

mermaids monthly

Issue #4 - April 2021



Annie Taylor - Carlos Hernandez - C. S. E. Cooney
Denisse Di Stelle - Dianita - J.D. Harlock - Kris Herndon
Lorraine Schein - Michael Angelo Stephens - S. Brackett Robertson
Stevie Rose Maguire - Tara Campbell

mermaids monthly

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

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



Hey sailors! This month we've found 16 different mermaid takes to share with you, including five poems and five illustrations! Tangle yourself in the nets of transformation and spend some time wrestling with the waves of resilience as the Spring tides arrive. There is plenty to enjoy and some news to be found about the future of this aquatic adventure.



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The Coral Fairy

by Lorraine Schein

*This poem previously appeared in Star*Line, Summer 2020*



Under all seas,
my wings branch red filigree.

Redder than the sun's reflection on the sea
where insolent mermaids bask
naked as seals on thrusting rocks
taunting passing sailors shamelessly,
flaunting my bright polyps as their jewelry.

My eyes are bioluminescent deep water,
the green glowing dark of ocean trenches.

I shelter scared fish who seek refuge in me
and sometimes save a drowning human to be
my captured changeling for company.

To create a child I bud myself asexually--
break a calcium bloom into fragments of me
or spew eggs from my mouth to build a new colony.

If you touch me, I calcify,
wings perished to white.

Bleached to a ghost, brittle-boned
no more can I spread my red wings through the sea.



The Undersea Crossing Guard

by Lorraine Schein

Stop, In The Name Of Fish--Before We Break Your Boat!

By order of M.E.R.M.—Mermaids' Education and Resistance Movement




Halt!
Touch not the coral.
Touch not the fish. 
The sea's not your playground
to use as you wish!

Illustration by Kris Herndon

I'm the undersea crossing guard from S.W.I.M.*
protecting my class of sea children.
I teach them how to recognize and avoid
those who would poach, hook, and cook us.

I stop the encroaching overfishers, waste dumpers, coral harvesters...
all the air-breathing enemies of our ocean home from going farther.

But I wave through other fish, friendly snorkelers, scuba divers,
fellow mermaids, selkies, pirate ghosts, and oceanographers.

*Society for the Welfare of Imperiled Marinelife

After Atlantis

by Lorraine Schein

The mermaid swims through the flooded city,
glides between the empty windows of New York's skyscrapers,
the Empire State's spire skewered with sharks and octopi
while below fish flit through submerged subway cars.

She struggles over the flooded river to the sea,
dodging bobbing bottles, broken glass,
beer rings caught on her tail, plastic bags clinging to her face,
and emerges to bask on a floating trash island.

The mermaid finds a pink acrylic comb to unsnarl her hair,
then dons some washed-up cheap sunglasses
to shield against the too-hot sun.

She thinks about going to a subsurface water world
like Miranda, Oberon, Pluto
or the exoplanets far beyond our galaxy.
But mermaids are not eligible for the space program--
they get airsick and astronauts require legs.

The mermaid dreams of young Earth,
its new oceans formed from gases of meteors and stars
when the water was clearest crystalline,
an aquamarine mirror to endlessly dive through--
down into tourmaline, turquoise, azure, lapis,
then stygian cerulean depths.

She remembers her time in Atlantis
where no harsh sun or cold moon speared the dark
only the soft glow of neon blue plankton overhead
like moire silk lapping on waves at sunset.
Ghostly anemone trembled below, as lantern fish headlights
swept across fronds of bright coral.

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But tonight the stars look like styrofoam beads,
white shards that will never degrade in the sky.

The Lady in the Lake

by Lorraine Schein

This poem previously appeared in Unspoken Water 1, 2011

I am a deep hollow filled with water
and live in this clear blue castle
that none can see.
Its crystal gates, portals to other worlds.

My throne is encrusted with fine sand, pearls
and your flung offerings.

I am clad in soft ripples
limned with small mirrors.
Reeds cling to and wreath my face,
yet I can see far.

The moon watches over me,
casts its pale reflections
to obscure my highest turrets.

My towers' flying pennants whip
wind-blown ripples to you above.

Toss a coin into me for luck.

My thoughts are green--
my powers, lacustrine:
dissolving, floating, dispersing.

Hear me, at night, lick at lovers' feet.

Though I seem calm,
the wind blows me into
columns of turbulence below.

Remember,
that only the worthy
can rouse me from my glass palace
with raised sword in hand.

It will cleave flesh
like a barge splits water.

Like love,
it is an offering
mysterious and triumphant,
bestowed from the depths.

Illustration by Annie Taylor



The Mermaid's Dilemma

by Michael Angelo Stephens

My life is on the rocks, the mermaid said,
And who am I to disagree with her,

This diaphanous creature of earth and
Sea, lounging near the pier filled with penguin

Guano and gull regurgitations of
Fish bones and seaweed, spindrift and icy

Foam tentacles, as the waves break on shore,
And the tide rushes out as if it was

Late for an appointment out beyond the
Far off blue horizon. The sad mermaid

Wonders where is her place in the scheme of
Things without a first-class college degree.



Illustration by Stevie Rose Maguire

Cold Weather Accessories for Imaginary Creatures

by Lorraine Schein

*This poem previously appeared in Star*Line, Spring 2019*

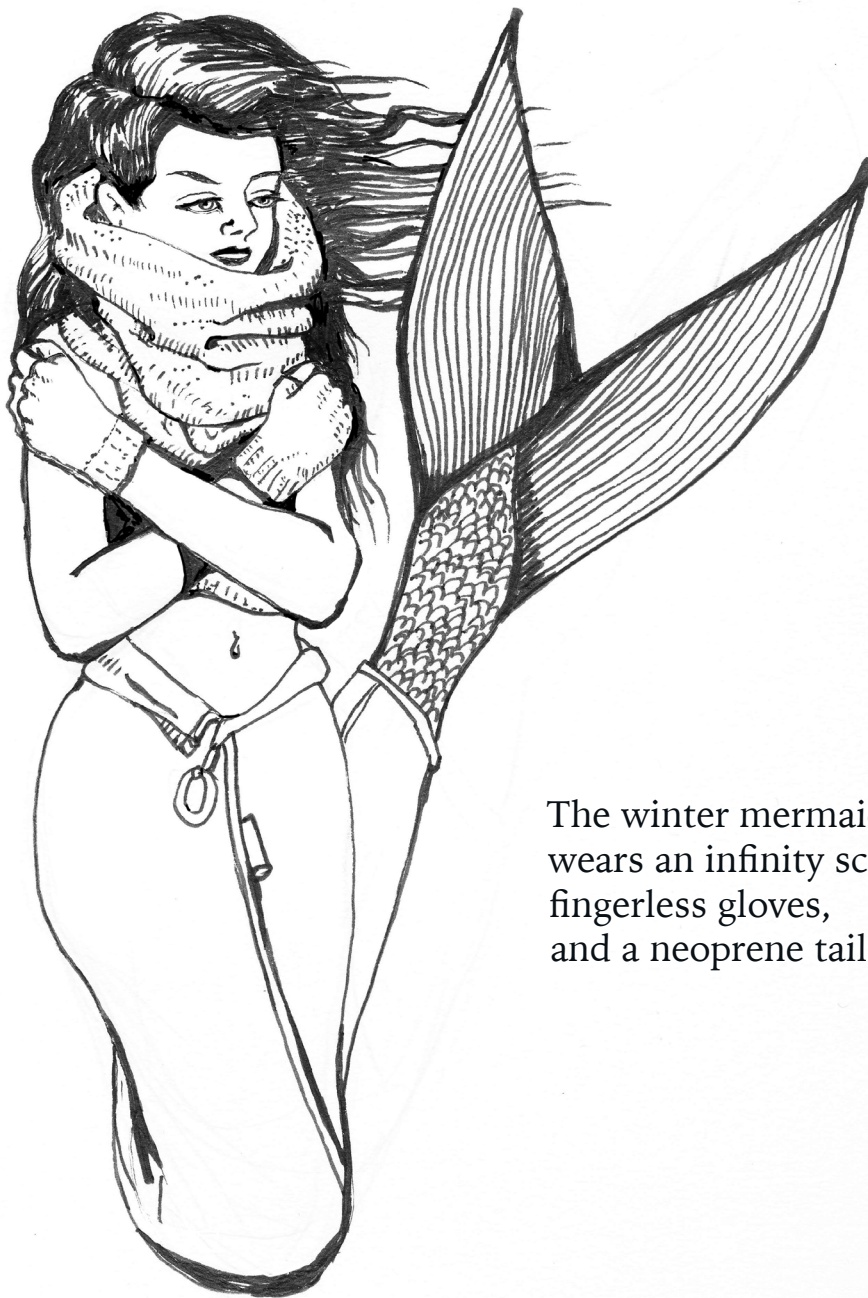


Illustration by Kris Herndon

The winter mermaid
wears an infinity scarf,
fingerless gloves,
and a neoprene tail warmer.

