

Conversation Pieces
Volume 61

If Not Skin
Collected Transformations

Toby MacNutt





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*With gratitude to Mattie, Eli, Thomas, and all the other
poets who have helped me arrive.*

I want to be the wind that strokes your cheek. I want to be the light fading from the hills as the autumn days get shorter, shorter. I want to be the collective thought process of all the zooplankton in all the seas. I want to be a stone dropped by a glacier, untouched for millennia and then carved by a stream. I want to be the familiar sounds half-heard outside your window as you fall asleep. I want to be the rain.

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Chatterbones, Chatterbones

*Chatterbones, chatterbones,
tell us what the clouds know.*

So heavy they churn around ropey, bulging scars
bruised dark, trace them, knotted seams of air that
warp and twist
the sky, the earth, the stones—they stir and wake
unquiet bones.

Chatterbones, chatterbones

See the skin stretched taut at knuckles and noon
blurred by the buzz, we shiver yet before the gale,
sing discord
into the weeping, the ache, the shakes:
at last, the fever-storm breaks.

Rain.

Green Thumbs

I remember that day he burst into bloom
in my arms: all at once,
my every sense redolent
with color, with the crush of delicate petals,
with the impossible scent
of a season worn in flesh.

We'd both known he itched for spring—
his buds scab-like, nubbled and tight.
They tugged distortions in his skin,
streaked already with silver-green stretch marks.
He's carried them for longer than I've known him:
slept out one midsummer eve, between the stones,
woke up mushroom-ringed, palms sap-sticky,
all over smeared with grass stains. Changed.
The leaves didn't grow in till the following spring.

He blooms only rarely.
I had never seen him blossom;
I'd felt him flush with summer sun,
hazel eyes flashing green, watched him
darken and hollow into autumn,
when the sweet grass and warm salt taste of him
took on a bitter edge, like walnuts or almonds.
(I could not get enough, hungry before winter.)

He bruised like wintergreen, like pine,

pungent beneath my lips and fingers
and wore the stains fading green to brown to gone
in the short days' half-light.

I could feel the nascent sprouts, still shrouded
beneath his skin, like rows of extra vertebrae,
like peas in pod, like pebbles underwater.

I licked one still buried: he shivered, pressed back
to me for more. They broke the skin in time,
so tender, soft and green between my lips.

Grazed with teeth, their sap was stinging-sweet,
and clear as lymph.

I was holding him one sleepy morning,
his body all green hope—budded tight,
save for his palms, his soles, his scars
like chalk-cut anchors on his chest.

I stroked the lines of him, curve-studded,
And he bloomed.

His skin exhaled a gust of dawn-gold pollen,
my lips and chest and lashes dusted
in the span of one reflexive blink.

He opened a thousand blossoming eyes,
a cascade of tessellating petals
twisting toward me as if to the sun—
straining, calling, dazzling.

I nuzzled one flower, pressed past
its stamens—twisted, curved, alien.

Pistils reached out to tickle my cheeks,
and I breathed him in:

here was his lemon balm of summer,
steeped now in bergamot; there basil,
there peppery nasturtium, copper-salted;

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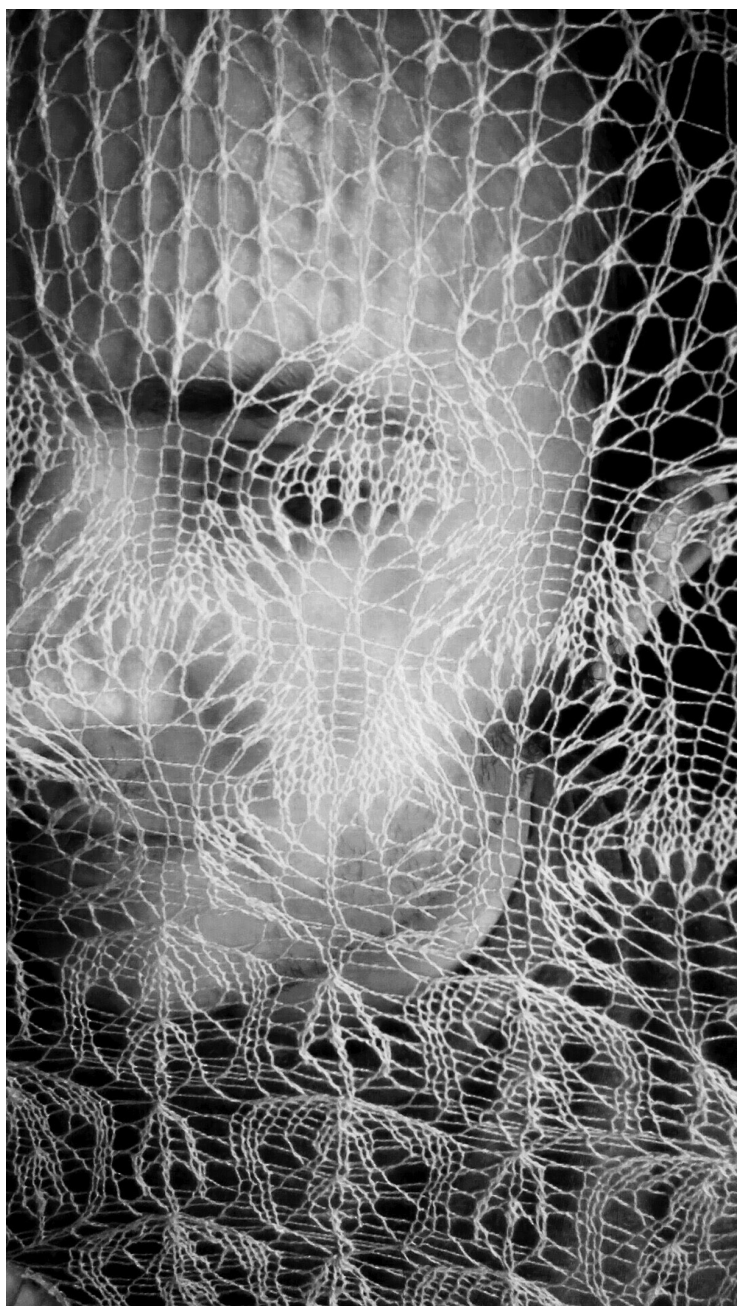
here crocus, sage, honey—
and still beneath all those, his skin,
the musk of morning.

