



# absence of language

a kit march short story



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# imprint

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# blurb

Four months ago, Kit March abandoned his fiancé without even a note of explanation for a deserving man.

Leaving Lauri should have freed him from the pressures of romantic expectation, so how does a talented magician end up performing flash magic for buttons and hairpins in Raugue's worst tavern? Kit doesn't know and doesn't care, as long as he can keep drowning guilt in beer and spellworking. As long as he can keep not thinking!

When a stranger offers the word "aromantic" followed by an opportunity to join a dangerous quest to the Gast, Kit may have more distraction than he can survive—and more comprehension than he can navigate.

Contains: A transgender, allo-aro gay man riddled with guilt for fleeing his fiancé; an aro-ace man offering the gift of language; and the prospect of a journey to a place that will forever change Kit and his new companion.

# contents

content advisory	5
absence of language	6
additional works	31
about the author	33

# content advisory

PLEASE EXPECT DEPICTIONS OF OR references to amatonormativity, allosexism, cissexism, heterosexism, depression, autistic-targeted ableism, alcohol and alcohol used as a coping mechanism for depression. This story also includes several non-explicit sex references, Kit's use of sex as another coping mechanism, casual references to and depictions of violence, and a heaping mountain of guilt. Please note that the second half (after Kit exists the Crooked Door) depicts scenes of non-romantic, non-sexual physical intimacy.

This piece is best read after the **Kit March** story **Ringbound**.

# absence of language

KIT MARCH LEARNT LONG AGO that the taproom is the closest thing to Astreuch hell, and the Creaking Door offers no exception. He fights to keep his smile as he drops his hands, as the last floating flower descends to the floor, as the crowd becomes individual faces to watch and judge, as the drag threatens to steal his footing. “That’s it for tonight, lovelies!” He kicks his upturned bowler, since a broke man can be none too subtle when performing for a drinking crowd. “All gratuities gratefully accepted! My thanks for your enthusiasm, and I wish you all a good evening!”

He turns to the rough bench atop the step that has become his stage and snatches up a roll stuffed with cheese, not caring if anyone objects to a man bowing and chewing at the same time. Magicians, as a rule, pass out on grubby floorboards too often to oblige food-related annoyances like “manners” and “social niceties”. Besides, the Crooked Door’s punters aren’t known for their commitment to decorum!

Neither are they known for largess when it comes to paying entertainers: only a few clinking sounds echo from his hat.

Buttons, most likely.

Kit sighs, sinks onto a chair and chokes down the rest of his roll. Elizabet’s bouncer looms over the table, a presence of hulking muscles and more sharp points than the average pin cushion. While a few voices shout for more, none approach him. The regulars know that Kit doesn’t

talk to people after the show, and his guard discourages everyone else. Nobody stops him from inhaling the cold food on his waiting plate—another roll, a congealing beef stew, a mound of greyish potato—and gulping a beer to finish.

The sores inside his cheeks sting on contact with food and liquid alike, but Kit waves his hand at a server for more.

Free from the distraction of performing tricks for a crowd, it's harder to forget what—whom—he left in Malvade. He knows he's better to take those moments for himself before allowing conversation, that he can't readily shift from performance to talk the way other folks can, but space gives him too much time to ponder. To remember. Kit exhales, trying to focus on anything else, but, as always, the taproom doesn't distract so much as torture.

First lurks the noxious mingling of sweat, perfume, wine and spilled beer, the reek seeping up from the floorboards as though no amount of soap and scrubbing will convince the wood to release its memory. His meal, prepared and cooked by someone indifferent to the art, does nothing to ease his nose: if one must consume it, they're better to do so *quickly*.

Second rings a riotous chorus: stamping feet, conversations spoken in words that grow louder as the crowd grows drunker, the metallic plucking of an untuned lute as Elizabeth's musician takes to the step, a knot of knackers in the corner howling the names of their favourite folk songs. The sound crests and ebbs like waves crashing onto Malvade's beaches, softening just enough to give Kit hope before smashing against his ears.

Third and worst, though, is the constant flashing and flickering of cloaks, hair and hands. For this, Kit has no sense-dampening spells; he can only take the inside of his cheek between his teeth, grinding soft, swollen knots of flesh with hard molars. The flash of colour from a swirled skirt or the unceasing tapping of a woman's ringed fingers against a neighbouring table, seen out of the corner of his eyes, feel like a stabbing knife to the mind. Nowhere, in this room of end-day gossip and frivolity, can Kit find his easing, needed stillness.

Sometimes, when he's tired or overwhelmed, watching another person breathe is more than he can bear. Sometimes watching his own chest rise and fall, or the pulse beating in his wrist as he writes, is more than he can bear, because Kit forever drowns within a seething, writhing, restless world.

On the job, he pours his energy and focus into his spellwork, finding survival in distraction. Off the job, he has no ideal answers. Most people have a limit on the noise they can bear and find some scents objectionable, but the beringed woman does nothing abnormal. They can't understand, can't contextualise—can't respond to a request that they stop moving save with indignant, offended fury.

Since drink offers the only practical, actionable solution, Kit looks to the bar and waves again. A girl swishes over with a jug, topping up the mug. In return for entertaining Elizabeth's drinking punters, Kit earns board and bread and beer, keeping whatever coins his audience deigns to throw him. He nods his thanks, decides the crowd done with their gratuities and hooks the hat with his ankle for examination. One chip, three copper clips, two hairpins and six buttons of assorted sizes and colours, none matching.

"So grateful," he mutters under his breath, slamming down half the mug. The rest slops over his fingers and the table; Kit curses and wipes his hand on his coat. It isn't good beer, but at least Elizabeth doesn't water down her magician's drink. Best not to waste it. "Hark at Astreut's famed generosity, all! The fabled city welcoming the wandering and lost!"

