



the  
mundane  
progression of  
premortem  
colloquy

k. a. cook

a marchverse short story

# imprint

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# blurb

After a night of revelations to her dead aunt Rosie and her living brother Esher, Mara Hill must dare another with Benjamin Lisbet. If she's truly the woman Mara hopes, surely Benjamin will be receptive to a conversation of the "I love you and want to be with you, just not romantically" sort? Surely this afternoon won't stray beyond Mara's preparations of a picnic basket, chives, rehearsed speeches and less-rumpled clothing?

Yet her months of searching for magic to refresh her fading love means there's too much she doesn't know about Benjamin. Too much Mara needs to know to hold this conversation without losing Benjamin's friendship.

Mara thought speaking of her fading love under cover of dark difficult enough ... but speaking of romance in daylight is another challenge entirely.

Contains: A sapphic, lithromantic trans witch making a misstep in the quest to build a love that honours her nature; an autistic, idemromantic schoolmarm with coeliac revealing her struggles in building romantic relationships with allistic women; and a conversation concluding in utterances of the word "when".

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# content advisory

THIS STORY CONTAINS NON-EXPLICIT REFERENCES to sex and sex acts by two allosexual aromantic-spectrum women. These references are more integral to the story and their relationship than in my other pieces, in that I'm not relying on mentions of sex as something these characters have or desire to convey their allosexuality.

While Benjamin doesn't recognise that her understanding of romance isn't an alloromantic one, the reader may perceive her as a neurodiverse shape of idemromantic—someone who conceptualises her sense of what is romance and romantic attraction by external characteristics (like the presence or development of an intimate, committed pairing).

It should be noted that this piece contains discussions about romance, romantic relationships and sexual relationships, along with the ways these intersect with autistic-targeted ableism and reflections on ways to navigate sexual non-romantic relationships. I don't recommend this story for people who experience severe sexual and/or romantic repulsion.

# author's note

THIS STORY IS A DIRECT sequel to **The Sorcerous Compendium of Postmortem Query**. I don't recommend reading this piece without first having perused the story of how Mara comes to terms with her lithromanticism.

# the mundane progression of premortem colloquy

IN THE BRIGHT OF DAY, a light breeze stirring dust onto her skirts, Mara walks in the company of a litany of unasked questions. How does a girl best tell another girl about different kinds of love? Should Mara consider the consequences of having this conversation with Benjamin Lisbet, schoolmarm and governor of Dead Horse Hill's small library? Can she accept both Mara's nature and Mara's affection?

Last night, her course of action held fewer complications. Meet Benjamin at the schoolhouse, explain Mara's shape of love, discuss her needs from their relationship. Something, according to Aunt Rosie, that isn't or shouldn't be so complicated a prospect.

Why does bravery feel more difficult when the sun warms Mara's braided hair and every step of her booted feet brings her closer to discovering no ideal answer? That last night's question provided a good—if unexpected—resolution doesn't mean that a second must follow!

Esher shouldn't mind borrowing books for her, Mara thinks as she adjusts her sweaty-palmed grip on her basket. She'll survive if she never again reads save through an intermediary's efforts. She can buy her own books or devote more time outside to trowel and bucket. What witch doesn't own a weed collection threatening to conquer her garden? Her vegetable bed will appreciate a good mulching before the hotter days

strip the soil's spring moisture. She can even clean her bedroom, should she need distraction!

*Can* she avoid someone in a village as small as Dead Horse Hill?

She breathes in, breathes out, swings the basket in time with her steps. She's prepared, as much as any witch can be—the basket housing a bottle of what Reggie calls “Malvadan Kick” for failing nerves, apples and cheese cut up in a spell-painted cool box, a handkerchief, and a bouquet of early chive heads. The mirror *and* Esher endured Mara's rehearsal of explanation before she spent an hour selecting her best “dressed up enough to convey seriousness but not festival garb” frock and waistcoat (the least-wrinkled garments in Mara's wardrobe, her leavings scattered across her bed for later tidying). She even braided and pinned her waist-long hair, although the immediate reappearance of flyaway strands suggests she'd have more profitably spent the time wielding a darning needle.

What else does a woman need arrange for the “I love you but not quite the way you think” conversation?

Why didn't she ask more questions of Aunt Rosie? Her advice will be more useful than dresses, braids and a picnic basket!

Mara sighs, breathing in lanolin and dust as she passes the empty yards on the track out to the schoolhouse and cemetery. She must do this. Doesn't she want to stop hiding? Doesn't she want to stop bowing to the strict rhythms of an alien life?

Overhead, a kite soars into the limitless blue.

If it goes badly, she owns no end of yellow plain over which to run.

