



what
makes
us
human

k. a. cook

a marchverse short story

imprint

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Produced in Geelong, Australia.

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Layout and cover design: K. A. Cook

Credits: Cover and text typeset in **Amadeus** by Bright Ideas, **Life Savers** by Impallari Type, **Nymphette** by Nymphont and Adobe Garamond Pro. Assorted stock images from **Open-ClipartVectors**.

blurb

Moll of Sirenne needs prompts in their girdle book to navigate casual conversations, struggles to master facial expressions and feels safest weeding the monastery's vegetable gardens. Following their call to service, however, means offering wanderers in need a priest's support and guidance. A life free of social expectation to court, wed and befriend does outweigh their fear of causing harm—until forgetting the date of a holiday provokes a guest's ire and three cutting words: *lifeless and loveless*.

A priest must expand a guest's sense of human worth, but what do they do when their own comes under question? Can an autistic, aromantic priest ever expect to serve outside the garden? And what day *is* it...?

Contains: A middle-aged, agender priest set on defying social norms around love; an alloromantic guest with a journey to undergo in conquering her amatonormativity and ableism; an elderly aromantic priest providing somewhat-irascible reassurance; and the story of how Moll became Esher's guiding priest.

contents

content advisory	5
what makes us human	6
additional works	30
about the author	32

content advisory

DEPICTIONS AND DISCUSSIONS OF ABLEISM, amatonormativity and dehumanisation, particularly with regards to autism and aromanticism. Please expect additional background references to partner abuse and dysfunctional relationships, along with a side mention of magic causing harm to animals. This piece also includes reflections on non-romantic love's being pushed as a second-best "humanising" quality on non-partnering, aplatonic and neurodiverse aros.

what makes us human

MOLL OPENS THEIR GIRDLE BOOK and, without looking, sets their fingertip by a word written a third of the way down the page. *Gardening*. Sighing, they buckle the book closed and drop it back into position at their hip. Sirenne's greenhouses and vegetable gardens, in their midsummer bounty, gift the monastery a glut of corn, beans and cucumbers; they can start breakfast's conversation with that observation. The kitchen's current tendency to add corn to foods and dishes that don't usually encompass them offers another direction, along with more anodyne comments about weeding and Sirenne's scores of potted plants. Simple enough, as discussions go.

When will their calling start to feel simple?

True, they count ownership of their red robes in weeks and months, the scar on their shoulder still pink. The brown belt of a novice priest bears the girdle book and a leather pouch, its length crisp and unmarked. Five years of study can't yet earn the confidence of experience: by logic's metric, it's unreasonable for Moll to expect mastery in this new art. How can they compare the difficulty of their new work to the ease they owned in the old? Aren't they creating their distress by anticipating the unrealistic?

"Fifteen years with the Seventh," they mutter under their breath as they walk to the serving tables and fill a bowl with steamed rice and quinoa, today drizzled with stewed apricots. A waiting acolyte,

standing behind the array of dishes, pays Moll's murmuring no mind. "It's only been a little over five, here. Don't compare them."

They add another ladle of apricots to their bowl and turn towards their table, tucked to the side of the great hall—away from the clatter of the kitchen doors, close to a window looking onto one of the monastery's fern-clustered courtyards. Moll dislikes navigating all the chairs filled by guests, acolytes and guiding priests, but they'll accept that thrice-daily annoyance for the comparative quiet of their corner.

Today, despite the hall's great arched roof and echoing tile floor, the noise isn't as bothersome.

Only when they reach their table do they realise why: one advising priest, her red robes belted with green, joins the gaggle of guests and acolytes. Where are the others? Did something happen overnight? The Guide misses as many meals as she attends, but never has Moll seen so few of Sirenne's senior priests at breakfast. Frowning, they look to their acolytes sitting at the middle of the table. Dare they ask? If something serious has happened, wouldn't Moll already know? Why risk distressing James by calling attention to something that may lack any import?

Neither appears to mark anything amiss.

"Good morning." Moll sits opposite James and across from the brown-robed acolytes, working to keep their voice even and low. James regards the slightest abruptness in Moll's speech as indicative of anger or disgust, and they prefer no further misunderstandings. "I see that the kitchen serves cornbread, creamed corn and corn fritters this morning?"

The acolytes nod vehemently.

James, staring at her plate, pays Moll no attention. She's a small and delicate woman, pretty as some reckon such things. Fine chains of embroidery decorate the cuffs of her linen shirt and the panels of her grey waistcoat; studs carved like silver roses sparkle in her ear lobes, while matching combs and pins hold back her silky curls. Paint darkens her lips and evens a complexion in little need of it; no callus of pen, needle or weapon roughens her soft fingers. She's elegant like a fashion

plate in a book, but the illusion breaks when Moll looks to her nails, bitten down to the distal edge. A habit, they know, discouraged in the classes of people needful of donning powder and paint before breakfast at a secluded monastery.

Never has she bitten them in public, and she rejected Moll's suggestion of fidget tools as though offended by their observation of her need. Even their usual use of a weighted, beaded cord while talking drew her ire: *it's manipulative*, she said, as though their stimming exists only in relationship to the shame social niceties require nobody mention, *to pressure me by using something I have refused in front of me*.

She did, yesterday, observe the morning greeting.

"Corn wouldn't be so bad," Alicia says, her eyes flicking from James to Moll underneath an untidy mop of red hair, "if they'd do something *new* with it."