He can find work somewhere else—somewhere quieter, somewhere warmer, somewhere possessed of people able and willing to pay a magician his worth. Somewhere not Astreut; somewhere south. Why not?

He'll need to buy another horse, a coat, a blanket, a...

Just the thought exhausts him, so Kit tucks his earnings into his pocket and sits the bowler on his table. What best, tonight? Does he wait to see if an interesting man comes late to drink or does he call for another beer in search of the right amount of alcohol to settle his

thoughts without groaning on the morrow? He hasn't yet mastered the latter, but nobody learns anything without willingness to risk error and great deal of practice. He'll figure it out. Eventually. With practice.

"Can I have a word, mate?"

A gangling, leggy figure approaches his corner table, a copper sunburst pin in the Eastern style for designating masculinity fastened to the collar of a long sheepskin-lined oilskin. A second pin sits beside the first, a larger piece shaped like a horseshoe cradling a leaf. Guild marker, perhaps? At first Kit thinks the stranger a swordsman, for he wears a short, curved blade and a knife too long for fruit at his hip, but then Kit notes the brown breeches lined with suede and the split skirt of his coat. His cuffs, collar and red check shirt are clean and well-mended for this end of town, and he wears his sleeves wide and long, reaching past the knuckle to bare only the fingers of his leather gloves. The sleeves of his coat are darker and newer than the rest, as if taken from another garment; maybe they weren't long enough for his arms?

Unlike most travellers and wanderers in Astreut, he wears no hat, baring straight, sable hair pulled back in a short tail. He isn't pretty, Kit admits. A white-faded scar—bared by patchy stubble—pulls at his bottom lip, his limbs are too long for his torso and weather has coarsened his skin. Good enough, though: honey speckles his hazel eyes and he leans against the table with an easy grace. Perhaps—

Only then does Kit notice the dogs.

A massive grey wolfhound, wire-haired, long-nosed and slender, leans against the man's leg, its withers as tall as Kit's table. How does it move in the taproom without crashing into chairs or servers? The other, a sensibly-sized black and white herder, rests in a low crouch at the man's feet, its feathery tail wagging. A mercenary or adventurer wanting a last night before crossing the range, perhaps? Kit shapes his best smile, waves a hand at the watching bouncer and points to the chair opposite his. "How may I help you, sir?"

Kit's Greenstone accent and shift body mean that he's regularly approached by men who want men free of restrictive Astreuch notions about acceptable bed partners. Sometimes, less pleasantly, men see in

him a sought-after combination of desired masculinity housed in a body they can misgender as female—a convoluted attempt at justification that few but the Astreuch regard as reasonable. While Elizabeth’s floors and rafters betray her inability to recognise a broom’s function, she and her bouncers offer a shift man and everyone else under her roof some safety—decent enough for Raugue. Most folk leave their morality at the eponymous door, and if some can’t, a broken skull soon educates one on the importance of concealing their disapproval.

A man distracts Kit in ways beer can’t ... and the bottle kept up in his room solves inconvenient attacks of morning-after, Lauri-related guilt.

His companion turns the chair so the railed back faces the table and sits astride in a smooth movement, his right hand resting on his lap and the left on the table. The wolfhound leans against his side; the sheepdog slips underneath the chair. His eyes look over the top of Kit’s head and stay there, paying no mind to the room. Odd. Kit smiles and waits, only his hope of company inducing him to silence long-held opinions on the kind of men who sit backwards on chairs.

The Crooked Door, alas, attracts more than a few.

“About the flash. I’ve a crew into the Crackenbush. I need a witch or word hag.” The man speaks in an accent mingling lilted vowels with a slight Malvadan drawl, his words clear and deliberate.

“A job?” Kit fishes the largest button from his pocket, running it between his fingers. At the Crooked Door, he performs the showman trickery that welcomes him to most public houses: flowers, lights, levitation, sparkles, changing colours. Magic stripped of danger, complexity and capability for others’ entertainment and amusement, as if someone like him can’t be, and shouldn’t be, capable of anything more. He shapes his words at the behest of non-magical folks who howl at his mistakes, the unknowable eldritch stripped of its majesty. “I’m not that,” he says, testing, wondering. Most adventurers and wanderers know enough of magic to avoid propositioning Kit March, public house entertainer. “I’m a jongleur.”

Never yet has anyone observed the difficulty in juggling kittens, in his surrounding said animals with a bubble of unmoving space to avoid

jostling. Nor has anyone noticed that Kit's mistakes aren't accidental: people don't fear a magician who is competent but not gifted at his craft. Flawed ordinariness doesn't solve the problem of buttons in his pocket but does ensure Kit's safety in Raugue's narrow streets. He isn't someone able to threaten, challenge or empower. He isn't the confusing aberration of a divergent magic worker who possesses more power or ability than the similar-minded.

There's only so many shapes of different that folk can accept in a man.

"I saw you witch the beer. I saw you flub the catch but mouth a spell to keep the glass from smashing. You're more than just flash." The horseman grunts, his voice low enough that even the bouncer may not overhear. He doesn't merge and mush his vowels like Lauri, but his words bear a slow cautiousness, as though buying time to think before allowing each syllable to slip from his tongue. "I don't think much of the kittens. How can you *do* that?"

Kit exhales, alarm at the observation warring with pride at the compliment. There's nothing subtle in how he now moves the button, but the man pays Kit's face and hands no attention—no *obvious* attention. "I've worked with Elizabet's cats each night. They don't complain when getting extra meat after."

"It's cruel." The stranger grunts louder. "But you're quick with the words and I need a word hag."