Bathyscape

by S. Brackett Robertson

This poem previously appeared in Stone Telling

There was a mermaid
in my bathtub.
She said the river led her here.
She wouldn't leave for months
kept swimming laps,
made friends with my rubber duck.

I didn't shower for fear of drowning her,
but she said she wouldn't mind.
It is like rain,
she says, swims at tub-end where the water doesn't fall.
she's only a foot tall.

Soon my tub housed two, her girlfriend
moved in from the beach, trailing sand and seaweed.
It was unusual, they said, for a freshwater mermaid
and a seawater mermaid to date, but my tub was neutral ground.

I couldn't fit in the bath the next day.
Five of their friends had moved in
they planted seaweed at the bottom.
Now I bathe in the ocean instead,
bring back sand and shells for my swimming friends
and make a home in the bath.



Illustration by Denisse Di Stelle

My Little Mermaid

by Lorraine Schein

This story previously appeared in Hysteria #7, 1995

Content Note: This story contains references to and descriptions of sexual activity.

My little mermaid lives at home in my apartment in a small goldfish bowl on the night table next to my bed. I've decorated her bowl with a pink and green turreted and crenelated plastic castle and a pink and gray molded plastic 1950s toy TV set.

She likes to watch her TV while she combs her long pink hair with her little golden comb, her long pink hair with green streaks that reaches to the top of her ankles. The TV has only three scenes in it, though -- these can be changed by clicking a little white button on its side. However, this does not bother her; she is content to look at the same static picture of a happy family of four for an hour, and then press the button for the next scene, which she looks at as attentively as if she had never seen it before.

I don't feed her goldfish food. I tried that once, but Aquanette (her name) became very sick, her tail thrashing about wildly, and the water around her turned a bilious green. I feed her flakes of dismantled McDonald's Fishwiches

or goldfish crackers. She especially likes goldfish crackers.

Aquanette likes music also. She particularly likes listening to her albums. Her favorite groups are Country Joe and the Fish and The Turtles; she's very much still a 60s person.

She puts on their records and flicks her tail greenly and happily to the beat, creating tiny shell-shaped ripples of water around it. "Let's swim to the moon, baby," she sings happily along with The Doors.

In the summer she wears green mirror shades and a polka-dot bandeau, when it's not too hot; in the winter, she wears a long knitted tail warmer and mittens. She sleeps in the nude, always.

I found her this July at Coney Island. Some others had found her first apparently, because they had put her in one of those large glass boxes filled with stuffed animals you can win near the Ferris wheel in the amusement park.

I had put in my quarter to play and had beginner's luck, for on my first try, the large metal pincers that overhung the box and were controlled by a push button swung forward, lowered and closed in on a small stuffed animal, but something else was clinging to its back, something I could not see, until the pincers released her and she fell through the opening along with the stuffed animal, rolling into my hands, surprised as I.

I thought she was a goldfish when I first saw her, or one of those hallucinatory shapes the sunlight makes behind your lids when you close your eyes tightly against its brightness. She was bigger than a goldfish, and about as tall as a lipstick.

When I take her to the beach, she sits atop my transistor radio, with a tiny spot of white sunblock on her nose and a tiny silver sun reflector. She puts on her sunglasses -- mirror shades, of course. Her hair is wet. She chews bubble gum. She blows out a tiny perfect bubble the size of a dime, then pops it and takes the pink mini-wad of gum out from her mouth and sticks it against my Coke can.

I give her a sip of my Coke by pouring some into a styrofoam cup I'd brought, and lowering her carefully by the tail over it, so she can lap it up easily. She perches atop of my Coke can when she is done with her drink, the tip of her tail poking into the opening of the pop-top, surveying the beach from the can's rim.

She swims far out when she goes in the water. Once I called her for a long time and she didn't come back. Later, as I was leaving the beach, I saw her clinging to the edge of the beach blanket I was shaking out, holding up the treasures she had found for me to see -- a penny and a used condom. She didn't know what the latter was, but suspected it might be a close relative.

When we get home, she watches her favorite TV shows on my big TV -- *The Love Boat* and *Gilligan's Island*. Then it is time to get ready for bed, and I start to fill the tub. She loves to take baths with me, and sits nestled between my legs, leaning against my pubic hair. She rubs herself up and down on me -- it's like having a little vibrator down there.

We are waiting to be turned into each other -- I, a mermaid, and she, a human. But the surgery is costly and there is a long waiting list.

When I get my tail, I will swim far away into the ocean, away from my job, apartment, condo payments, and relationships.

When she gets her legs, Aquanette says the first thing she'll do is buy pantyhose, a skirt, and high heels, walk back to Coney Island, and find a handsome, rich prince or princess to take her on a world cruise.

The Collector

by Tara Campbell

This story previously appeared in Latchkey Tales, Elementals: Children of Water in July, 2014

Content note: This story contains consumption of alcohol, consumption of live animals, and a child in peril.

The mermaid wriggled up toward the surface of her lake, eyes fixed on the shiny cylinder floating above her. She plucked it down from its perch between water and air. It was a beer can, dented but still closed. She put it in her plastic shopping bag and dove all the way down to the bottom of the lake.

A change in current caught her attention. She listened to the water, picking up tiny vibrations from the far shore. Lake weed floated and bowed while young carp chased each other around her waist. She waved the fish away and went to investigate, the can of beer bumping against her flank as she swam.

Triton had chosen this lake for her, making sure it was big enough for her to swim, play and receive his visits without being discovered—his way of keeping her away from all of his Mrs. Tritons. It would have been easier to marry her, she'd told him, but he said he'd already hit his wife limit at 5,000. She'd never known of a god with a wife limit, or any other limits for that matter.

The water shuddered again. She stopped behind a clutch of reeds and put a hand to the bottom of the lake. Humans, heavy, probably men. The thumping stopped. Then came the worm, impaled on a hook.

Breakfast.

The mermaid slid the worm off the hook and popped it into her mouth, then gave the line a good tug, yanking her hand away when the metal barb shot upward.

She scanned the water for a second hook. There was always a second one, and a third, and a fourth. She shared the worms with the carp when they caught up with her. The fish were the closest thing she had to company.

Muffled talking and laughter filtered through the water. With a rush of adrenaline, the mermaid flirted with the surface, letting the tip of her tail flash above water for seconds at a time. Triton had warned her against this. But with all

the thought he had put into the shape of her lake and its places to hide, she wondered how he could have forgotten the most important variable: curiosity. That “What-Would-Happen-If?” impulse that neither humankind nor merfolk could resist. It was something she and Triton shared—and it had eventually landed her in this lake.

A few worms later, the fishermen gave up, thumping to their vehicle and driving away. The tingle of imminent danger faded. The mermaid swam to her secluded spot on the other side of the lake. She glided past a curtain of weeping willow branches that drooped to the water’s surface, and pulled herself up onto her favorite rock.

The shopping bag crinkled as she pulled out her can of beer. Carp circled her rock. She alternated sipping from the can and pouring beer shots into the lake. She couldn’t tell what the fish were thinking, really, but she hoped they could share in her sunny, happy stupor.

Downing the rest of the beer, she slipped back into the lake and headed toward her stash of cigarettes. She wriggled partway out of the water near a small cave-cache and held the grass overhang aside, revealing the pile of crumpled butts she’d skimmed off the lake and left to dry. Sticking one into her mouth, she flipped open a mangled matchbook she’d found on the shore. Empty! She ripped the cigarette out of her mouth and threw it into the cache, flopping onto her back and

crossing her arms.

Her brooding was interrupted by a *click*. Then another one.

She slid into the water and glided closer to the curtain of willow branches shielding her from the light. A boy crouched by the shore, his back to her. Children often caught her by surprise. Unless they were running, she never felt them coming.

Click. Click.

She inched out from behind the willow, eyes just above the surface, angling to observe him from the side.

Click. Click.

Her heartbeat quickened when she saw what he was playing with. It was one of those little rockets, the kind children put in a bottle and light and run. She never tired of these tiny fireworks, with their sense of danger in miniature. She stared at the rocket, holding her breath, anticipating the crackle of the fuse, the *whoosh* of flight, the *pop!* in the air.

She wouldn’t mind having the lighter either. But it didn’t seem to work—she heard *click* and *click* and *click*, but the fuse wouldn’t light. Then the clicking stopped. She looked up from the rocket—and met the boy’s eyes.

She twisted and dove; but knew it was too late. The boy’s face peered over the

edge of the lake, looming above her through the stream of bubbles she had created. She kept telling Triton this lake was too small; that too many children came here to play. That this was all his fault.

The shadow of the boy's head undulated above her. She imagined him on his hands and knees, leaning out over the water, craning his neck to catch another glimpse of her, teetering uncertainly at the edge of the lake.

#

That evening the mermaid sat on her favorite rock, smoking a stubby cigarette. She watched the carp slide past one another in the water, knowing she had only one or two more days of peace before the men would come to look for the boy.

One of the carp jumped out of the water onto her rock. It lay still, its mouth opening and closing, gaping again and again as it watched her.

“I know, I’m sorry,” she said, and nudged the fish back into the water with the tip of her tail. Soon the men would come to search the shore, then dredge the lake—and now she had one more carp to keep out of harm’s way when they arrived.