She meets the first lot of returning students halfway, a pair of boys kicking a ball while taking surreptitious looks at a trio of girls walking a few paces behind. Mara waves, smiles and ignores the snickering girl—one of Isa's grandchildren—who comments, loudly, on the behaviours to be carried out between her teacher and the woman walking to meet her. Mara can speak to Isa, of course; she can also do nothing. One day, the girl will have something personal to discuss with a witch; her terror then should serve as punishment! Besides, didn't Mara make similar

comments about Teacher Evins's husband? Was her childhood conduct so beyond reproach?

Esher and Lis, likely, wouldn't have beat each other up as often or as soundly if Mara hadn't screeched her humiliation and indignation whenever they took up sticks or ropes. What youth doesn't enjoy the show of her friends' sympathy? What pair of youths don't revel in the gift of an audience? Maybe she owes Esher an apology, given that he never voiced embarrassment over Mara's disorganised ways. He just ensured they both arrived at school with the requisite number of books, papers, slates and pencils until, even if tidiness became an unconquerable mountain, she learnt to remember to look for her belongings.

In those days, she dwelt in the centre of her knot of friends; now Mara lingers on the edges. She burnt a few bridges with some girls' hurt at Mara's losing interest in their friendships become romances, but the best part of her distance comes from the bridges unbuilt—from lives now focused on marriage, home and children. Malice doesn't have to shut her out of other people's worlds; a lack of connection and reciprocation, the girl become the woman who remains with nobody, serves just as admirably.

She wants some of those things and is amenable to others, but how does she gain them when she can't master the first step in the process, courting?

"Please," she whispers, knowing the Sojourner cares nothing for how eir worshippers comport themselves in relationships or families. "Please. I can't lose her."

Saluria and Sillemon push their magic deeper into Mara's skin, warming her against a cold sweat at odds with the spring afternoon, but they too offer no wisdom.

Her pace slows as she approaches the schoolhouse. The cemetery's sheltering glade of gums reaches out to cradle the schoolhouse's weathered mud-brick walls, children and the dead enjoying the closest thing the Great Southern Plain offers to bush. A gumnut-strewn clearing between the track and the front steps allows for games, and for a moment Mara feels again a child, half-expecting to see Rachel walking

beside her while Esher and Lis trail behind. Does only adulthood's wistfulness make Mara think those days simpler? Did her childish agonies and confusions, resolved or survived, truly feel easier than her current pains and complications?

She now knows herself. She now knows she isn't and wasn't alone. Can't she hold onto that truth in facing this latest difficulty?

No matter what happens, she'll always have her brother.

She shakes her head and takes the steps up into the cloakroom, a bare hall of hooks and benches, now housing three cupboards at one end and a box of balls and bats at the other. The same scent stings her nose: a mingling of leather, eucalyptus, dust, sweat and something Mara can only name "childhood". It smells like a kind of freedom, a world penned in by adults but free of adult responsibility—free, but not free. Is that so markedly different from the grind of adulthood—free, but not free?

No! Stop pondering the irrelevant and the unsolvable! Have courage, she tells herself, and knock on the doorframe!

The main room shows itself a shrine to Benjamin's inquisitive nature: shelves by the door bow under the weight of too many books, potted bean plants sprout on the east-facing windowsill and chains of sun-faded looped paper hang over the blackboard. A collection of pencils and pens sit in a jar on the teacher's desk beside another holding fresh strands of bracken fern; more jars line the west-facing windowsills, filled with feathery grass heads and clusters of gumnuts. A basket of small fidgets—wooden puzzle toys, faded fabric bags filled with beans, small leather balls, scraps of fabric embroidered with spells to hold scent—sits on the desk's corner, awaiting any soul in need. Teacher Evins permitted no fancies or decorations, but now the blackboard bears a collection of sketches—animals, plants, a multitude of stick figures—wrought by several hands.

Uncle Sascha and Ida Fisher mutter that Teacher Lisbet misuses paper and chalk, deviates from prescribed lessons and encourages an unwanted directness in her students, but Mara has never heard Reggie, Mistress Hayes or the students utter complaint.

Two columns of desks and benches, marked with scuffs from generations of heels and pens, sit before the teacher's desk with its ladder-back chair. Strings of dead witchlights, Mara's own work, hang from the rafters. A well-blacked stove crouches by the window, also dead, for while Benjamin likes her tea, the warm room needs no additional heating.

Free of students to whisper, tap and scratch, Mara feels as though she's stepped into a monastery—a house solemnly but joyfully revering the cause of education.

“If Lis had been allowed to draw on the board as a reward,” she says as Benjamin looks up from her desk, “I think he'd have copied from Esh a little less often.”

Benjamin breaks into a broad smile, likely less from Mara's comment than her unexpected presence, and leaps from her chair with knee-banging enthusiasm. On school days, she wears a staid floral-print frock and a plain worsted coat, a brown belt buckled over all to bear sundry leather purses and pouches of mixed sizes and colours. Neat and sensible enough, even if Benjamin wears too few petticoats and hems her skirts too high to be described as “demure”—*but who*, she asked in hand-flapping annoyance after Ida's latest comment, *likes always treading on one's skirts? I don't want to fall over!*

They're still not short enough to show more of Benjamin's legs than her blue-witched boots, more's the pity.