When he's levitating ten glasses of beer before a clapping audience, Kit feels nothing not the thrill of performing for an enthusiastic crowd. No inconvenient memories, no wondering what Lauri may be doing or feeling. No quiet, soul-aching moments when Kit realises that he abandoned a man who cares about him without even a one-sentence note of explanation. No facing the bitter, terrible truth that what Kit once thought of as freedom has left him broke and idling in the dregs of Raugue, casting flash and trickery in return for a hard bed and cold meals. No weighty doubt, no bone-deep misery, no guilt, no confusion.

He's a man who exists on stage, liberated from the wreck of the rest of his life.

He's a man who knows that temporary escape will never be enough.

Kit shudders, running the toe of his boot over one of the man's legs. The man isn't pretty, but he'll do for distraction if he leaves his dogs in the hallway. "Flash is my work. I suppose it depends what kind of magic you need? Wards? Protection spells?" He hesitates, boot stroking calf, for nobody stares under the table to watch what he does with his feet. "Perhaps you should explain to me what you want upstairs, away from the noise?"

Speaking in hints still feels like peddling deception, but while the Crooked Door offers a comparative paradise, even Kit doesn't proposition a man in ways other people can't misinterpret.

The swordsman jerks his chair backwards, the legs shrieking as they scrape over the floor. "*No*. I don't do that." He stands, his brow and lips twisted into a terrific scowl, as one of the servers—staring at the wolfhound—stops to top up Kit's mug on his way to a table by the door. "Good luck with the work. Stop juggling the poor cats."

Kit stares, gaping.

How can anyone not Astreuch react that way? Why? Is it Kit's hands? Something he said? Why ... no, it doesn't matter. He won't go upstairs alone now that he's decided to seek companionship. He just needs to wait, glance at someone promising, talk a little. Easy. Kit doesn't claim mastery over social interaction, but a broad smile, feigned cheerfulness and a flirtatious willingness go a fair way to smooth the cracks provoked by his divergence. Picking up men for his bed is one of the few non-magical things at which Kit considers himself *good*. One refusal doesn't change that.

Perhaps it's the drag, perhaps it's the awful food, perhaps it's the rejection, perhaps it's the stranger's accent reminding him of Lauri and perhaps it's four months of devouring guilt, for Kit leans forwards, rests his forehead on the table and weeps.

Even as he starts, shaking, he wants to stop. People must be staring, the regulars and the servers and Elizabet—none of whom will ask, all of whom will judge. One thing to sob in his room, in those odd, uncomfortable moments endured between tipsiness and drunkenness;

another to perform tomorrow knowing tonight's punters saw him blubber! What chance does Kit have of finding a night's companionship if they think him just a crying drunk?

His spine crawls as though their eyes bore through his clothing, but Kit, gasping under the onslaught of crushing sadness, can't make himself sit up, never mind stop.

The floorboards creak. A long, lean hand closes about Kit's right shoulder. "Outside. *Not* upstairs. Come."

He doesn't understand; he doesn't care. Kit gulps and pushes himself up from the table, stumbling. He isn't drunk, because can think, he can count the items on the table, he *can't stop thinking*. Kit's feet, however, possess a giddy inability to move where he thinks he means to place them; the legs of tables, chairs and one enormous dog feel like a tangle of traps waiting to snap closed. Just dizziness, he decides: from crying, from the drag even though he ate. Isn't the drag why he's crying? Isn't this only the moodiness and instability that comes from too much magic worked in too short a time?

His body contains energy like a volcano contains magma, words the tools with which Kit accesses, manipulates and directs such power. Word magic requires less mystery and more mathematics in its working than people imagine; even the most practiced of magicians can fail to accurately estimate, tally and replace the sugars consumed in spellcasting. What mind works well when deprived of fuel?

He isn't drunk, so Kit reaches for his mug.

The stranger pulls him up off the chair, huffing slightly, before Kit's fingers close around the handle. "Leave it. Outside. Now."

His button skids off the table and vanishes into the crack between the dirty boards underfoot.

He doesn't mean to lean against the swordsman, but Kit's feet and knees lack steadiness—just the drag—and the stranger smells good. Metal polish, leather, lavender, stinging tea-tree, horse and greasy lanolin blur into something clean and outdoorsy. Natural. Homely. Nothing like Lauri and his merchant blend of expensive oils, ink, paper and idle evenings—once exciting and thrilling when compared to Kit's

familiar worlds of Grandmother, Amelia and country. Nothing like Lauri.

Tears roll down Kit's face, soaking into the collar of his shirt.

Reality hits him with an unwanted, stomach-churning clarity: when did he last wash said shirt ... or his coat? Even the absurd fear of smelling like a pub, however, isn't enough to strengthen his knees, to let Kit push himself up and away from the man guiding him through the bewildering leg-maze of tables, chairs and patrons. Even knowing what people think when a man leans against another in public view can't make Kit stand—and if the swordsman allows this intimacy without heed for the Astreuch and their cursed ability to read suggestion into anything, why did he push Kit away?

He sniffs, his right arm pressed into the horseman's chest, the left flapping.

Two dogs trail them out of the taproom.

Outside, the night free of the bitter, sour warmth generated by fire and body, he shivers. No salt, no seaweed, no harbour; inland, Astreut looks on the Stormcoast's gulf ports with seething envy. Instead, Kit breathes a perfume of piss, manure, cattle and a ghost of eucalyptus, the stars obscured by Raugue's countless burning chimneys. The road outside the Creaking Door leads to Arsh, Ihrne and the foothills of the Crackenbush; the cattle market and slaughterhouses sit across the way, conveniently located for traders, merchants, stockmen and mercenaries—and locals who don't have the means to live in a less pungent location.