Illustration by Dianita

The Many Mermaids of Fiction

by J.D. Harlock

There is something ineffable about the allure of the mermaid. Whether it is their boundless potential for riveting tales or the sheer ingenuity of their design, mermaids have somehow managed to capture the imaginations of writers all over the world in a way few other mythical creatures have. Their stories have been told and retold for almost as long as human civilization has existed and are as popular today as they were ages ago.

The first mermaid tale actually dates back millennia to the ancient Assyrian myth surrounding the goddess Atargatis. According to the myth, Atargatis drowned herself in the lake near Ascalon (transforming into a fish in the process) after accidentally killing her mortal lover Haddad. However, the waters were unable to conceal her beauty, so she only took the form of a fish below the waist.

What's striking about the story of Atargatis is that many of the recurring motifs of mermaid fiction are present right from the start. Elements such as their comeliness, their ability to transform from one form to another, and their romances with humans appear in

mermaid stories throughout history from the Indian *Ramayana* to the Maori *Pania*. Even the grim end to the romance anticipates the bleak outcomes to mermaid/human romances that dominate the early history of mermaid fiction.

Ever since the spread of the Atargatis myth to other civilizations (and especially after the publication of Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Mermaid*), mermaids have appeared in fiction quite often, each time a little differently, so that, over time, the lines between mermaids and other human/fish hybrids (like the Japanese Ningyo or the West African Mami Wata) have blurred. Although the way they appear tends to vary wildly, there are general templates that writers tend to follow when telling their mermaid stories, with each variance dictated by the plot's demands.

For starters, mermaids are often portrayed as gorgeous young women with fish-like tails in the place of legs. This is only natural when one considers that a romance with humans is a staple of mermaid fiction. However, it also carries over when the mermaids are antagonists, and the work isn't a romance. This is especially common when mermaids take

on a siren-like function in the narrative. No one's entirely sure why mermaids and sirens were initially conflated with one another, but throughout history, they have taken on each other's characteristics. Which is quite odd when you realize that Sirens were originally winged bird/women hybrids. The Philippines' Sirena appear to be one product of this, being mermaid-like creatures who sing lovely songs to lure people to their watery graves.

This is not to say that mermaids are always looking their best; at times have been depicted as repulsive humanoid sea-creatures, as was the case with *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. The fish motif may also be dropped entirely in favor of features reminiscent of other sea-creatures. This is usually done to distinguish a character from the rest and give the audience some insight into their disposition (like Ursula's eerie octopus half in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*). At times, a sea creature-like lower-half isn't even needed, with some merfolk looking exactly (or at least almost) like their land counterparts. One early example is the sea people in *The Arabian Nights*' tale Jullanar of the Sea, where neither the mermaid Jullanar nor her half-human offspring Badr are distinguishable from the humans apart from the fact they can live underwater. Writers tend to portray their mermaids like this when they need them to function on land properly and/or blend in with human society without complicating the plot with a transformation or a disguise.

When the writer insists on having a traditional look for their mermaids, they may introduce a way for them to transform into a human. This is either to give the mermaids in question a way to conceal their identity and allow the aforementioned romance to take place (and continue indefinitely) on land or to handwave any issue surrounding copulation without the need for more 'imaginative' explanations. This transformation comes in four main varieties.

The simplest method is to have mermaids switch forms more or less at will. This allows the writer to have the traditional mermaid while having their transformation hold no narrative stakes.

The second method (which was popularized by *The Little Mermaid*) has the mermaid invoking a magic spell that allows them to transform. This transformation often comes at a hefty cost or with a time limit in order to introduce some stakes to the story.

A rather ingenious transformation originates from the film *Splash*, where a mermaid becomes human when she's dry and turns back when she's wet. This transformation adds tension to the narrative by having the mermaid perpetually at risk of having her identity exposed.

The final type of transformation is when an item (oftentimes magical) allows the mermaids to change from one form to

another. Much like the water transformation in *Splash*, this enables writers to introduce narrative complications by finding ways for that item to be broken, stolen, or lost.

Of course, writers can just never bring the subject up or even make it impossible for their mermaids to transform into humans even though they may desperately want to. This inability to change can be a rich source of dramatic tension.

One thing that writers play around with is their mermaids' ability to survive on land. Writers might make their mermaids unable to breathe on land (The Sea People in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*) or require them to stay wet (Fujimoto in *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*). However, it's not uncommon for them to have no issues at all and stay above water indefinitely if the author doesn't want to deal with the ramifications of this contrivance.

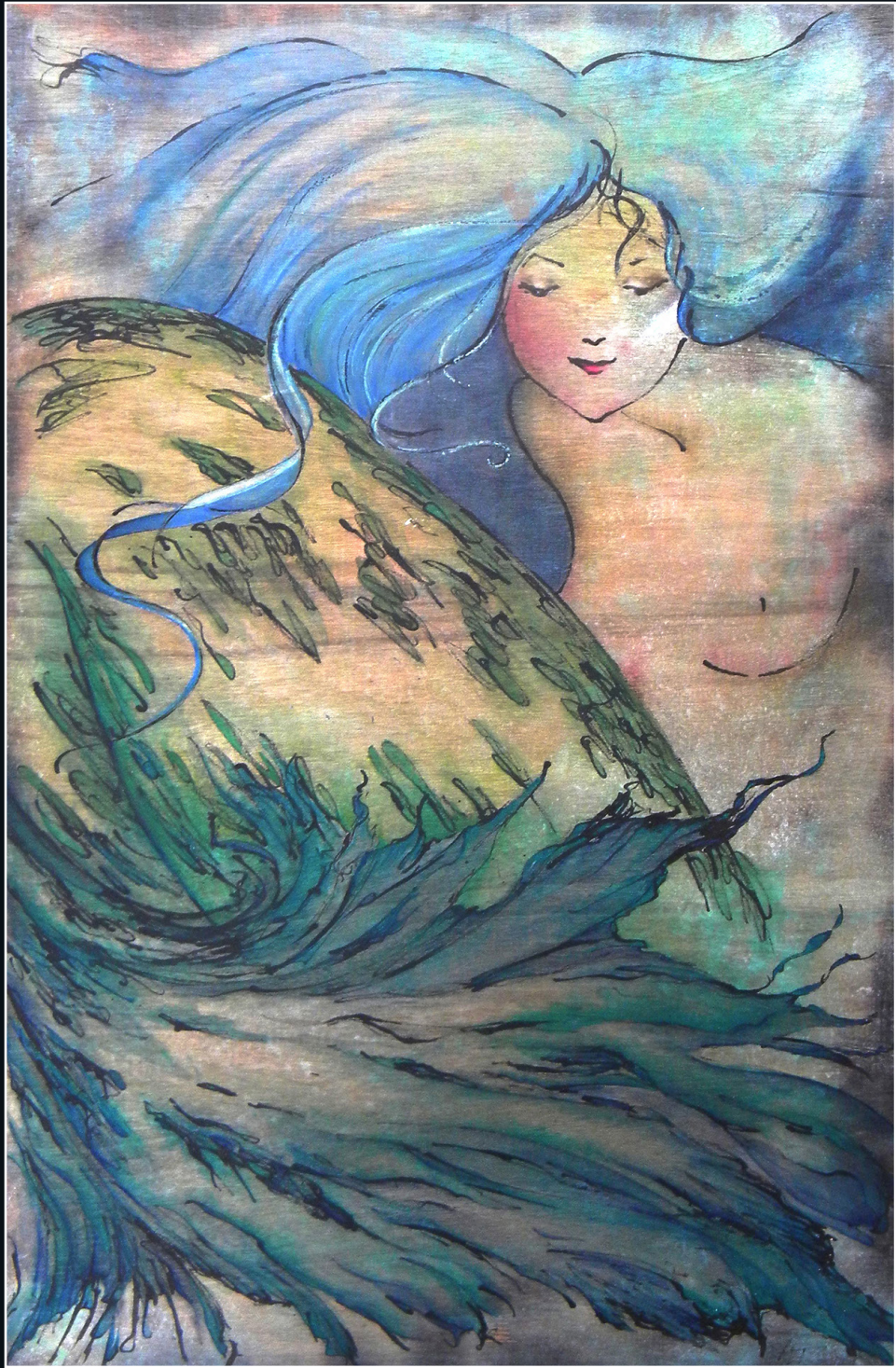
Finally, merfolk are often depicted with a deeper connection to the ocean and the creatures that live in it. This often manifests in an ability to communicate with fish and other sea creatures. It could be telepathic (à la Aquaman), or through a language, we land-dwellers are unfamiliar with. This is usually introduced to allow fish and other sea creatures to be part of the supporting cast or (as often was the case with Aquaman) to have these creatures help out the hero when they are in need of assistance. Laughably, it's not uncommon

to have them just speak in English (or whatever language the work is in) with no thought put into why or how these creatures learned to speak in man's tongue. Mermaid fiction has always been accompanied by a host of plot holes and hand waves to make the concept work.

But what a concept it is!