“I don't know him well enough to say anything.” Her brow creases into a frown deep enough to bunch the freckles on her forehead as she waves a hand at the board. “Expression is important. It isn't just hearing lessons and giving tests. Otherwise, you could put a *cat* on the desk and there wouldn't be much difference, would there?”

Mara, struck by an image of Pa's cat Sooty placing inked pawprints to grade student compositions, can't help a nervousness-fuelled giggle. “Can you imagine how Sascha or Ned would react to a cat teaching?”

“I think it depends,” Benjamin says, her head resting to one side like a roosting bird, “on what a cat's teaching is. If teaching the way we reckon it presupposes sapience—remembering that cats do teach!

Most mammalian adults show their young how to carry out survival behaviours. Are we imagining, then, cats teaching as I teach or as cats teach?” She speaks at volume, as though an instructor before her class, and her words quicken in her enthusiasm. “If the former, but presupposing sapience, I can’t begin to guess what qualities feline sapience should possess ... although my sister did say, once, that I was more like a cat than a person. I think that less a comment about feline sapience than her ... her beliefs. Perhaps I should have said a *brick*, an inanimate object, still presuming a lack of sapience...”

If any woman exists that should have sustained Mara’s romantic love, surely she is Benjamin Lisbet?

On an ordinary day, Mara will offer her thoughts on what may constitute feline sapience and begin an unwieldy conversation that ends up at an unexpected destination with no conclusion—two women talking for the joy of pondering, revelling in an exploration unsanctioned in a society that minimises the bewildering.

Instead, she watches the flicker of confusion shift Benjamin’s brow and lips as she works to hide her consternation at the unusual hesitation.

“Is this a good time to have a serious conversation about our relationship?” Mara reaches into the basket and holds out the bouquet of chives, the clusters of mauve star-shaped flowers lightly damaged by her basket-swinging walk. “About what we feel, what we need from each other?”

*Inflorescence*, Benjamin said: the word describing a cluster of flowers attached to a main stem. Mother Hayes taught Mara to grow chives, in and out of season, for their uses in protecting surrounding herbs from pests and diseases. Benjamin, though, gave her the academic language used to describe the parts and structures of the plants Mara uses and tends.

Benjamin straightens her papers, aligning the pile to the base of her pencil jar. “Thank you for not just saying ‘can we talk,’” she murmurs at the desk—but for the life of her, Mara can’t think of a gentler way to broach this. “I can talk with you now. Can we go outside? I’ve been inside nearly all day.”

What does someone think when the woman she's courting edges back after displaying abundant enthusiasm? Nothing good, by the metric of Mara's failed relationships. Her history of inducing uncomfortable conversations with a lover, however, provides no successful dress rehearsal; neither do last night's conversations with Aunt Rosie and Esher.

"Outside. Of course." Mara nods. "These are for you. Would you like me to leave them on your desk?"

"Oh, no. The students will make much of it. They don't need excuses to whisper while I take the other classes." Benjamin shakes her head and stoops to pick up her satchel and parasol, slinging the former over her shoulder and hooking the latter over her forearm. She does, though, take the bouquet from Mara's hand. "Thank you."

She doesn't look at the flowers, letting them hang by her side as far away from her face as her hand can reach.

"Don't you like chives?" Mara asks, baffled that the woman who picks weeds and ferns to display in jars on the windowsill of her boarding-house room seems so uninterested.

Benjamin jerks the bouquet-holding hand and ushers Mara towards the door, plucking the heavy iron key from one of her many pouches. "I don't dislike chives. I..." She hesitates, her chin and brow stiff, her words tense and careful—like someone's forcing her to read aloud her personal diary. "The last woman I bedded gave me tulips tied with a bow. Then she used pretty words to explain that she didn't think she could court me, but she'd like to stay my friend and in my bed. She wasn't the first to do this ... trick. I suppose this is that, also?"

Mara meant to reassure Benjamin through a gesture of intimacy: chives should show affection and recognition for her love of untraditional decorative plants without suggesting an inconvenient romantic symbolism.

Now, that simple bouquet resembles the gift meant to mollify another in the face of hard revelations: a touch of manipulation the speaker hopes eases a difficult process.

Which is, come to think of it, exactly their purpose.

“No!” Mara, panicked, halts on the doorstep while Benjamin turns the key, staring out at the copse of trees—thin in daylight, fresh blue sky and dry yellow-green grass peeking between the scrubby boughs. “I don’t love you the way I used to, not the way you think I do, not the way I want—wanted—to love you. I don’t love you romantically. I can’t. So I need to find out if . . . if loving you in other ways is enough.”

