

ASEXUAL

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ON ASEXUALITY AND BODY

ISSUE THEME

A human body may be nothing more or so much more than its physicality. As potential onlookers, we often consume anatomical and phenotypical qualities of bodies at first glance. Our perceptions may produce quiet whispers, seeping into our unconscious, or silencing screams, accelerating our heartbeats, but each body tells us something. What the body conveys is informed by the culture(s) we inhabit, from the media, family, church, school, and more. Our bodies themselves are reproductions and (potential) reproducers of this culture, as we become entangled by its desire for self-continuation. Our bodies are consumed in this self-perpetuating cycle. Is our body our destiny? Is transcending this system possible? We still can and do resist and disrupt, decolonize and deconstruct, unlearn and unpack, at least, we may try. Whether our efforts will triumph is an impossible question for another time.

If our bodies are the reproductive machines of society, where does the asexual body fit? How does one even define an asexual body? At the very least, asexual bodies are often left unmarked within society. One may be asexual, but this is difficult to discern through perception alone. Rather, our identities are often learned through our own intimate and/or public confessions, frequently producing disbelief and numerous other points of affect in the audience. In this transitional and critical moment in which we may decide to share our asexuality, our bodies quickly transform into subjects for dissection. Does what we say match what they see? Do our bodies *look* asexual to the audience? For certain bodies, being “asexual” already pre-exists as an assumed or impossible quality, with intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, age, queerness, fatness, disability, and hegemonic conceptions of beauty, among other variables, constructing this equation of understanding.

The forthcoming pieces by authors under the ace umbrella grapple with questions and concepts suggested in this introduction, examining topics of body positivity, identity management, reproduction, health, navigating relationships, intersectionality, and more to explore this theme of asexuality and the body.

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HOW TO DISAPPEAR COMPLETELY

BY ASHLEY KLECZKA

Oil and Conte Crayon Mixed Media Painting
24" x 48"

"How to Disappear Completely" was painted during a time in which the artist was first starting to readdress their personhood after coming out of a long-term emotionally and sexually abusive relationship. After many years of having their sexuality and identity invalidated it was a struggle for them to feel like their body was their own, and worth feeling comfortable in. It was a cathartic process that needed to pass in order to move on. If there is one thing that the artist has learned while on this journey of self-discovery, it's that being Ace doesn't mean being less of a person than anyone else.

Ashley Kleczka is a non-binary illustrator and game dev with an interest in fantasy, video games, and sitting down with a good book. They generally identify as greysexual and bi-romantic; a status that their now-husband is very accepting and supportive of.

AN ASEXUAL AWAKENING

BY EMILY KARP

Until I was almost twenty-four years old, I found myself still trying to solve the puzzles of sexuality. I was especially trying to figure out where in the picture I might fit. I believed the framework encompassed every adult human, so the question I asked wasn't *if* I fit, just where. Gradually, perhaps a part of me realized that only asking "Where do I fit?" over and over again was not revealing any answers, and maybe the question had to shift. Deep down, I stopped feeling merely curious to understand in the abstract, and started feeling like my whole self was *wrong*. The simple truth was that I did not intuitively know the answers, despite the fact that everyone around me seemed to possess such intuition. When I set off on a quest of understanding, no one warned me what I might uncover: that the equation had never even accounted for a person like me existing.

Starting in my preteen years, I found a lot of things very confusing. Did I believe that God really existed? (No, but I didn't yet know that atheism was a valid option, so I struggled internally with this question a bit, confused at the concept of having faith and avoiding admitting my actual lack of belief). Was my mother's parenting style harmful enough to count as abuse? (Yes, it was. In fact, when I turned eighteen I cut off all contact with her, to protect my own mental health and possibly also physical safety. She still doesn't know I'm an atheist or asexual).

And then, there was that broad subject of human sexuality. That one was a doozy.

Continuing well into my teenage years, I abstractly questioned what emotions and thoughts were supposed to arise when I looked at someone that had captivated me. As a person clearly going through puberty on a typical schedule, I had learned that we all were supposed to experience the emotions and thoughts of crushes, and find certain people to be attractive. I certainly expected to be included in the experience. Since I was a girl, I knew these feelings would most likely occur towards boys. However, even if I turned out to not be attracted to men, all that would be remaining would be women, since *everyone* was supposed to be attracted to at least one of those two genders.

