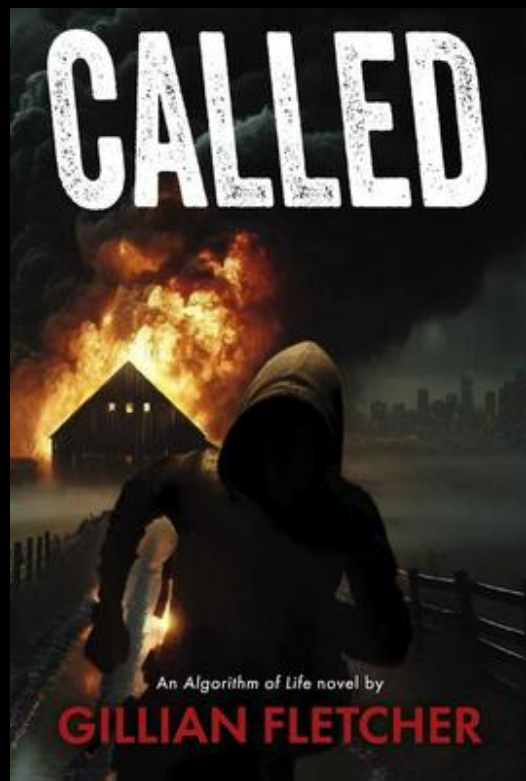
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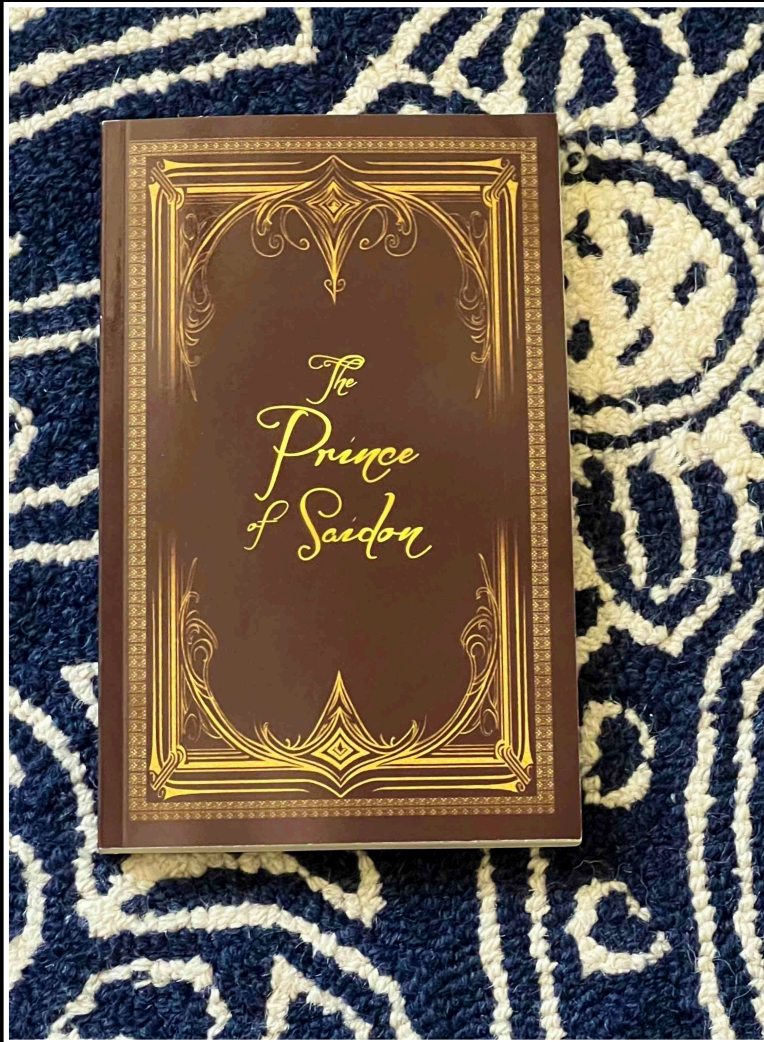
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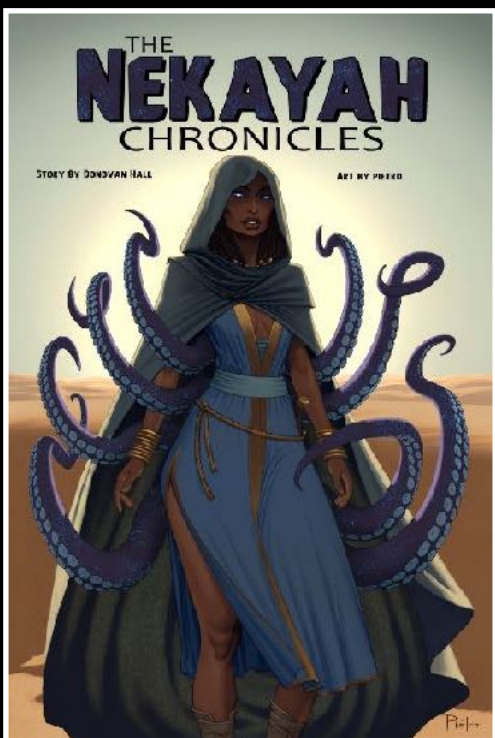
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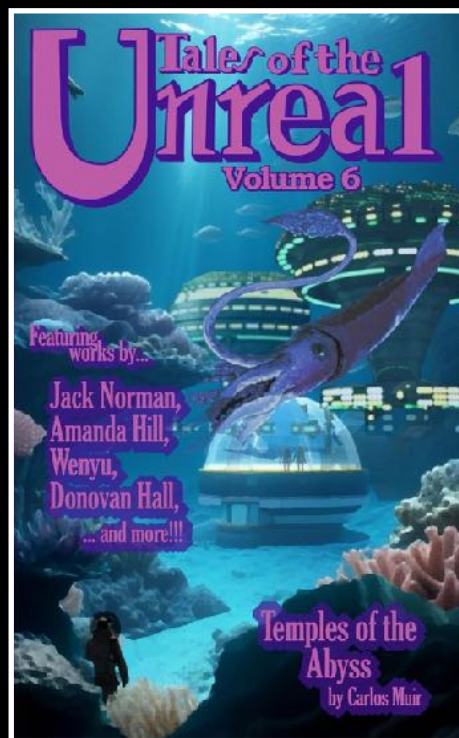
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