Odd how night lends the illusion of depth and distance; sunlight, bright and hard, strips the world of its fantasies, both comforting and frightening. The dark feels more dangerous, pregnant with unseen possibility, but the day holds greater, more obvious cruelty.

Mara sees that truth, again, in the flaring of Benjamin’s ire.

She pushes past Mara, stomping her way down the steps—something Mara usually takes less as anger and more as Benjamin’s need for the slap of leather soles against wood. “She said that! Is it *enough* if she loves me as a friend? Until she finds another girl to love, she means but doesn’t say?”

The terrific scowl scrunching her face says otherwise: never has Mara head Benjamin sound so harsh, brittle or cutting.

“I didn’t mean—”

Despite the heat of the sun and Benjamin’s pale, burn-prone skin, she doesn’t open the parasol; she waves it in her hand, reminding Mara of Esher’s pokers. “She *loves* me, she truly *loves* me, but not enough to court me! And they all think I won’t find out what they’re about when they walk out with other girls but spend evenings with me!”

Benjamin doesn’t speak with directness about her previous post on the Stormcoast. She’ll talk about books or pets, festivals or holidays; she’ll make occasional reference to her kin. But, just as Benjamin never asks Mara about her previous partners or how those relationships ended, she doesn’t volunteer her own history. That doesn’t mean Mara, happy to dodge such discussions, hasn’t gleaned hints enough for a guess or two. A woman who hadn’t spent the last few seasons focused on her own perceived failings, however, might have pondered Benjamin’s willingness to oblige Mara’s unrequested avoidance of personal subjects.

In so long fearing her inability to stay in love, she has donned fear's cloaking veil of abstraction and self-obsession.

"Benj—"

"I thought it'd be better with you! With your fathers, with your brother! With your not hiding it! That I can just be ... me, because you know what it means to treat people as their own person, not as a category from which unacceptable deviation is tolerable only for *fucking!*" Benjamin whips the parasol through the air, less intentional movement and more the consequence of a parasol-holding woman jerking her arms in distress—but Mara trails behind for safety as Benjamin heads for the trees growing around the fallen-down cemetery fence. "I thought it'd be better with you!"

*It isn't you, it's me?* Truth, but also perhaps a line delivered by women trying to sheath their cruelty and disregard in an illusion of gentleness.

"I want to be with you," Mara cries, her boots crunching on gumnuts and fallen leaves. "I want to be with you. I want to bed you—shades, I desperately want to bed you—"

"So did they!" Benjamin shouts as she jumps over the fallen stone wall. The tip of the closed parasol scrapes against hanging branches as she lands; a clump of leaves flutter to the ground. "They all wanted that! Bed and avoiding conversations! I thought it was different that you didn't try sex *first!*"

Mara picks her way through the fallen stones, hidden by clumps of bleached grass, and follows Benjamin into the graveyard. She isn't running away as much as moving with her anger—Esher and Pa are prone to hurting themselves in anger or distress if confined or constrained—but for a moment Mara wants nothing more than for Benjamin to just stand *still!*

"And I want to stay with you ... live with you, if you want that! I'm just ... I don't love you romantically, because I can't stay in love with people. I love you; I'm not *in* love with you! I'm scared I'm not enough for you, if I stop pretending that I love you romantically. And..." Mara gulps, swinging her basket almost as wildly as Benjamin her parasol;

the bottle slips and clinks against the wicker. “You’re saying something like that, aren’t you?”

Benjamin, standing by Eldest Ned’s lichen-festooned headstone, wheels about to face Mara.

She jerks backwards, narrowly missing impalement. “Please—”

“What do you mean? *Romantically?*” Benjamin stomps her left foot above the approximate location of Ned’s skull, should the distance between grave and headstone remain unchanged over the last three generations of burials. “I thought *you* wouldn’t do this, take something and shred it into pieces I can’t even see! I thought *you* wouldn’t use the bits I don’t understand to tell me I’m not enough!”

For a moment she stands, her chin high, her cheeks flushed, her parasol raised in the very picture of indignant outrage—and then she slumps to the ground in a billowing mound of skirts, sobbing with a gasping, shoulder-jerking desperation.

Mara sits on a patch of blanket-weed behind the adjoining headstone: close enough to lean over and rest a hand on Benjamin’s shoulder, far enough to leave space between them. Those wracking tears feel like a slap to the face, but Mara dealt the blows. How can she help Benjamin comprehend? Aunt Rosie and Esher grasped Mara’s meaning through their own inability to perform the interests expected of them; Benjamin, not possessing that commonality of experience, sees this as another dismissal.

Having spent today worrying about Benjamin’s rejection, shouldn’t Mara laugh at the irony?

What does she do?

*Ask her how she feels if you regard her as a best friend, sharing hanky, panky and books,* Rosie said ... advice that may have worked should Mara have followed it!

How must Benjamin feel? How much pain does she bear being someone too many women appreciate for bedding over courting or love, “friend” code for “bedding without involvement”? Mara may have appreciated such a relationship, had she known enough about herself

to accept her nature, but the reasoning would have—should have!—wounded her.