I brought my pollen-streaked face
to his flowered one. I found his lips
(no longer bud-stubbled), kissed them,
tasting at last his nectar,
my ambrosia. I felt him smile,
as he twined around me, pulled me deeper
into his wild garden.

In the summer to come he is plump,
laden with swollen, ripening fruits.

One lies heavy on my tongue,
smooth and shade-cool.

I suck it gently from its stem,
before I take that first succulent bite
and dissolve,
awash in the taste
of our bliss.



The Somatic Market

I wake up silent and empty—the bees had swarmed off in the night. No more would their honey drip down upon my tongue; there is no echoing buzz, now, in my hollow places. I cut the orphaned comb and scrape wax carefully from my unglazed terra-cotta, leather joints creaking. I pour one measure of white sand and two of saltwater into each foot, and go to market.



The air is thick with craft, by ear and nose, but I want no mandrake bread, no pomegranate, no dream-salt, and I am keeping good time. I pass up shadowy mice, riddles, pocket seas, and green brittle sunlight. The sweets seller by the miniature herbalist offers me a sympathetic smile and a wax-paper bag, into which I scoop ginseng puppies, white lightning caramels, and basil-amethyst drops for the children. She recommends a bubblestone—black-berry—for my condition, on the house. I accept. I break its shell, and suck; it fizzes in my mouth.

Today I ignore the metallic chorus of dragonflies, though I am tempted as ever by the glass beetles drawing circles in their little tray of coal-dust. I wish for my beeswax to return, as I push through the musician's quarter—it is only noise to me. With my fingers in my ears, the violet-tasting gases from the bubblestone waft higher,

condensing against the cool of my pate, still faintly wax-smearred (its curves were hard to reach).



The beekeeper is not here, and I don't know what I need. I wedge myself into a quiet corner, just a gap between stalls. I try to think. I cannot remember. It is hard without my bees, their patterns, their hum, their honey on my tongue.

A vendor. *Lost your mind?*

I have. The words taste purple, though the bubblestone is gone, dissolved.

But you are growing a new one? No, I shake my head. *Looks like a sky, to me. Here, breathe,* and I oblige, exhaling into the glass mask. She draws it away: it is full of tiny drifting clouds, in shifting shades of lavender.

The windmonger is at the corner of Green Alley and Parchment. In her hand are a score of seed-sized, sky-blue pearls, iridescent as the summer, and as warm. In thanks, I cross her palm with silver and a kiss.



I chase the wind home.



The children gather moss and twigs, build a nest in my occipital bulge; in a fortnight's time I feel the egg-pearls hatch. It is dawn. There is a murmuration in my mind and lilac on my tongue. I hum a morning song and lick clean a spoon of honey from the jar.

How I Lost the Sky

I remember:

when impatient down at last gave way
to strong shoulders, when envy and pale fancy
were set aside for shrieking, whirling games
in rich wind-riffled colors.

I remember broad lazy buzzard circles,
the silent stalking of owls,
entire congregations of us wheeling
like a hive-mind, flocking, murmuring.

I remember freedom.

I remember

the day the wind
wouldn't hold me anymore.

It faltered. I felt it rise the way it should—
and pass me by, untouching.

As breath failed in my lungs
it returned, holding, buoying
and I circled and climbed.

I was still flying. But the wind,
the wind had dropped me, and in that moment
I knew.

I had lost the sky.

I told no one.

I gathered myself,

arranged my plumage preened and shining,
one last time. I stretched out
long, slender albatross wings
and leapt from the cliff's-edge,
one last time. The sea-wind,
racing up the rock face,
made all its usual enticements:
liberty, seduction, *if you come with me...*
I would have it keep its promises,
while I still could hear them.
Just one last time.

Far off, over a dark sea,
I sought and seized a storm-cell.
Not to court its lightnings,
not to dance between its raindrops,
not to steal away its bruising purples
for twilight feathers. No longer.
I drove hard amidst the thunderclaps
to the silence at its heart,
where the wind chokes on its own tail,
suffocates.

As I passed beyond the last living wind,
it did not whisper to me.
Not one apology. Not one last caress.
I fell.

I dove, falcon-sleek,
dropping faster than a hailstone.
I plummeted from one silence
to a deeper one, and its darkness
filled my ears and nose and mouth.

The sea-currents tumbled me
'til I could no longer remember
where the sky had gone.