"Don't say that!" Ro howls, poking Alicia in the arm. At eighteen, he isn't much more than a child, gangly and frenetic. Remembering the reasons underpinning his service during meals—to help a guiding priest maintain a casual conversation before their guests—isn't yet second nature. "They'll be giving us corn in pudding next!"

Moll suspects they're meant to learn from Ro's impulsiveness as much as Ro should from their measured consideration.

Measured consideration is the polite way of saying "rigidly follows rules".

"Corn custard?" Alicia grins and elbows Ro in the ribs. When he forgets his duty, she soon follows him.

"Don't even say it! Don't give them ideas!"

"Corn custard, corn custard, corn custard!"

James sits at the table as if unhearing, her lean hands pushing a piece of toasted wheat bread across her plate. She smells like jasmine, her perfume a foreign, expensive contrast to breakfast's savoury aromas, Moll's apricots and the damp, earthy scents of the courtyard. She smells like their childhood.

They hastily swallow a mouthful of their own breakfast, the grains mingling with the sweet fruit, before attempting a direct question. "Do

you garden, James? I didn't have the opportunity before Sirenne, unless I count the Warp's tendency to provoke sacks of flour into sprouting seedlings overnight? I still know little, but I've learnt that I enjoy mucking about with a trowel."

There: a question *and* a few personal observations. Isn't that the mainstay of an acceptable social exchange? Three terms in the Seventh Western Regiment, stationed in the Warp during the Council of Advocates' last attempt to settle that magic-twisted territory, have left Moll with a lifetime of anecdotes. Many—like the time a crate of fleeced-lined coats outside the wards became a bleating collection of violently disfigured sheep—are best left unmentioned during meals, but magical wheat seems safe enough for breakfast chatter.

James, without blinking, pinches off a corner from her piece of buttered toast.

If not for a week's observation, Moll may have thought her unable to hear or process.

"I hate gardening," Alicia offers, after another look at James. "Dirt under my fingernails? I'd rather dust or wash dishes or sweep."

Ro snickers. "Dirt? Of course—"

Moll taps him on the ankle with their bare foot.

"Uh ... yes, I don't like dirt, either. Because I hate laundry. Your hands get all cracked and dry. I've still got scars from when my skin split in winter. But when your father's a launderer..." Ro shakes his head and glances at Moll. "What did you hate, in your old job?"

People who go through my wagons. Officers who refuse to follow needed precautions. The mouldy-citrus smell of warped, decaying magic.

Instead, they stop to think of something others will find relatable: Moll enjoyed the usual army annoyances of polishing boots and mending uniforms. The barracks brats of the Seventh always knew when their quartermaster passed a sleepless night, for they'd wake to find their newly-darned stockings laid out over their gear chests.

"Latrine duty. I didn't dislike planning or digging, but cleaning up a latrine site isn't enjoyable for obvious reasons. Soldiers left to unsupervised orders, however, have a marked tendency to the slapdash."

Alicia, of course, pulls a face.

James turns away from Moll, her pressed lips and deep frown suggesting irritation or disdain.

Anxiety, too familiar a companion, sits as heavily in Moll's gut as a month's diet of wheat bread.

They can't remember a time in childhood absent that pervasive sense of dread, the knowing of their having erred without cognition on how or why. Nor was their adulthood so free—the difference being that Moll had twenty years to learn the rules and rhythms of military life, and service in the Warp excused some of Moll's habits and provoked similar needs in others. Then the Council surrendered to the Warp and disbanded the Seventh, leaving Moll adrift in a world governed by normal magic and unexplained rules.

Sirenne, where people communicate with clarity and directness about concepts brushed aside as unacceptable, should have offered refuge.

They eat, letting Alicia and Ro carry the conversation against the backdrop of James's pointed silence. She only makes a few pointed grimaces when Moll speaks, picking her way through half a slice of toast.

After yesterday, they planned to offer James the morning for further discussion.

Today, in the absence of a proper breakfast and animus targeted at Moll, they'd best make it a priority.

When the acolytes clear away the dishes and the hall empties out with priests and guests going about chores or sessions, they stand, round the end of the table and bow at James. "Would you please come and walk with me?"

At first, it felt deceptive to string together words so unrelated to their intent. Honesty, to Moll, means saying what is meant: *I want to have a private conversation about your mood and health, to help guide you in following the life's path best suited to you.* Gennifer explained, over several occasions, that while all believers know what a priest of the

Sojourner means by “walk”, success rarely results from beginning said conversations with direct utterances of an uncomfortable truth.

They still don’t grasp the logic in that, but Moll now regards the script as a signpost marking the transition from breakfast’s communality to discussion’s intimacy. If Sirenne possesses an agreed-upon willingness to dishonesty between all parties, is it still a lie? A priest’s work doesn’t mean, Gennifer added, a strict adherence to direct honesty, and aren’t they supposed to be challenging the existence of an objective truth? Why should Moll’s regard become the defining metric of falsehood?

Priesthood requires accepting the unfading presence of an existential headache.

James rises, drops her spoon onto her plate with a teeth-jarring clang and follows Moll from the hall—offering, presumably, her consent.