Raugue isn't grand, for all that Astreut tells stories of wandering saints and the city's largest church in an attempt to burnish shingled roofs with sacred resonance. It's a crossroads, a tired offcomer settlement grown up around inland trade routes, a place of dour practicality and restriction masquerading as civilisation. It's a sprawling, smoky city of human-wrought artifice that, having consumed the green wealth of Raugue's cradling valley, now turns to devour the bush-shrouded foothills.

Bad country for a man called by Crow.

Good country for a man sundered of everything else.

“I don’t—” he murmurs, as his companion guides them across the yard towards the stable. “I don’t understand.”

The horseman guides Kit down off his chest with his left hand; Kit lands on a bale of rough, mouldy-sweet hay. That explains, he supposes, why it sits outside the stable. It doesn’t explain why the other man settles beside him, stretching his long legs over the straw-strewn cobblestones. Lights shine onto the street and from the Crooked Door’s windows, but this corner—beside the stable and away from the backhouse—provides as much late-evening quiet as is possible in this corner of Raugue. Music echoes from inside and horses rustle behind him, while a green witchlight hangs from the eaves, but compared to the taproom, he sits in an dim, blissfully *still* silence.

Dark’s smoothing shadows makes the breaths of dogs and men so much easier for Kit to stop noticing.

“Esher. Esher Hill. He. Some folks call me Esh.” He points first to the herder lying across his lap and then to the wolfhound, settling itself down beside his legs, a lean head resting atop a crossed boot. “Berta. She. The pony dog’s Bill, he. Berta, *greet*. You?”

Berta bounds into a sitting position and offers Kit her paw, her dark eyes fixed on his face and her feathery tail smacking into Esher’s ribs and the stable wall.

Kit, amused and confused, reaches out to shake Berta’s warm, silky paw. She lowers her nose to sniff his hand, licks his thumb and, once he releases her, settles back on Esher’s lap. Her master croons something inaudible and gives her a soft slap on the flanks, her left side an uneven blotch of black over rump and part of her ribs. Even as Kit watches, she rolls to bare part of her belly, and Esher promptly scrubs his fingers through her thick coat.

They put him in mind of his cousin Amelia, a woman never to be found without at least one cat. An animal she’ll never stop complaining about, even though Amelia looks most at ease when sitting or sleeping with something furry spread out over her skirts or quilt.

Esher Hill seems cut from the same cloth.

“Kit March. He. Kit, usually.” Once he went by Christopher, until Grandmother found him sleeping too often by the kitchen fire, but a shroudname can and should change as often as required. Christopher sounds too long and unwieldy for a man most kindly described as “short”, anyway! “I don’t have dogs. My cousin always has a cat, but I’ve never ended up with an animal.” He hesitates, thinking that Amelia warms most to Kit after he says something complimentary about her feline companions, even though he sees them, at best, as beclawed demons. “Berta seems clever.”

“She’s smarter than most people. Probably smarter than you.” Esher smiles down at the herder, working his left hand over her belly and flanks in slow, steady strokes.

Kit waits, but Esher offers no following question or repartee, seemingly engrossed in his dog. He doesn’t look Kit in the face, so odd a courtesy from a stranger, so shouldn’t he realise the difficulty in a conversational partner’s responding to such a flat, finite comment? Kit wipes his eyes with his sleeve, bewildered. Esher all but dragged Kit out here without indication of intent, so why must he direct the conversation?

He draws a deep breath and tips his head back against the wall, shivering. Despite the fragrance emanating from the backhouse and the cattle yards, the autumn-sharp night leaves him a little less giddy, a little closer to alert. Far less overwhelmed. Should he head back inside, slink upstairs, send down for another meal, go to bed and forget this cursed night? Do his best to worry about tomorrow—well, tomorrow?

“That the Green in your voice?”

He jumps, breathes, nods. Esher uses the offcomers’ name, but since they have no right to know truenames, Kit provides no correction. “Yes. Born and raised in Greenstone. Now here, through some fluke of fate.”

“Dead Horse Hill. Between Malvade, the Wold and Astreut. Northern edge of the Great Southern Plain.”

“Never heard of it,” Kit says for want of anything else: Esher doesn’t make for easy small talk! “You don’t drawl as badly as a Malvadan.”

“No.” Esher keeps his silence for another agonising moment.

Kit, with nothing else to think about and too many things he’d rather avoid acknowledging, chews on the inside of his cheek and wonders why Esher sits so close, thigh brushing thigh. People baffle in their behaviour, but Kit has learnt to view them in terms of rules, nonsensical but nonetheless possessed of an illogical consistency. If he strips rationality from the equation, he can parse, with reasonable accuracy, what people mean by what they do. Esher, though? He doesn’t act or talk like a man set on seduction, so why allow something so similar to that which he before objected?

“Why are you trying to ... bury something away, I think? Because ... it doesn’t work.”

Kit leans away from Esher, angrier at himself, at being someone to whom one asks such a thing, than at the question. “If you don’t want me, why do you care? What makes you think you can go up to a stranger and ask that?”

He should stand, walk away, depart. Instead, Kit rubs his hands over his forearms until the fabric’s texture changes from greasy worsted to something lumpy and crusty. Old stew, perhaps? He scratches it off, shuddering. While he’s scraped together some coin, the season turns fast towards winter and buttons won’t buy a good cloak. Wasn’t he going to buy himself a coat and anything else he needed? He left Malvade with a purse and a new horse ... only to find himself at the Crooked Door, his horse lamed and his purse empty, his feet so mired in Raugue’s sucking dregs that he can’t even leave an annoying stranger!

A drowning man doesn’t drown because the water creeps up on him by degrees, so why can’t Kit make himself search out something better?

“Easy.” Esher speaks in a soft, breathy exhalation. “I’m singular, not heartless. I’m not interested in you or anyone, but I won’t ignore a crying man. Decency doesn’t just come with *interest*.”