I had not known the sea,
no more than to stroke her surface.
Perhaps brush shoulders,
here and there.
I had the sky: how should I have known?

She picked my locks.
Her rippling fingers
rotted free my worthless,
waterlogged feathers,
slicked my skin.
Golden eagle-eyes clouded
and bleached to silver,
leaching color
into her dark depths.

I shimmer, now.
I am a lithe thing,
curving more smoothly
than any thermal.

And on clear nights,
little glowing, rising plankton
reflect against the surface
in a slow dance of glittering lights:

twice as many stars
as any sky.



The Way You Say Good-Night

I moved in with the goddess in spring, after a month and a half of cautious emailing and coffee shop conversations. She had placed an ad in the classifieds: “Seeking housemate: 2br bungalow, countryside, owner occupied. Artists, writers, LGBTQ, introverts welcome. Quiet hours & amiable presence a must; mutual support preferred.” The rent was reasonable, utilities were included, and the explicit mention of queers and introversion intrigued me. Mutual support sounded nice, but I had my reservations.

We emailed, and emailed, and finally in April met. I didn’t notice straightaway. She hadn’t said, in her ad or in her emails, and she wore her strangeness subtly—I’m not sure how I would have responded, either, which I guess is why she didn’t mention. Everything odd about *me*, on the other hand, is right there on the surface. Even the most sheltered of country-mice could probably recognize my queerness, marked as it is in my name and hair and clothing, even inked into my skin. I don’t hide it and I never have. You can read my disability in my body now, too, without much effort. It was hidden once, camouflaged, but it has accumulated visible accessories: the splints, the sticks, the wheels. And most of the time now, I don’t try to hide the pain. I’m up-front about it. Her bungalow was single-story, step-free; that had been the first question I asked.

Her name was Arielle— “call me Ari” —and she was a slight, unassuming woman. Dark hair framed her pale face; a tousled sort of look, just beginning to grow out from a short crop, maybe. She cradled her mocha to her chest and kept her hands around the mug even after it was empty. In her emails her tone had been formal, reserved; in the coffee shop, she looked nervous—her narrow shoulders tensed tight, her eyes not quite finding mine, she’d picked a shadowed corner—but her voice was even, low, and velvety. We talked about the vacancy. It sounded perfect.

She asked to meet again. Spring was burgeoning; the sun was out at last, and the pale blue of winter skies had just begun to deepen into one a little more succulent. The sunlight was still watery, but warm enough that the breezes couldn’t steal its heat. Ari was inside, despite the fine weather, and tucked into a corner once again. The sunlight didn’t quite seem to reach her. As she leaned from her niche to hail me, her hair swung forward, and I did a double-take. It was past shoulder-length, curling over itself. It had been short, last time, I was sure—or maybe just pulled back, I supposed, some kind of messy and unobtrusive up-do.

“Thanks for meeting me. Sorry for all the runaround, but, I just need to be careful, you know?”

“It’s alright, better safe than sorry, I know.” I settled in.

She drew a deep heavy breath. “I feel pretty good about you. I think we’d do okay living together. But,” and she hesitated, hands tight around a mug she’d emptied before I arrived, “I haven’t been entirely honest with you, there’s something I still need to tell you.”

I felt myself guarding—my belly tensed, my shoulders pulled forward. “Okay...”

“And I guess part of why I think we’d be okay is, I think you might understand. I hope. So—alright. The thing is, what I need you to know is—I’m not quite normal. You know I’m a night person? There’s a reason, I was born with an aspect. Night-aspect, particularly.”

I relaxed. “Is that all?”

She startled, clearly surprised. “...yes?”

“Not so different, I don’t think.” I shrugged. “I’m a mutant of sorts, and queer, and I haven’t found a gender that fits. We aren’t the same shapes, you and I, but we both got made with odd molds, and we’re living with what that means.” I could see her evaluating this statement, suspiciously, slowly coming to terms with the fact that someone might say that and mean it. I guess acceptance had been rare for her; that’s people for you. But this wasn’t the first coming-out I’d been privy to, and goodness knows I’m strange enough in my own way. Aspects aren’t that different from mutations, just less well-understood, and carrying baggage of prophecy more so than medicine, though our histories twine some there, too—in visionaries, the possessed, those who spoke in tongues; those who were seen as crazy, malingering, fraudulent. And they’re still so rare, even now. I’d never met one, not knowingly.

“You’re sure? That doesn’t bother you?”

“Does it bother you that some days I can walk and some days I can’t? Or that strangers on any given day might address me alternately as ‘sir’ or ‘ma’am?’” She shook her head. “Then, no, I’m not bothered. Does it affect what it’s like to live with you? Just to be practical

about it. I don't know much about the everyday life of aspects."

"I wax and wane, a bit. Night tends to stick to me. I don't sleep much... Really, it changes, over the course of the year. It's stronger in winter, when it's dark so much. Summer's easy, almost like being normal, I think."

I shrugged again. "Sounds less eventful than some basic-human roommates I've had."

So I moved in with the goddess—with Arielle, not a goddess, not really, but a woman of night—in May.