Their favourite courtyard, as always, bears no tag of occupancy. A triangular space jammed between the kitchens and the Guide’s personal wing, it lacks the green softness of Sirenne’s other courtyards, instead beset with craggy planes of rock part-covered by draping vines. While few areas of the monastery don’t feature running water—its movement reflecting the Sojourner’s eternal journey—here a still basin houses pond fish and lilies. Other priests abhor the darkness and stuffiness caused by four walls and the slanting eaves above, but Moll appreciates the yard’s quiet. How do the others listen to running water for hours on end without succumbing to teeth-grinding annoyance?

They murmur the spell for a peach-hued witchlight, palm the resulting sphere and fling it upwards to catch on a trailing cluster of vines by the archway’s apex. “Please, enter.”

James folds her arms, passes under the arch and sits on the bench by the basin, staring at the white lilies clustered along one edge. The toe of her left boot, the leather polished near to gleaming, worries at a crack in the flagstones. “*What.*”

No lilt, no upturned voice. Probably not a question.

Moll moves to their usual seat. A pillow placed on a dip of the rocky wall provides a safe distance between them and their guests while offering the damp, loamy aura of fern and moss. They still can’t take

ordinary nature for granted; they still wake in the night, startled to breathe air that doesn't smell of rot. "I fear that I have caused you offense or hurt. I would appreciate knowing, if you'd be so kind as to explain, what I did."

The difficulty in needing to ask people for explanations lies in their requiring them from those Moll has hurt. Some don't mind, those who understand the cause of their ignorance, but too many become more offended when having to explain the how and why of something Moll should have known to avoid. If a quartermaster is expected to read another's body language and glean its inspiring thoughts and feelings, guests grant far less leeway to a priest—no matter how much introductory explanation Moll provides about their autism.

They try, where possible, to describe situations and ask questions of other people, but how can they do so here? James is distressed enough to disregard the customs on which she sets such value; while she wasn't friendly at breakfast, she didn't direct her expressions at the acolytes. Moll, based on limited evidence, a reasonable assumption and their history, must have caused her mood.

Again.

James turns her head and shoulders away from Moll—almost putting her back to them while remaining seated on the stone bench.

"I apologise." They bow as best they can from their seated position. "It's unfair to place on you the burden of educating me after being hurt. I do wish to know how I can avoid distressing you in future, and I promise that I won't be angered by your explanation. If you wish another priest to assist in—"

James whirls to face them with startling speed, her teeth bared in something close to a snarl. "What, so you'll write it down in your book of things to remember?"

Talking, however abrupt and disagreeable, provides an entry into exploration. While a variety of considering or responsive silences should be recognised and supported in a healthy exchange, guiding is easier when anything expressive replaces the wall of sullen silence.

Even accusation and aggression.

“I don’t understand,” Moll demurs, letting their eyes rest on James’s face for fear avoidance suggests anger or insincerity. “Didn’t I explain sufficiently to you why I use my book?”

A guiding priest must, inquisitively, engage with their flock’s thoughts and feelings. Curiosity means putting aside judgement and listening, open-hearted, to the twists and turns of a path that lead to their conclusions. Curiosity means offering, as non-judgementally as possible, a more useful direction. Curiosity means listening to and acknowledging another’s criticism of their work. Curiosity means putting aside the last conversation Moll had with a guest about their girdle book ... even as bile’s bitter sourness coats the back of their throat and tongue.

James snorts. She holds her chin high above the stiff collar of her shirt, her shoulders set, her hands folded in her lap. Even in session, she doesn’t forgo correctness for comfort. “You think that I haven’t seen you picking something to talk about each meal? Except you didn’t remember to write down what day it is, did you? You just ask completely irrelevant questions!”

What day...? They work through the shards of story James has shared, but none suggest significance of the day, week or season. She spoke, in short references, of a relationship fallen apart and a family taking the side of her partner, citing reasons of financial investment. She spoke of need for a temporary reprieve from both—threaded with the hope of return when her partner’s anger ebbs enough for normal’s resumption—but resentment colours her references to the friend that suggested sanctuary at a monastery. They know of no anniversary that lends one summer day such profound weight.

Perhaps her disdain draws from something she believes sufficiently communicated, conveyed in hints perceived by an allistic priest?

“I find participating in casual exchanges difficult. This book,” and Moll dips their chin towards their hip, “helps me engage in the talk many of our guests find comforting. Perhaps I mayn’t need it in future, but today I do.” Moll closes their fists and opens them, one deliberate finger at a time. Since fidgets provoke James’s anger, Moll possesses fewer

ways to direct and manage their nervousness. “I am grateful for a tool that eases my navigation of unsuited customs. Do you have occasions where you would appreciate a tool to help you with something people don’t expect you to find difficult?”

Gennifer gifted them the girdle book a few months after Moll took the brown; the acolytes of Moll’s calling-year spent that evening offering suggestions and prompts. Sorcha and Oki passed the book amongst the priests until a score of hands filled the pages. For the first time in Moll’s life, they found themselves surrounded by people more interested in helping them navigate expectations than in using their difficulties to void their position.

If not for the guests, Sirenne should have offered nothing short of paradise.

Even to think this borders on sacrilege.

“You’re a *priest*. You’re supposed to be...” James stares, shaking her head. “Or maybe that’s *why*! You don’t even know what today is, do you? It’s just another day to you—away from the real world, thinking you know anything!” Her voice edges on shrill as she leans forwards. “Is that why you all become priests? Because you’re not normal enough for anything but hiding here?”