To think that after thousands of years, humans are still writing mermaid stories with a fervor reserved only for some of human civilization's most treasured cultural artifacts. And even after all that's been written, we're still coming up with ingenious spins on these magnificent creatures. But that's no surprise. After all, the ocean's treasures are endless, and the journey ahead is a promising one.





Wistful by Annie Taylor

A Minnow, or Perhaps a Colossal Squid

by C. S. E. Cooney and Carlos Hernandez

From the Monograph Sirenas of Garganta by Ven. Damiana Cardosa y Fuentes, Doctora de Filosofia Naturál

They are gigantic. We could not see sirenas because they are gigantic!

Too long have our imaginations been limited by sea shanties that portrayed sirenas as lusty, acid-tongued wenches who (how?) learned to speak flawless Mariposan while underwater; or else sly anthropovores whose songs make thralls of concupiscent mariners; or any other myth that characterizes them as anything resembling us.

They are not like us. So that I, Ven. Damiana Cardosa y Fuentes, do not die in vain, understand this: they are not human. They are as different from humans as the butterfly is from the fly.

The eternal challenge of humanity can be summed up thusly: you are a small animal

of little stature; you are mortal; you are scared. Think bigger. Die young if you must, for even if you live to be a hundred years old, you will die young. Think bigger.

But enough poesy. Let us turn to natural philosophy.

)-€

Estrella Santaez y Perreta was the “empress” of el Estanque. Estrella always liked to imagine herself empress of something, and she would work with whatever was in front of her. When she was younger and far more imperious, her gifts had brought her to the attention of the royal executioner, who in time had offered her this apprenticeship. One day, Estrella herself would be royal executioner.

But for now, she was merely el Estanque’s empress—which on most days amounted

to being royal aquarium cleaner. She looked after the morosely pop-eyed fish who used to be debtors, cleaned their tanks, changed their water, and shook earthworms and shrimp meal over their pools at dawn and at twilight.

“El Estanque” was just how it was commonly known—the name mothers used to frighten fractious children: “Behave, diablito, or I’ll pitch you into el Estanque!”; leg-breakers to warn delinquent gamblers: “It’s either your kneecaps or a stint at el Estanque!”; or words of warning whispered in the dimly-lit Mariposan lupanars: “Not that one, love; his one true mistress is el Estanque, who eats every coin he makes.” The proper name of el Estanque, the one by which every prodigal noble of the court of Reina Tenebra knew and feared it, was el Acuario Real para los Deudores y Pobres de la Isla de las Mariposas. It was engraved right there on the marble facade. It would be one of the last things you read with human eyes if you were drowning in debt and unable to pay your way back to breathable air.

When Estrella first came to apprentice under the executioner, she was surprised to be given as her first duty charge over el Estanque. She thought she would be learning how to transform murderers into birds—like a proper executioner—not debtors into fish.

But, as her mentor told her, “Well, your grace, even an executioner has to start somewhere.”

“Your grace” was what was what the executioner had called her ever since the day they met—Estrella at age six, the executioner who knew how old? It was both a tease and an honorific. The executioner was comfortable expressing herself in contradictions.

But it was not as if Estrella did not enjoy learning a lot about fish. And rarework. And how to turn people into fish.

The most popular fish, naturally, was cod, because everybody knew what that was. If you didn’t have a better thought in your head, you became a cod. But the wise and studied conspired to become convict cichlids, as these fish were hardy and long-lived. Their lifespans ranged from eight to ten years; if you couldn’t clear your debts in a decade, well, you were never going to clear them, were you?

Some nobles thought the cichlid beneath them, however. They tried to bribe the pretty, young guardian del Acuario Real to give them a shape more robust and alarming, like that of the gurry shark or the bowhead whale or the bigmouth buffalo. Estrella never accepted their bribes. Instead, she talked her tongue to chalk attempting to explain the numinous nature of rarework. Pescafication was a compromise between herself, the debtor, and los Matadores, who watch from beyond the sky and decide who lives and who dies and what shape they must take meantime. But try sometime to tell a rich person that money will not solve their

problems if you want to waste your life.

There were many other kinds of fish in el Estanque, as many and various as there were ways to go into debt! There were goldfish, koi, clown loaches, and pacus, not to mention quahog clams, crabs and lobsters, octopuses of every size and alligator gar as long as your nieta.¹

There were two kinds of pools in el Estanque: salt water and fresh water. Both were crowded to such a degree that Estrella always found many fish—too many fish—floating at the surface when she unlocked the doors each morning.

Those were the worst moments of her apprenticeship. Her dread began before she even mounted the steps of el Estanque every morning, for she could feel within her the emptiness of the prisoners who had died overnight. Her rarework created a bond between herself and those she transformed that was only severed when they became human again or when they were no longer anything. But nothingness, though substanceless, is not weightless. Not when that nothingness was once a living soul.

“It does not seem like justice, tía,” Estrella told the executioner, who was not her tía,

but who was everyone’s tía. She had that sort of face. “Did not Reina Ténegra build her aquarium to improve the plight of debtors?”

“Fewer die now than did,” replied the executioner. “And their lives are much gentler. Surely you learned in school of the squalor and misery of the debtors’ prisons of yore?”

“The squalor of the past does not excuse the iniquities of the present.”

The executioner conceded the point with a nod. “If you think el Estanque is an unjust holding cell for debtors, your grace,” said the executioner, “how will you feel when your apprenticeship is done, and I hand you over my keys to the Henhouse, and your job becomes the care and maintenance of the avified?”

The Henhouse, like el Estanque, was the vulgar word for Her Majesty’s Aviary of Murderers, where resided all the most dangerous criminals of la Isla de las Mariposas, whom the executioner had changed, via her unparalleled rarework, into birds. The condemned were given the option to take their chances as a bird out in the wild, but everyone knew that birds in the wild had a much higher chance of

¹Ven. Aurelia Tierradulce y Matos, famous for her extravagance, became an entire coral reef. So robust a reef, in fact, that when she was returned to her human form a mere four months later (her debt having been paid by a windfall from a dying uncle) much of the coral remained. It was transported to the beaches near the Palacio de las Sombras where it could flourish.

dying, or of forgetting too much of their human selves before they could rejoin Mariposan society as repentant, model citizens. Most, therefore, laid their nests in the Henhouse.

Plenty died there as well, of course. But more survived their stints in the Henhouse than had ever survived the gallows or the chopping block. Because, really, who survives a chopping block?

“Ah!” Estrella scolded, shaking her finger at the executioner. “I know that when you start asking me questions, tía, it means you are done answering my own!”

“When we are exploring questions of philosophy,” replied the executioner, genuinely surprised, “I believe that your grace has as many valid answers as do I. Have we not conversed thusly all our lives?”

They had, and Estrella laughed in apology for her teasing.

She then begged leave of the executioner to go away and dress for the party she was attending that night. The executioner, feigning indignation, asked who would be feeding the fish whilst Estrella danced with courtiers and delighted in genteel persiflage?

“Why, I will, of course,” Estrella replied. “Afterwards.”

She attended her party, only for an hour or so. But in that hour, she shone brighter

than even her namesake. She danced every dance, drank the dry, sparkling wine her host pressed on her, and flirted her fan and fishtailed her train at every eligible courtier with a swagger and a jaunty grin. From the center of her circle of sycophants, even Reina Ténegra raised a glass to her.

But Estrella left the party early and went, still dressed in her glittering gown, to pace beside the ceramic pools of el Estanque, dreamily scattering fishfood. The night guard was surprised to see her; this was not her usual shift. But Estrella was *Guardiana en Jefe* of el Estanque, and if she chose to spend her nights here rather than the arms of a lover, who would gainsay her?

She stayed until dawn, absorbed in her charges. Patiently she separated the fighting fish by rearranging their potted plants, driftwood, and rocks to confuse their territory. She checked the pale, listless fish for tail rot or dropsy, and whenever she found signs of infection, she quarantined the sick in large glass bowls, which she left in the office of the chief veterinarian, who would diagnose and medicate them properly in the morning.

Sometimes, rage surged in her like waves crashing against the malecón. Maybe el Estanque was a better prison than the cruel prisons of the past; that did not make it good. Or just. Or desirable. Tonight, like so many nights before, she felt a nigh-irresistible urge to turn all the

fish back into humans and end this inhumane practice herself.

But she never did.



From the Monograph Sirenas of Garganta by Ven. Damiana Cardosa y Fuentes, Doctora de Filosofía Naturál

I base the following description of that animal known popularly as “sirena” and called by philosophers “las ahogaderas”² on four different specimens that I recovered during a voyage, which I myself financed, to the eternal maelstrom Garganta. I spent my family’s fortune in the name of discovery, and I have succeeded. If we are a society that values truth and knowledge, then my endeavors will be seen as valuable.

And if not, not. I will give you in these pages everything that I have learned. It is for you decide what price this knowledge merits. If it merits nothing in your seeming, turn me into a minnow in el Estanque where we Mariposans, in our wisdom and mercy, deposit our debtors. A minnow, if you will: I pray to be eaten quickly, since there is zed chance I will ever have the funds to spring myself out

of that algae-choked hell: not without intervention from la reina herself, and we all know how likely that is.

