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ASEXUALITY AND REPRESENTATION

ISSUE THEME

Asexuality is commonly interpreted as a lack of sex by society – a totally “nonsexual” experience that exists in direct opposition to that which is marked as sexual – while the ace community largely defines asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction. This incongruence in defining asexuality between community and society creates an environment for aces that is obstructed by forced navigation of misunderstanding and disbelief. Therefore, to think of the relationship between asexuality and representation, one must first conceptualize how sex itself is portrayed throughout social realms, whether that be in the media, public institutions, religious organizations, and further, as the social worth that sex is assigned through representation correlates precisely with the manner in which asexuality, as a lack of sex, is (de)valued. Where sex often represents what is meaningful, powerful, and successful in society, the asexual often represents what is meaningless, powerlessness, and devoid of success. For example, where sex defines meaning, advancement, progression, and success in and of a relationship between humans, a lack of sex represents a union that is unfulfilled and incomplete. Representation holds the power to shift these societal understandings of the sexual and, in turn, the asexual, as well as their implications.

If asexuality is to be widely understood as a lack of sexual attraction, sex not only must be decentered in representations, but there must also be a simultaneous intentional movement that acknowledges the complexities of ace existence and identity. Representations should dismantle hierarchical structures that position the sexual at the apex of social value while also portraying a complex imagining of asexuality as an identity that exists beyond sex, one that allows for a total reimagining of how human attraction, love, and intimacy function. Volume 2, Issue 2 of *The Asexual* journal on Asexuality and Representation includes artwork and writing by various ace-identified authors who think of representations of asexuality in varying respects, whether as expressions of the self and community, as readings and interpretations of media, and as opportunities to reimagine the current social and sexual landscape. Representation is a key component in the necessary project of unraveling the dominant position of sex in society and amplifying the complexities of asexual identity.

Michael Paramo
Founder of *The Asexual*

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"A4^2

Daniela Illing

Photoshop

Negative space is not empty. It's just a different kind of building material. Let's adjust our perspective. We may not perceive a person in all their dimensions but can grasp at their inner complexity.

***Daniela Illing** is an art/history/media educator and freelance artist from Germany. She is a proud anglophile and nerd who loves to travel and explore history where it happened. Her social media profiles are listed at www.eyeling.de*

AN ASEXUAL MANIFESTO

Terlona Knife | Queer People of Color & Allies at Washington State University

You have failed me
Sex sells, good girls are don't have sex
Be pure they say to the white girl
You haven't had sex yet... but black I see
That skin speaks to me sexually
He said.. She said.. They said... Them they ALLL said
Your blackness speaks sex to me
Speaks fluid languages of sexuality
Fuck autonomy.
Identity

I don't want to have sex with you
Or anyone for that matter
That shit is radical

You look good in that shirt
Those pants fit nice
BUT still
I don't want none...
Not like that anyways
Don't tell me I'm broken
Don't tell me you'll fix me
Don't say I'll make you like this
Try to Make me beg down and pray for you
Bow down to you
That you think your mediocre dick or tongue game will make me WEAK

At the knees
I can hardly breath when you hold my hand real nice, just right
Sooo when I tell you
I have been admiring your aesthetic for a while now
I know the curves of your chocolaty skin
I know you
I listen, I care
Deep down
you have planted a seed in myheart
It's growing
Don't tell me when I stay up at night thinking about you and how your existence
amazes me that my feelings are **not worth it**
That this dirt in my heart hasn't broken for you
Been fertilized
New for you
NO I don't wanna have sex with you
but I need you to stay in my mind
Flowing like petals
Long enough so I can catch you, Flatten you, Keep you
in my book To remember you just like this
I'm not tryna go to bed with ya
I just wanna make out in the car
Moses taught me Black skin like charcoal Sorrow stitched into your voice
Echoing reverberating through the ages catching the void space where we exist
challenging the structure of romantic love and sexuality
This world tells you to love
But you don't have to
You are radical
They constructed our blackness

With sex Intertwined them together, Call you Black Call you Deviant Call you Wild,
Call you primitive

So when I tell you being black

Not wanting or needing to have sex with you is radical

Cause this blood has fallen for the name of deviant sexuality for decades

Since it's conception

That I have been bleeding now And bodies like mine

Blood tied for generations

Since white people decided they could categorize my blackness I'm taking it back

My asexuality and blackness Are tied together like roots

They know me like dirt

*My name is **Terlona Jude Knife**. I identify as being a black agenderqueer pan(emotional)asexual. My pronouns are they/they, ze/zey. My twitter handle is @sunflowerLona*

CAKE AND ICE CREAM

Ellen Huang | B.A. in Writing & Theatre at Point Loma Nazarene University

Let's say there's a kind of dessert that's everyone's favorite but yours. You can imagine this however you want, a piece of red velvet cake, a tall cup of coffee flavored boba, a cup of chocolate tea.

You see advertisements for this dessert *all the time*. Try as you may, you can't escape the 30 second jingles on YouTube, the songs dropping reference to the dessert's whipped cream or shot of caffeine or extra sweet sugar. The way voices slyly drawl when they name this dessert, the way it makes people's mouths water.

You might find it absolutely awkward how people's tones of voice change describing just *eating*, but you accept that it's everywhere. You just don't personally crave it.

You could still think the dessert beautifully arranged. You could enjoy the atmosphere when the aroma fills the cafe. You aren't necessarily allergic or repulsed, so you *could* sip that drink if you decided to. You don't necessarily *mind* it. You could even enjoy getting this dessert with a friend, even if what you mostly enjoy isn't the dessert itself but the fact that it's a bonding experience.

For all you know, this could be an acquired taste, and with enough of these midnight runs with good company, you could find yourself eventually wanting it. Maybe you'll associate the dessert with good memories and then begin to love the dessert itself. Maybe.

But for now all you know is that while people are rushing for this dessert, randomly craving it like a pregnant woman craves an eclectic grocery list, needing that taste of coffee to start the day or needing that drink to finish their day—you don't feel the same way.

You don't have that craving.

Now, all around you people may choose not to get this dessert for whatever reason. Maybe they can't afford it right now. Maybe they're on a diet, and decide to work on their own health in different food groups first. Maybe they've been told you can only have this dessert if you're a member of this club, and some places only sell this dessert exclusively to members of this club. Maybe they really are allergic. Maybe they can't wait to try this dessert but are saving it for special occasions, like their birthdays or when their best friends finally return from that tour in France. (That's legit.)

Many of these people can choose not to buy the dessert, but still randomly crave it. They can still go on about their day to other things they enjoy. They'll just sometimes sing about how delicious the dessert is, or write literature about how *good* that dessert

looked in the shop window, or in a game of charades, associate the universal word "eating" with this particular famous dessert. They still have the craving every now and then.

You don't have that craving.

People gasp. Have you even tried it? The answer could be yes, and it was disappointing. Or the answer could be no, but you just feel really neutral about it. As you see the close-up images, your mouth doesn't water the same way. As you smell the aroma of the sweet dish, your mouth still doesn't water. The ingredients of this dessert, you may have tasted in different foods before, and you don't particularly care for these ingredients.

People try to reassure you out of any fear of its health hazards, telling you you're now old enough to know about its health benefits—parents were just afraid kids would waste all their money on getting this dessert. Now that you are earning your own money and taking care of yourself, you can go get the dessert now.

You know. You just don't crave it yourself.

People try to tell you *everyone* likes this dessert, you crazy. This dessert *brings people together*. Going out to this cafe that sells this dessert, that's what friends will want to do on the weekends! Wouldn't it be weird to go along with them only to not order anything? Don't you want to get out more?

Yes, but you don't particularly crave this dessert, so there's no reason to order it. And that should be okay.

But one thing you do love is ice cream.

So, while your friends take in that lava velvet cake and it warms them up, or sip in that chocolate tea and sigh as if just kissed by a spark, as your friends ask you if you're *sure* you don't want something hot right now, you smile and say you're sure. And, laughing with good company while the music goes on and your best friend obsesses over taking pictures of all the pretty colors before eating, you delight in a sweetness all your own as it melts in your mouth.

Ellen Huang is an asexual writer of fairy tales and human skits. Most recently, she wrote about diversity and heaven in a new Lenten devotional called *Our Daily Rice* and won an award in school for her short film project "Cross the Horizon." El is known around school for her windswept cloak, her quirky collection of props, her dark or punny humor, the skeletons on her balcony, her night owl habits, and her uncanny ability to reenact Disney scenes on demand (a reputation she'll have to rebuild since graduation). Follow her creative work: worrydollsandfloatinglights.wordpress.com

BY ANY OTHER NAME

Kendell Fitzgerald

1. LIAR

"You like him, don't you?"

Your cheeks glow pink, and your ears burn hot. "No, I don't! He's a friend!"

"You're blushing!" they exclaim. The school bus starts moving, but they ignore the driver's shouts and still face you, smirking. "You're such a liar."

What makes blood pool in your cheeks and drum in your ears is *embarrassment*. You're telling the truth – you always have. You've never liked anyone, at least not in the way they accuse. You don't even really understand what they're talking about. How can your friends even see what they supposedly see in you? Almost every interaction becomes some sort of code that they only have the answer to. Maybe you're just that blind. Maybe there is something there.

You blush harder, and their voices grow loud with affirmation.

2. STORYTELLER

They are the same friends that accuse you of lying at sleepovers: "We always tell you about our crushes, but you never tell us anything back. Don't you trust us?"

It escalates to the point where you've become the outsider. The circle of crush-discussion forms, and slowly you are pushed to the corner of the bed, fiddling with your iPod.

They still ask though – they can't comprehend your disinterest, so they begin creating stories involving any person you seem to get along with. After all, there must be *someone*.

"What about you?" they ask, expectantly. "Is there anyone you like?"

It's exhausting sitting outside the circle, but you know why they ask. There are rumours about you and a boy. You tease one another, and often sit beside each other in class. It really seems like nothing different from the rest of the classroom, but even some teachers make a coy remark or joke about the two of you. Sometimes you catch the boy's eye when it happens, and his ears are brushed with pink. You can no longer tell whether it's embarrassment or some silent confession of love.

The question sits in the air. Why not put the rumour to good use?

"I . . . I might like someone . . ."

The gaggle of girls shriek in delight, and even though you're smiling at the chance to conjure up some grand, sweeping love story – to finally feel like you're truly included – it scares you how relieved they seem to be.