Moll admits that their calling exists in part because of the similarities shared by divine and armed service. Both offer the comforting limits of hour bells, set times for work and play, assigned clothing, clear expectations around behaviour. While surprises happen, Sirenne and the Seventh provide rules and processes for how one responds; even the unexpected, in many ways, still owns a guiding spectre of regularity.

Structure, Gennifer summarised after Moll’s explanation. *You need—thrive in—the structure.*

The monastic life also permits and justifies their failure to navigate life and relationship expectations. A priest of the Sojourner needn’t avoid partnering, but such avoidance isn’t startling given their remove from circumstances that facilitate such relationships.

They knew, their boots crunching on the driveway’s blanket of fallen leaves and twigs, that this secluded compound will become home.

They knew, during their first gently-interrogative conversation with Gennifer, what new path their feet must follow.

Does that correlate to hiding?

“I was quartermaster for fifteen years in the Seventh Western Regiment,” Moll says quietly. “After the Seventh’s disbandment and my discharge, I was called to begin a new shape of service, in which I am recognised by the Sojourner and the community of Sirenne. May I ask what ‘normal’ means to you?”

It’s crass to draw James’s attention to their bare shoulders, one marked by their god and one marked by the Guide. What does the possession of either mean, anyway, if Moll doubts their ability to serve as called? They open and close their fists, lifting and lowering one finger at a time, until their body feels less likely to slip out of control.

James, her thin brows raised, stares at the basin and its lilies.

Remember your curiosity.

Curiosity, in the Warp, too often became lethal.

“Would you share with me your understanding of priestly service? Guests are often surprised by the differences between the monastic orders.” They try to smile. “I think that speaks to what the Sojourner preaches—that there are many pathways, often contradictory but always leading to the same place, to understand and honour hir. But it can, sometimes, make for confusion.”

Even her criticism, should it encompass substance and clarity, seems better than this wall of vague disdain interspersed with rejecting silence. Other than referencing a date on which Moll recognises no significance and objecting to their use of the girdle book’s prompts, she hasn’t provided actionable critique or evaluation. They forgot—or didn’t know—today’s significance. How can they rectify that without explanation?

James snorts. “That’s what you tell yourself.”

A woman so bound up in observing customs of dress and behaviour must intend her rudeness.

Should they admit defeat and take James to Gennifer for reassignment? Yet if something significant busies the Guide and her advising priests,

Gennifer doesn't need a brown-belted priest running for help with one guest in, comparatively, a trivial circumstance. Surely even a raw priest, who doesn't need reminder lists for mealtime conversations, will navigate this situation without help? Isn't this, then, a learning opportunity? If they can figure out how to gain James's trust, will they make fewer mistakes with other allistic guests?

They draw a series of breaths—inhale, hold, exhale—but the nauseating anxiety now bears the edges of a restless, sweating panic.

"Yes, I do tell myself that," they say as agreeably as possible. A display of receptiveness may help James feel comfortable with further elaboration, even though they don't know why she made such a snide comment. "I do wish to better support you. Before I can do that, I need to learn from you. Every priest must learn from their guests; I just have a greater need than some."

James looks down at their feet, scraping the soles of their boots across the tiles with a sound that sets Moll's teeth on edge.

Breathe in, hold, breathe out. Exhale for as long as possible. Close fingers one by one, hold, open them again as slowly as possible. Breathe.

"That sound hurts my ears. Would you please stop?" Moll attempts, again, a smile, but even on the best of days and in the happiest of moods such an expression feels forced and unnatural. If only they could project an image of quiet harmlessness! How else do they manage a tension too often read as threatening when their lips don't move the usual way? "Thank you."

James stills her feet, staring at Moll with her head tilted as if to suggest that she looks through them to focus on the vine-shrouded stone behind.

"I understand that today has meaning to you," they offer. Perhaps retreating to the one problem about which James has provided any clarity will encourage movement. "Would you share this meaning with me, so I can offer the specific support you need? I've missed your communicating it."

As soon as they say "me", they realise that an allistic priest with an allistic's intuitive understanding of social interactions will instead have

asked an unrelated question or offered a distracting observation on an unrelated subject.

As soon as they say “me”, they know they have handed James all the excuse she needs.

They just don’t know why.

She leaps upright, her hands trembling. “How are you going to help if you don’t even know? How are you going to help me with my partner, when you don’t know why *today* matters? Why I have to be alone today of all days, and how awful that is—but you just want explanations like you’re a child at their first solstice, too young to know anything! What’s the good of talking to you when you’re just a statue, lifeless and loveless? Look at you—you don’t even have an *expression!*”

Her brown eyes glisten as though she stands one wrong word away from tears.

Moll opens and closes their hands, one slow finger at a time.

Share, Oki advised every shadowing. Don’t burden them with your pain, but don’t secret your own struggles. Show them that you walk this road because you know theirs.

One word, though, they are hesitant to mention.

Perhaps their aromanticism, the sense Moll has owned as for as long as memory that they don’t desire romantic partnerships, is obvious to others. Perhaps James believes that an autistic, with stiff words and a book of conversation prompts, must be aromantic, both “lifeless and loveless”. Maybe she believes aromanticism accompanies an identity equally misunderstood as a detriment or shortcoming. Doesn’t she believe, at least, that those called to priesthood have surrendered any validating sense of what she considers normal—and, therefore, of value?

Convention, for all that she privileges it, nonetheless sent both sheltering beneath Sirenne’s roof.