No matter. My only regret is that I have never encountered a living sirena, now that I know what to look for. Add it to the list of indignities that are the contents of my life.

But come, enough self-pity. Let us turn to natural philosophy.



Estrella always anticipated Debtor’s Day with both dread and excitement. Today would be more merciful than most: she had three debtors to release, and only one to imprison!

There in la reina’s throne room, before the mighty Trono Sapiente itself, two of the three potential parolees (a flirtatious koi with beautifully brocaded scales in metallic gold and silver, and a feisty fighting betta with a fierce bite and fins so flowy they resembled Rojas lace) were swimming in their separate crystal bowls. The third parolee was a handsomely spotted horn shark so large that Estrella had to conscript two of her crew to wheel its glass tank into the palacio.

²Or “the women who drown [humans].” At this point in history, there are exactly zed verified cases of humans who have been drowned by sirenas. Let this serve as proof that natural philosophy needs to engage in a great deal of self-examination before it can claim it has freed itself from the prejudices it has inherited from society at large.

The courtiers who loitered in the throne room gasped and tittered behind lace fans at one another, each outdoing the other with their histrionic horror. A shark was still a novelty to any Mariposan who did not live and die by the whim of the sea.

The three parolees, as you might have guessed, were themselves all courtiers. Commoners rarely found means to pay off their debts, and when it happened, the event was surrounded by no pomp. But the courtiers—ah! They were given mantles of velvet from Reina Ténobra's own hands, and a kiss of welcome on each cheek, a third upon their forehead. Often, there was a ball held in their honor that night—should, that is, their families be able to afford such a festivity.

Many borrowed heavily in order that they should.

Today, Estrella was most nervous about the debtor she was to imprison. She was a great admirer of Ven. Damiana Cardosa y Fuentes. She'd read every monograph on the *Sirenas of Garganta* that the doctora had penned, had saved all the illustrated broadsides detailing "Damiana's Adventures at Sea"—often in song or verse. The discoveries she'd made at the edge of the whirlpool, the recovery of those colossal cadavers, and the public autopsies she'd performed in the old coliseum, which she'd mortgaged her family's ancestral home to turn into a medical theatre: there was no one in the world like Dra. Cardosa y Fuentes.

Once, Estrella had attended a lecture Ven. Damiana gave at the Royal University. The executioner, who knew the infamous natural philosopher more than just casually, had cadged Estrella an invitation to a private dinner held afterwards at an exclusive restaurant. (The executioner was a master of giving Estrella inimitable, priceless gifts.)

Estrella had been too intimidated to say much that night, and could barely eat anything, but she'd listened to Ven. Damiana hold forth ever more eloquently as the fine wine flowed. The others in attendance, courtiers to a one, lost interest long before Estrella did. Before the evening was over, she found herself the sole audience of this fascinating, formidable woman, who looked right into her eyes without ever seeming to blink or breathe, and spoke to her about sirenas—myth, history, fact, wonder.

And now, here was Ven. Damiana Cardosa y Fuentes, a debtor by any definition, who had declared in her latest article, which had been circulating like wildfire at court, that she wanted Estrella to turn her into a minnow.

A minnow!

Estrella didn't know if she could manage it. She could not *imagine* Ven. Damiana as a minnow. In no world could this wild-haired woman, with her tall boots and patched trousers, her strident, raspy voice that overrode all other sounds, her

spectacles that seemed to reflect blue-violet fires—like the ghostly corposants that cling to the masts of ships in peril—be re-conceptualized as a bait fish. Estrella just could not do it. Not even the Matadores, she was convinced, could do it.

But when Estrella murmured her concerns to the executioner that morning before they each took their places to the right and left of el Trono Sapiente, the executioner merely returned her a strained little smile.

“Rarework,” she replied, “rarely goes awry. It may not go as anyone expects, but it will not play a fair worker foul. Try not to fall prey to your anxieties. Remember your forms and rituals. Be respectful, be precise, and—if at all possible—be impartial.”

“But *you* are never impartial!” Estrella cried.

The executioner shrugged. “I am your cautionary tale.”

On cue, Reina Ténebra’s herald of arms announced the official commencement of Debtor’s Day. All the courtiers assembled shook out their hems, and repositioned their feet, and contorted their postures into attitudes of attentiveness and expectancy. La reina herself mounted the steps of the dais and settled onto el Trono Sapiente.

“Presenting la Guardiania en Jefe del Acuario Real!” shouted the herald of arms.

Now Estrella stepped down from the dais, removed her outer robe to stand in a short tunic of byssus which served as her ceremonial swimwear, and made her courtesy to the court. Clearing her throat, she pronounced:

“I, Ven. Estrella Santaez y Perreta, stand before el Trono Sapiente and before all of you who are gathered here, to perform la reina’s justice.”

Silence filled every throat in the room.

From the Monograph Sirenas of Garganta by Ven. Damiana Cardosa y Fuentes, Doctora de Filosofía Natural

But first, my indulgent reader, a word on how terrible we are at knowledge.

What a mess our language is! How orotund and phatic, brimming with folderol, convoluted and locution-laden. It is a wonder anyone can become literate at all! If we were wise, we would create a single language so perfect that we would never need turn to a separate language for mathematics, philology, alchemy, or rarework. Instead, we insist on dividing knowledge into false categories, thereby assuring ourselves gaps in our knowledge of nature and supernature. It is almost as if we are insisting on remaining ignorant.

To the future natural philosophers who will find my feeble attempts at a

taxonomy laughable, I say this: swallow your laughter and shit it out later, when you're alone on the pot and it will do no one harm. For I, too, as a young philosopher, spent a great deal of time chortling at the mistaken notions of my forebears. I wondered how they, presumably among the finest thinkers of their respective generations, could have been so wrong.

The answer, of course, is that it is easy to see the answer when you have already been given the answer.

But enough epistemology. Let us arrive, finally, at the meat course of this dinner. What follows is the most complete and rigorous taxonomy of sirenas ever written on the planet Gloriana.



Estrella's rarework went off without a hitch.

Well, except that Ven. Zaira lost her grip on Estrella's hand as she was being helped from the shark tank and fell back in and floundered for a while.

And Ven. Vega almost bit a chunk out of Estrella as she was being un-bettaed back to her human form, but remembered herself just in time and apologized most humbly and profusely.

Ven. Oriol, upon being relieved of his koinness, fainted coyly. His grateful husband clasped him close to his breast and

revived him with kisses in no time at all—to the great entertainment of all gathered.

But the real entertainment was yet to come, when Ven. Damiana Cardosa y Fuentes was to be brought before el Trono Sapiente. Only after the puddles were mopped away, the crystal bowls and shark tank cleared, and Estrella towed off, newly composed for this next, much harder, piece of rarework, did the guards bring their newest prisoner into the throne room.

She was already talking. Ven. Damiana did not have to be dragged; she marched forward, gesticulating so hugely that the guards surrounding la reina kept stiffening like hunting cats with every sweep of her arm. But for all she noticed them, they might have been flower arrangements at a banquet.

“This is your last chance, Patricia Viviana. You still have it within your power to forgive my debt and fund my next expedition. Do so, and your name will be illuminated in all the history books as the most rational monarch that our benighted Isla de las Mariposas has ever known. *Yours* shall be the eponym for the Ténébran College of Marine Biology that I shall found upon my deathbed.”

Reina Ténébra rolled her eyes. “Dami,” she returned, in a voice so fond it was querulous, “you will never found a college, or even so much as a country school. You have thrown your house out the window,

and then thrown the window after it. The money that we have already lent you—a great deal of it, in good faith, with promises of tremendous return—we will never see again. True, you have made some discoveries that might yet benefit Mariposas. Even now, if you agree to indenture yourself to our great fisheries in order that you might work off your debt in honor, we would consider commuting your—”

“Don’t bother,” said Ven. Damiana, not horrified or furious, just contemptuous. “I have no interest in murdering whales for their grasa. Besides, who’s to say that once you’ve hunted them to extinction, you won’t go after my sirenas?”

Reina Ténobra retorted, “Why should we hunt sirenas—which would require an outlay of considerable resources, nay, an entire renovation of the industry!—when we have no proof that they possess assets of any value?” She leaned forward on her throne. “Unless... did you, perhaps, find evidence of their potential usefulness in one of your precious carcasses? Something, perhaps, that you concealed from publication?”



From the Monograph Sirenas of Garganta by Ven. Damiana Cardosa y Fuentes, Doctora de Filosofía Natural

As I have stated, sirenas are gigantic. But what an incomplete conveyance of meaning “gigantic” provides you, estimable reader! Should I rather say “ciclópeo,” or perhaps “descomunal”? Would “monumental” better render the breathtaking, expectation-destroying enormity of our sirenas? Perhaps “ingente”? “Incommensurable”?

You are free to choose any word you wish when you write your own etiology. The only word I forbid, now and forever, is “monstruoso.” Only fear of the unknown would compel a philosopher to call them monsters. And fear is the opposite of natural philosophy.