The last word holds the bitter stress of long-ago or oft-repeated wounds, but Kit stares, his annoyance fading in the wake of such an odd, unexpected comment. Singular?

Confusion must show on his face, for Esher repeats himself: “I’m singular. And if you’re crying because I said no, there’s something wrong.”

Kit fights to find his voice, his throat oddly taut. “Singular? What do you mean by it?”

Esher frowns, his eyebrows thick atop a narrow face. Sharp bones crown hollowed cheeks, and it occurs to Kit that the layers of Esher’s coat, shirt and gloves lend him more bulk than he rightfully owns. “What it sounds like. Me. Alone.” He runs the tip of his tongue over his bottom lip. “I don’t mean entirely alone. I mean ... that my dogs and horse, and my kin, and my friends ... they’re enough. I mean that I don’t feel the pull for anything else. Nothing romantic. Not people *intimately* together. That’s what it is.” He gives a short, definite nod. “Berta, Bill and Bess are always enough.”

Kit’s hands don’t so much quiver as vibrate, even when he grasps his knees in a desperate attempt to hold them still. He draws a breath in the hope to even his voice, for never in his wildest imaginings did he anticipate this conversation. “There’s a *word* for that?”

Singular? It isn’t true to say that Kit holds no intimate interest in people. The concept, though, holds resonance enough to excite and frighten.

“There’s a word for anything if you look long enough.” Esher shakes his head as if baffled. “I know these words aren’t well known. I didn’t know them. But you’re a ... you’re ... *educated*, aren’t you?”

Even in the dull light of the yard, he doesn’t look directly at Kit’s face, shifting his gaze from various points over the top and to the side. Close enough to suggest an intent to look, or at least the interest conveyed with or expected from eye contact, without ever meeting Kit’s eyes.

At first he thought this kindness, odd because it betrays recognition, but now Kit wonders. Esher speaks with the stilted rigidity of a man who does so because it’s necessary, not desirable. The way his left hand never stops pushing, flattening and teasing Berta’s thick coat is, at best, a more-permissible variation on Kit’s button. On first glance, Esher may look little different to any other gruff mercenary, but Kit has seen

too many pass through the Crooked Door to think himself wrong in this.

Divergent folk know their own, even when they hide its obvious facets in an unrelenting, similar-minded world.

“I am a magician. Learnt from books and everything. Grandmother had a library. She thought ... I should find it useful to know offcomer magic, too.” Kit exhales, trying to calm the shake in his voice and ease the catch in his throat. “I left school after the first term. My teachers were philosophically disinclined to answer my questions.”

“You talk like...” Esher trails off, his eyelids flickering, his expression blank.

“I’m a magician,” Kit says carelessly. “We like language, even if we must learn it on our own. I just pretend that I’m certain on all the pronunciation.” He exhales, still feeling that he’s risking everything to ask the question ... and then he laughs: a rough, spine-aching snort. Risking everything? What has he left to risk? “Is there a word—not an insult, a descriptor like gay or short—if you just want people for the bedding, the sex? And anything else isn’t right, even though it shouldn’t feel that way, because...”

Does a word exist for the fear and confusion that saw Kit leave a man who loved him, a man who planned to marry him, a man who deserves better than Kit’s unexplained rejection?

He’s always known, in the way rarely spoken outright but suggested in story and fable, that peace and happiness come from desiring someone in a way beyond sexual fidelity or commitment alone.

He’s always known, in the way rarely spoken outright but suggested in story and fable, that to be at a loss to do so makes him something indescribably, horrifyingly other.

“If you don’t want the romantic parts, that kind of closeness or the marriage that follows?” Kit sucks in a shaking, gasping breath. “If you’ve tried and you *can’t*...? You just want the sex and everything after that goes wrong, because that’s where everything feels wrong? *Is there a word?*”

Kit doesn't know how he ends up with his hands fisted in Esher's coat, sobbing into his chest. Nor does Kit know why Esher rests his left arm around Kit's shoulders as though content in such an embrace, save for that frustrated declaration of decency. Once the tears spill, nothing can hold them back; Kit isn't sure he wants to. Never has he spoken such words aloud. Never has he held the shred of possibility that someone will listen to him voice something he knows to be awful and understand without condemnation or criticism. Never has he felt more than the suffocating fear that Kit's lack leaves him void of qualities both natural and important.

Void of qualities profoundly, fundamentally human.

If he has a word, if this is a named experience like his sense of gender and the shape of his mind, maybe—just maybe—Kit isn't a monster.

Well before Lauri, Kit liked men for time spent in clothes-off togetherness. Complications always exist in such a pursuit, especially in Astreut, but they never feel beyond his ability to comprehend if not navigate. Sex alone bears nothing of the incomprehensible terror that he must return a shape of connection and love he doesn't feel, a shape a good man expects and deserves. It's just sex! One colour of interest feels an ordinary part of Kit, the other an insurmountable mountain of air-stealing height—but when everyone else breathes without difficulty, why can't he? What makes him so different that he can't even pretend at courting and marriage, can't accept those panic-inducing expectations of a lifetime's love?

A stranger's awkward words shatter a lie so common that he never stopped to question its falsehood.

"I'm sorry," he rasps. "I just..."

"I know," Esher murmurs, his throat and chest shifting as he speaks, "what it feels to ... learn, suddenly, that someone else can name what you are. I know." He breathes, a long exhalation brushing Kit's neck and hair. "I don't know ordinary words. I only know the academic ones from the ... the priests, but how do I tell people I'm 'asexual' and 'aromantic'? They don't mean anything. When you can love as you want—outside of Astreut—and there's all the different, ordinary names

for the ways they know? I wanted that. So I took a word that sounds like what it means. Singular.” Esher shifts his left hand up onto Kit’s shoulder and upper arm, working his fingers over the fabric in slow, heavy strokes. “Maybe you just prefer ‘aromantic’, not experiencing romantic attraction? I don’t, either. And ... I do, sometimes, feel sexual attraction, but not often, so I usually say ‘asexual’ to people for that, if I’m explaining everything. Easier that way.”