“I’m truly sorry that you’re hurting and that today is difficult for you. I will do my best to help you, but the more you’re willing to share, the easier I will find it.” Moll speaks with measured care, pausing between each word in the fight to keep their voice from breaking. Measured means rigid. Rigid ... isn’t that another way of saying “lifeless”? “My

autism or aromanticism, however, don't mean we lack humanity in common, or that I haven't struggled with my family or departures from my road—my own despair and illnesses. I haven't experienced your precise circumstances, but that doesn't mean I don't believe in your struggles or won't offer a sympathetic ear.”

How can they provide that if she won't explain her needs?

Lifeless. Frantic limbs and a wild voice, emotion given movement and language, also earns them censure—accusations of immaturity or aggression. Moll's big, broad body and limbs don't permit even dangerousness's suggestion without provoking restrictive consequence. No, they can't expect her to understand their inability to recollect freedom of reaction, emotion or speech. They don't expect her to understand that adulthood's repetition has rendered a seemingly-unnatural control all but innate. Can't she at least assume that if Moll can master that acceptable state of allistic-flavoured emotional expression, they will?

Loveless. No, they don't feel in any way categorisable as “love”. They're not drawn to friends or partners in ways that suit, even non-romantically, the word's sense of passion and vibrancy; it doesn't fit their connection to people, labour or place. Their calling to service is too powerful and all-encompassing to be love. Such a general word, often used to describe feelings and actions contradictory to its given purpose, feels ill-suited.

Why must it be a moral failing to use words other than “love” to describe their relationships and feelings? Why must complex emotions be reduced to a binary of hate and love? Why must people replace the pressure to love romantically with the pressure to at least avoid accusations of lovelessness?

“Lifeless” devalues their best attempt to oblige other people's expectations.

“Loveless”, not synonymous with loathing or disregard, shouldn't serve as any kind of criticism. James loves. Which of them, today, is the crueller?

Maybe Moll has constrained their feelings for too long to permit a broader, warmer range of emotion.

Maybe their need to match feelings and experiences to words' exact specifications means they, unknowingly, feel something allistics name "love".

Maybe the stories that explain and identify love hold little relevance in real life, and people not Moll better accept the chasm standing between idealism and reality.

Maybe the reasoning doesn't matter: the Sojourner has never required that her followers love.

What if, though, they're better suited to a trowel or chopping knife than the careful, subtle art of guiding their guests? What if Moll can't help James because of the qualities they don't experience or the relationships they don't desire? What if lovelessness and lifelessness, even best regarded as neutral states of being, render them ill-suited to the work?

"You're like a puppet—moving your wooden lips, saying the words. But you don't know anything about ... about really being human." James folds her arms across her body before turning towards the arch, her chin held high. "There's no *point*. Not with you."

No, there isn't. She needs a priest who won't make her feel distanced by their inability to share her experiences. One who, in curiosity and kindness, can explore and sympathise with her pain-born feelings and judgements. One who doesn't feel slapped across the face and punched in the gut by three words: lifeless and loveless.

They understand the process. Pluck out the least-acceptable aspects of aromanticism and autism, disguise them as general qualities society finds objectionable and wield them at the vulnerable—prejudice now concealed under the thinnest veneer of acceptable disregard. Awareness of it doesn't ease their hurt.

Wooden. Puppet. Statue.

Inhuman.

She halts at the archway, gesturing in their direction. "See? You aren't even saying anything now! You're—"

"Pain!" The word spills from Moll's lips with shocking vehemence. "You think *love* is what makes us human, if you must choose one

quality? No, humans are *pain*, not love—the pain of having our worth denied, the pain of injury and loss, the pain of our cognisance of our mortality, the pain of fear, the pain of being overlooked or ignored, even the pain of having our pain denied! Who doesn't endure against the hurt of being told in word or action that we aren't worth kindness?"

James stares at Moll in an aghast, still silence.

"You think I can't know you? If you think, in your pain and ignorance, that I haven't had someone demonstrate that I'm undeserving of respect, *you have done so just now!* You sought to strip away my humanity, because you think cruelty will give you back the power torn from you. It won't. It only makes you cruel. It only envenomates another." They rise and walk towards the archway, fighting to keep their steps slow and hands loose by their sides. "Because you misunderstand your own humanity, you gave me what makes me as human as you—pain. Will you say it again, now, why I *can't* guide you?"

Her lips part as though about to speak, but no sound emerges.

"I have consented to guide you to your rightful path. I haven't consented to your disrespect." Despite their efforts, Moll's bare feet smack against the stone as they step past James into the fern-lined pathway. "Gennifer will assign you to another priest's care. I won't spend a moment longer with you." Just for a moment, they adopt the snapping bark mastered with the Seventh: "*Come!*"

James moves as though afraid to make the slightest noise, hanging back a few steps behind with the nail of her pointer finger clasped between her teeth.

Moll checks that she follows and, wordlessly, heads towards the guest common room. Their heart thrums in their chest; they fight to slow their heaving ribs. What will they do if Gennifer isn't finished with what caused her to miss breakfast? What if ... *shades*, can't they send an acolyte to find her or Oki? Waiting with James won't lack unpleasantness, but Moll needn't engage her in conversation. They can keep their silence while a brown-robe hunts down a senior priest.

Breathe.

For good or ill, they are both decided to follow a new path.