It isn't too difficult to imagine: perhaps a woman felt herself enticed by a gorgeous, flirtatious soul in possession of a wonderful bosom and no awkwardness about sex—but couldn't bear a lifetime spent with a partner who voices anything that crosses her mind, can't moderate her voice and will never comprehend, never mind master, subtlety. Not something people who ascribe to narrow social customs find easy to explain; even those who consider Pa and Da difficult never say so directly. Everyone knows Theo Dray sends anyone to the smithy in her stead, but she still conjures a string of kitchen-related disasters to excuse summoning her son from the sheep to carry out a five-minute errand.

What does it feel like to be reduced to a diversion—one coloured with false trappings of love and friendship?

The difference between that and Mara's wanted relationship, she supposes, lies in her setting out expectations and needs from the beginning—in openness, negotiation and *not* telling a woman she's loved as a sop to allow casual bedding during the search for a more agreeable partner. No manipulative promises of friendship or gifts of flowers used to seduce an autistic woman into accepting her own objectification!

In that, too, Mara hasn't succeeded.

That's why knowing matters, she thinks, twisting her skirts in her hand, entangled within her own angry helplessness. That's why the dead's witness matters, why Esher's sense of attraction as baffling matters, why these conversations about the many shapes of love and want must leave night's safety for day's cruelty. In understanding herself, Mara can navigate relationships that suit her without avoidance, pretence, distance or deception.

She can't control what other people desire of her, but she can be plain about her own expectations.

What, then, does their relationship look like to Benjamin? Perhaps a partnership with a woman from a family of autistics, a woman who

finds Benjamin's bluntness and loquaciousness qualities to adore, not condone. Does Mara do them both a disservice to disregard the rarity in that? She thinks Benjamin her dream girl, a woman too wonderful to farewell or surrender. Isn't it probable that Benjamin feels similarly?

Maybe confidence doesn't explain Benjamin's flirting with Mara, that first day, as much as the liberation of knowing that she'd found a woman whose love shouldn't become a lie.

Never has Mara so wanted to laugh or so feared the timbre of the merriment like to escape her lips.

Counting gumnuts into piles around her skirts, longing to draw Benjamin into her embrace and knowing all the reasons she shouldn't, Mara waits for the desperation in Benjamin's tears to ease.

A magpie flutters onto a branch overhead, warbling.

Benjamin sniffs, pats at her skirts as if in want of something and scrubs her sleeve over her face.

"How many women told you all that? Thinking you should be grateful for scraps?" Mara exhales, working to calm her voice. Rephrasing Benjamin's pieces of story is the best way Mara knows to indicate understanding, but she shouldn't transform another's pain into her own outrage. "They act like they want to court you, don't they? And when you think you are, and it's all good ... they back off, they say you're friends, like you talked about? And you end up being someone they bed until they find an allistic girl?"

Just when Mara thought Benjamin's shaking done, her crying becomes a waterfall. Tears trail down her chin; blotches of water and snot mark the lapels of her coat and her floral-print skirts. She still clasps the closed parasol in one hand, the nails of the other digging into her stocking-covered calf with aching force.

What happened to the chives, Mara doesn't know.

She pulls her gumnuts into a heap, sorting them out by size and colour. "I've never been able to keep someone. I meet a girl, or notice one in a new way, and at the start it's romantic interest like people think. I'm making excuse to meet her, fantasising about her, singing

ridiculous songs while I'm weeding ... which is terrible, because the only person who sings worse than Esh is *me*."

Benjamin's laugh sounds more like choking.

"But when she starts falling in love with me, I'm falling out of love with her. When she's ready to court me, or ready to make our courting serious, because she loves me, I'm trying to escape. It's like..." Mara hesitates, trying to find a simile that will make sense to Benjamin. "It's like someone throws water over my fire right when someone throws kerosene on hers. Hers flares higher; mine dies. Her love traps me, because I can't bear all the things she wants and the things I lead her to believe I want. So I end it. Always."

Benjamin, her cheeks blotched dark enough to obscure her freckles, looks up.

"It's different with you," Mara whispers. "I don't love you like that anymore. I tried to! I wanted to do anything to stay in love!"

Should she tell Benjamin how much she tried and how far she went—to the extent of selling her soul to a brace of demons? Does it matter? Mara doesn't intend on becoming a world-conquering sorcerer; what use has she for such magic, save a few more conversations with the dead? Why risk further upsetting Benjamin—who mayn't like being the cause of Mara's selling her soul—over something now irrelevant? Isn't this conversation difficult enough?

"But it doesn't feel romantic with you. You're my best friend! You're funny and clever, you think about things from different angles ... and I can have, I think, something like what Pa and Da have with you. A companion, closeness, understanding. Someone to read with, someone to sew with, someone to talk with, someone to share a life with. And I can't bear the thought of hurting you by telling you that I don't want you, when I do love you!"