Eventually an array of television series and novels starring teenage characters, in combination with sentiments from peers and adults alike in

my social circles, had convinced me that having crushes must have already started for me. I was still feeling confused by the whole notion of attraction—so clearly, I needed to do a better job analyzing my own experiences.

I would try to figure out if there was a chance I might be attracted to women, all the while aiming to determine which men were my type. Then, I'd leave the question alone for months—or even possibly years—at a time. Much later, I concluded that sexual desires were things I'd never feel, and so on some level, they'll always be a mystery to me. But with each passing year, the mystery felt more overwhelming—grew *urgent* to become demystified, even. I didn't know asexuality existed. I thought my mind and body were normal. However, a new feeling of cognitive dissonance was slowly emerging within my mind, threatening to tear me apart. *Normal* minds don't struggle so much with this question. *Normal* bodies... well, it's a long story.

In my only romantic partnership, a relationship which spanned months, I revealed my body to my boyfriend. He treated me with nothing but kindness, and seemed to actually appreciate my body exactly as it was, both clothed or unclothed. I had been unprepared for him to have such positive feelings for my body. My body is overweight, my hair often full of frizz, and my face is just as acne-ridden as a teenager's and without any makeup to hide the blemishes. Society had instilled in me a shame over how I looked, but here was a twenty-two-year-old guy who felt only respect and admiration for me, and as a twenty-three-year-old in her first significant foray into long-term dating, I floundered.

I felt uncomfortable—in fact, in a vague sense, I felt on the brink of violation—to know I was wanted in a sexual way. I didn't understand yet that I was sex-averse, and therefore being the star of someone else's sexual fantasies would mean that they would be wanting something from me that I could never give. My boyfriend wasn't imagining *me*, but rather a non-existent version of me that *wasn't* a sex-averse ace. In hindsight, I realize that imagining me in that light stripped me of such an inherent, defining part of my entire lived experience. However, I didn't know how to frame those feelings and reactions at the time, so I tried to be grateful for his compliments of my body, and for finding me sexy.

My boyfriend didn't do anything wrong, but my relationship with him left me in a constant conflict between how I wished I felt versus my true feelings, as well as in a state of denial about how atypical my

complete lack of libido was. My boyfriend had been incredulous to learn that I'd never masturbated; it wasn't conceivable to him that a person might not have the ability to get aroused, to orgasm. It wasn't merely that I had never felt a strong urge to "get off"—I physically cannot get aroused. I tried my best to honestly explain how I'd only just begun to realize that my body *might* be a bit dysfunctional in that regard.

It's hard to explain just how much internalized shame I possessed over having never masturbated. It started with my insidious small-town public-school health classes. There, I'd had the woefully inadequate type of sexual education where one learns all the reasons abstinence is ideal and then *eventually* learns, much later, from a pop song's lyrics or a television show's jokes, more details about what sex entails.

It took me an embarrassingly long time to learn, which I eventually did from podcasts I listened to and videos I watched on YouTube, that women can masturbate. Even if many women don't... I was taught that they *all* are capable of it. It was implied in a lot of the secular feminist spaces that I frequented, that all women *should*, from a moral standpoint, be pleasuring themselves and are missing out on a joy of life if they aren't. The attitudes towards women who hadn't orgasmed were pity at best and harsh judgment at worst. The concept of a teenage girl or young twenty-something-year-old woman physically not being able to become aroused at all was never mentioned, not even in passing.

Unless you've experienced hermeneutical injustice firsthand, it is really hard to sympathize with just how broken or lonely you feel every time you hear a throwaway joke about how everyone masturbates and how if anyone says they don't, they must be lying. These seemingly knowledgeable people caused me to doubt it was even true that I had never been sexually aroused, because they had never heard of such a person existing. Losing one's sex drive from age, injury, drugs, or a hormone problem is possible. Existing without libido is not even taken into consideration. Even among asexuals, experiences like mine often feel forgotten or invisible.