3. TEASE

You've always had a habit for teasing. Most of your sense of humour is founded upon it. You try to work with what you have.

It's never been used as an insult before though.

College is for exploration, and to your parents and friends and neighbours and everyone you talk to for longer than two minutes, that translates best to dating. So, you date.

He's cute, funny, and walks so closely at your side that at every step your shoulders bump together. You like the closeness; it reminds you of some silver-screen love story. He asks if you want to go up to his room, and you say, "Yes," because that's what you're supposed to do.

You hate kissing. His body is heavy and suffocating. It's only been minutes, and four times now you've halted things from going farther. He's getting frustrated. You try to explain but you trip over your words so much that they no longer resemble any human language.

"So, what is this? Are you waiting 'til marriage?"

"What? No!" You struggle not to laugh – nothing about this is as conscious a decision as that. It's deeper within you, something almost integral to your being.

"Is anything actually gonna happen, or should we just end things here?" He looks tired and disappointed.

You tell yourself you tried. You also tell yourself that maybe if you would just have sex and get it over with, you'd understand yourself a bit better. Maybe you'd even change your mind about the whole sex thing! After all, weren't you okay with giving this a try? Isn't that why you were seeing him in the first place?

He's good looking, funny, engaging, and he's *interested*. This is what you're supposed to be doing!

"No, I think we should probably just call it a night."

Before his room door closes behind you, you hear him murmur, "Of course I'd end up with a tease."

For a moment, guilt bubbles in your stomach. It doesn't stop you from shouting through the door that he can just jerk it out then. A stoner stumbles out of the washroom, and high-fives you as you head down the hallway.

4. SPINSTER

Your parents are getting worried. They keep waiting for that movie moment – for the awkward holiday visit home with your new partner in tow. They are open to the idea of you being gay now (they are getting *that* desperate). As you sit across the kitchen table from them, you can't tell what's worse: their unspoken expectations or their stilted dating advice (which you never ask for).

"Maybe you haven't met the right person," your mom says quietly one night. Every visit home leads to a conversation like this. It's strange how much your parents care about you getting laid. You don't think about it too hard.

"Maybe there will never be the right person," you reply. There could be the right person, you think, but the constant repulsion towards anything sexual kind of complicates matters.

"It's just . . . you never really dated in high school, and we want you to be happy. I hope you're not holding yourself back because you're frightened."

You *are* holding yourself back. You *are* scared. But not of dating. You have dated, and you will continue to. The fear comes with the repulsion; it makes you feel broken. You wonder if you are missing out on some essential part of life. How can you force yourself to be part of something that refuses to mesh with you?

"I'm fine, really," you lie. "Maybe this is how things are meant to be."

But as you sit in your old bedroom lined with crumpled posters, your words gently dust and cover everything there. Your entire childhood surrounds you – toys, stuffed animals, and books all sit unchanged, perfectly positioned as they were when you first moved away. They wait expectantly, you think, just as your parents do; they wait for when you will return as a fully-grown adult.

They will always be waiting though. Adulthood to them means a home with a wife or husband and two kids running around in the backyard. You used to force yourself to see that picket fence, but now there's only a thick blanket of fog.

Your parents glance at the clock, then back at you, and they worry. You can't ease their fear – there's too much of your own.

5. A-SOMETHING

You come across the word outside the context of a science class, and you wonder if it is fate.

It stands in front of you in cut-out glitter letters, like a poorly rendered beacon. The college clubs try to entice fresh blood at the start of every school year, and the LGBTQ+ alliance is no exception.

The word is one of many that decorate the table's billboard, but the sunlight catches it and flashes it directly towards you.

Going up to the table would mean talking to the very enthusiastic, very chatty committee members, and that is not about to happen, so you log the word into your brain and continue towards your dorm. Once you're in the comfort of your own bed, you pull out your laptop and begin to search.

You finally shut your laptop closed hours later, sinking your room into darkness. Your eyes blur from focusing so long, but you need to know. It would be so much easier to put a word to what you are, instead of tossing around multiple theories as to what's wrong with you.

For so long, people have accused you of repressing or suppressing . . . something; and for just as long, you've accused yourself of holding back and missing out on an essential part of life. You can see the word imprinted on your eyelids – "asexual" – and you feel yourself stand up and go to the mirror.

Looking at your reflection suddenly makes you feel as if you're on a stage with a bright spotlight in your eyes and a crowd before you. It's so quiet you can hear your heartbeat drum in your ear.

"I'm asexual," you say to the mirror, and you see your reflection smiling back.

"Asexual" may refer to a certain absence of sexual attraction, just as "aromantic" refers to the absence of romantic attraction, but the word fills a void that's been in your identity for so long.

6. ALIEN

You and Spock have very little in common.

You never thought you would have to proclaim this to yourself in the mirror, but you find yourself staring back nonetheless.

It's not that you don't like Spock; he's an interesting well-written character in a fun and campy '60s romp of a show. Besides your shared love for science and your awful habit for overplucking your eyebrows however, there's very little similarity.

Your friends disagree.

After weeks of reading articles and watching YouTube vlogs, you come out as asexual to your friend as you sit on your bed and drink tea. Your throat is hot and tight, but you can't tell if it's from nerves or from your inability to let your drink cool first.

Your friend tilts their head, thinks, and then asks, "You mean like Spock? Like *Star Trek* Spock?"

". . . what?"

"You know, the guy who was from Vulcan and didn't feel anything like love and stuff? Isn't that kind of the same thing?"

You sit and stare. This was your first big "coming out" moment. You didn't know what you were expecting . . . maybe tears? Confetti? Three cheers of hooray?

Why *Star Trek*?

It's not until hours later when you're alone and lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, listening to your dormmate's breathing, that you feel bitterly *hurt*.

It's silly, and because it's silly you start crying, and you start feeling angry because you're crying over some stupid comment about Spock.

The words linger though, stinging against your skin. Your friend tries to explain themselves better, but you find yourself further and further away. You didn't think asexuality marked you as something so "other." Asexuality didn't mean you didn't understand love, or that you shunned it for some higher, more intellectual pursuit. It doesn't help that during those hours of searching articles and watching vlogs, you encountered asexuality as an easy means of showing that someone is "inhuman." After all, all humans lust and desire, and every character must have a love story. Normality and happiness don't seem to mesh well with asexuality – at least, that's what the internet seems to say.

Tears wet your temples until you fall asleep. You're human, you tell yourself. You're still flesh and blood. You are not denying your nature. Coming out was supposed to be about embracing your nature, wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

7. VALID

The questions and doubt never quite end, but you begin to revel in it.

You navigate your way through the world of sex, and often come out looking like a fool who has no idea what they are doing. There's no shame or embarrassment, however, for each experience brings you closer to knowing yourself. Sex is more complex than you ever thought it could be. There's giving, receiving, watching,

partaking, smiles, and tears. Repulsion towards certain aspects and roles remain in your core, but now you know how to better explain your identity to your partners, and they are more than happy to accommodate. Dating becomes *fun*.

Your parents shook their heads when you told them about your asexuality, saying they were too old to understand. The night ended abruptly as you hid in your room like a scolded child. Trying to explain asexuality to your parents resembled a lecture more than a discussion, and you were exhausted of the responsibility.

An hour later, they knock on the door. Your mom has a cup of tea for you, and your father asks for your help with Google as he pulls out his laptop.

Some friends crack jokes at the very sound of "asexual," but they listen and acknowledge it, and that is what you want most of all. *Star Trek* ends up featuring much more in conversations than it did before you came out, but the queer theories are endless, and you and your friends can go on for *hours*. Spock may not be asexual in your mind, but you see it in other shows and characters. Your friends message you anytime they come across some asexual representation, and you grin every time.

There are still doubts, of course. Questions loom over your head, but you remind them that there is still time for answers, and they retreat into the rafters for a little longer.

You're asexual. It's more complicated than that, but it is something that finally feels yours.

Kendell Fitzgerald is currently an undergraduate student attending the University of King's College, focusing on Victorian Literature and Gender studies. Besides reading, writing, and drawing, she enjoys studying history, especially in relation to her hometown in Cape Breton. Her gender identity and sexuality remain a mystery to even her – but she presently identifies as a bisexual on the aro/ace-spectrum. Follow her art blog: jjs-doubledouble.tumblr.com.

WHY I NEED ASEXUAL REPRESENTATION

Lijavi Toledo Loaiza

Because teenage me thought that people only had sex to make kids and piss off their parents.

Because, once I learned that people actually had sex for fun, I couldn't understand why I was the only one who didn't want to do it.

Because I was so lonely and confused and isolated that I believed the lies that I must just be a late bloomer.

Because society screamed at me that people who didn't want to have sex were wrong in the head.

Because the only willingly celibate people I ever saw were nuns and priests, and we were assured that it was some grand, noble sacrifice, because they actually really did want to do it, they were only abstaining for God.

Because even many of these supposedly willingly celibate people were totally doing it.

Because sex is such a massive need.

Because to have sex is to be human.

Because to not want it is inconceivable.

Because I forced myself to watch and read sex scenes even long after they began making me grimace because if I couldn't stand watching it, how was I supposed to ever do it.

Because of course I wanted to do it. Only freaks and deviants didn't want to do it, and I didn't want to be a freak.

Because years of forcing myself like this have left me so sex-repulsed that having any mention of sex sprung on me with no warning makes me flinch.

Because I really did think I felt sexual attraction despite everything, because aesthetic and sensual attraction aren't things anyone talks about, so how was I supposed to know the difference?

Because I rejected that I could be asexual, because that meant that I could never be normal.

Because, even though I didn't judge anyone else for it, it took me weeks to accept that I didn't feel sexual attraction, that I never had felt sexual attraction, and that this was not a bad thing.

Because even now that I'm part of the ace community and proudly wear a black ring, I still cry when movie after movie, and show after show, displays every character lusting after and having sex with each other.

Because society fully rejects my existence.

Because I'm so erased that some days I don't feel human.

Because I am human, and I deserve to see myself on the screen and the page.

Because the ace spectrum is vast, and we have the right to see that immense complexity represented, just like everyone else does.

Because when I finally read an ace character, I couldn't stop grinning for the rest of the day.

Because, when I write ace characters, I feel happier and freer than I ever have.

Because I refuse to be invisible any longer.