Gennifer, fortunately, sits in one of several armchairs, frowning down at the ledger in her lap. Two acolytes tidying feel more like shadows than occupants in a vast room of redwood tables and bookshelves, all crammed with books, games, paper, pencils and paints. Pots filled with trailing ferns hang from the high rafters, lending the room a touch of Sirenne’s soil-and-leaflitter scent; the large slate tiles, polished smooth and set close together, feel cool under Moll’s bare feet. Large windows reveal the gardens between wings, permitting light enough that demarcations of “outside” and “inside” lose relevance.

She closes the book and looks up, her thick brows raised. Moll has long learnt better than to voice these observations, but Gennifer resembles her pet chicken—a round, fat woman with nut-brown skin and hair, the latter trimmed to a fine fuzz covering her scalp and neck. The red robes, belted with an advising priest’s green sash, pick up the reddish tinge in the hen’s feathers; the neat way she tucks her arms at her sides, her hands drawn up by her chest, resembles the hen’s wings. No quality will so provoke this comparison if not for Gennifer’s mothering of anyone, guest or priest, she judges in need.

“May we converse in private?” Moll asks, turning their head to ensure that James follows them into the room. “Thank you.”

She stands a few paces off, tucking her hand—the tip of one finger smeared with her lip paint—behind her back.

The acolytes down their books and retreat to the hallway.

“What is it?” Gennifer waves at the chair opposite her table. “Sit down. Can I get you a cup of tea? A biscuit?”

“No. James has the opinion ... that I can’t relate to their experiences. She wishes the guidance of another priest.” Only a lifetime of practice allows Moll to keep their voice flat and calm. “I don’t wish to cause her any further distress, so I ask that you assign her to someone of a more ... suitable nature.”

Only the slightest shift of brow mars Gennifer’s quiet smile. “I see. Is this the case, James?”

How can Gennifer, as careful and controlled as most of Sirenne’s priests, so evade accusations of lifelessness? What difference exists

between her expression and theirs? Why can't Moll see, recognise and imitate it?

James hesitates for long enough that Moll wonders if she's beset by a change of heart, but at length she nods and takes the offered chair. "Yes. Please. They don't even know what day it is! They just ask pointless question after question, all stiff and wooden. How am I supposed to get anywhere with a priest that remembers nothing normal?"

She doesn't mention, Moll thinks with a nauseating bitterness, that she accused all priests of such ignorance. They may not know what the date means, how better to have approached James's guiding or why only Gennifer's questions are worth answering, but they know one thing: their control teeters on collapse's edge.

They bow, turn and stride to the doorway.

"It's difficult," Gennifer says with a non-committal softness, "to feel as though—"

Moll quickens their step, their red robes flapping about their calves. Another pair of acolytes enter the hallway, stop and abruptly reverse direction as though afraid to tangle with a priest in a temper. They fist their hands until their fingers ache, but their shoulders shake and their chest heaves. Why did they entertain the delusion that their thick, autistic body, with its oversized hands and stern face, can ever be anything but threatening?

How much more damage need they cause before accepting the truth?

The feel of grass beneath their soles and the strengthening of the rich damp-earth smell tells Moll that they've left the building for one of the gardens. Rows of mulched corn, peas and beans grow in a sunny section of the monastery, angled away from the greenhouse. The gardens weren't their intention, at least insofar that they possessed any, but a riot of unwanted seedlings sprout from the pea straw's seeds, diverting water and nutrients from the vegetables. The acolytes are a few days behind in their weeding. Good enough.

Moll—ignored by the priest and guests tending the greenhouse's tomatoes—grabs a bucket and a trowel, kneels by the first pea-festooned trellis and starts pulling up weeds.

There's no glamour in weeding, no proud presentation of the literal fruits of one's labour. New weeds poke through the soil and mulch almost as soon as one finishes, and, as in laundry and dishwashing, Moll never finds the satisfaction of conclusion. A garden always provides distraction, however, and nobody stopped to marvel at a quartermaster's labour. Why expect it now?

Peace, instead, lies in the feel of damp earth clinging to bare feet, the patter of water falling on green leaves, the smell of sun warming soil and straw, the pop as a root pulls free from its earthen cradle. Moll's trembling fingers fight to gently prise weeds from the bed and shake soil from their roots, but they put their rage into their shoulder as they hurl each into the bucket left at the end of the row.

Pull, shake, throw.

Pop, patter, thwack.

Isn't this suitable work? If their labour allows Gennifer to guide James by providing the food eaten by priests, acolytes and guests, how aren't they following their calling?

Pop, patter, *smack*.

"Do all of those require pulling?"

They jerk, straighten and turn, started to find the Guide sitting in her wheelchair only an arm's length distant, her attendant idling with a book at the other end of the row. She's a small woman with white hair gone yellow, sunken cheeks and bony limbs; "elderly" suggests more youth than she shows. Her green robe, belted with red, catches the light through some trickery of weave; a darker green blanket, knit from witched wool, sits over her lap, although the summer warmth permits her to bare both marked shoulders. A ball of yarn, two knitting needles and a toe and heel in progress rests in the valley between her knees. Based on Moll's infrequent glimpses of her work about the monastery, she too prefers her hands busy, perhaps despite her swollen knuckles.

She looks like a stiff breeze will blow her out of her chair, but she reminds Moll of a century-dead tree, its roots grown so deep that its trunk and limbs survive drought and cyclone.