Kit’s teeth ache, his throat pulses and his head pounds, tears pouring from his eyes like rain on cracked salt pans.

Nothing in the world can make his mouth, just then, frame words. For the first time in months, he feels possessed of hope.

“This it? The not knowing?”

Several punters leave the Crooked Door before Kit can slow his tears for long enough to stammer, but Esher doesn’t seem to care. He sits, Kit’s body nestled close, with one long left arm draped around his shoulder, Esher’s fingers rubbing Kit’s forearm through sleeve and glove. Berta creeps forwards to rest her warm, heavy head on Kit’s knee, as though mimicking her master’s embrace; even Kit can’t deny the pull of her dark eyes, dropping one hand to stroke her ears.

He weeps on a stranger and his dog, and Kit can’t find any good reason to stop.

Finally, his breath whistling through a blocked nose, Kit fumbles his way through his story. Lauri, a kind and decent man who gave Kit a ring and the promise of a future. Lauri, for whom Kit so desperately wanted to master the married, ringbonded life. Lauri, abandoned by Kit without apology or explanation. Lauri, subject to Kit’s confusion and cowardice by a lack of feeling for which he had no names beyond “cruel” and “heartless”.

“I told myself I was free,” he whispers, “and I end up here, like ... like this.”

Esher, in his turn, doesn’t tell stories. He explains words, alternating between repeating memorised definitions and more halting, casual interpretations; at times he stops, raises his left hand and jerks it through the air before them, as if frustrated by something misstated or beyond

his ability to enunciate. Aromantic. Asexual. Allosexual. Attraction. All outlined in his terse, deliberate voice, a scowl creasing his brow and pulling at his lip scar as he labours his way from one concept to the next.

His speech lacks gentleness, but Esher always returns his hand to Kit's arm, his fingertips steady and gentle as he works them over shoulder and sleeve.

Kit knows himself a master of magic's languages, able to wield, twist and manipulate the arcane subtleties conveyed with terms, phrases and even grammar. Esher reveals his possession of a language as arcane and as powerful: one concerned with identifying the ways humans feel, and don't feel, about other humans—a language set on contextualising and encapsulating the unspoken rhythms of why people behave as they do.

Aromantic.

Allosexual.

Kit feels as entranced, as cursed with that overwhelming need to master something yet beyond his comprehension, as was his young boy-self when gifted Grandmother's spell book.

He knows, as he knew on that first tantalising glimpse of the pages housing esoteric possibility, that he wants, *needs*, more.

“My sister is aromantic, just a different shape. She desires people romantically and sexually in the beginning, but that romantic love doesn't last for her.” Esher's exhalation is too long and slow to be anything but intentional, but the movements of his hand and fingers don't falter. “My kin ... I learnt that there's a few relatives, dead now, who didn't do attraction the way people think we're supposed to. It's just not talked about, *yet*, so we don't know we're not alone ... that we exist, we're here.”

Is it wrong to feel as though Kit loves this horseman stranger? He loves him, in an odd, dizzying way, for the gift of words more wondrous than any ring, house or husband. Loves a man who finds talking difficult and speaks as much through touch and closeness, yet gifts both to Kit despite knowing nothing of him. Loves, perhaps, a man who must

have better things to do than spend a chill night outside, educating and reassuring a sobbing stranger?

Aromantic.

Allosexual.

Why Esher, though? Why didn't anyone else offer this language as a potential option for how one may be human? With knowledge, Kit wouldn't have hurt Lauri, wouldn't have forced himself to pretend at something he can't want, wouldn't have denied his own needs. Why didn't he hear this word spoken by teacher or elder before years spent waiting for alien feelings to bloom, before months spent fearing his own truth, before weeks spent floundering in a toxic mire of confusion, guilt and hate?

Why didn't someone tell him that "adulthood" doesn't have to mean "loving partnership" or "marriage"?

Grandmother gave him the words "divergent" and "shift" so long ago that Kit can't recollect ignorance of either. She gave him stewardship over the sacred names Crow entrusted to their line of singers and tellers; she gave him the truenames, and the history embedded in those names, of the land and trees that midwived his birth. While Kit later learnt the more academic "autistic" and "trans", terms bearing a shroudname's usefulness in navigating and educating offcomers, he did so inside the musty, paper-scented wondrousness of her library. Names spoken aloud, names scratched into the earth, names spoken only before crackling fires and beneath distant stars: Grandmother shared them all.

She, a woman of so many names, couldn't break this absence of language.

"Where did you find this? Learn this? A school or university?"

Esher shakes his head. "I only went to our village school. No. I ... I knew a priest. They were aromantic and made a study of it." His hand slips down Kit's arm to halt at his, gently prising Kit's free from the shirt before straightening his fingers to loosen the tendons and muscle. "I suppose it's my ... I'm meant to share what I learnt."

Kit bites back a groan at the release of unrealised stiffness, leaning against Esher's shoulder. In that moment, more than for any man since

Lauri, Kit yearns to reach up, to kiss the man holding him, to take him to bed, to find himself inside Esher's skin—a deep, boiling need about discovery's wonderment, not distraction's desperation. So easy to turn his head, to stroke that stubbled jaw, to express a sudden craving for a man who not only treats Kit with gentleness but understands what he can't offer. To express a craving for the first man with whom sex can be safely, non-romantically intimate.