Benjamin releases her hold on her calf, drawing her knees up under her skirts, but she does offer Mara a brief, jerking nod.

"I can't pretend to love you romantically. I can't be anything than myself. You deserve to be loved in all the ways you want, and I wish I could ... but I can't." She bites her lip, her throat tightening. "I can't

bear you settling for me if I'm not enough, but I can't bear not being with you, either—and that isn't fair, but..."

Hot, betraying droplets dapple Mara's grass-stained skirts; she sniffs, angry. She doesn't cry like this! Didn't last night involve enough blubbing for any one person? How does Benjamin feel, hurting, only to watch the woman who caused said hurt start crying herself?

"What do you *want*?" Benjamin gulps and sniffs, but her strained words still sound like a smith taking a rasp to a horse's hoof. "What do you want from us?"

"Something not romantic—"

"*Romantic!*" Benjamin flaps both hands, dropping the parasol; it fetches up against Eldest Ned's headstone, startling the magpie into flight. "What does that mean, if something's romantic? What you described wanting instead—I thought that's what it is! That romance is people formalising their togetherness to other people! What do you *want*? To live together? To live apart? To get married, have children, bed? I can't..." She drags in a whistling breath, but her congestion doesn't keep her voice from rising. "I can't do this when it's so, so ... imprecise! I don't know what your loving not-romantically means! I don't know what loving you romantically means!"

Her lips twisted and brow creased, she glances at Mara as if trying to ascertain that she isn't angry—as if Benjamin fears annoyance or disregard for voicing something, yesterday, Mara would have considered absurd. Today, now she knows that a person may not experience or desire romance the way the world takes for granted, why shouldn't someone feel frustrated and bewildered? Why should Mara's notions of what is and isn't romantic match another's? Why shouldn't one wave their hands at something nobody bothers to explain or clarify?

Does the world understand what upon it sets so great a value?

Does Mara understand what she, yesterday, thought she wanted?

"Go," Mara signs, keeping her movements unhurried, her hands wide and loose. "Say what you want."

Benjamin takes in another long breath, forcing her trembling hands rigid in the fight to calm herself. "I want someone to ... bed, and live

with, and have me in their family.” She stops, her voice choking, her head rocking. She looks like a bewildered chicken; she looks like Da. “I want someone I can trust around food if they insist on wheat bread. I want a bed that’s just mine for sleeping, because I can’t always sleep beside someone. I want ... someone to talk to, the way we talk. I want someone to love me and mean it. I want to be a wife, with a ring and a lawyer. I don’t want ... frippery. I’d rather buy a book with someone than have them buy a surprise book for me.” She frowns, shaking her head, before adding hesitantly: “I’ve read romance stories with all that. I thought that’s what romance is! Not the beds, maybe...”

Why does the world set such store on falling in love—the spectre haunting too many stories, songs and poems to count—when it doesn’t seem that significant or distinct an experience, past the early, heady days of interest’s first blossoming? Are there any hard lines to draw between romance and friendship? Are there any hard lines to draw between a marriage born of romance and a marriage born of camaraderie?

This, to Mara, feels nothing like the nerve-heightened excitement of asking a girl out. It feels mundane, ordinary, a conversation about relationships stripped of the magical and ineffable—but terrifying in realer, truer ways.

It feels like a reminder that different approaches to love aren’t and shouldn’t be the dead’s domain.

“Some nights my fathers sleep together; some nights they have their own beds. I don’t care.” Mara swallows and plucks a reddish stem of blanketweed free from the plant, entwining it around her finger. “I want that with you. Does it matter if you name it romance and I don’t?”

Benjamin sighs, her lips wobbling. “Then ... then what don’t you want? What don’t you want me to do, if you say you don’t want romance? *Tell me what you don’t want!*”

Mara blinks, considering ... and then she laughs until her side aches. “Mara...?”

“It’s just...” she rasps, her eyes watering, because the truth now seems so obvious that Mara can’t figure out how or why she missed it. Doesn’t Benjamin ignore many social norms, including the romantic

ones? Isn't that why Mara likes her company? "I don't know!" Mara braces her palms against the ground, fighting to regain her breath. "You don't ... you don't do most of the things I don't want! And ... and I didn't know to recognise it when I have it!"

She doesn't want a girl who moons after her, who expects to be told she's loved countless times a day, who yearns for surprise gifts and shows of affection, who wants to curl up in another girl's embrace to watch the sunset. She doesn't want, in the wake of her fading love, the romantic notions that once so enthralled her.

Benjamin wants a ring and a wife. She wants stability, recognition, respect.

Can't Mara offer those things, in her own companionate way?

"Do you want me to wear your ring?" she asks, her heart hammering against her ribs, her palms slick with sweat. "Would you be content just wearing mine, if you know that it binds us?"