Summer evenings were easy. Ari got a duskiness about her as the sun kissed the horizon each night; not a blush or a glow, but something between the two, a quiet liveliness. It was a good time of day to tackle her unruly shadows, as they lengthened. Our back porch looked out westwards, toward sunset. She sat on the deck to watch the sun go down, a glow in her eyes and darkness streaming behind her, while I sat with her, combing shadows out of her hair. Left ungroomed, they coiled up in the bottom of the bath or balled up in corners, leading to stopped drains and stubbed toes and missteps—dark, tricky little dust bunnies. They stuck to her; it was hard for her to separate her shed shadows from her fingers, but easy for me, with my mundane human hands. I liked the task. It had a simple intimacy, and we chatted or sat in sunset quiet as I worked.

Other than shadow-combing, she was particular about touch; I noticed the care she took to avoid bumping into anyone if we were out and about, and she rarely

touched me directly, either. But how much would one touch a housemate, anyway?

Not long after the solstice, I asked her about her hair. Not the shadows—those seemed self-evident, an element of her aspect—but its inconstant length. It had been short again when I moved in, grown down to her low back by late May, and then just—*diminished*, down to a pixie-cut length, barely there. At the end of June it was long again, full of shadows easily tangled.

“It’s a moon thing,” she said. “The shadows get stronger when the moon’s dark. It’s sort of the same inside, I guess, I feel it more, but you see it in my hair. Less right now, because it’s midsummer. There’s so much light all the time.”

“Will that change? This winter?”

“Yeah, it’s a bit more—dramatic.”

“Well, god help us if our cycles sync, then, huh?” I chuckled. “Do yours match the moon, just sort of—automatically?”

She shifted uneasily, and I cringed inwardly. I’d fucked up; been too cavalier, too intrusive. And presumptive. I forget sometimes that even people raised female get uncomfortable talking about menstrual cycles, and of course not everyone who reads as “female” has one—I know better than that. Or I should. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything, if it’s uncomfortable for you...”

“No, it’s—I’m just, I don’t,” she gestured vaguely around her belly, “I don’t cycle like that. I don’t bleed, I’m not built like you.”

“To be fair, most people aren’t.” I grinned wryly. “I am not exactly factory standard.” That earned a smile, to my relief. “I’m sorry if it’s a sore topic for you,

though. It's a personal thing, I shouldn't have asked. Or assumed."

"Oh, it's a source of embarrassment long past... I just don't talk about it much, so everyone just assumes. It was hard, as a teenager, but these days I don't think I miss it."

"You can have mine, if you like. I've often thought I'd give it up happily, to a trans woman or someone else who'd appreciate it."

Ari chuckled. "No, really, I'm fine. Shadows are enough as it is!"

Conversation moved on, and she relaxed again.



Sometimes conversation would happen that way. It had something of a pattern to it: I'd bumble into some unique element of her aspect, some difference, without knowing; she'd explain, nervously at first, then more confidently. I shared what I could about myself, in return; sometimes she'd be the accidentally awkward one. It got easier for us both as time went on. She saw me walk on two legs or three or four or none; she saw me whirling with activity and flattened by fatigue. She heard about ex-boyfriends, ex-girlfriends, ex-queer lovers of all stripes, in triads and quads. She saw me in ties and dresses and heels and faux sideburns. The strange and fluid things about me I had writ large, exaggerated in preemptive self-defense; Ari lived hers close and quiet. Both were paths we'd chosen to keep us safe in a world where we had never quite fit.

We talked about change: both of us seem mercurial to the outside eye, in flux, maybe even unstable. But

there's a constancy to each of us, internally—a familiar, intrinsic pattern, albeit a complex one. I don't even *like* change, as a rule. Surprises make me anxious; unexpected alterations to my environment set me on edge. I make my plans in advance, and it takes me ages to learn and remember new things. I was still asking Ari for reminders of our mailing address come July.

We built routines together. She picked up my morning blackberry-sage tea habit; I joined her for sunsets. We read poetry, swapped our favorites. I started noticing the moon. Our conversations and our silences alike grew easier, over the summer months. Brooding dust bunnies and all considered, I'd never had an easier roommate.



One day in early September I came home cheery, humming to myself. The sun was ripe and golden and the trees were just beginning to turn, punctuating the waves of green with little bursts of autumnal color. The living room was dim, though. Ari was balled up in the corner of the couch, looking quietly miserable.

“Hey.” I sat down next to her. She barely moved. “You okay?”

“No.” Well. Okay. That had been self-evident.

“What’s wrong? Want to talk about it?”

There was a long pause—I wanted to reach out to her, stroke her back or offer her some sort of comfort, some companionship. But she did not ever touch, and I wasn't sure if I'd help, or hurt.

Slowly, she spoke. “It'll be worse soon. The winter, it'll be dark this year, I can tell, and I hate the change. So cold.”

“But it’s not here yet, right?”

“Soon. Equinox in two weeks, and the moon’s going dark.”

“That’s alright...we’ll figure it out, okay?”

She hunched further. “You won’t want to be here for that. I should just stay away, be alone. Nobody wants the winter-dark.” I could hear tears unshed in her voice, and my heart ached.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there, huh? After all, my lease runs ’til spring!” It was not a good attempt at levity. “We’ll figure it out, okay?” Silence, a tiny nod. “Hey. I don’t know, exactly, but you look like you could use a hug. Would you like a hug? No pressure.”

She started to move toward me, shifting in place, and then froze, eyes wide. I saw her eyes track my shoulders and my arms, bare—I was taking advantage of late summer while it lasted, enjoying the days of tank tops, sun-kissed skin. I heard a tiny whisper, just barely audible. “I can’t.”