How much courage does Esher need to state rules the world won't cherish and offer intimacy as though his limitations will be unquestionably accepted, even with two watchful dogs? This generosity fits no rules that Kit knows of the world ... rules that don't encompass Kit, never mind Esher himself.

Does Esher write his own rules about expression and connection?

Can Kit learn how?

They sit in silence for minutes, hours or lifetimes. Wisps of cloud drift over the moon, the dogs lie still, Esher's fingers speak what his words can't, and Kit works to push away that bewildering longing.

Finally, he sniffs and risks speaking: "All this isn't what you meant to do when seeking a magician for an ... expedition, you said?"

"Yes. My sister's dying." Esher skips through those words with unwonted haste, as if he can't bear to speak them. "There's a magical ... thing, a relic, that can save her if I fetch it for the Greys. Across the Divide. I've a crew already, some of them magic workers. You work like you're quick with the words." His breaths quicken. "The more people ... maybe."

"The *Divide*?" Kit pushes himself up and away. "You want to go across the *Divide*?" Esher releases Kit's hand; he turns to face Esher, staring. There's only one place on the other side of the Divide, a wall of magic surrounding a region left so warped and distorted by the Change that the elves separated it from the world and no human disagreed. "Say it as it is! You want to go into the Gast?"

Did Esher say this before? How did Kit miss that?

"Yes."

“You want to go into the *Gast* for a relic?” The last remnants of desire fade as though Kit plunges, gasping, into an iced-over water trough. “Do you have a death wish?”

Berta lifts her head, glances at Kit as if pondering the reason for his loud slew of questions and settles herself back onto Esher’s lap.

Esher doesn’t answer.

Any artefact procured from the *Gast* will be priceless, but Esher must be talking about something beyond monetary value—for the Grey Mages, a powerful and mysterious sect of magic workers, can afford anything attainable by mere coin. Only one thing Kit can think of justifies enduring the *Gast*’s horrors, referenced in countless shreds of stories from before the Change: a power source, a device long-ago magicians made to bleed energy off universes. A device with which the Greys can save anyone if they still breathe and more besides; a device that allows a magic worker to cast without selling souls to demons or consuming their own fat and tissue.

A device that provides power without cost or limitation.

Any magician, witch or sorcerer must desire—with feverish, frenetic longing—such an object. Why shouldn’t the Greys make this deal? It’s quite sensible, in a way riddled with dispassionate cruelty, to offer a man seeking to save a dying sister her life in trade. Esher has no reason to find an artefact—be it the source Kit imagines or any other lost, ancient object—only to then sell it to the highest bidder. He has every reason to return to the Greys.

Kit thinks he knows the answer, given Esher’s proposition of a magician performing in a worker’s pub, but he asks to be certain: “And your crew doesn’t include a Grey Mage or two, does it...?”

Esher’s short, strangled grunt-laugh provides all the answer one needs.

Kit slumps against the stable wall, again bewildered. No, the Greys are happy to offer a life as incentive for another to risk danger on their behalf, and Esher’s lip-twisted expression doesn’t suggest any lack of awareness. Doesn’t he realise, then, that it’s kinder to support and comfort his sister in her last days, rather than his dying within the *Gast*

only for his sister to follow him into whatever afterlife their beliefs dictate? What of his parents, his family, his kin? Surely it's worse to lose two children rather than one?

"Why do you risk your life to save hers?" They're awful words, and Kit isn't surprised when Esher's scowl deepens. "Go home and be with her in her last days! Don't give your kin two corpses to mourn!"

"She saved my life a few years ago." Esher bites off each word, his left hand clenched in on itself. "I need to save hers."

Kit lets his eyes trail over Esher's body, considering. Tidy, clothed as though accustomed to travel, armed, tall but too thin, accompanied by the biggest dog Kit has ever seen up close. If Esher isn't a magic worker, his sword and animals will do little to protect him in the Gast. He did, however, see beyond the illusions in Kit's art. "Do you have magic? Do you usually carry out this sort of work?"

Esher sighs and rests his right hand on Berta's back, his gloved fingertips sinking into her black-and-white fur. "Stockman. Drover. Spent a few years working cattle through the Crackenbush. I've been up to the Divide, this side of the Gast. I know its ... hum." He presses his lips together, brow still furrowed. "Just a couple of camp spells. My sister's the witch, not me."

Kit bites down on the inside of his left cheek, recalling Grandmother's stories—of venomous creatures half snake and half vine, wandering spirits, and countless beasts distorted by magic into ravaging predators of fang and fur. If these horrors are described by those few who return, who knows how many more threats lurk in that forested hell? A man who herds cows means to enter one of the most dangerous places in the West and survive with two dogs and a sword? Yes, Bill, for all his present placidity, owns a wolfhound's impressive jaws, but the Gast must throw at him larger, more vicious monsters. Berta is just a sheepdog who shakes paws!

"I do flash," Kit whispers. "How are *you* supposed to survive?"

Esher crooks his head, as if aware of the thoughts behind Kit's eyes. "We aren't as useless as you think."

Kit flaps both hands in frustration, trying to imagine Amelia—the closest person he has to a sister—venturing into the Gast for his sake. He can't, no more than he can see himself attempting this for her. She'll tie him up in her cellar, with her cat guarding the door, before he gets past making the suggestion! "It's the *Gast*, Hill! You realise that you're going to get your dogs killed, if you somehow manage to avoid it yourself?"

Esher pulls away from Kit, wrapping both arms around Berta's body in a reaction so childish—so odd in a gruff, quiet man—that Kit can only blink in shock. The sheepdog turns her head and licks him on the cheek, but Esher's unblinking eyes rest on the rise and fall of the wolfhound's ribs.