Lijavi Toledo Loaiza is an autistic, agender, Latinx, biromantic ace. They are working on their first novel, an intersectional work born of the frustration of needing more to live off than the media's scraps. When they're not writing, they either have their nose stuck in a book or are walking outside checking out what the birds are up to.

CREATING ACE SPACE IN THE MEDIA

Anna Goshua | Medical Student at Stanford University

For impressionable youth who spend increasing amounts of time exposed to it in various forms, media is a critical agent of socialization. The content that we encounter informs virtually all aspects of our lives, from our perspectives on sociocultural issues to our very identities. For instance, a survey of the LGBTQ+ community published in the *Journal of Homosexuality* found that the media influenced self-perception. The presence of positive role models can help to affirm personal identity and provide guidance in the coming-out process. In contrast, inaccurate or absent representation contributes to a damaging sense of exclusion from society at large. This is especially pertinent to members of marginalized demographics, who may not have access to mentors or resources in their communities.

Asexuality suffers from both underrepresentation and misrepresentation in the media. I was nineteen when I first heard of asexuality outside of a biology class, in reference to a human sexual orientation as opposed to reproduction in organisms like bacteria. This was through the BBC show *Sherlock*, in which the titular character regularly professed disinterest in any and all romantic and sexual relations. However, multiple members of the cast have disputed the characterization of Sherlock as aromantic asexual. The actor, Benedict Cumberbatch, conflates asexuality with celibacy in claiming that Sherlock is “asexual for a purpose”. Worse, one of the showrunners, Steven Moffat, stated that “if he [Sherlock] was asexual, there would be no tension in that, no fun in that – it's someone who abstains who's interesting”.

These statements speak to some of the prevalent misconceptions about asexuality that present challenges to accurate media portrayal. I would argue that the most challenging of these is the notion that asexual characters are intrinsically less compelling than allosexual characters. Given the saturation of sexual content in the media, this perception is unsurprising. For example, more than 75% of prime-time television programming was found to be sexual in nature. In advertising, women are almost as likely to be portrayed in suggestive clothing or partially or fully nude as they are fully clothed. In general, sexual messaging has increased in quantity and become more explicit over the past twenty years.

This is by no means an inherently negative trend. Open dialogue about sex helps to promote healthy attitudes and behaviours, and an understanding of concepts such as consent. Furthermore, the emergence of the sex positivity movement has been important in emancipating women from suffocating patriarchal standards. However, our society provides little guidance and is unquestionably challenging for those who identify along the asexual spectrum to navigate.

The pervasive nature of sex-driven narratives establishes the expectation that sexual relations are an integral and inevitable part of every individual's life. To state that an asexual character's story would involve "no tension...no fun", as Moffat does, is to insinuate that personal development and meaningful conflicts in an individual's life are inextricably intertwined with sexual attraction. Coupled with the stereotypical portrayal of asexuals as psychologically defunct in some manner — cold; incapable of empathy; outcasts; or as Sherlock describes himself, a "high-functioning sociopath" — members of the asexual community internalize the message that there is only space for us on the fringes of society. The aromantic asexual is pathologized and rendered a caricature; the asexual who experiences romantic attraction is eventually normalized through having sex. I should clarify that while there are certainly asexuals who opt to engage in and enjoy sex (this is not articulated in media either), storylines that frame asexuality as reparable are dangerous as they imply that coercion and corrective rape are acceptable.

Though both are misrepresented and not explicitly acknowledged, romantic and aromantic sexuality differ from one another in what little representation they do receive in the media. Romantic asexuality is viewed as paradoxical since romance and sex are thought to go hand-in-hand. While they often do co-occur, approximately one-third of self-identified asexuals are in long-term co-habitation or marriage situations. Nevertheless, couples that are not having sex and a certain amount of it besides are characterized as dysfunctional. Physical acts of intimacy are often used in storylines to legitimate relationships. A commonly used trope is that of unresolved sexual tension between characters in a budding relationship, which is officially canonized when they end up having sex.

Media portrayals of aromantic asexuality, on the other hand, tend to default to dehumanization. A lack of romantic and sexual interest is used as a lazy demarcation of characters that are unstable or, like the alien Doctor in *Doctor Who*?, inhuman in the most literal sense. As an example, in the pilot of *Dexter*, the principal character is a serial killer named Dexter Morgan who says, "I don't understand sex. It's not in my nature. I don't have anything against women, and I certainly have an appropriate sensibility about men, but when it comes to the actual act of sex, it just seems so undignified". Sherlock is a character who Sir Arthur Conan Doyle described as "inhuman as a Babbage's Calculating Machine, and just about as likely to fall in love" in a letter to his mentor, Joseph Bell. In an erotonormative paradigm, to say that one does not experience sexual attraction is to divorce oneself from humanity.

In any context, it seems that there must always be an excuse made to explain a character's asexuality, whether the character is naïve or deranged or traumatized. BBC *Sherlock* features Dr. Watson asking Sherlock on multiple occasions what it was that

made him the way he is, invalidating his potential aromantic asexuality and casting it as a symptom of some underlying issue that can and should be addressed. Moreover, media refusal to explicitly articulate asexuality is exploitative in that it enables content creators and audiences to financially or emotionally benefit from a character without having to officially acknowledge asexuality and the issues with which the community contends. *Sherlock* has also made use of more well-known forms of queerbaiting, such as having characters comment that Sherlock and Dr. Watson are in a relationship despite the denials issued by the duo, to fuel the engine of the popular *JohnLock* [John Watson x Sherlock Holmes] ship in the fandom.

The limited representation of asexuality in the media is more than simply an issue of imagination. Creating inclusive narratives that do service to the variety of asexual lived experiences requires a critical re-examination of the problematic assumptions that drive the heteronormative sexual agenda. Asexuality is paradigmatically disruptive because it challenges the widely held belief that humans are fundamentally sexual beings. In a climate in which magazines and talk shows frequently debate just how much sex single people or couples should be having every week to lead a happy, healthy life, asexuality interrogates traditional conceptions of pleasure and fulfillment. Our society privileges sexual relationships over others while asexuality subverts this hierarchy by valuing platonic relationships, such as friendships and queerplatonic partnerships, and non-sexual romantic relationships.

The bulk of asexual representation does not represent who we actually are. This is not to say that progress has not been made in how the media portrays asexuality. Slowly but surely, we are witnessing the advent of characters such as Todd Chavez in *BoJack Horseman*. He is a lead character who declares himself asexual, attends an asexual meet-up, and asks out an asexual female character. Another notable instance was a scene in the show *Shadowhunters* in which Raphael Santiago, a vampire, rejects the sexual advances of his romantic interest, Isabelle Lightwood. When she asks if becoming a vampire affected his sexuality, he makes certain to emphasize that his lack of sexual attraction predated his vampirism. Although he does not use the term asexual, refuting the ideology of asexuality as an acquired disease is an important step toward erasing stigma.

This is just the beginning, of course. The asexual community is extraordinarily diverse, meaning that our media portrayals cannot be constrained to white, cisgender, and able-bodied individuals. We must push for an inclusive, intersectional approach that accurately represents our vast range of experiences.

Asexuals deserve to be able to live our lives without constantly interrogating ourselves about our lack of — or, in the case of demi and graysexuals, circumstantial — sexual desire. We should not be bombarded with messaging that tells us that we are missing

a prerequisite to personal and social fulfillment and life satisfaction, and that there is something defective within us. Much like everyone else, the asexual community deserves to have a plethora of role models with well-rounded and engaging narratives with which we can identify and that inspire us.

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WORDS

Alex Stabler

I want to tell you who I am. I want you to understand how I feel. But I can't.

It's not that I don't know - I do. I just can't find the right words. Most of the time I have to explain my identity with flow charts and diagrams.

The dictionary is backwards; it's playing catch-up to define a moon we've only just landed on as we dissect ourselves to find words and meanings which help us understand who we are, coining words for gender identities and sexualities nobody knew existed and nobody still does because the gap remains in the dictionary, the book we all swear by to tell us what everything means.

When I turn to this Bible of words I find it lacking. I can say I'm asexual, but that's only painting a picture in a single hue.

More people are beginning to understand, but I want everyone to understand, and understand it all, because I do, finally; I have definitions bursting from my skin with no words to attribute them to, and it hurts. I want to set them free.

I know who I am. I just don't know how to say it.

It's like I speak a different language, but we use the same words; a language where a crush isn't lustful and attraction isn't sexual, where orientations have binary directions and logical definitions.

I envy those who can use words to describe who they are, those who can say they're bi or pan or homo or hetero. That neat little label which paints me in all my colours seems so far out of reach.

None of the words fit. I'm attracted to everyone, so you could say I'm pan, but never in the same way. My two crushes have been on women, so you could say I'm hetero, but I'm not. I could be bi-sensual or bi-aesthetic, but the label is inaccurate and vague, so often used to refer to binary genders.

Romantically, sensually, aesthetically - my three faces of attraction point in different directions. The words we use aren't useful.

Whether I'm aesthetically attracted to a random man, sensually attracted to a non-binary person or romantically attracted to a woman I know well, the only words I can use are 'I'm attracted to you'; and if I tell you that, I have no idea what you think I mean.

There are so many words for love, but all of them imply sex; there are so many words for attraction, but I can't confess it without implying some lustful desire. Hot, sexy, beautiful; they all imply more, when there's nothing wrong with less.

I'm so much more complicated than our neat, simple and tidy words can describe, and maybe we all are. Maybe we're all eclectic messes, finding parts of ourselves in labels others will understand, trying to ignore the colouring outside the lines.

But the problem is... well, we use different dictionaries, and they're both playing catch-up. Neither has the words I need. Neither can help me tell you who I am. Neither can help you understand how I feel. I want you to know, because I know, but I can't.

The paint on the palette is drying, and I have no idea what to paint.

Alex Stabler is a Creative Writing student from the UK. He is, as you might imagine, asexual and probably something else aromantic-y but he has far too many deadlines to bother working that out yet. He has previously been published in Volume 1, Issue 2 of *The Asexual*, which was a tremendous surprise he hasn't really recovered from. He also struggles to stop himself slipping terrible puns into his writing and is really bad at writing bios about himself.

EXISTING AND DEFYING STEREOTYPES AS AN A-SPEC DISABLED PERSON

Sapphire Crimson Claw

It's something that is often assumed, but not often discussed — the stereotype that people with disabilities do not have sex or have conventional relationships. To some, coming out as asexual/aromantic while being disabled is a slight to other disabled activists. Am I a self-fulfilling prophecy? Am I dealing with internalized ableism? Don't I know that other disabled people are fighting the idea that we don't love or make love, and I'm making it hard for them to do that?