“That’s okay. No pressure, alright? But the offer’s good anytime, if you need it.”

She shook, a little, sniffing; I could see the tension in her, trying to pull toward and away all at once. I sat back a little distance, to give her space.

“No—please. Stay?”

“Of course.” So I sat nearby, quietly, trying to exude a grounded calm. “It’s okay, Ari, really it is.” A few quiet breaths. “Would you like me to talk to you?” She shook her head, so I just stayed there near her, quiet together.

She shifted again in a few minutes, just the tiniest fraction of movement. I saw it, and read it; my own body has taught me the importance of little, hard-won move-

ments. She'd moved, barely, but moved, a little bit more upright, a little bit nearer, just the adjustment maybe of one or two vertebra, a twitch of the shoulder. I could hear her breathing shallowly, and swallowing hard.

"I want to," she said, in that tiny whispering voice.

"Yeah?"

"But I *can't*," and she cried, and it took everything in me not to gather her up into my lap and hold her close.

"Why, honey? What's wrong?"

"It'll hurt."

"You? Or me?"

"You—I can't hurt you, I can't hurt anyone, I *can't*." She sobbed.

"Hey. Hey, deep breaths, alright?" I stroked her hair, mid-long now, and her back through her shirt beneath her hair. Just like shadow-combing. Nothing happened to me, and in a few minutes I felt her relax a little, slowly. She breathed a little more evenly, and I breathed with her. "You're okay. I'm okay, alright? See, nothing bad happened."

"No, it's just—skin to skin."

"What happens? You don't have to tell me, if you don't want."

"It burns. That's what they told me. It burns, and the night comes."

I managed not to raise an eyebrow, but I was powerfully curious. "The night comes?"

"Around us. My night."

"And burns?"

"I don't know, they said it burns. Mustn't touch." She curled tighter, fists tucked close to her chest.

Ari was possibly the least threatening person I'd ever known, but she'd not been well-loved. And my life had left me deeply distrustful of any "they" who would castigate or shame. I weighed my risks. Pain was, after all, not unfamiliar to me. "Can I try? You need a hug."

She shook, stifling sobs, and I stroked her back. She bit her lip and nodded, two tiny, sharp nods—so I reached for her, and gathered her up.

And yes, it *burned*. It was an electric type of pain, like a static shock that persisted, roaming over my arms; maybe a bit like lightning. But it was a cold pain, like that feeling of meltwater that comes when a nerve is misfiring. Chilled, prickling pain, a freezer-burn. I could feel her skin against mine, where her cheek and ear and wrists rested against my own arms and shoulders, but just barely. The touch of her hardly registered, and she seemed to carry no heat. My skin was stippled with goosebumps; my hair stood on end. I shivered, breath hissing, and heard her sob a helpless apology. But I had known worse pain. I held her, tried to make sure I had her safely encircled, before I went numb, so I would hold her, not drop her—

And then the night came.

The living room faded. I worried I was blacking out, at first—but I could still see Ari, cradled in my arms, shadows gently spooling from her. She seemed to sink into me, as if she weren't quite solid. All around her, night blossomed. It wasn't the pitch-black of midnight, but an earlier, gentler time of night, not long after sundown. The ceiling was shrouded with a blanket of indigo, and where the baseboards ought to have been there was just a thin line of pale gold, the last vestiges of

daylight. Between gold and indigo was a whole delicious peacock gradient—pale bleached silver, teal, sea-green, cobalt. The floor was carpeted in long, lush shadows. I thought I heard crickets, and I could almost smell the summer-baked earth releasing its heat into the cool sky, could almost feel the soft breezes of evening.

I had not noticed that I was holding my breath. I let it out in a rush. It joined the sighing in the air, the cricket chirps—it became illusory. I could not feel my arms, or my shoulders, spiraled now with shadowstuff. I didn't care.

But my numbed grip slowly slipped, and Ari shifted away, legs draped over my lap but upper body nestled back into the couch. As her touch faded, so did the night, and the cold. I came to blinking into the late afternoon light, my arms and shoulders prickling all over in cascades of shivering pins-and-needles.

Ari held her face in her hands, slowly trying to part her fingers, to look back at me. Muffled, she said, "I'm sorry—are you ok? I just, I'm sorry, I can't help, I shouldn't have let you. I'm sorry."

I shook my head, still clearing dark spots from my vision. Shadows fell from me. My tongue felt heavy. "No, honey." I tried again. "Arielle. That was *beautiful*."

"...really?"

I nodded, slowly.

"And you're—are you okay? You're not angry?"

"I'm okay. It hurt, but. Not *all* that badly, and it was—it was like being there." I tried to shake my fingers out, get the blood moving enough to massage the rest of me back to life. It was slow going, and the reawakening of cold-pinched nerves is never pleasant. "Are you always this cold? How do you keep from freezing?"

“I think so? I don’t know. Oh, you’re cold—I’ll make tea.”

We watched the sun set with tea warm in our hands, blankets wrapped snug around us. The sky was perfect and clear, from golden horizon to indigo vault, sprinkled with stars.