They drop their plant and, suddenly aware of their aching shoulders and back, bow to Sirenne's most senior priest.

"Oh, stop. Sit up and stay sit up. Sat up? Whatever." The Guide sighs and peers down at Moll. "Aren't your back and knees breaking? I'm hurting just *looking* at you."

Moll realises then that they've worked down the row and halfway across the bed. Small bits of seed and gravel dig into their knees through the thin linen of their summer robe; their legs, beset with an unnatural stiffness, fight their attempts to sit. "I'm sorry, sir, for my unapp—"

The Guide raises both hands and claps her fingers to her thumb in the gesture meant to indicate a bird's opening beak—usually made to mock a person prone to gossip. If she owns something as ordinary as a shroudname, Moll has never heard it mentioned. She's just the Guide, the leader of her flock on their journey to ... well, the Sojourner isn't the sort of god that provides clarity. No bright heaven or dark hell; just the bewildering grey of *somewhere*.

Moll dislikes those vague, unspecific words.

"I'm sorry for abandon—"

She repeats the gesture several times, fingertip smacking against thumb.

"I'm ... sorry?"

Moll has heard the monastery's gossip about the Guide, but they didn't expect ... well, *this*.

"Stop it with the drivel." The Guide sighs and shakes her head. "If you apologise again, I'll send you to shadow with the calling-year acolytes. Don't think I won't!"

Just the thought of taking lessons with Ro and Alicia has Moll closing their mouth with a teeth-clacking snap. Moll's calling-year included a grandparent twice their age, but Ro's year leans young, and they can't say that they'll enjoy being so subjected to the acolytes' discussions, explosions, giggles, jibes and pranks. Moll endured enough of that in the army, irritated even when they were of the customary age to partake!

Is this the Guide's way of saying that Moll needs those lessons?

Are their missteps with James so serious that Gennifer went to the Guide?

“Moll?”

They sit up, rolling their shoulders back in a vain attempt to ease their stiffness. “I don’t think I need those lessons refreshed,” they say, hoping that their tone doesn’t convey their stomach’s nervous roiling. A priest shouldn’t be afraid to admit fault. How can one help guide another in open-hearted curiosity while bound to an unfailing sense of correctness? “I think I’ll do better in the gardens or the stables. Wherever you believe my work most needed.”

Not that Moll has done an exemplary job with the garden, given the halo of uprooted-and-thrown plants surrounding the bucket.

“Really?” The Guide sighs, looking down at Moll with raised eyebrows. “Because *I* came here to tell a guiding priest to pick the gravel from their knees, wash up and hop to the infirmary to be briefed on a guest’s needs from his new priest.”

Moll frowns. The infirmary? A guest’s new priest? “Another guest—”

“No! You want to specialise in the arts of weed pulling and shit shovelling! Far be it from me to stop a priest from following their road—even if that road takes them five clicks backwards.” The Guide shrugs and nestles her hands in her lap. “I’m sure there’s another priest with curiosity, patience and directness to help guide a guest as much harmed by Sirenne as the world—another priest that finds equal confusion in tedious definitions of normality. Gennifer’s unexpectedly busy—what about Oki?”

They stiffen, their eyes resting on the thick, bobbled stockings covering the Guide’s unshod feet. “I don’t understand,” Moll murmurs, beset with too many curiosities to untangle but certain that few priests have referenced Sirenne’s harming a guest. “If I knew what you’re referencing, perhaps I could say...? But ... I don’t want to distress another guest, and someone must muck the stables.”

After all, she may as well be referencing Moll’s treatment of James.

The Guide stares at Moll, her brow furrowed, her expression well beyond their conjecture. “I think,” she says at length, “*you* should explain the source of your newfound enthusiasm for regression.”

By now, narrating a discussion with a guest to a senior priest feels habitual. Moll exhales, hissing their breath over their teeth, before beginning with the dining hall, backtracking to explain their anxiety and James’s prior behaviours, and continuing with the courtyard conversations.

Their voice, steady during all manner of absurd, eldritch and horrifying goings-on in their fifteen years with Seventh, wobbles on the words “loveless” and “lifeless”.

“...so I did the inappropriate thing of leaving without allowing for proper explanation or facilitation of—”

“Nep, nep, *nep*.” The Guide beaks her fingers thrice; Moll, startled, falls silent. “Drivel. You cluck worse than Gennifer’s chicken. That you can work on—tell Gennifer or your calling-year priests that you want them to help you learn to stop clucking.” She sighs and shakes her head. “You assumed yourself the cause of her mood. James felt distressed by spending Lovers’ Day separated from her partner and took offense to your thinking you’d caused offense. She wanted you to simply offer sympathy, believing her situation *abundantly* self-evident and unneedful of explanation.”

How many times, over the course of a life, have allistics and alloromantics driven them to aghast speechlessness at their absence of rationality? Lovers’ Day is but a petty holiday borrowed from Astreuch tradition, something about which the Sojourner says nothing. Moll doesn’t care enough to recollect its existence, but neither will they disparage or dismiss her pain—if only she mentioned the holiday when asked!

Sirenne should offer sanctuary, but they’re still caught up in the mess caused by love’s assumption, expectation and conformity.

Even here, they’re still rendered less than human.

“I ... asked *why*...” Moll shakes their head, turns and pulls up another weed. “I don’t understand that. None of it. So I belong out here.”