"In Astreut, only a woman wears the ring—but a woman can only wed a man, so I think it less a marker of love than a statement of relationship or possession by the house or guild to which the woman has now joined." Benjamin frowns, her lips pursed; Mara fights the urge to comment and waits for Benjamin to think her way to a conclusion. "Thomas Jess doesn't wear a ring; I imagine it's bothersome for a smith. Perhaps for a witch as well? Hands in the soil, preparing herbs and oils, sewing a wound? But for a teacher, it isn't a difficulty." She hesitates, a slight smile easing her face. "Is this a ringbonding?"

No, he doesn't. It never occurred to Mara to ponder his reasoning.

Is her fathers' love that different to her own?

"Oh, *yes*," Mara croaks, wondering how she didn't appreciate until this moment Benjamin's generosity. "We'll get a lawyer! I'll give up wheat forever ... but I'd like to make bread without it. Can we? I know you said there's other flours? Both my fathers snore, so if I inherit that, having our own bedrooms is just sensible. And you know my things go everywhere and I'm terrible at remembering to put them away, so I should have my own disaster room! I can't cook—I spend so much time concentrating on spells and potions that I can't keep my mind on

more of it, so everything burns. I'll garden, I'll grow any vegetable you want, I'll sew all the boring things like sheets ... but please cook. Can you cook? I know you're at the boarding house—"

Benjamin breaks into a snuffling giggle before blowing her nose into her sleeve—and then Mara laughs herself at Benjamin's screwed-up crimson face, as a trail of snot dangles from her nose to her forearm before landing across the skirt of her coat.

"I don't know where my handkerchief is!" she wails, flapping one hand while scrubbing the other arm on a patch of weed. "I used my sleeve one to wipe the board and my pocket one to bind Nora's knee and my skirt one ... I had it, before, but it isn't in my stocking or my sleeve..."

Mara, grateful for her one useful act of preparation, plucks hers from the basket.

"Thank you." Benjamin blows her nose several times before swiping at her coat. "I cook for myself at the boarding house! Theo hates that I do it—I'd love my own kitchen." She sighs and shakes her head. "I don't know about yeasted bread—it's hard to maintain structure without wheat flour—but I can make muffins, some soda breads and griddle cakes, depending on what flour blends I can get from Malvade."

Mara doesn't know what Benjamin means about "structure" and promises herself that she'll find out. "Good enough. I wonder if there's cooking spells in Mother Hayes's books? There must be some witch or magician who went 'I can't eat wheat, but I still want cake' and made a spell to help! Or even ordinary spells for bread I can adapt...?"

Why, in all the hours they've spent walking out, or drinking at the pub or sitting by the fire with Sooty wedged in between them, didn't they discuss this? Yes, Mara knows what meals and drinks to avoid ordering for Benjamin and how to handle and store the food she eats at home. But why didn't Mara think to look through her inheritance of witchy tomes ... or ask questions that lead to revelations about baking? Why did they speak of arbitrary, academic things, like the sapience possessed by a cat, over their own struggles with family, relationships and food?

They both feared an impossible future. They both feared to risk frightening away the other.

In obsessing on her inability to love—or remain in love—one way, Mara has only held the woman she adores at arm’s length.

“There’s the house behind the shop,” she whispers, pushing the stem free from her finger. “Mother Hayes’s house. It seemed ... silly, to live there alone, so I let the drovers have it. We can make it ours when they’re all out for the summer. No grain of wheat shall ever pass the threshold. A bedroom each. Make one room a library—no, the sitting room a library! And bookshelves in the kitchen!”

Only then does Mara realise that Benjamin hasn’t yet said the one word that matters ... but how can she, when Mara hasn’t yet asked the question?

Saluria and Sillemon, as if sensing her tension, push their magic into her skin.

The loose coil of blanketweed, the reddish stem split under the force of her hands, sits in her lap like an egg in a nest of stained russet and brown calico. Mara isn’t the sort of woman who takes undue care for her clothing; few of her frocks are left unmarked by sap, dirt, salves and teas. She’s a witch, by title and name! Why shouldn’t she dress like one?

She’s also a sorcerer, a woman who sold her soul for a power she never needed.

Why not use up a little of it?

Mara closes the coil inside her palm, sending her demons’ magic streaming through her fingers and into the plant. The sensation sets her teeth on edge, a cold tingling at odds with the sweat dampening her neck and back. She hasn’t the least idea what she’s doing or what she wants—just something that will look pretty on a schoolmarm’s finger. Something like a butterfly preserved under glass, like food preserved by magic, like green life made forever unwilting and displayed in a glass jar ... but always a match to Mara’s dirty fingernails.

*Help me*, she whispers at her brace. *Help me make this*.

Saluria and Sillemon surge forwards in her mind, their will shaping the ring in her hand but leaving her thoughts untouched. Dot Hickmann

believes demons should be feared, but Mara's brace has only helped and protected her, even from herself. How many stories and assumptions, spoken as if applicable to all, bear her no fruit? How many stories and assumptions is she yet to question?