The four sirenas I recovered measured in length as follows: 41.246m, 41.471m, 44.028m, and 49.533m. The span of their two superior arms, which resemble human arms in proportion to the rest of the body, measured from the tip of the longest of their five fingers (that is to say, the index finger) of each hand, for each specimen and in the same order as given above, are as follows: 31.202m, 30.97m, 32.055m, and 36.624m.

The span of the two inferior arms, which connect at the midpoint of the sirena’s torso³ range in the four specimens as follows: 24.339m, 24.567m, 25.097m, and 29.428m. Given the strong

³The inferior hands are webbed, four-fingered, and, unlike the superior hands, lack opposable thumbs. They thus resemble the frog’s manus.

musculature, the suppleness of the tendons, and signs of wear at the elbow and inferior shoulder joints, there is every reason to believe that the inferior arms are not vestigial, but are actively used by sirenas in their daily lives, though their exact functions I must leave to future philosophers.

Their tails formed more than half the length of their bodies: 20.724m, 21.221m, 23.793m, and 25.588m. Each ends in a horizontal fluke resembling in size and proportion that of the spermaceti whale, complete with medial notch. Also similarly to whales, their tails are controlled by powerful epaxial and hypaxial muscles.⁴

The diameter at the shoulders for each of my four specimens run as follows: 4.701m, 4.684m, 5m exactly, and 6.11m. At their hips, I measured each at 4.963m, 5.177m, 5.385m, and 7.427m in diameter.

Since I am uncertain as to how public this account may spread, I will for the moment withhold the measurements of the chest and each of my specimens' six dugs. I do not wish to be accused of indecency, despite the fact that there is nothing at all indecent about studying the anatomy of an animal.

I will, however, for the sake of improving society, risk censure by saying this: the sirena possesses a cloaca, from which, it is clear from my dissections, it defecates, urinates, has sexual intercourse, and lays eggs that are larger than any human has ever been. There is no way imaginable for a sirena and a human to fornicate, unless, perhaps, the sirena decided to use an entire human's body as a dildonic appliance. There can be little doubt such activity would leave the human drowned and shattered.

Right-reasoning people of the world should take this as evidence abundant that sirenas and humans have never been, and will never be, amorously acquainted, despite the centuries of sailors' thwarted fantasies that litter our songs and myths.

In fact, my examinations have revealed the tantalizing possibility that sirenas may be a parthenogenic species, self-fertilizing, spermatozoon-free, endlessly motherful and forevermore fatherless. If this is the case, then, with philosophical certainty, I can state that the very last thing a sirena would want in its life—her life—is a pathetically small human seaman.

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⁴Though I dare not speculate as to what the top speed of sirenas might be without beholding them in the wild, the fact that they prey upon the fastest alpha predators in the ocean, along with the fact that there is little likelihood they have much ability to camouflage themselves, makes the prospect that they can outpace some of the fastest predators in the sea a viable one.

In reply to Reina Ténebra, Ven. Damiana sucked in such a breath that Estrella thought she was hoping to inflate herself till she loomed over el Trono Sapiente. With face empurpled and spectacles ablaze, her strident voice reaching glass-cutting pitch, she declared:

“If you’re thinking of going after them, I say to you, Patricia Viviana, it’d be wiser for you to cast your bullion into the whirlpool and your liver after it than to hunt sirenas in the deep. The only place we’ve found hard evidence of them—and of these specimens, only their dead—is in orbit around the Garganta, which chews up our whaling ships like birria and doesn’t bother to spit them out again.

“They’re drawn there in death; they don’t *live* there. They don’t construct castles at the bottom of the whirlpool, and build gardens of seashells, and wear gowns of pearl and pirate treasure, and gossip about the size of each other’s dugs. They aren’t *like* us. *Their* brains are seven times the size of ours, and like us they possess opposable thumbs—on their upper arms at least. Sirenas might very well use *tools*. Implements. *Weapons*. How might they defend themselves from danger? Imagine a sentient creature, empress of all ocean predators, imagine what she might do to one of your whaling ships once she puzzles out what, exactly, has been depleting her food supply? You think to hunt *them*?

“Try it,” she dared them all, a martial

gleam in her eye, “Try it, and la Isla de las Mariposas will find itself at war with a superior species—embraced by the powerful arms of the apex constrictor—*squeezed* dry!”

By now her raspy voice had dropped in pitch and timbre, not in exhaustion, but in enthusiasm. It reached from the elaborately painted tiles on the floor to the patterned cedar of the recessed ceiling to the entire court. Everyone in Estrella’s range of vision leaned in to hear her, practically salivating: at the scandal, at the downfall of one of la reina’s favorites, at the intoxicating vista of strange thoughts and new ideas that Ven. Damiana was presenting them. Estrella, too, felt her heart racing, her ears growing ears, her eyes growing eyes, the meat of her brain trying to trying understand what seven times itself might mean for its own understanding.

And what (Estrella thought wildly, suddenly) if sirenas are *rareworkers* too? What then, *tía*?

The doctora waved a hand, dismissing her dudgeon as if it were no more bothersome than smoke from a cheroot. “Ah! But I doubt such magnificent creatures would trouble themselves to eradicate a few diminutive, landlubbing, air-wheezing, island-hugging apes who wrongly think themselves the center of the universe. They have remained hidden up to now, after all. You will never find them. And moreover, you should pray that

you don't."

"Well, then Dami," said Reina Ténegra into the throat-clearing silence, "if that is your final word on the subject?"

Every prisoner was entitled to their últimas palabras. Estrella was shocked to note that they had arrived at that part of the Debtor's Day ceremony already. Look, there was the executioner, waggling her eyebrows to indicate that it was, indeed, Estrella's turn to speak!

She swallowed, and took one step closer to Ven. Damiana.

"Ven. Damiana, as prisoner indebted to Reina Ténegra, until such time as Casa Cardosa y Fuentes can make up your debt in bullion, labor, or a gift of like or equal value to Mariposan society, you are sentenced to pescafication in such form as you and I will shortly agree upon in raretime. Before we enter raretime, I must ask you: do you wish to serve your term in el Acuario Real or in the wilds of el océano Vino Blanco? Either way, you and I shall be bonded by my rarework and by the grace of los Matadores. If you choose the wild, know this: wherever you go in all the great world of Gloriana, I shall by our rarebond receive communications as to your location and well-being, and, at the time your term is up, if indeed there comes such a time, I shall be able to summon you home."

Ven. Damiana was smiling at her now, paying Estrella her full attention. "I recognize you, niña. You're the

executioner's prodigy, aren't you? We ate dinner together at la Baraca. You were a marvelous conversationalist." She winked. "I'd like to be dumped in the bay behind el Estanque, thanks," she said in answer to Estrella's question.

She gave another wave of the hand, this time as if knocking down a house of cards. "And I've changed my mind about the whole minnow thing. Do you think you can make me a squid?"

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From the Monograph Sirenas of Garganta by Ven. Damiana Cardosa y Fuentes, Doctora de Filosofía Naturál

The logical portion of my mind tells me to request to be turned into a minnow, so that I can die quickly and be rid of all of this unhelpful knowing that I carry around in my skull. But what, instead, if I could die as a meal for a sirena? I would like that, if somehow it could be arranged. The sirena is omnivorous, as the variety of their cementum-covered teeth and the contents of their stomachs revealed during my dissections. Though I cannot generalize from only four specimens, the sirenas I investigated seemed in life to be partial to sharks, toothed whales, and colossal squid, since their digestive tracts and multiple stomachs were a treasure trove of teeth and beaks. They might, in their biomes, serve as a check to the outsized growth of top predators.

How exactly the sirenas kill these animals

must remain a mystery until we acquire empirical evidence. Were I to conjecture, I would hypothesize that sirenas use their four arms to constrict their prey to death. Ram ventilators such as sharks would be immobilized and would immediately find it difficult to breathe, whales would have their lungs emptied and would soon drown, and colossal squid—well, sirenas probably need not waste time depriving a colossal squid of air. They probably just rend it to pieces, and then eat it up as daintily as we enjoy tripe soup.

I make this last conjecture unflinchingly: those whales who, like the sirena, dine upon squid have sucker-scars all over their dermises, acquired during the great battles they must have fought with those monsters to earn their dinner. The four sirenas I dissected had no such scars on their bodies. The early evidence indicates that they can dismantle a kraken like a child pulling legs off a beetle.

Yes, perhaps I will ask the guardiana to turn me into a colossal squid and throw me into the sea. Then, I could range the abyssal depths until I found a hungry sirena. I would dance in front of her, cavorting and tumbling and seductively squirting ink. In that way, she would know me to be her meetest meat. She would grab my arms and pull my massive head free of them. Then, as I watched, she would eat my arms like a child eating licorice, twist by twist. I would be in shock and bleeding out, so perhaps I would not be aware when, saving the best for last, the sirena would eat my head and

make me nothing.

But perhaps I would. I think I would like to behold my entrance into erasure.