“I didn’t say it was reasonable. It isn’t any more reasonable than your current occupational decision.” The Guide barks a laugh. “But since *when* do we expect guests to bring reason with them? They don’t. We help them find it.”

They don’t know what word names the mood that has Moll wrench, twist and fling a seeding somewhere towards the bucket before looking up at the Guide. “*How* could I have—”

“You should have,” the Guide says, her words soft, “taken her to Gennifer as soon as her judgement turned personal. You didn’t need to tolerate that half as long as you did. Take her to someone who gives her fewer excuses and isn’t bearing bruises the world never lets heal. No garden so needs weeding that you should be breaking your body, afterwards, to survive the punches you thought you had to let her throw.”

They sit up, bunching their robes over their legs. Her words ring of bewildering improbability, an unexpected response—like the giving of their girdle book, the leather cover now speckled with dirt and mulch—wildly contradictory to the world’s usual rules and processes. Ideal, certainly, but not in practice true.

“I’m meant,” Moll says slowly, “to be able to do my work. I can’t give every allistic or alloromantic guest to Gennifer because they don’t make se—”

“We both know you won’t ask that another priest take on a guest’s care because you don’t understand their reasoning, but you *should* if they don’t respect your humanity!” The Guide waves her hand towards the great hall. “How, if you break yourself dealing with every guest assigned to you, are you going to give your best service to the next agender, aromantic or autistic guest walking up our driveway? What if there’s someone there in need of *you*? Can you, right now, serve as they need?”

They freeze, open-mouthed.

Never did Moll think to look at their work from that angle.

“There wouldn’t be that many—”

“*Drivel.* Most of the priests not us can handle James. Gennifer, though, isn’t aromantic. She’s kind, sweet and open-minded, certainly—and that’s better than nothing. But she doesn’t speak from a place of knowing. We do. And now, you can give someone something neither of us had—a guiding priest who knows in the heart. Can’t you imagine what that must feel like?” She sighs, her crow’s voice cracking. “Some guests won’t be suited to your strengths, but they’ll respect your humanity. Some won’t suit you, and you’ll make sure they’re cared for by someone they’re less likely to harm. And others, yet unknowing, need you. Will you, Moll, ignore their need of someone their own to reassure them that they *are* so wonderfully and deservedly human—no matter what the world says?”

Moll draws a breath, the hairs on their forearms raised, their body alert and quivering. Despite the near-cloudless sky, they look up, searching for lightning; the air crackles with that wild, dangerous energy. They hoped, five years ago, to return this gift Gennifer offered to a discharged quartermaster stripped of home and place. The gift of reframing the world, tossing about all long-held expectations so one can put aside the misunderstandings and follow a new turning. The gift, a chance to see everything anew, they couldn’t offer James.

A gift, perhaps, they can still offer someone else—because she’s right, something Moll didn’t realise until she said the word “us”.

They didn’t know that they’d waited forty-four years to receive that gift from their own—to be affirmed human by their kin’s reckoning.

The garden shouldn’t be the entirety of their service.

“That’s better.” The Guide gives a small, satisfied nod. “You’ve forgotten, I think, that in your first year, we learn how best you work with guests. Knowing that better, now, I need you in the infirmary to work with a guest who also didn’t pair well with his first priest—a guest who needs *you*, not Oki. Or will you mumble about weeds and manure?”

Moll shakes their head. No, not on their life or name!

“Good. Get up, have a long bath, scrub your fingernails, eat a late lunch and then present yourself to Thanh. Tell hir that I sent you to be Esher’s new guiding priest and ze must explain to you the magic. I doubt he’ll be any kind of conscious today, so you have time to dawdle.”

What happened last night? “Magic? Conscious?”

“Thanh will tell you. Go. I’ve got too many priests yet to talk to.”

Far too curious to surrender to bewilderment, Moll bows their head, grabs their trowel and scrambles upright just as the Guide waves her hand to her attendant. “Thank you. Sir. Thank you.” They turn for their bucket, freeze and spin back to face the Guide. “Sir, can I ask something?”

“Yes, *quickly*, but it had better not be clucking.”

They don’t know what she means by “clucking”, but they’ll ask Gennifer and Oki. “If you weren’t guiding guests when I came, why...?”

“Why didn’t I guide you, you mean?” The Guide shrugs. “I don’t guide guests or teach the acolytes. I’m perceptive and intelligent, they told me, but disastrously blunt. Now, after years in the kitchens, I guide the priests—once you’re educated enough in yourself that I needn’t dance around my words.” She hesitates. “I think, perhaps, there’s some acolytes I should have taught. But I *do* know the worth and the necessity in ensuring my own number in the priests that follow me.”

“I think you guide well,” Moll says quietly. “For me, if nobody else.”

Their own expressions aren’t given to smiling, but the Guide’s broadening lips, perhaps, speak for them both.

additional works

mara and esher hill

The Sorcerous Compendium of Postmortem Query

The Mundane Progression of Premortem Colloquy

What Makes Us Human

Those With More

Love is the Reckoning

amelia march

Old Fashioned

Conception

efer 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 fiction 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 many short fantasy stories combining ridiculous magic, cats, dogs, disability, bacon, mental illness, stim toys, cross stitch, coeliac disease, verbose eldritch entities and as many transgender and aromantic autistics as any one story can hold.

You can find hir blogging at **aroworlds.com** and running the Tumblr accounts **@aroworlds** and **@alloaroworlds**.