It's unfortunate that having the opportunity to finally clarify who I am and how I feel about sex and romance is seen as some type of infraction. To be a good representative for both communities, should I hide that I am disabled, or should I hide that I'm on the asexual/aromantic spectrum?

To me, the answer to both of these is no.

I feel that my disabilities and my asexuality/aromanticism are connected, but not in the ways able-bodied people might think. I don't see myself as someone who could not be loved, either romantically or physically. As a matter of fact, I am polyamorous and have relationships with many wonderful people. My aromanticism, which often gets unfairly attributed to neurodiverse people whether or not they identify as aspec, comes from my soul. It is not a matter of having a brain that doesn't function like most people. It is not because I was traumatized, not exclusively, although I feel it could have played a part. Like being polyamorous, I simply love in a way that is different than the norm. Sometimes, I feel romantically attracted to other people; other times, my love is less romantic, but that does not make it shallow. It just means that it feels different, and comes with different behavior.

Just like being disabled, it's hard to explain being aspec to someone who's never lived like I do. If you can take for granted that your body will always do what you want it to, and will never be in pain, or stiff, or ill, it's hard to imagine being disabled. Likewise, if you have never experienced a lack of sexual attraction, or the absence of romantic feelings, you just will have a hard time imagining what it's like living like I do. Or rather, loving like I do.

When I first stumbled across aspec orientations on Tumblr, I felt like a whole new world of belonging was opened up. Not since finding out that I could be neither male nor female did I feel so liberated and validated. When I discovered the ace/aro spectrum, and the effects were strikingly similar. I went all out, exploring my identity, exploring

labels, and being proud to express myself. And then I got to thinking: how could I integrate my experiences of being a disabled lover into my newfound aspec freedom? Answer: by coining my own label. Thus, wolandsexual/-romantic was born.

I define wolandsexual/-romantic as being disabled or chronically ill, and having your desire tied directly to your current pain level or energy level ("spoons"). If you don't have a chronic illness, you can't imagine what it feels like to feel completely and utterly tired. You are so tired that you are faced with the desire to simply rest, and nothing else. So what happens to your sexual attraction? Naturally, it's diminished. And of course, you don't want to have sex when you're in pain. So even if you might have the desire, you can look at someone you might otherwise be attracted to and go "ugh, not now."

I have been approached by other a-spec people saying that this term is an absolute revelation for them. And for that, I am grateful. Together, we are defying the stereotype that disabled people are sexless people. Asexuality, or being aspec, isn't not having sex, it's having low or no attraction; we still have sex with people. It's just that it's complicated. Especially if you don't have the spoons.

Sapphire Crimson Claw is a queer nonbinary author and activist seeking to educate the general public on nonbinary trans identities and issues, life being disabled, and being on the ace/aro spectrum.

FROM DISSONANCE TO UNDERSTANDING

Jess

My story doesn't start when I first heard of asexuality.

I lived on this earth for nearly 21 years before I heard the term in reference to a sexual orientation, and the absence of representation I experienced during those 21 years shaped me as a person in ways I will likely never fully understand. I grew up deeply uncomfortable with my own body, and it is only recently (I am now 32) that I recognize how much of that could have had to do with my asexuality. I endured years of pain and isolation because of a cognitive dissonance brought on by watching my peers go through their lives in ways I could not understand.

But I didn't know that we were on such different planes. I thought I felt what they felt. There were no other options presented to me, but some part of me knew there was a difference. I couldn't consciously label it as such; I just knew that there was something seemingly wrong with how I was experiencing things. I felt like maybe I was missing something even though as far as I knew there was nothing for me to miss.

It didn't make sense. That's what got me. The source of my pain was largely unknowable to me. I didn't have any concepts or language to explain the disconnect I was feeling, even to myself. Because how do you know you are lacking a feeling so personal, so apparently ubiquitous? You just assume that you feel it. Or that you will, at the very least. So what if I didn't seem to be feeling the same things my peers were feeling? It would all work out. I would figure it out. I had to, at some point. This is what I would try to tell myself.

So, I spent my formative years trying to come to terms with the fact that I just couldn't seem to form relationships in the way I was supposed to — in the way that, intellectually, I felt I wanted to. My isolation and dissonance did not lead me to keep a lot of friendships. I spent most of my time at college barely speaking to anyone. When it came to talk of relationships of any kind, familial bonds were what I had to go off. I would read romance stories and watch movies and wonder what it would be like to matter to someone else that much, outside of my family. I read magazines with advice like "you'll know when you're ready" (for kissing, for sex). I trusted them and kept waiting to feel something.

But then one evening I was watching TV and there it was: *asexuality*. The possibility of not feeling sexual attraction was finally presented to me. It was a news segment, on *20/20*, interviewing a small group of asexual people. It is still available on [YouTube](#). If you watch it, you'll see the reporter look on in skepticism and confusion as the people

she's interviewing try to explain their feelings. She then speaks with a sex therapist, who lists potential conditions or repressions that "might be to blame."

Can we call this representation? I know that I did not, at the end of the segment, think that I had finally found my place (though clearly I remembered the video itself, well enough, after all these years). This particular interview treated asexuality as a problem and the people who claimed it as deeply strange, and it was still my only source of information on the topic at that time. If you look at the first few comments under the video on YouTube, you can see that even four years ago people knew to be offended by its content. I'm encouraged by that, at least.

But my experience was still defined by a lack of representation. I didn't think I was asexual. By this point (2006) there was a small community online where I'm sure I could have learned at least a bit more if I'd tried, but the *20/20* interview wasn't any kind of impetus for me to do so. I spent another several years growing and working and trying my best. I got help for my body dysmorphia and learned to eat food and wear clothes and exist in my own body with a level of comfort I had never had before. I made some friends. I attributed my lack of any kind of dating life to my body-related issues, and tried again to be normal.

And with the rapid growth of social media and online content in general, asexuality began to get more notice. At first the articles (and the comments below them) were still more offensive than not, but eventually, in my late 20s, I came across an article on the now defunct website *The Toast*, written by Julie Sondra Decker. That article and the conversations it inspired led me to finally realize the truth: I am asexual, and aromantic. Things finally started making sense.

But now I am experiencing a new kind of confusion. As representation grows, it almost seems unreal to me. I watched the episode of *BoJack Horseman* where the character Todd says out loud "I'm asexual," and I didn't know what to do with myself. I felt elated, but also like I couldn't quite believe what I was hearing. I had gotten so used to nothing, that to have this kind of recognition was jarring.

I work on a university campus, and we have an LGBTQIAP+ group, and I want to be involved, somehow, but I don't know how. I spent so many of my years of my life without representation, without the knowledge that I could exist this way, and I do not know how to talk about it out loud. I feel like a lot of the current efforts are not for me. I can look up meetups for aces in places relatively close by, but the attendees are all 10 years younger than me. I still feel as though I am on a somewhat different plane.

But even writing that out, I don't feel sad about it. Not at this moment, anyway. I feel grateful for the understanding I get to have. For the comfort I am able to feel, in being

myself, and getting to the place where I can write out this essay. I look forward to the day when I feel more comfortable saying the words out loud: I'm asexual.

***Jess** is an aromantic asexual cisgendered woman who does not normally write essays unless they involve pop culture analysis, and even then she prefers listening to podcasts. Professionally, she gets to nerd out all day in a library and teach students that research is both annoying and worth it. You can reach her on twitter @jessdotro.*

ASEXUAL POSITIVITY IN A GAME ABOUT SEXY DEMONS

Alex Henderson

I can pinpoint the moment when I started down the path to identifying the way I do now: an 18+ visual novel about incubi and succubi helped me realise that I was ace. It sounds quite ironic, but I promise it's a *positive* story, as opposed to my having played a game with such terribly-written erotic scenes that I was put off the idea of sex forever (which, while that isn't really how sexuality works, would be a reasonable response to some of the bad erotica out there). No, the game in question, *Cute Demon Crashers*, which I played for the first time back in 2015, is a sweet, gentle, fun little interactive story of loneliness and love demons, and one of the first pieces of media to explicitly say to me "you should only have sex if you want to." Much of the world runs on the assumption that everyone *does* want to, which filters down into our fiction in many forms both benign and insidious. It was an assumption I had adopted into my own mindset and my own relationship, and it was an assumption that this indie game helped me realise did not fit me.

Cute Demon Crashers is a visual novel created by Sugarscript, originally launched as part of a game jam called NaNoRenO (in which creators take on the challenge to make a game in the program Renpy in one month) and completed later. On the game's homepage [link: <https://sugarscript.itch.io/cute-demon-crashers>] the team expresses that the idea for the game came from "a need of consent in 18+ VNs for women." True to their mission statement, consent is not only the biggest theme in the character-driven story of *Cute Demon Crashers*, but also its most prominent game mechanic.

The game follows a lonely college student who is stuck home alone over spring break, and who accidentally summons three incubi and one succubus into her bedroom when they sense her sexual frustration. Your first option as a player is to call the police on the four strange scantily-clad creatures that have appeared in your player character's home. Doing this ends the game immediately, and is effectively pointless, except that it demonstrates the player's ability of choice: if you don't want to deal with these love demons, you do not have to.

Even if you decide to let them hang around, the message remains that you do not *have* to have sex with any of them, regardless of their offering it up. The player navigates through a series of conversations with the four demons, getting to know them over a period of a day, whether that means playing video games with them on the couch or talking about books. When evening falls, the four demons present themselves to you asking who, if any of them, you would like to spend the night with. Five options pop up: one for each prospective lover, and one to opt out and not have sex with any of them. If you choose this last one, they do not mind, and simply go on

their way with no hard feelings. If you choose one of them to sleep with, the ensuing erotic scene is peppered throughout with dialogue and action options as the demon asks you what you would like to do — is it okay if they do this? Would you like them to do this, or that? Would you like to stop?

As well as the occasional options, there is a big pink “stop” button in the corner of the screen at all times, which ends the love scene instantly — again, with no hard feelings from the demon. Just as there is no pressure to have sex in the first place, once you initiate the scene there is never any pressure to perform certain sex acts, and never any pressure to continue to climax. The scenes themselves are tastefully written and really quite sweet, the dynamic with each demon different and varied but each equally kind and gentle. Sex is treated at once like something important and personal, but also like something that’s no big deal if you don’t want it to be; just something two consenting adults do together if they want to. I was surprised to realise that, fantastical element and occasional goofy comedy and all, this game contained some of the most mature conversations about sex I’d ever seen in fiction.