After the equinox, night fell earlier and earlier, and earlier still inside our house. She didn’t sleep most nights, only napping at midday. Some nights she’d go out, especially the windy ones, the wild ones, and come home around dawn, starry-eyed, shadows writhing. As the days shortened and the air chilled, my body started to constrict into its winter limits. I went out less and less. I walked less, just around the house, and then not at all. Ari would bring me back tales of the evening. She told me about the different ways the nights could feel: the kind that felt wide-open to the void of space, the kind that were closed-in to near claustrophobia. The difference between half- and quarter-moonlight, the taste of the air before dawn, the scent of impending snow. If the night were fine, and I were awake when she came home, sometimes she’d touch me, just briefly, to share the vigor of her aspect as it grew into its winter-dark force.

It hurt—but what didn’t?

We spoke a lot about the nature of pain, its many qualities, its roles and significance. We laid out the poetry of it—the beauty, even, for the right pain from the right source. Not just in a kinky way, but the pleasure of the heartache in a favorite novel’s tragedy, or loving to the point of bursting. We talked about its ugly sides, yes,

those too, but also about the way its character changes, if you have it long enough as a bedfellow. It was a relief, to me, to speak freely. And when I did hurt, she was perhaps more prepared.

She shared fewer nights as the winter drew in; her touch bit too sharply. Sweeping the shadows from her hair became nearly impossible around new moons: the shadows were so fierce, and just being near her scalp left my fingers tingling, inept. I lose dexterity anyway, as winter comes. The cold sinks into my knuckles and freezes their motion. We were both cold, swathed constantly in thermals and arm warmers and fuzzy socks and shawls.

The first truly bad day of winter came for me on a new-moon day. Her new moon, *and* mine; statistics won out, it had been likely enough.

I couldn't get out of bed. I could barely think. I keep pain meds in my nightstand, for just such occasions, but as is often the case in winter's vise-grip, they were little help. My tendons were seized with cold, and my bones ached and shivered, slipping between the taut threads of panicked muscles. My gut wrenched. I felt like I was vibrating, subtly and off-key. I had no room for thought. Ari found me that way, in midafternoon, when she realized I hadn't gone out but hadn't been seen.

"Why didn't you call to me? Or text, if you couldn't shout! I didn't know you were here!"

I mumbled some sort of excuse. The reality is that pain makes it hard to use logic. It makes it hard to make plans, even plans to make things better. And pain is a lonely experience: it makes it hard to reach out.

She frowned at me. "I'll be right back." She vanished, and I could hear pattering from the kitchen, quick

crossings of the house. The kettle boiled, and boiled again; the toaster dinged. She came back with a hot water bottle, and a cup of tea, and some toast. “Extra sugar in your tea, and peanut butter for your toast. I bet you haven’t eaten today, have you?”

No, of course I had not. And I could not sit up. I tried, and whimpered, and curled back up again, pulling the hot water bottle close. Ari left.

I sank into further despair, and loneliness, and embarrassment at my own ineptitude—how many people had my pain driven away? But she came back. Beneath her winter layers she’d put on a pair of gloves, dark velvet, ones I’d never seen. She’d pulled her hair back—enormously unruly, shadow-rampant, new-moon hair—into a stark, tight-bundled knot. “I should be safe enough, now. I’ll help you sit up so you can eat, okay?”

And she slid one wool-and-velvet arm beneath my shoulders, slowly, slowly rocked me to her chest, and rolled me far enough to pillow-prop me, supported at knees and back and elbows, just like I would have done. Not a single shadow fell against my skin.



Winter marched on, and with a little care, we marched with it. We turned up the heating, made cookies, drank oceans of tea. I tried to teach her how to knit; shadows inevitably tangled up with her yarn, to her consternation and our mutual chuckles. I thought we were getting the hang of winter—we had churned through its first two moons, and my first snow-linked flares. The sun dazzled on the snowbanks, and the cottage was well-sited for

natural light. The house glowed bright. We stayed warm, and kept our spirits up.

As the days darkened, Ari drifted further into her aspect. Sometime in December she stopped sleeping altogether, and faded around the edges. I don't mean that metaphorically. She faded, like the light couldn't quite touch her. If she stood in silhouette against a window at night, she'd be missing entirely. At the height of mid-day, in snow-glare, she seemed pale and drawn; she could barely focus. But she came alive at night, in the long hours of darkness that just made me want to hibernate. It seemed like a positive thing for her at first. She had energy in her, crackling, though cold. She burned through projects. The house was clean. I envied her energy; winter is a lull time for me.

But it wore on her, and as we sank further into December, I began to worry. Night-aspect she may be, but she still lived in a mostly-human body, and that body couldn't keep up. She was exhausted, but her body roared at her through the night and kept her up shakily through the day. She barely ate; she shivered, constantly, couldn't get warm despite her layers. "Just gotta make it through the solstice," she mumbled to me, when I asked after her. I had to coax her to sit still enough to wrangle her hair, but I couldn't stay ahead of it, even so. Shadows littered the floor.

Neither of us had family worth celebrating with, so we spent our winter holidays together. It seemed to make sense to observe the solstice. I cooked us a meal, with what help Ari could give. We sat up through the night together, a fire burning in the grate: light would return. In lieu of gifts, we treated ourselves to chocolate

and winter-expensive fresh fruit. I breathed a sigh of relief when the sun finally, finally rose. The light was insubstantial, ethereally bare, and Ari's face was a study in chiaroscuro: a few light-grazed planes sharp against dark hollows. Nonetheless, relief.