Bill lies asleep, stretched out across Esher's feet.

"You clearly love your dogs," Kit says in an attempt at apology, thinking that beer alone doesn't make his stomach twist so savagely. Why should he feel guilt over speaking the truth? Yes, Esher has given him the beginnings of language, the hope of comprehension, but shouldn't such kindness be repaid by honesty? "If you do this—"

"I need to save her. I have no other way." Esher rests his cheek against Berta's back, his head facing towards the yard, his words and shoulders as stiff and unyielding as the wall behind them. "You'll have thrice the going rate, held by the Greys, so if I don't ... you, or your family, will be paid. Standard risk bonuses, standard contract. Have you a horse?"

People don't go into the Gast if they wish to live a long, content life, but Esher has gathered a group of people—more than one!—intent on doing the same. How? Are they all like Kit? Lost and broken, saying yes in gratitude for rescue?

"The Greys," Kit says desperately, because all the rules of human decency say that Esher should have abandoned Kit in his weeping and therefore he owes Esher *something*, "can't be trusted. Don't you think that if this could be done safely, they'd go themselves? Don't you think they're taking advantage of you, asking for a price you shouldn't have to pay? Go home and be with your sister—please. Go home."

"I need to save her. I have no other way."

He'll die when unnamed demons possess his bones and breath, die when a plague burns through his body in a single night, die when venomous plant-beasts suck his veins dry or die, broken, at the bottom of a ditch. He'll die in more ways than Kit can imagine. Esher Hill will die in the Gast.

"You want another magician," Kit says slowly, every iota of rationality screeching at the thought, "to go with you."

"I've two magicians and a scholar." Esher doesn't move, his words slightly muffled by Berta's coat. "The Roxleighs, Sarie and Marie, served in the Astreuch army as casters before I met them at Sir—met them. Faiza spent years studying pre-Change artefacts. They know what to look for. And our guide, Indigo, has run the Gast before. Returned. And Bill, Berta and Bess."

Five people, two magic workers. Nowhere near enough.

Amelia will name Kit by a thousand different curses, and he will deserve all of them. Yet he sits in the company of a man who rescued him from grief and loneliness, a man who offered up the words that shape and save a life. What does Kit with his days but smother guilt and entertain crowds? If refusal means returning to the taproom, downing another beer, bedding a man, facing another horrific morning only to endure the hours before performance's distraction, why bother?

If he dies from monstrous magic or dies from drinking and misery, what's the difference?

He owns new words, words that may explain, words that may rebuild, words that may make him real and whole. One day, grandmothers will give the word *aromantic* to their children without hesitation or consideration—just another way in which some people are, another identity to consider. Esher, though, had no reason to begin the conversation that led to his gifting of language. Isn't that worth recompense when Kit has no reason to remain in Raugue?

Will his magic make enough of a difference? Will that help a drover and his dogs survive the horrifying? Kit doesn't lack for skills in flash and trickery, but is he good enough off the stage? Can he trust Esher's

evaluation of him as more than the desperate hope of a man with few options?

He can't make the situation worse, can he?

"I'm divergent," Kit murmurs into the dark. "Autistic, in book language. Better at people and talking than most, but I am. If I weren't ... if I were completely sober, I'd never be in a taproom. Too much *movement*."

For an awful moment, he can't hear anything but breathing, rustling and a fading snatch of music from inside the Crooked Door.

"What am I supposed to say to the ... obvious? I suppose that if there's something you need, we'll figure it out?" Esher raises his head, a slight frown creasing his brow. "It might be hard for you, if you like talking. The Roxleighs sign. Maybe you can talk to Faiza. Are you saying yes?"

Kit yawns, beset by a sudden, exhausted wooziness. "I don't have a horse. It lamed, so I sold it."

The Gast takes Kit away from Raugue, away from his stifling loneliness, away from a city lacking truename and song. Crow has given him a direction to follow, and Kit isn't so far gone that he doesn't recognise—as the red priests speak—his next step on the path. Raugue doesn't need a jongleur, but Esher needs a magician.

Kit March: magician, divergent, shift, Crow-speaker ... aromantic?

It doesn't feel comfortable or understood, but it does feel possible.

He has a beginning, the book placed in his hands. Where else can Kit find a lived understanding, knowledge deeper than cursory definitions, but through working with another aromantic—one with an aromantic sister who learnt the word from an aromantic priest? If there's anyone able to teach the subtleties of this new language in ways beyond cursory definitions, isn't it Esher? Isn't that, entwined with a desperate gratitude and a yearning to escape but no other direction, reason enough?

Who knows, too, what stories he may find in the Gast?

"Are you saying yes?"

"Yes." Whatever happens, Kit will never tell Amelia about a decision she'll only lambast as foolhardy. If he survives for long enough to not

tell her, that is. “Yes. I’ll go upstairs and get my things.” Grab his gear, down a last mug of beer to celebrate, pen a quick note to Lauri and pay Elizabet to send it once Kit has vanished into the bush—and that last has a delicious, if cowardly, appeal. He can give an owed explanation, unfettered by fear of Lauri’s reply. “I’ll just be a few moments.”

Esher clasps Kit’s shoulder with his long-fingered hand. “No worries, March.”

No worries? When Kit can’t find a reason for Esher’s willingness to risk his life for his sister? When Kit knows better than to trust the Grey Mages? When the frond of knowledge’s temptation unfurls in his heart? He laughs, shaking his head. Yet, for the first time since leaving Lauri, Kit’s choice feels right. Dangerous, absurd, frightening and inexplicable, but right.

He spent the last two months trying to keep from thinking on the world he left behind.

He wonders how well he can think, now, on the road that leads ahead.

# 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

## kit and amelia march

Ringbound

Absence of Language

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 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**.