Cute Demon Crashers was the first piece of media I can think of that explicitly said to me “you only have to do this if you want to.” Most other fiction seemingly runs on the principle that *of course* you want to, whether that comes in the form of corny-and-horny comedies about college students trying to lose their virginity, or the grand tradition of romantic arcs culminating in passionate love scenes (or at least the strong implication of one). It’s a massive step aside from the norm to see fictional characters have a serious conversation about “only doing it once they’re both ready.” But while those conversations and the focus on consent and personal desire are important, they do, once again, come with the assumption that those characters will one day be “ready”, and sex will happen, because that is what a reasonable person wants even if that wanting comes at different rates. If that wanting never appears, the character is likely a villainous or humorous husk of a human being, meant to be Othered whether that’s for horror or for laughs — or simply waiting for the right person to thaw their unnatural frigidity. Ordinary people, the heroes of rom-coms and action movies alike, all get romantic storylines driven by sexual tension, and they all see these storylines through to their so-called natural conclusion. And this is certainly true for dating sim protagonists, where the entire point of the game is, in many cases, to woo the player’s favourite character and get that coveted erotic scene with them.

Cute Demon Crashers is noteworthy in not just the VN/dating sim world but also in fictional media at large, since so much media is created with heteronormativity embedded, including the idea that *of course* everyone wants to have sex. *Cute Demon Crashers* is not explicit asexual representation, but it is the first fictional world I’ve entered where I felt genuine space for asexuality to exist. Schlocky and sexy as the

game's premise may sound — a group of love demons are at your beck and call! — its open sex positivity left space for asexual positivity as well. The incubi and succubus emphasize repeatedly that there is no point engaging in any sexual act unless both partners enjoy it: they won't get the energy they feed on if you're not having a good time, and so they want you to have the best time possible. Consent and pleasure are placed in a position of utmost importance via magical worldbuilding, making the titular *Cute Demons* an unexpectedly positive and nurturing version of the succubus/incubus mythos. Creatures usually used in stories to convey the terror and ruin in unconscious sexual desire are incarnated here as champions for mutual enjoyment and consensual personal fulfillment. They are here to make sure you have a good time, and they acknowledge, where most other voices from fictional media have not, that for some people having a good time does not equal having sex.

Cute Demon Crashers is a special little game that struck me somewhere deep in my heart. I assumed, when I first played it, that I was simply delighted to find some erotica to my tastes — a genre I'd always avoided since it usually contained tropes or language that put me off, a genre that, for reasons I now understand but didn't quite get back then, I could never really *relate* to. But in retrospect, I can see why this game spoke to me: it validated a part of me that I did not yet know existed. In putting the question "do you want this?" to me so directly when no other media had before, it started me down the path of trying to answer it for myself. It turned out that the answer was "no." It also turned out that my partner at the time thought the game sounded silly and had no interest in playing it, not even to try and understand what I had enjoyed about it so much, so in some ways this heralded the first cracks in our understanding of each other, too. Sometimes I joke that *Cute Demon Crashers* destroyed my relationship because it gave me standards. In all seriousness, though, it goes to show how important this conversation is to have: to have media of all mediums and genres weave consent and positivity into their love stories and/or erotic narratives, to leave room for that question, "do you really want to do this?", and to have it be genuine, rather than backed by the assumption that the answer is always "yes." If a game all about sexy demons can take the time and loving care to make space for asexuality, there is no reason other fictional media cannot.

Alex Henderson is a writer and fledgling academic from Australia, currently working on a creative thesis about mythic archetypes and gender. She has reviewed books for magazines, been published in fiction anthologies, and writes essays and analysis about anime, superheroes, YA novels, and other pop culture over on her blog *The Afictionado*. She is passionate about queer representation in fiction and hopes to create fun stories and interesting articles that all kinds of people can relate to and enjoy.

THANKS, KEYLETH: ACE REPRESENTATION IN *CRITICAL ROLE*

Deramin

Tabletop roleplaying game (TTRPG) livestreams are a relatively new invention. A game master (GM), sets up the world and the major events that the players react to. The players write and act a character. Events play out (often in improv) through a combination of acting out interpersonal dialogue and using dice to determine how skillfully challenges are faced (with both failure and success often leading to dramatic outcomes. Episodes usually last 3-5 hours and air weekly. As a medium it lets people tell long-form (usually) adventure stories without media executives telling them what they can and can't do. *Critical Role* is an online show where a bunch of well-known voice actors play Dungeons & Dragons. It started as a private home-game between friends, and success hasn't changed the dynamic of gifting deeply personal stories to people they love. There are two campaigns (a campaign being a story with the same group of characters). I'm mostly talking about Campaign 1 here, although most of this applies to Campaign 2 (which is maybe even more queer).

Epic as the story is, the characters are very complex, conflicted, and often contradictory. Characters can be kind and also assholes, brave and also scared, confident and insecure. It contains some of the best portrayals of mental illness I've ever seen, especially anxiety, depression, and PTSD. It's also very queer. Of the main group, 2 are confirmed bi, 1 pan, and 1 gay. Many of their friends are confirmed queer. Almost everyone in the main party is at least queer-coded. And then there's Keyleth, who is semi-confirmed to be demisexual. Her player, Marisha Ray, said only that Keyleth, at 21, is very new to relationships and still figuring herself out. Matt Mercer, the GM and Marisha's husband, said that Keyleth's eventual romantic relationship was more asexual than the other major relationship between Vex and Percy. While initially hesitant to call either character ace, when a fan explained demisexuality he agreed that sounded pretty accurate.

Some queer fans repeatedly bristled at how few canon answers were given about the main characters' sexualities, accusing the cast of wanting brownie points for queer rep without actually showing it. They were accused of straight-washing bi characters because so many ended up in other-gender relationships. But I think they've shown something even more important: young people who don't have the answers trying to figure themselves out. These are not characters fully fleshed-out from the beginning being written in a highly structured, well edited story that's striving to make a point. These are stories being told from the inside of stressful, chaotic events where literally no one, including the creators, have any idea what's going to actually happen in the

next 5 minutes. Stories where people don't have the answers are as important as stories about queer people who have figured themselves out. It's also important to note that at least one of the cast identifies as queer, and these aren't just stories coming from straight authors.

Keyleth isn't perfect ace representation, but she's the best I've ever come across. So often ace people are depicted as cold, emotionally distant, physically closed off, and prudish. Keyleth is none of that. Her warmth is one of her most prominent traits. She is the moral center of the group, profoundly kind, and always pushing the group to be better. She is very cuddly, full of hugs and other physical affection for her friends. She doesn't dress conservatively; she's often depicted in fairly revealing clothing.

She's about 21 when we meet her. She hadn't been kissed before, and romantic or sexual relationships were just something she hadn't really considered or pursued. Her reaction to Vax, played by Liam O'Brien, confessing his love for her was basically to freeze and say she didn't know how she felt. He backed off, and she took about two months to decide. She was able to talk to all of her friends, including Vax, about where her trepidation was coming from. She got to talk about not knowing herself or what she wanted. No one pressured her or told her she needed to have a sexual or romantic relationship to know herself (a different character was pressured into sex like this later, but he was also pressuring himself when it happened).

When she did decide to be with Vax, all but one of their intimate moments could be read as non-sexual. Their relationship was always based on a lot of emotional support, and not so much physical contact beyond cuddling. The first night they spend together both Marisha and Liam clarified they were just holding each other for comfort. Even subtle things like Keyleth not liking to sleep naked. It's unknown if Vax is ace, he could be, or he could be an example of an allo person giving an ace person the space and respect they need. He does it without complaint or being cast as "heroic for putting up with it." It's completely normalized, which isn't shown nearly enough.

None of their friends ever really pressured them to have a different type of relationship. Vax's sister, Vex, did give them a lot of shit for their relationship in general, but that was more out of a fear that it threatened their very close sibling relationship. Vex is also very allo and definitely doesn't understand ace relationships, so she does lovingly tease them with a lot of innuendo that makes them uncomfortable, but she never tells them how to be. Their relationship is just one among many different sorts all depicted with equal weight and validity.

Friendships, too, are given a weight and depth in the series that is rarely seen in media. Romantic and/or sexual relationships are never portrayed as better, more important, or closer than friendships. They are physically affectionate as friends (in game and out of game), hugging and holding each other, kissing each other on the cheek or

forehead. They are emotionally open with each other. They get into fights out of love and fear for each other. They tell their friends they love them. Gender isn't a factor in their friendships. The men are just as affectionate and vulnerable as the women (or enbies in Campaign 2).

Although no fandom is perfect, *Critical Role* has done a better job than most (every other one I've been in) at fostering a kind and supportive space. The prominent queer representation has drawn in a lot of queer fans. It's still not uncommon to encounter acephobia from fans, it varies a lot by platform, however there's plenty of influential ace fans to engage with instead of the haters. This was the community where I first encountered asexuality. First through an old friend that the show reconnected me with. Then through her friend, and other fans I met through Twitter. suddenly I was passively connected to ace discourse and ace and/or aromantic people living their lives and talking about their truth. I never had access to those voices before. I got exposed to the full asexual range from people who are and aren't sexual, are and aren't sex-repulsed, are and aren't in relationships.

Within a year I had figured out that I was demisexual. For the first time in my life I had an answer other than "broken" for the way I experienced the world. I have an all-ace chat group now of people that have become some of my closest friends which started out talking about *Critical Role* and now is sort of about everything. In the last couple of years because of this show and the community around it, I've come to understand myself better, love myself more, and find new purpose in my life. That's the power of good representation.

A couple other TTRPG livestream series to note: *Eric's TBD RPG* on Geek & Sundry, a Dr. Who RPG, has an ace character named Rokokokoko, a plant lizard who can read minds and yells at people when they think dirty thoughts. They were referred to as asexual on air. *Dice Camera Action* by Wizards of the Coast (who make D&D) includes an ace character named Styx. Her creator, Holly Conrad, confirmed online that Styx is demisexual (as is Holly). TTRPGs as a medium are giving queer people the opportunity to tell their stories and be their own representation. I look forward to a lot more ace and aro characters in TTRPGs in the future.