But solstice ran straight into a waning moon. Ari's winter-dark didn't ebb. She had always been slim and was now painfully thin; the nights were eating away at her. Unprotected bony prominences bruised as she knocked into doorframes and cabinets, rendered as clumsy as I would be on my feet, at this time of year. If I spoke to her she answered slowly, after a long pause, as if from far away. The velvet voice was now ragged, raven-hoarse.

The day before the new moon would rise, I moved through the silent house alone but for the sound of my wheels. The few extra moments of sun earned back since the solstice didn't do much to offset the overall environment of greys. The snow was dingy, and the sky bleak. Ari was nowhere to be seen. I hoped she'd finally found her way into a nap, but as the sun sank, I still didn't hear her stir—and she hadn't slept in sundown hours for weeks and weeks.

I had been in her room only once, maybe twice. She liked it dark, and private. Her door was often shut. I knocked at it, carefully; no response. I was worried enough to try the handle. I found it unlocked, so I cracked the door, just a hair. Darkness billowed out in a wave. It pushed me back, and I grabbed my wheels to fight against it. It rushed like a tide, a great outpouring of night. I couldn't see in, at all.

“Ari?”

The dark air settled still and cold, puddling around me like the draft from under a door. I could feel the chill tug at my bones and clench around my heart; I almost thought her window must be open, letting in the frigid night air. It had that sharp smell of cold about it, too. I heard nothing.

I felt my way in, trying to remember the layout of her room—bookcase to the right, a desk somewhere, left maybe?, bed under the window at the far side. I found her chair, empty. There were clothes across the floor. I felt each thing carefully as I moved, tried not to roll over anything, hoping she wasn't collapsed below me. I called again, a little louder, a little more worried. "Ari? Are you in here?" She *must* be—the night was so concentrated.

I couldn't see, still, but I could hear: just a little sound, a small sound, shallow. Breathing. With difficulty, but there. I followed it 'til I ran into her bed, and I walked my fingers across her mattress, looking for her.

She was so cold. My fingers numbed, and I thought for a moment I must have laid my hand on her skin, but no, the texture was wrong, nubbled. A blanket, or a sweater, with a long bony limb inside, an arm's length from the edge of the bed—probably curled up against the wall, beneath the windowsill. She liked edges, and corners.

I levered myself up and out of my chair onto her bed, feeling for her. "Ari? Ari, I'm here. Can you hear me?" I found her, identified hip and shoulder, head with its tangled mass of hair. Somewhere there should be blankets; I found them. I curled around her, tucking her little bird-boned body to mine, pulling blankets around us, talking the whole time, trying to keep my voice calm. She didn't stir. I could feel her breathing, just barely,

against my chest—and she was so cold. She shook like a leaf. To accidentally graze her skin, this cold in this darkness, made nearly no sensory change; I was lost, lost and numb, just as she was. We were so cold, and it was so dark, so dark and so cold. No moon. No stars. No sun. Lost. Lost, winter-dark.

I startled—had I been dozing? I was too cold even to shiver. We had to get warm. I couldn't lift her to move her, and I wasn't sure it would do anything, anyway; her dark stuck to her. And the heating was on: it was working fine in the rest of the house. It just wasn't enough, here. What had they taught me in first aid, so many years ago, for hypothermia? It seemed so far away. So hard to remember: bright and smiling, trips to the woods, summer hikes. Dark, now. Cold. Hypothermia: right. You had to heat the core. Get the cold things away.

“Ari,” and my voice was raven-ragged now too, cold-constricted. I coughed. “Ari, I don't know if you can hear me. I'm going to touch you, okay? See if I can get us warm.” It might have been a stupid plan, but it was my only plan. I tried to flex my cold-stiff fingers and found them seized up, had to tug claw-handed at the layers between us. I shifted most of my own layers—everything over my core—wriggling awkwardly, wincing at the cold. Hers were harder; I had to lift her a bit, rock, tug, trying to make sense of what I couldn't see with hands that barely felt. I pulled anything else I could reach, be it blanket or towel or clothes, over the two of us. I did what I could, and when I couldn't shift anything more, I braced myself and spooned up to her.

Where her back touched my belly, it *burned*. I choked and whimpered, trying not to spasm, trying keep my

calm. I could feel a deeper cold spread through me, seizing my limbs, spearing them with icy shards. The pain burst in my bones. I was pinioned and perforated with cold; I could barely breathe. I numbed slowly, frozen, deadened. Any night I saw was indistinguishable from what already surrounded us. I could do nothing but hold her, in silence, for a while; I might have dozed off again, I'm not sure. When I could, I talked to her, teeth chattering, brain as frozen as the rest of me.

 Aeons passed.

Her trembling stopped. I didn't realize immediately. Everything hurt, a deep cold ache, nerves burning, but I could feel most of me again, and could feel her stillness. I panicked at first, thinking I'd lost her, but she was still breathing. "Good," I said. I hoped. "Good. Still here with me?"

I must have slept a little, then, because when I next opened my eyes, I could tell I had done so: there was light. Not much, hardly anything, but there was light; it wasn't from the window, just a general sort of diffuse, barely-there glow. Watery, colorless. I looked at Ari. I could see the shapes of her, just barely, dim static against the darker shadows—not so much like seeing where she was, but seeing spaces where darkness was not.