"I know there's so many things we don't know now that we'll need to talk about. But I know ... you're my friend. I want you in my life. I want to work out how we can be together. Even if you understand this as romance, as long as you know that I don't."

She draws a breath as her demons withdraw and looks down. A seamless loop of blanketweed sits in her palm, the green leaves pushed out and flat to rest against a finger. A testing nail tells her the plant still possesses pliability but resists breaking and tearing, the colours as bright as if fresh-picked. Like a child's mimicry of an adult's ring, perhaps; an unenchanted vine coiled around a finger.

Mundane, on first and even second glance. Perfect.

The squeak issuing from Benjamin's throat, as she peers at Mara's hand, does indeed sound kitten-like.

"Romantic lovers exchange gold and flowers," she says, holding her ring out to Benjamin, "but lifetime friends exchange grass and weeds, because there'll *always* be a weed in the garden."

Benjamin signs one word in answer: *yes*.

The ring fits as well on Benjamin's finger as her arm fits around Mara's shoulders.

"I don't ... I don't understand," Benjamin rasps, sniffing, "what's so profound about whatever you think romance is to you, that I'd ... value it more than..." Snot bubbles at her nose; she blows it again on Mara's sodden, wretched-looking handkerchief. "I want to be with you, more than anything—no, not anything. I want air to breathe; I wouldn't choose you over air. Or food I can eat, or water, or my family. Or my work, because teaching is important! I think it better to say that I want this more than many things, but..."

Mara's grin sets her cheeks to aching.

Two women sob and hug by turns before they come to sprawling across the grown-over grave, one freckled, beringed hand entwined

with one brown, grass-stained one. The sun slips further towards the western horizon, and a distant part of Mara feels as though she should begin to think about home, dinner, chores, the rub to make for Isa Fisher's back and hips. A mundane conversation, after all, takes place in the ordinary world.

They need to ensure that more people can understand and celebrate its worth.

"If I let go of you," Mara murmurs, "then we'll have to leave, and since Esh knows I was going to talk to you, there's no way we can go back home without a conversation first. I have to tell him! And our fathers, and then they'll all want to celebrate by discussing the right number of shelves in a pantry, so ... no. I'm not going to let go. At least not for another half hour."

"Back home?" Benjamin angles her head, blinking like a bemused owl. "Together? Why, if not to tell them?"

"You said to say when." Mara, winking, hooks Benjamin's ankle with her own boot. "When, when, *when*. If you—"

Benjamin releases Mara's hand with startling alacrity, but while she opens her mouth to object, no sound emerges—because Benjamin, with one hand and a series of hip-wiggles that draws Mara's entire attention, works free a set of plain linen drawers from underneath her skirts. Benjamin slips one booted-foot free; the drawers flop to her other ankle, tangling against her stocking.

"There's nobody here but the dead." She kicks the drawers free, gathering her skirts in one hand and tugging down her bodice with the other. "They only talk once a year, so..."

"Legs," Mara croaks, struggling to divest herself of at least part of her clothing while Benjamin's satchel and boots land on the blanketweed, one of her stockings joining the drawers atop Eldest Ned's headstone. "A girl's *got* to show off her legs. I demand it."

Benjamin tugs her skirts up to her knees. Her plump, soft calves are almost as freckled as her face and forearms, with a scattering of light brown spots and darker moles dappling her pale skin. "Show me *yours*,

then. What do you like doing? I like doing with lips. Can I? Where can I?”

Aunt Rosie and the residents of Dead Horse Hill’s cemetery may discuss this unseemly act of panky a year from now, but Mara’s far too busy admiring—and being admired by—a pretty girl to care.

# additional works

mara and esher hill

The Sorcerous Compendium of Postmortem Query

The Mundane Progression of Premortem Colloquy

What Makes Us Human

Love is the Reckoning

amelia march

Old Fashioned

Conception

efe and darius

Certain Eldritch Artefacts

Love in the House of the Ravens

One Strange Man

The Adventurer King

# the eagle court

Their Courts of Crows  
A Prince of the Dead  
The King of Gears and Bone

Crooked Words  
The Wind and the Stars  
Hallo, Aro  
When Quiver Meets Quill

# about the author

K. A. Cook is an abrosexual, aromantic, agender autistic who experiences chronic pain and mental illness. Ze writes creative non-fiction, personal essays and novels about the above on the philosophy that if the universe is going to make life interesting, ze may as well make interesting art.

Ze is the author of several short fantasy stories combining ridiculous magic, cats, disability, bacon, mental illness, microscopic gnomes, aromanticism, the undead, verbose eldritch entities and as many transgender autistics as any one story can hold.

Ze blogs at **Queer Without Gender** and runs the aro media blog **Aro Worlds**.