***Deramin** is an artist who makes queer nerdy embroidery patches and decorates hats and jackets (as Majestic Mess Designs). She also writes articles and poetry, usually about queerness, disability, and D&D. She is a demisexual genderfluid demi-woman in a closed poly relationship. She discovered her gender and sexuality through D&D friends. Now in her 30s, she lives off a steady diet of tabletop roleplaying games, defiant kindness, passionate music, gallows humor, kombucha, and farmers market fava beans in Eugene, Oregon. Twitter: @OTDDeramin.*

THE STUMBLING DEAD AND AROMANTICISM

Seth Lukas Hynes

On October 26, 2015, long-running humour and article website *Cracked* released *The Stumbling Dead*, a four-part post-apocalyptic narrative comedy web series.

The Stumbling Dead offers a fresh and surprisingly endearing take on the zombie genre, portraying its undead as naive, childlike beings, just as motivated by friendship and unassailable optimism as they are by hunger for human flesh. They even euphemistically refer to other zombies as 'friends', and living humans as 'foods'.

Starring actor Espie Randolph and *Cracked* staff writers Katy Stoll, Michael Swaim and Cody Johnston, the series follows a group of zombies wandering through the wilderness, searching for 'food' and gradually learning more about themselves and the world around them.

The series is funny and charming, deriving plenty of gags and humorous observations from its stylised characters and their upbeat cluelessness, but the writing can be poignant and even insightful.

The narrative is interspersed with grey-tinted flashbacks, as the zombies dredge up important memories from their former lives, and some are genuinely sombre, depicting the hard personal loss experienced by one woman, and the desperate, drunken confusion of another before her zombification.

In Episode 2, Arrow (Randolph - this zombie is named 'Arrow' in the credits because of the arrow embedded in his chest) eagerly experiments with alternative forms of food, including dirt, grass, rocks and mushrooms. Cynical Suit's (Johnston) irritated reluctance is reminiscent of the backlash against veganism, and his rebuke of Arrow for having 'changed the natural definition of food' is a subtle satire of conservative arguments against same-sex marriage.

In Episode 3, the group makes the shocking revelation that they were once 'food' (human), after a bitten food (Hunter - Tess Paras) becomes a friend before their very eyes. When they inform the Horde of their discovery, the Horde's narrow-minded dismissal of the evidence parodies confirmation bias and the still-ongoing rejection of evolution among certain religious communities. One Horde zombie (played by *Cracked* senior editor Tom Reimann) even invokes the 'transitional form' chestnut.

A zealous zombie orator (Zlarma - Haley Mancini) appeals to the sentiment of 'simpler times for simpler friends', and the outrage she cultivates at the notion of their leader (Katie Wilert) once having been food harkens back to the ridicule Charles Darwin received for proposing that humans evolved from apes.

The Stumbling Dead is a morbidly-funny, well-produced and very clever series, but it resonated with me on an additional level.

The rough zombie 'society' in *The Stumbling Dead* almost represents a sort of macabre aromantic idyll.

I learned recently that I'm aromantic. I can and do experience romantic attraction from time to time, but not very often; I've never had a long-term girlfriend, and romantic relationships don't really interest me. Conversely, I love my friends very dearly; I tell my close friends that I love them, and I admire and care for them very deeply. For many years, I've wondered if my sense of 'love' is too intense and too general for me to develop romantic relationships, and a few weeks ago, with the help of some kind Twitter users, I found that the term 'aromantic' fits this state of being.

In *The Stumbling Dead*, there appear to be no romantic or sexual relationships within the Horde, but the friendships every zombie forms are incredibly strong and devoted. This is a community in which respect is absolute and anyone can openly and earnestly tell someone else that they love them, and be reciprocated without ridicule.

In Episode 3, as Tami (Katy Stoll), the perceptive ostensible leader of their group, rejoins the group after being caught in a car door, my heart melted when Suit greeted her with: "Hey! I love you."

The Stumbling Dead is a great piece of clever, morbid satire, but it's also a strangely sweet depiction of aromantic attitudes.

The Stumbling Dead is available to view for free on YouTube and on the *Cracked* website.

Seth Lukas Hynes is a writer and film critic from Australia. He runs a weekly film review column for the *Mountain Views Mail* newspaper, wrote and self-published *Trans-Sentient*, a volume of cyberpunk short fiction, and has a Bachelor of Arts, Honours degree in Writing from Deakin University. He has had articles published by *mX*, *Ramona Mag*, the *COSMOS* website, *Wordly* magazine and *Data Extract*. He is a cis-male, mostly-heterosexual individual, but an aromantic and a committed ally of the broader LGBTQIA+ community.

AGE OF DISCOVERY

Emma Kouhi

You're fourteen, the first time it occurs to you: maybe you're not quite like everyone else. Not in the secret superpower way, either, but the way where everyone else seems to know something you don't.

Your friends are turning fifteen, and one by one, birthday parties all end up in the same place. Truth or dare. Spin the bottle. Seven minutes in heaven. Party after party, your friends whisper and giggle as people are dared to kiss each other, as they're locked in closets together and emerge blushing. You can see them eyeing each other, leaning into the path of the spinning bottle, engineering the perfect match-ups.

Everyone seems to have someone they're angling for, but you're coming up empty. Your friends have told you about their crushes, about the butterflies they get in the pit of their stomach when they make eye contact, and you've felt that too, there's someone who gives you those butterflies too—but the thought of being alone in a room with him isn't exciting, like your friends tell you, it's mostly just stressful. They tell you kissing is great, but you can't imagine it being worth the stress.

Quietly, you melt into the background at parties, making sure you don't get picked. There are enough people who want a turn that no one notices you never have one.

You have your first kiss when you're sixteen. The boy gives you butterflies when he asks you to get a coffee with him, but when he leans in and touches his lips to yours, the butterflies aren't there, and it mostly just feels awkward. You can't quite fathom how this became the primary human method of expressing affection, but his cheeks are flushed when he pulls back, so the confusion isn't mutual.

You kiss the boy regularly, waiting for it to become the magical experience your friends tell you about, but it never really does. It's fun enough, but you can never fully lose yourself in the experience. In the back of your mind, you're thinking about your algebra homework, your shopping list, what you're going to get your grandma for her birthday. He comes away slightly out of breath, adjusting his trousers and trying not to let you see; you come away having decided to make lasagne for dinner.

You keep trying, though, because you like the boy, and maybe one day it will get better.

One day, his hand strays under your shirt when you're kissing him. He pulls away, meets your gaze, asks if it's okay, and you tell him it is: maybe this will be it. Maybe now you'll feel what everyone else does. He unhooks your bra, and his breathing gets faster.

His hands feel nice, but you feel none of the desperation you've read about, seen in movies, heard from your friends. You're not left wanting when he excuses himself to the bathroom.

Later, you realise maybe you should have returned the favour, but the thought never really occurred to you at the time.

Over time, you explore each other further. The boy gets carried away sometimes, ruled by instinct, but you're still detached, still thinking about other things, never losing control or giving into passion or any of the other clichés you came across on the internet when you tried to look up why you were so withdrawn. Everything you read said that when you're in the moment, things just fall into place and everything is easy, but you're still waiting.

He looks awestruck as he slides into you for the first time, and you resolve to never tell him that you're practicing your history presentation for tomorrow's final.

You start to think maybe you're just not that into him, but then he texts you about his day, or calls just to say hi, or takes you to the spot in the forest where he made forts when he was a kid, and your heart swells, and you know you're in love with him.

When he breaks up with you, he doesn't say it's because of the sex, but you know he's been getting more and more frustrated by the way you never initiate anything, never take control, the way you space out sometimes and only half pay attention to him. You don't try and argue with him, because he deserves someone who wants him the way he wanted you. The way you can't seem to want him.

"Maybe I'm bi," you say to your friend a year later. You still don't feel the urge to kiss anyone, to take their clothes off, to lock yourself in a room with them, and at a day shy of eighteen you're losing hope that maybe you'll 'grow into it'. You don't feel the urge to kiss anyone, but you think girls are pretty the same way you think boys are handsome, so maybe you're not straight.

Maybe kissing a girl will be different.

"No, you're not," your friend says, without looking up from her homework. "Have you ever had a crush on a girl?"

Not if just thinking girls are beautiful doesn't count as a crush. Not in the way you've had crushes on boys, with butterflies in your stomach and wanting to show them your secret inlet on the beach, wanting to tell them about your day and talk about the mysteries of the universe.

But you can't let go of the thought that maybe kissing a girl will be different.

At the Halloween party the next week, you drink a little more than you normally would, and when a pretty girl invites you upstairs with her, you follow willingly.

Maybe kissing a girl will be different, you think, right up until it isn't.

You go to university, make new friends, and one by one they end up in relationships. Sometimes they suggest setting you up with someone, with the friend of a boyfriend or the brother of a classmate or the "cute TA who's younger than he looks, really," but you tell them you're fine, you're enjoying being single, you like being alone.

Friends break up with their partners and complain about how it's been three whole months since they last had sex. You realise it's been three years for you, and you're in no real hurry to break that streak.

When you're twenty-one, a late-night Wikipedia loop leads you to a page on asexuality, and you freeze. The first line of the article reads "asexuality is the lack of sexual attraction to others, or low or absent interest in or desire for sexual activity," and your heart starts racing, because this could explain so much. Your hands shake as you google 'definition of sexual attraction', and as you read through descriptions given on various sites and forums, the pieces all fall into place and you can't imagine ever not knowing what now seems like the most obvious thing in the world: you're asexual.

You spend the rest of the night reading forum posts, talking to people just like you, and every now and then you remember something that happened in the past and think, huh, that makes a lot more sense now.

You're twenty-two, the first time you read a book with an asexual main character. The book isn't great, as far as books go, but you cry when it ends, because it's the most understood by a work of fiction you've ever felt.

You can't help but wonder how different it would have been if you'd had a book like that when you were fourteen and wondering why everyone else was so invested in spinning the bottle, when you were sixteen and kissing the boy wasn't as exciting as you thought it should be, when you were eighteen and thought maybe kissing a girl would be different.

You're twenty-two when you decide you're going to make that difference, to make sure other people have books like that when they're growing up. *Books*, plural, more than the handful that currently exist. It seems like a small decision, but momentous as well; you've written things before, but starting this book feels different. It feels important.