Next time I opened my eyes, I looked for the light. There was enough of it to try to find a source—it wasn't from any fixture, and there was still no daylight at the window. It seemed to be beneath her, maybe by her belly. It moved as I craned to look over her shoulder, and I realized: it was coming from me. Anywhere my skin touched hers, it seemed to be pricked with the tiniest of lights, the most distant of stars. And I thought I could

feel heat, between us, between our skins. Not much, nowhere near blood-heat, but it wasn't nothing.

She stirred in my arms and I opened my eyes again. The room was dawn-grey; I could see now the window shade light-limned, and Ari's sharp, fine features. She blinked slowly, found her hand in mine, my chest at her back, my head at her shoulder. "Wh- what?"

"Shhh. It's okay, Ari, we're okay..."

"But you're—are you?" Her brow furrowed into ridges of light and shadow. "Are you glowing?"

"Uhhh." I looked. "I would seem to be, yes. I thought I imagined it." It looked like the warmer light of true dawn had caught the edges of me. The little star-specks were denser where we touched, but had spread a ways, as well.

"Oh," she said. "That's nice," and she fell back asleep. Her steady breathing lulled me, and I slept, too.

When we woke for real, night still played over the ceiling and tangled our hair, but dawn nestled around us. I hurt, everywhere. I always hurt in the morning, but a night cold and frightened and unmoving hurt all the more. I groaned as I moved. I could feel the efforts of the heating system, through our haphazard cocoon of blankets and laundry, though the room was still unpleasantly cold. Ari, by contrast, felt warm.

"Is it morning?" she asked.

"Yes, or gone morning, already, maybe."

"How long were you here?"

"All night." She looked at me, her face puzzled. I blushed, and tugged layers back over myself. As soon as I broke skin contact, my stars faded away. "You didn't

come out at sundown, so I came looking...and you were so dark and cold, I hope I did the right thing.”

“How? How are you here? How did you stay?”

“I—I don’t know?”

“Thank you,” she said, and covered my hand with hers. Shadows swirled, and despite myself I shuddered as a chill swept up my arm. But as her hand moved, tiny stars bloomed and closed in its wake. “I’ve never had stars, before,” she said, sounding shy. “And nobody’s ever—gone into the night with me. Like that. Thank you.”

She made tea, and I laid a fire, and we warmed up slowly in the weak winter sun.



I stayed with her the next few nights of darkened moon, with a hot water bottle and post-holiday-sale electric blanket for backup. She slept the night through easily. Always, by morning, my touch was dawn-lit. “I don’t know,” she said. “My aspect has never infiltrated somebody else before; I don’t think it’s supposed to work like that.”

“Who knows? You are a mystery.”

“Though nobody ever—nobody else ever tried.”

“I’ll try everything once, and probably twice, in case the first time was a fluke. You know me.”

“I do. And I’m glad.”



When the next new moon came, she asked for me. It would be an easier one—the days were slowly lengthening, after all, fraction by fraction. I held her, and we were a comfort to each other. A shy one, a quiet one,

and admittedly a somewhat dark and chilly one, but a comfort, nonetheless. The cold and my bones grew no friendlier with each other, but kindling stars in my skin seemed to give me a buffer, a little. Or maybe it was just a placebo effect, helped along by its own beauty and that basic human need for touch—either way, it helped. The next moon I volunteered, starting from the waning quarter, and I stayed.

She kissed me for the first time in March, at the equinox. I had asked her if the night she saw—or felt, or showed, I wasn't sure of the word—with her aspect was always the present night, that current night. She thought it over for a moment.

“I think I can find a night-memory instead? I've never tried. Mostly people don't see them on purpose. Should I try to show you?”

“Sure. How about a nice summer one, maybe? Mild and warm.” I was jesting, somewhat.

“Alright. I know one that...okay. Ready?” and she leaned over, and in one motion, cupped my cheek and kissed my mouth.

Cold burst on my lips, but not the burning ache of winter-dark; this was a summery cool, just starting to crisp up into autumn, damp and tingling. I recognized the night that stretched across the living room—I'd seen it here, just five months prior. The cobalt sky, the light-limned horizon, the perfect dome of a clear September twilight.

I melted into her kiss—strange, to kiss someone with my eyes wide open, but she opened hers, too, as she felt me lean in, lips parting. I saw her eyes smile, dancing,

and then widen in surprise: all across the formless, deep-sea night above us, the stars were coming out.

About the Author

Toby MacNutt is a queer, nonbinary trans, disabled author, artist, and teacher who lives in Burlington, VT. *If Not Skin* is their debut collection! Toby's poetry and prose have also appeared in such publications as *Goblin Fruit*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Liminality Magazine*, and in anthologies by The Future Fire (*Accessing the Future* and *TFF-X*) and Lethe Press (*Transcendent 2*). Their work generally, and especially the pieces in *If Not Skin*, often explores questions of embodiment and selfhood, with shapeshifters, robots, and creator archetypes, as well as plenty of good queer love.

In addition to writing, Toby is a fiber artist, tailor, teacher, body/makeup artist, aerialist, dancer, and choreographer. Toby has danced in Murmurations Dance immersive site piece "When Women Were Birds," work by Lida Winfield, and Heidi Latsky's "GIMP Project," among others; their independent evening work "One, Two" showed locally and internationally. Currently they are developing new performance installation work that will combine dance, visual arts, soundscapes, and poetry—all their genres together for the first time! By day, Toby manages high school programming and an arts-based mentoring program for VSA Vermont, and works on skill development with their service dog in training, Jabberwocky.