The rest of the court, Estrella knew, were gathered on the southeast loggia of the Palacio de las Sombras, watching her rarework from its sheltered splendor while dining al fresco on delicacies of both surf and turf caught or slaughtered that morning. El Acuario Real flanked the palacio on the west, with the airy Aviary of Murderers soaring several stories high on the east, all part of the campus that included administrative buildings, courthouses, a planetarium, the natural philosophers' cabinet of curiosities, and a few of the oldest colleges of the Royal University, all lining the sea cliffs of los Centinelas.

But for the moment, at least, Estrella and Ven. Damiana were alone on the malecón, the paving stones of the breakwater wet beneath their bare feet. Rarework needed no incantation or grand gesture. The executioner sometimes prayed before she transformed a murderer into a bird. Estrella, rather, looked deeply into the eyes of her prisoner, and fixed them fast in her memory as the humans they were—flawed, desperate, frightened, *specific*. She gave them the gift of her fullest attention, her entire capacity for thought and feeling, an acknowledgement of their humanity. She doubted, in these moments, everything. And it was in that moment

of doubt, in the locking of eyes, and the knowledge of her own and her prisoner's beautiful humanity, that she invoked her rarework.

But in that moment, the rarework wasn't hers alone. It was theirs. It was the rareworker's idea of justice, and the prisoner's idea of their transformed self, and whatever inscrutable logic the Matadores applied to these matters. Estrella's mouth would fill with the taste of brine, and her eyes spill over with tears, and then everything would go a clear and pale gold, like the world was being washed in wine.

She, in her swimming tunic, and Ven. Damiana, naked⁵, made their way down the slippery stone steps of the malecón. Together, they stepped into the gray-green waves of el océano Vino Blanco, until they stood in water up to their thighs. They held hands. Ven. Damiana's hand was colder than the water. She was trembling.

When Estrella saw Ven. Damiana's chin lift, she lifted hers as well, determined to be as brave. Their eyes met.

On the loggia of the Palacio de las Sombras, the court of Reina Ténegra marveled once again at this work, which was, in truth, so exceedingly rare.



Letter from Estrella Santaetz y Perreta to the Society of Natural Philosophers, Year 34 of the Tenure of Reina Ténegra, in the Month of Cielo Desierto, Day 17.

To the Most Esteemed Members of La Reina's Society of Natural Philosophers,

It is my melancholy honor to present to you this description of a sea creature that heretofore has not been identified nor described in the annals of Glorianan science. The name I have given this fish carries with it the imprimatur of Reina Ténegra herself and may not be changed, save by royal fiat. What follows below is a description of this new fish which I have called the "chupasirena."

One of the peculiarities of rarework of which you may not be aware is that, at the moment of transformation, the rareworker is accosted by an onslaught of visions pertaining to the transformed. Those visions range from history to prophecy and reveal to me what fate awaits the transformed. When I search my inner life, I can feel every person whom I have transformed, individually and distinctly. I know whether they are well or sick, hungry or sated, frightened or calm. I also know if their minds are irretrievable, or whether they might still be returned to human form with their memories and personalities reasonably intact.

In the pescafication of Ven. Damiana

⁵Her choice. Of course she was naked.

Cardosa y Fuentes into her chupasirena form I experienced (and continue to experience) the clearest line of communication I have ever known between myself and one of the transformed. I am regularly receiving dispatches from her now—images, sounds, physical feelings—from the lightless depths where now she flourishes. Such an ongoing, powerful, and limpid link between minds is unprecedented in rarework to my knowledge, and to the knowledge of my mentor. I consider it nothing less than a miracle, a gift from los Matadores.

It is from this connection that I am able to give you the account of the heretofore unidentified fish, namely, the chupasirena, that follows.

For clarity's sake, let us say the chupasirena greatly resembles the famous and well-documented remora. It, like the remora, is a symbiote; the chupasirena has formed a mutually beneficial relationship with a powerful creature of the sea. The remora has its famous friend, the shark, and the chupasirena has its sirena.

Once Ven. Damiana was pescafied, I fainted, and my vision joined Ven. Damiana's in an act that can be called nothing less than clairvoyance. We traveled through an ink-thick darkness that was—please note this, philosophers—no impediment to the self-illuminating eyes of the chupasirena. The ocean makes for such a strange, slow medium!

Deeper and deeper we swam, Ven. Damiana assured of her destination as if she were a native of the ocean. I realized suddenly how little time we on land spend looking up. Underwater, however, a predator can attack you from any of 1080°. How two-dimensional my life on land felt, and how wide my vista underwater!

During a vision, time speeds up during periods of uninterest and slows down at moments of importance—the opposite of how time normally works for us here on land.

I cannot say how long we swam or how deep we dove. At some point, I simultaneously registered that in the black zones to which we descended, the pressure would squeeze a human body to death, and that the chupasirena finds that pressure quite pleasant and comforting. It is built for the deep.

Time slowed again when the chupasirena arrived at her destination. Her destination was a harmony of sirenas.

This harmony consisted of at least seven sirenas, who, despite their massive forms, cavorted with one another with all the obvious and contagious joy of porpoises. They moved so quickly, in fact, and were of such an immensity that I found it difficult to count them. My view was also impeded by the fact that Ven. Damiana was following her new instincts as a chupasirena and, well, began chupando the nearest sirena.

That is to say, she shot over to the nearest sirena and began chewing on some sort of tubæform ectoparasite that had attached itself to the sirena's lower back. The parasite—an eyeless, mouth-and-sack nightmare—had affixed itself just above the seam where mammalian-seeming flesh turned into piscine-seeming scales.

After Ven. Damiana had finished her meal⁶, not a mark was left on the sirena's skin where once the parasite had fed off her⁷. I am recalled to a childhood experience where I yanked a leech off my leg, instead of letting my parents remove it with art and delicacy, and the scar left behind remains there to this day. Clearly, the sirena and the chupasirena have come to an agreement: "You may eat of the bounty of parasites on my body," says the sirena to the chupasirena, "and I, in turn, will not make a meal of you."

But here my clairvoyance began to fade. While my mind retreated from hers, I saw, swarming around the sirenas, a large school of chupasirenas. They zipped about, circling and tumbling as much as the sirenas themselves—and, I came to

realize, *with* the sirenas. I wonder now if the typical chupasirena is an exceptionally intelligent fish, one that perhaps the sirenas have domesticated and bred for its usefulness, as we have dogs. Indeed, the chupasirena reminds me strongly of the dog, for its frolicsome nature and its desire to please its master. This I felt from within Ven. Damiana herself, who, in my last memory of her, was charging gleefully into the school of chupasirenas and playing among the harmony of sirenas. It was as if she had always been a part of their community.

Her feeling of happiness was so complete in that moment that it has no equal in the human mind.

Ven. Damiana's felicity is our loss. She will never, ever, ever, come back to us, no matter how I call her. Humanity will never again benefit from her numberless gifts, save through the messages she deigns to transmit to me, for as long as they last.

But know, natural philosophers, that I will dutifully relay to you everything that Ven. Damiana teaches me about sirenas,

⁶It is my pleasure to inform you that either my clairvoyance did not also impart a transmission of the gustatory sense, or the chupasirena does not possess it, for I tasted nothing of that ghastly meal.

⁷I have adopted the convention in Ven. Damiana's late writings to refer to sirenas as "she/her," with the understanding that you, as natural philosophers, may in due time find a more appropriate referent for this species, which, as you know from Ven. Damiana's writings, may be sexually monomorphic.

chupasirenas, and life under the sea. Even now, I must write to you a second letter regarding the means by which sirenas use the scalding ejecta of fumaroles to bathe themselves and their beloved chupasirenas!

Until then, please know that I remain the obedient servant of los Matadores, la reina, my mentor, and you, friends and colleagues. My greatest desire is to witness a growing alignment of science and rarework until that momentous day when our two disciplines will become one.

With all Gratitude and Respect,
Ven. Estrella Santaetz y Perreta
Guardiana en Jefe del Acuario Real para
los Deudores y Pobres de la Isla de las
Mariposas

)-€

The Fin(e) Print

by Meg Frank

We're four issues into this aquatic adventure and we are deeply pleased to have been able to share with you over 40 different pieces of mermaid magic. So far we've published 10 poems, 8 short stories, 6 Each to Each collaborations, 2 comics, and 2 essays. We've also commissioned two original pieces of art for covers, licensed two more, and published about a dozen aquatic illustrations. This is more than we were planning to publish, but we

were blown away by the outstanding submissions that we received and we've decided to think just a little bit bigger.

To make all of this happen we've spent about half (\$13,361 of \$26,150) of our overall budget. We've used about half of our art budget and just under a third of our written work budget. We're working on plans to raise a little bit more money this summer so that we can set free some of the white whales we found in our submission net..

The first four issues cost \$5863 to produce - the least expensive costing \$835 and the most expensive costing \$2271. We've also purchased another \$712 of material for future issues bringing the **total spent on content to \$6575.**

We've paid our team \$4200 in total, which is less than we were planning for, but Julia and I decided to redirect some of our pay to buying more material and covering administrative costs.

We've spent \$2586 on administrative and logistical costs. We spent \$1000 more in this area than planned - we hired an accountant to do our tax paperwork and that was very worth it.