I'm grateful I found the word "asexual" when I did. It took me a few months—and a lot of attempts to fit inside a heteronormative mold—before I finally accepted that I'd never feel sexual attraction, desire, or arousal. Lack of arousal was central to my journey; for roughly a decade it'd been holding me back from understanding myself. Once I was with my boyfriend, I developed a hypothesis: I might feel something like sexual

desire if only I could figure out how to get myself aroused. So, I researched arousal and desire as much as I could, and then I tried being somewhat sexual with my boyfriend. I did these things mainly because I couldn't accept I was ace until I had confidence that my body definitely wasn't going to get aroused—when I was sure I had tested a variety of scenarios.

A few months before I reached my twenty-fourth birthday, I realized that all of this effort, this research, this experimenting with sexual stuff, was for naught. I wasn't willing to subject myself to physical pain, which is sort of what not being aroused leads to when a cis woman tries to do anything with her genitals. This meant I was left with the option of embracing a new future for myself, a sex-free future. It only seemed like a choice because I finally knew there was an asexual community out there—a community that thrived on puns about disliking sex and where I wouldn't be the only person unwilling to have sex in my future.

I figured out I was a non-libidoist, sex-averse, asexual—who was also kissing-averse—and immediately ended my relationship with my boyfriend. The breakup was amicable enough, and I only cried once. My emotions hit their peak when he validated me by saying he knew I couldn't choose my sexual orientation and that it wasn't my fault. We ended things because of sexual incompatibility, and afterwards, I never doubted for even a second that the breakup was necessary.

While getting into my pajamas one evening, I came to the realization that my underwear probably would never be seen by anyone else except me, ever again in my life. Remembering with wry amusement that my mother had once spent hours raging over the new bras I'd purchased not being sexy enough—she had called them “old lady bras”—I now knew that in my future I'd never have to stress or feel shame over my bras. In fact, I'd never have to show anyone my naked body ever again. I wouldn't have to stress or feel shame over my stretch marks, or body hair, or whatever else anyone cared to have critical opinions on.

I had an epiphany about how my underwear and my nakedness were no longer only shielded *most* of the time, as there is no *until* I am in a sexually active relationship again. It was—and *is*—so very freeing for a sex-averse person such as myself to know all the inevitable sexual intimacy I'd thought had been in my future was no longer inescapable. I simply chose to reject it. It is empowering to know certain areas of my body are fully my own, just for me, for all of the foreseeable future. I reclaimed my body from a hypothetical uncomfortable future that I

thought was my destiny before I had the framework and words I needed to understand myself.

Of course, there are still obstacles occasionally, such as with shopping for clothes. I understand now that I prefer to embrace a modest type of femininity when possible. The less sexy a straight man would be likely to find me in the outfit, the better—and yet I still do want to feel *pretty*. My ideal scenario is for other people to see me as attractive in the same exact way that I find people attractive: aesthetically, rather than sexually.

I now understand my aversion to people finding me or my body sexy. Knowledge really is power. I do my best to embody the type of prettiness that I want others to notice. In addition, I've discarded my shame over how I've never once orgasmed or even felt aroused. If I need to remind myself to be okay with myself as I am, I consciously think about how my life so far has already been full of plenty of joy and excitement in more than enough non-sexual ways. I'm more comfortable in my own skin than ever. I come out as asexual on a pretty regular basis to various family, friends, and acquaintances. I feel truly happy, confident, and at peace.

Emily Karp is a 27-year-old living in Maryland who has known she was asexual since she was 23. It has, however, been much more recent that she determined her complicated romantic orientation fell between panromantic and aromantic on the gray-aro spectrum. She co-hosts the *Recovering from Religion* podcast. She blogs about a variety of topics, including asexuality, under the pseudonym *luvtheheaven*, on the WordPress blog *From Fandom to Family*. Most of her closest offline friendships these days were formed through regularly attending her local ace meetup, Asexuals of the Mid-Atlantic.