It feels terrifying, but one day it might make others feel less terrified, and that makes it worth it.

***Emma** is a soon-to-be graduate who's glad she figured out asexuality before she now has to figure out life after university, because one minor identity crisis at a time is more than enough. She writes in her spare time and will downplay it if asked about it, but her goal is to publish a mainstream Young Adult novel with an asexual main character (and also some mermaids). You can find her on twitter @phonotactless and instagram @k.ouhi.*



THE ACE UP YOUR SLEEVE

Daniela Illing

30x40cm

pencil on paper and Photoshop

Asexuality is defined by the absence of something. Therefore, visualizing it feels like an exercise in depicting invisibility. This does frustrate me, as symbolism is something I tend to avoid in my personal work. Yet, I'm struggling to develop a visual language that portrays absence when addressing ace subjects. This drawing sees asexuality as one of the cards we can be dealt in life. It can help us succeed, if we play it right. It also deals with the ambivalence of belonging to the LGBTQ+ tapestry, but not quite fitting in.

***Daniela Illing** is an art/history/media educator and freelance artist from Germany. She is a proud anglophile and nerd who loves to travel and explore history where it happened. Her social media profiles are listed at www.eyeling.de*

THE ASEXUAL AGENDA

Alba

Sometimes people are asexual. Sometimes people think they might be. Sexuality is weird and complicated both with and without an A preceding it, but sometimes labels help.

And sometimes, life can decide to spice things up and add a little something extra to the package, like mental illness. Then one day you're minding your own business, sitting in the canteen, maybe. Lasagna is pretty good today. Somebody comes up and sits down next to you, and they say: "What, pray tell, is the deal with you? What do you mean you don't feel sexually attracted to people? How does that even work? What do you even *do*, like, *with your life*?"

So you stop minding your own business, sigh deeply, set the fork down and say: "Things are actually a little bit more complex than that and there is a lot more to life than sex or the lack of it, and besides why are you all of a sudden acting like sex is the only thing in life and the alternative to wanting to fuck people is the endless void? First of all, buddy, I'm depressed, and that's a full-time job. Second, some asexuals have sex and some don't and that is none of your business either way. But if you really CARE about what being asexual is like, here's the tip of the iceberg."

Then you take a piece of paper from your pocket, unfold it, unfold it again, and again, and again (it's a big piece of paper but you have big pockets and you've also had enough). You clear your throat, stand up on your chair and proceed to read loudly, like a medieval town crier, hear ye, hear ye. You wish you had a bell.

Asexual culture is:

- Not knowing where your asexuality ends and your mental illness begins.
- Having no clue how an asexual relationship is even supposed to be like and how it would differ from friendship -since there is zero asexual representation in media that you can use as a reference.
- (Except for literally... one cartoon character, which is good but not good enough).
- Feeling, as a result of this, like a cartoon character yourself, less "real" than the rest.
- Being either infantilized or turned into "a challenge".
- Feeling like you are incomplete, forever failing at just being human, which is impossible to fail at.

- Never really being 100% sure whether you are asexual or just scared of intimacy.
- Giving up on relationships altogether because you have already assumed nobody will bother, since you have nothing to offer.
- Deliberately presenting yourself as non-sexual so no-one gets the wrong expectations.
- Feeling like even by trying to flirt you are somehow deceiving people, tricking them into thinking they will get laid when they won't.
- If you eventually find someone who says they don't mind not having sex:
 - 1) Obsess over the idea that they will expect you to be amazing in every other way to "make up for it".
 - 2) Feeling that they are secretly lying and they do, in fact, mind A LOT.
 - 3) Living in constant paranoia that they will leave you the second they find somebody who reciprocates their sexual attraction.
- Feeling like you will never be enough.
- Feeling like you don't deserve to be loved.
- Suspecting that everyone is judging, pitying or mistrusting you 24/7.
- Getting bombarded with the societal expectations of a sex-obsessed world that you don't identify with and only makes you feel more alienated.
- Literally hearing your co-workers talk about asexuality right next to you and compare it to "being a robot" and to "those people who get brain-damage and can't feel physical pain".
- Wondering what you are supposed to say when your mum or your 80-year-old grandma ask you (only once a year if you're lucky) about your love life without even bothering to hide their disappointment.
- Feeling like, to them, everything else you have accomplished in life suddenly becomes worthless because you haven't ticked THE MOST IMPORTANT BOX of all.
- Feeling like you owe everyone you meet an explanation, an apology, a justification.
- Never fitting in the group whenever sex is the topic of conversation.
- Thinking you're broken.
- Thinking other people think you're broken.
- Giving dating a go to experiment and try to figure it out because MAYBE you're not asexual, right? Maybe you're just scared? Inexperienced? Perhaps your mum and your 80-year-old grandma were right all along and you just haven't found the right person? Online dating seems like a safe and uncompromising

enough chance to try your luck. Surely if it doesn't work out you can just walk away without worrying about the feelings of a random person you just met?

- Feeling petrified because they may be a random person but you're still *tricking someone*. You're still a catfish, a scammer. You're the worst person to ever walk this earth. How dare you waste people's time? Nobody has to put up with you! People, NORMAL, REAL PEOPLE want sex and you're just going to use them as guinea pigs to try and figure yourself out? STOP USING PEOPLE! You're officially the worst, congratulations. No wonder nobody loves you! Good luck with that!
- Besides, you're not even pretty enough or special enough in any other way that will make someone want to stick around without sex.
- You're going to die alone.

You stop reading and sit back down. You're not looking at the person who asked you, but you know they're looking at you, confused, sad, scared. They learnt nothing, but they're slightly relieved they're not you. You go back to your lunch. Your lasagna is cold.

***Alba** is still figuring it out. She's a 25-year-old Spanish translator living in London and has recently started using the labels "asexual" and "heteroromantic" more often, because they are what comes closer to whatever is going on with her. She writes, mostly on the tube, mostly about her never-ending identity crisis, and shares bits of it on Instagram from time to time along with her pictures (@albagram). She tweets in Spanish at @dimitodetodo.*

CORRECTING FATHER MARTIN

Grace Gist

Difficult conversations are, by their nature, difficult. Whether we think they should be or not, conversations concerning quiltbag-plus folks generally end up as one of those difficult conversations, especially when it involves more of a general audience, rather than just the quiltbag-plus community. On top of the usual delicacy involved with these discussions, several factors can add to that trepidation:

- Important people—people who are in a position to be listened to—taking part in that conversation, and how they’re engaging.
- Being ace and near those conversations—we can encounter a great deal of confusion and resistance within our own quiltbag-plus communities concerning our identities, how can we expect folks outside that umbrella to understand?
- Anyone suggesting the mere idea of religion near the conversation.

Any one of those factors can cause some apprehension on their own. So it’s understandable, then, how they compounded when I, an ace Catholic, learned that a very well-known priest was releasing a book about the relationship between the quiltbag-plus community and the Catholic Church.

The author is Fr. James Martin, a prolific and popular Jesuit author—aside from Pope Francis, he is arguably one of the most famous Jesuits currently alive. His most recent book, published in June 2017, is *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity*. To coincide with the book’s release, he also gave a series of talks, including one at a church in Boston, Massachusetts. I was interested, having read some of his articles and heard him speak some months before, but I was also nervous. In the work I had seen he was open-minded, but given the difficulty of discussing quiltbag-plus matters and the Church, some concern is to be expected. A few days before the talk, I found the book in a local bookstore and read the introduction. Towards the end there’s a brief discussion of terminology, explaining the meaning of the LGBT initialism. He recognizes that LGBTQ and LGBTQA are common, but in explaining the latter he listed the A to mean ally. I was disappointed, but not terribly surprised—the A gets left out and misidentified often enough that us ace folks begrudgingly expect it, but that doesn’t mean the mistake doesn’t sting. That oversight aside, the rest of the introduction was decent enough to read on and go to the talk.

I picked up the book at the church on the night of the talk; I got there early, and the book is short enough that I read it in the hour or so before the talk was scheduled to

begin. On the whole, the book does what it says in its subtitle: start a conversation between the quiltbag-plus community and the Church, and how both parties can approach the conversation with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. It emphasizes that quiltbag-plus people are just as loved by God as the rest of creation, and the Church and its members need to strive to emulate that love, as they should with all people. He also takes time to recognize that this isn't his primary area of ministry; however, this is an important and necessary conversation, and as a prominent member of the Church he is in a position to foster it.

By the time I had finished reading, and the talk was due to start, more than seven hundred people had filled the church. Fr. Martin's talk primarily covered the first part of the book—how the Church should approach the quiltbag-plus community—and to my ear, was more forward in the talk than in the book. He acknowledged the circumstantial selection bias that had skewed his anecdotal sources to primarily feature gay men, and clearly stated that while both communities should approach each other with respect, compassion, and sensitivity—as anyone should in approaching anyone else—the primary onus of improving relations rests with the Church. That had seemed implicitly clear to me in the text, but given existing tensions such an important point should be as explicit as possible. He also reiterated that this is all relatively new to him, and said that he was open to new information.

Quietly, and rather nervously, I hoped so. Because I had decided to correct him on the matter of the A.

Following the talk was a book signing, and as with any signing with a well-known author who had just spoken with seven hundred people, the line was long. He was also incredibly generous with his time, taking time to talk briefly with everyone who came—it was lovely and admirable, but it also left me more time to stew with my nerves. There's a part of me that still isn't sure how I didn't chicken out and leave the line. The Jesuits are particularly known for their ministry in higher education, and I had challenged teachers before; but in my mind challenging a teacher is very different from challenging perhaps the second most famous living Jesuit. But, learning is an important part of teaching, he had said he was open to learning, and this was important. I stayed in line.

Eventually I approached his table, my copy of the book open to the end page. I introduced myself, thanked him for the book as he signed it, and for his openness in learning. And in the spirit of that openness I wanted to point out one thing: the introduction says that the A stands for ally, when it actually stands for asexual, aromantic, and agender. Internally I braced myself—I hope my nerves didn't show too much, but then again I have a terrible poker face.

He thanked me for this information. He pulled out a small notebook, wrote this down, and told me he was glad to know. He didn't just listen to what I had to say—he truly heard me, properly and genuinely.