Finally, while our plan for Mermaids Monthly was one year of mermaid magic, it's become clear that there is a lot more material out there. We've decided to pass the ship to a new crew. If you'd like to steer this ship, or know someone who could, check out the next page and start organizing your ideas for adventure!

Wanted: New Captain & Crew

~ We will be turning Mermaids Monthly over to a new team in 2022!



~ We want this team to be BIPOC-led and have a BIPOC editor.

~ We are happy for the editorial team to be based anywhere in the world, but at least one member of the team will need to be US-based and able and willing to take on the legal business owner/publisher role. This is so that the transfer of our US business infrastructure will be reasonably easy (as far as anything to do with owning a small business can be easy, anyway).

~ Our goal is to make it possible for a new BIPOC editor space to open in the SFWA pro rate magazine field without that person/team having to have money or a ton of industry experience to begin with.

~ We will have an open applications period in the second half of June, but application guidelines will be up in early May.

~ We hope to select our new team by the end of August and let them shadow us from September to December

~ We'll help the new team run the year two Kickstarter, which will most likely end in January, and we will turn over the legal ownership of the business on the first of January.

~ We will post our official applicant guidelines in early May so everyone has time to think about them for at least a month before the two week application window opens.

~ The guidelines will basically consist of a list of questions we have about your hopes and plans for the magazine if you take it over. You can work on figuring out your answers and writing them out before the application window opens.

~ Guidelines will be posted on the official Mermaids Monthly Submission Guidelines Page and we will also announce it on the Mermaids Monthly Twitter account, and make a google doc copy in our Public folder.

Our Contributors

Annie Taylor is the illustrative and textile artist behind Whitstabletail: where mermaids and fairy folk flirt with carnies and Kahlos. #hasshenothingbettertodo

Here is her personal statement: *“Living on the North Kent coast of the UK in a town known for Oysters and sunsets and smuggling, mermaids are never far from my thoughts. These thoughts then spill out onto the page or onto fabric, and I draw either with pen or needle. Some of my work stays as illustrations, others become dolls.*

Mermaids took centre stage in my life in 2010 when I took part in the Whitstable Biennale (Festival of contemporary arts) telling the Whitstable Tail dressed as a mermaid in a costume created from rubbish. The Tail is the story of a boy who falls in love with a mermaid. My larger than life size dolls mostly have legs, albeit often with two heads, but everyone still calls them mermaids. Don't ask me why.

I am Co-Founder of the Profanity Embroidery Group, and member of the Society for Embroidered Work.

Someone once said of me ‘has she nothing better to do?’ it sums things up perfectly.”

You can find her on Instagram and twitter as @whitstabletail, and buy small prints, dolls, and embroideries at her Etsy shop: <https://www.etsy.com/uk/shop/WhitstableTails>

C. S. E. Cooney (csecooney.com/@csecooney) is the World Fantasy Award-winning author of *Bone Swans: Stories*. She has narrated over a hundred audiobooks, released three albums as the singer/songwriter Brimstone Rhine, and her short plays have been performed in Chicago, St. Louis, Phoenix, New York City, and Taipei. Her novel *The Twice-Drowned Saint* can be found in Mythic Delirium's recent anthology *The Sinister Quartet*, and her forthcoming novel *Saint Death's Daughter* will be out with Rebellion in Spring of 2022. Other work includes novella *Desdemona and the Deep*, and a poetry collection: *How to Flirt in Faerieland and Other Wild Rhymes*, which features her Rhysling Award-winning “The Sea King's Second Bride.” Her short fiction and poetry can be found in Jonathan Strahan's anthology *Dragons*, Ellen Datlow's *Mad Hatters and March Hares: All-New Stories from the World of Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland*, Rich Horton's *Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy*, and elsewhere.

Our Contributors

Carlos Hernandez (he/him) is the author of the Pura Belpré-award winning *Sal and Gabi Break the Universe* (2019), as well as its sequel, *Sal and Gabi Fix the Universe* (2020) and the short story collection *The Assimilated Cuban's Guide to Quantum Santeria* (2016). He is also a CUNY associate professor of English at BMCC and the Graduate Center, as well as a game writer and designer. Find him on socials @writeteachplay.

Denisse Di Stelle is mexican illustrator who focuses on traditional art. With a background in Animation and Digital Art she prefers fairytale-like subjects. She is a very art driven person and has a high appreciation for the arts. She balances her daily life between illustration and opera singing, making her a well rounded artist.

Dianita is a fantasy artist born in Veracruz, Mexico, currently living in Texas. She has found that Fantasy provides her with the perfect language to portray her deepest emotions. It's where she finds freedom to explore fears, hopes, and that wish for connection between all living creatures and our world. Her tools of choice are pencils, acrylics, and oils, and she's often found creating art featuring women and their animal companions, or her cat Kitty meeting dragons!

She's a member of the Mexicanx Initiative and has created cover and interior illustrations for a middle grade book called *Dune Dragons* and *A larger reality 2.0: A Timeline in Which We Don't Go Extinct*. Some of her most exciting projects in 2020 are Month of Fear 2020, "The Woven Path Tarot" a project by the Changeling Artists Collective and being invited to participate in #NewbieNovember for Every Day Original.

J.D. Harlock is a Lebanese writer based in Beirut. You can find him on Twitter as @JD_Harlock.

Kris Herndon is a writer, musician and artist whose byline has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Reader's Digest*, *Entrepreneur*, *Wired*, *Metropolis*, *Think*, *Stop Smiling*, *Paste*, *Art Papers*, *Architecture Boston*, and many other publications. Find her at @herndy on Twitter and Instagram, and see more of her work at www.herndy.com.

Our Contributors

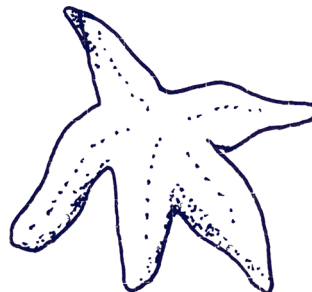
Lorraine Schein is a New York writer. Her work has appeared in *VICE Terraform*, *Strange Horizons*, *Enchanted Conversation*, *NewMyths*, and *Eye to the Telescope*, and in the anthologies *Tragedy Queens: Stories Inspired by Lana del Rey & Sylvia Plath* and *XVIII: Stories of Mischief & Mayhem*. *The Futurist's Mistress*, her poetry book, is available from Mayapple Press: <http://mayapplepress.com/the-futurists-mistress-lorraine-schein/>

Michael Angelo Stephens is the author of over 20 books, including the critically acclaimed novel *The Brooklyn Book of the Dead*; the travel memoir *Lost in Seoul*; and the award-winning essay collection *Green Dreams*. His latest book, just out, is a hybrid collection of prose poems and poetry, part fiction, part fact, about an out of work actor who lands the part of Hamlet, and is entitled *History of Theatre or the Glass of Fashion*. MadHat Press just published it.

S. Brackett Robertson lives near many bodies of water. Brackett's work has previously appeared in *Goblin Fruit*, *Mythic Delirium*, *Inkscrawl*, and *Stone Telling*. Brackett enjoys museums and math and occasionally tweets as @sbrackettr.

Stevie Rose Maguire is a Norwich, UK based artist and illustrator, making paintings responding to fairytales, folklore, childhood, and motherhood. steviepaints.co.uk
FB/IG/TikTok: @steviepaintsartwork

Tara Campbell (www.taracampbell.com) is a writer, teacher, Kimbilio Fellow, and fiction editor at *Barrelhouse*. She received her MFA from American University. Previous publication credits include *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Masters Review*, *Wigleaf*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Booth*, *Strange Horizons*, and *CRAFT Literary*. She's the author of a novel, *TreeVolution*, and three collections: *Circe's Bicycle*, *Midnight at the Organporium*, and *Political AF: A Rage Collection*. Her fourth collection, *Cabinet of Wrath: A Doll Collection*, is forthcoming from Aqueduct Press in 2021.



- a little squished, still a star

About Us

Julia Rios (they/them) is a queer, Latinx writer, editor, podcaster, and narrator whose fiction, non-fiction, and poetry have appeared in *Latin American Literature Today*, *Lightspeed*, and *Goblin Fruit*, among other places. Their editing work has won multiple awards including the Hugo Award. Julia is a co-host of *This is Why We're Like This*, a podcast about the movies we watch in childhood that shape our lives, for better or for worse. They've narrated stories for *Escape Pod*, *Podcastle*, *Pseudopod*, and *Cast of Wonders*. They're [@omgjulia](#) on Twitter.

Ashley Deng (she/her) is a Canadian-born Chinese-Jamaican writer with a love of fantasy and all things Gothic. She studied biochemistry with a particular interest in making accessible the often-cryptic world of science and medicine. When not writing, she spends her spare time overthinking society and culture and genre fiction. Her work has appeared at *Nightmare Magazine*, *Fireside Magazine*, and Queen of Swords Press and you can find her at aedeng.wordpress.com or on Twitter at [@ashesandmochi](#).

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

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

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