I was stunned as I left, and I was about halfway home when my emotions started to catch up with me. But it wasn't until I was home and relaying what had happened to a friend when it fully hit me what had happened, and I cried, overwhelmed with how validated I felt. I haven't had a ton of pushback on recognizing the validity of aceness, but I know it happens, and I'm still scared of that pushback—at best it's patronizing, and only worsens from there. Yet a stranger not only took the correction graciously, he thanked me for it. To be so seen, right on the spot and without question, is a most remarkable joy.

A revised and expanded edition of the book came out in March 2018, and of course I ordered a copy. My mother was visiting at the time, and the book arrived while I was out at a rehearsal. She texted me “page 22!!”, apropos of nothing, and I didn't have the chance to clarify what she meant. When I got home, she handed me the book, and at first I just skimmed the new introduction. Then I reached the section “Why I'm writing”, which had served as the introduction to the first edition, and immediately I flipped to the end. As it turns out, page twenty-two is where the explanation of terms now falls—it now explains that LGBTQA stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning or queer, and asexual.

He had written down the change, and the change made it into the updated edition. Asexuality isn't a focus of the book, but to have the word there in black and white, however small, is a powerful, joyful thing.

Fr. Martin gave another talk in Boston the next month. I brought my new copy of the book, and in the signing after the talk I reintroduced myself, and thanked him for making the correction.

“You made that happen!” he told me.

“Surely I wasn't the only one who said—?” I tried to suggest. Surely some other ace Catholics had pointed this out to him.

“No,” he assured me, “you were the only one.”

He signed page twenty-two for me.

Grace Gist is an intellectual omnivore who particularly enjoys audio drama, clever music, and crafting sounds as a Foley artist and sound designer with the Post Meridian Radio Players. She has also contributed to *Critical Approaches to Welcome to Night Vale: Podcasting Between Weather and the Void*, out September 2018.

TO BE THE ONE YOU LOVE

medina

*I know if I should live a hundred years
Never see another face like yours
On stranger seas, or brighter shores
Cause I know
That my love is real*

David Gray, If Your Love Is Real

I love her.

I love her.

I love her.

My heart blooms at the thought of her. My heart grows at the sight of her. But I can't love her the way she wants. Will love ever be on my terms?

It hurts to the spine to feel that my form of love is perceived as not right or not enough. *My love is real.*

I loved her.

"How do you know you love her?" Some ask.

I know it from how I feel when I am without her. Without her, the stars are dim and the sky slips into darkness. But when she is with me, the sun gallops through the sky and all living things rejoice in her name.

But I can't give her what she needs.

I am not the soul of spring that buds inside of her heart. I am not the stillness in between each breath as her mouth blooms with words. Because I can't give her what she needs. I can't be what she wants.

And even still, flowers fiercely bloom inside of my soul. White orchids, cherry blossoms, bluebells and clusters of bleeding hearts prance and dance to a rhythm of

their own when she is near. I'll give her anything she wants. But I can't love her like that.

I feel heaven's heart fade into the night. Hand clenching heart. Teeth sinking into my soul, because I know that I will never be the one she wants. The one she needs. Because I can't love her like that.

And when the world is silent, I can hear the beating of my brittle heart. Without her, the stars are dim and the sky slips into darkness.

And though I am all for believing, my heart is filled with a certain amount of doubt that she will ever want to be with me because she wants more than I can give.

But still, I long to be her one and only...the one she wants...the one she needs (in the way I can be wanted or needed).

I was a freshman in college when I started dating Maria. I loved being around her. She was so incredibly passionate, opinionated and intelligent. Effortlessly, she pulled me into her orbit. I felt like I was floating. I loved her. I didn't mind the kissing, sometimes it even made me dizzy, but that's all I wanted to do. After dating for a few months, she wanted more. In my heart I knew I didn't know how to give her more, but I tried. I tried because I wanted to be with her and if more is what keeps people together, I would. I gave her more. I tried. It didn't turn me on. I didn't feel good doing it, but I knew that is what she wanted. So I did it.

Soon, I started making excuses. I started being too busy. I made the circumstance impossible to be sexually intimate, so I didn't have to do it anymore.

"Do you not want me? Am I not pretty enough for you? Are you not attracted to me?" She'd ask.

"You're beautiful. I am just really tired. I have class in the morning and need to finish a paper." I replied, hoping the lie and shaking in my voice was concealed.

"You don't want me!" She said during a party with anger in her voice and a shot of tequila in her hand.

"I do. You're drunk right now and I want to get you home." I didn't want her like that. But I could never tell her.

It wasn't until she left me that I realized I could never be what she needed. She told me that she would never ever be with another girl because of me. She kept her promise. She married a guy, moved abroad and recently had a child.

But I'm not a girl.

I slip into darkness; I am stuck in unrequited love purgatory because I don't want to have sex with anyone I fall in love with. She too, may feel it is unrequited love.

Still --

I'll hold all my loving and longing for her tucked deep inside of my heart.

The second time I felt deeply for someone was about a year after Maria and I broke up. Carly was kind, hardworking, bright and powerful. She soared through the sky like a happy monarch butterfly. I always admired her gentle strength.

The second time we hung out, she leaned in to kiss me. Kissing was not on my mind, but I kissed her back. We started hanging out more regularly and soon we were dating. I made her mixtapes, brought her flowers, remembered dates that were important to her, wrote her poems and held her hand like branches of trees intertwined with one another. And like a tree, my love for her grew.

One day in summer, she called me and told me she had slept with her ex-girlfriend while back home in her midwest town. I told her I didn't want to see her again and that it was over. There was no coming back from that. She cheated. She cheated with someone who was able to give her something I couldn't give her.

I turned up "Without You" and slowly sank into my bubble bath. *I went to art school, okay?*

Months later we met up at a cafe and she said with a deep and sorrowful sigh: "I don't want to be a lesbian. I don't want to be an old lesbian."

I didn't know how to respond. All that crossed my mind was the monumental scene in *Lost and Delirious* when Paulie declares that she is not a lesbian.

Paulie: Lesbian? Lesbian? Are you fucking kidding me, you think I'm a LESBIAN?

Mouse: You're a girl in love with a girl, aren't you?

Paulie: No! I'm PAULIE in love with TORI. Remember? And Tori, she is, she IS in love with me because she is mine and I am hers and neither of us are LESBIANS!

At this point in my life I didn't see myself as a lesbian. I didn't see myself as male or female. I was still understanding how I identified. I told her I understood, paid for her drink and excused myself. We never spoke after that.

This would happen a half a dozen times with women I wanted to be with. It would keep happening because I didn't have the language to describe what I felt. It would happen because once I found the word asexual, no one would believe me.

The way I experience love is meaningful, whole and enough. But maybe this is what they mean when they say sometimes love isn't enough.

*Now for me some words come easy
But I know that they don't mean that much
Compared with the things that are said when lovers touch
You never knew what I loved in you
I don't know what you loved in me
Maybe the picture of somebody you were hoping I might be
Awake again I can't pretend and I know I'm alone
And close to the end of the feeling we've known
How long have I been sleeping
How long have I been drifting alone through the night
How long have I been dreaming I could make it right
If I closed my eyes and tried with all my might
To be the one you need*

Jackson Browne, Late for the Sky

medina is a Honduran nonbinary trans adoptee with Cerebral Palsy who lives in NYC. They will be receiving an MFA in Writing for Children at The New School. As a New School Impact Entrepreneur Graduate Fellow, their venture is to create inclusive youth-led safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ POC.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

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Lead Editor

Michael Paramo is a two-spirit queer ace graduate student researching (a)sexuality, gender, attraction, and intimacy. They founded *The Asexual* journal in October 2016 with the intention of providing a platform for ace artists and writers as well as to elevate discourse on gender and sexuality. They aspire to live near the forest and the ocean one day and be fully embraced by the beauty and power of nature. They can be found on Twitter @Michael_Paramo.

Editorial Board

Ai Baba is an aroace agender PhD candidate studying race, gender, and a/sexuality in modern Japanese history. Besides working on her dissertation, Ai is currently volunteering with the Asexual Census Survey Team, and also founded "ace to ace" (<http://ace2ace121.wordpress.com>) to connect aces in Japan. Twitter: @not_alibaba.

Evelyn Elgie is a queer ace poet, artist, and academic. Her work deals with mental illness, asexuality, deconstruction and landscape, and in particular a radical re-imagining of our cultural understanding of sex and romance. She holds a BA in Contemporary Studies and Creative Writing from the University of King's College, and her poetry has appeared in Open Heart Forgery, Glass Mountain, and Hinge: Journal of the Contemporary. She is about to begin her master's degree at the Social Justice Institute at the University of British Columbia.

Katie Halinski is a non-binary grey-asexual from London. They are currently doing a PhD in Anglo-Saxon, Norse & Celtic at the University of Cambridge, where they are researching human-bird interactions and bird symbolism in Old Norse culture. In their spare time, they enjoy playing bass guitar and watching films (the stranger the better). They can be found on Twitter as @Liminalitea, where they mostly post about kaiju, cats, the stranger parts of medieval culture, and mental health.

Emma Hutson is currently completing a PhD on trans literature at Sheffield Hallam University. She has work published in *C Word: An anthology of writing from Cardiff*, *Severine Literary and Art Journal*, *CrabFat Magazine*, the *Harpoon Review* and *The Asexual* journal. Her short story 'Footsteps' came second place

in Sheffield Authors' *Off The Shelf* short story competition. She is available on Twitter @Emma_S_Hutson.

Joe Jukes is currently studying for an MA in Sexual Dissidence at the University of Sussex, UK. Their primary research interests concern theory, including Queer- and Gender Theory, Critical Theory as well as Cultural Geography and Rural Studies. They have published in *The Asexual* before, in the Body Issue, and are hoping to pursue a PhD working towards the creation of "Asexual Theory." Their Twitter can be found @JoeJayyy.

sydney khoo is a non-binary and queer writer, born in new south wales, australia to malaysian-chinese parents. though typically located crying in starbucks or tweeting in mcdonalds, they can occasionally be found posting creative essays and short stories online. follow them on twitter @sydneykerosene.

Ashley O'Mara is a freelance writer, former *Jeopardy!* contestant, and PhD candidate at Syracuse University, where they are writing a dissertation about celibacy and asexuality in literature after the English Reformation. Their work on sexuality, religion, and politics has appeared in *America* and *Metathesis*. They identify as ace, enby, and some kind of andro- or biromantic. They have strong opinions about hummus. Follow them online at ashleyomara.com and @ashleymomara.

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