BEING ASEXUAL AND OVERWEIGHT

BY **KRYSTAL COOPER**

It seems that in society today we are told that skinny is better and more attractive, and being overweight is, not only unhealthy, but unattractive. If you're overweight that means you're less likely to find a significant other, romance, considered unattractive, etc. For the longest time, I have struggled with being overweight due to a combination of Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) and hypothyroidism. I did everything I could to lose weight because I wanted to be like the other girls in school. I wanted to be thin, have a boyfriend, and be popular.

The funny thing is, I didn't want a boyfriend for the romance or relationship. I just wanted a boyfriend to feel normal. Most of the girls I knew were boy-crazed, so I just went along with it to feel like I fit in. In fact, most of the things I did in middle school were to fit in. I put myself through a lot just to feel like I was normal. In the eighth grade, I joined a gym that I walked to after school every day. I worked out for about two hours every day, not including the required physical education class that I took. I went on diets and even stopped eating briefly, all to try to lose weight.

When it didn't work after a year, I honestly gave up. I didn't know I had PCOS at the time. That was something I would find out in tenth grade. So, I gave up, and continued being the shy, quiet, girl who focused on nothing but schoolwork and books. All through high school I wondered what it would be like to be thin, to have a boyfriend, and to be normal. All I wanted was to be normal, because, in my mind, I wasn't. I was overweight, which must have meant that I was ugly, which meant no boys would want to date me. I resigned myself to a life without a significant other.

Then, I graduated from high school and started college. I was still shy, overweight, and I still hadn't had a boyfriend. I began wondering if I was weird or abnormal because I had never had a boyfriend, or kissed a boy. I had never danced with a boy at a school dance. These things haunted my mind, and it all went back to one thing: being overweight. I concluded this to be the cause of all of my

problems. It was why I was so shy. It was why I never had a boyfriend. It was why I felt the way I did. I was so quick to blame my problems on my weight. I was so quick to even think that those were problems to begin with, because I still believed that those things were normal.

Eventually I had to take a human sexuality class for my degree, and honestly, I was nervous to have to take such a class. I, from a young age, never wanted to talk about sex. I thought it was disgusting, and I felt uncomfortable watching or reading about sex scenes. However, that class ended up being the best thing that ever happened to me. We started our section on human sexuality and suddenly, there it was in my book, the term that would change my life: Asexuality.

I had never heard of it before, and I was curious. I read about it in my textbook, and then I did some online research, and suddenly, everything clicked for me. I realized I wasn't abnormal, and there was nothing wrong with me. I was a sex-repulsed asexual. That moment was very freeing to me, but I still had a long way to go. There were still times that I had my doubts. Maybe I was only saying this because I hadn't ever had a boyfriend. I still thought I didn't have a boyfriend because of how I looked. It wasn't until recently, last year actually, that I really accepted who I am.

Accepting my sexuality actually helped me with my body image. It made me realize that I don't need to be skinny to attract a significant other because, ultimately, I didn't really want a significant other anyway, and even if I did, I would want someone who likes me in spite of my weight. It also made me realize that the only reason I should lose weight is so I can be healthier. In the last year, through eating healthier and exercising more, I have lost weight, despite all of the obstacles. When I have setbacks, I don't feel as bad anymore either. The pressure to be thin so I can be attractive to others is gone, and it is a true relief.

That's not to say that I still don't have my troubles. I do. Society is still so focused on the importance of being thin and attractive. Sex is still everywhere. Being overweight and asexual now, there are people who are not always nice to me. I'm told my sexuality isn't real, or that I'm just confused. I've been called "fat," "whale," "ugly," and so many other awful things. The difference is, in the past those comments would

have had me in tears, and now, I am confident in who I am, for the most part.

I just want others to be confident now. If there is any way I can inspire even one person through this writing, then I have succeeded. We in the asexual community have a long way to go in gaining understanding and acceptance. We who are overweight have a lot to overcome in terms of discrimination and body shaming. The only thing I can think to say to you, at this moment, is that there is nothing wrong with you. You are beautiful, not based on what you look like, but by the things you do, and the way you treat other people. Don't let other people tell you who you are. Decide that for yourself.

Krystal Cooper is a 27-year-old, recently realized sex-repulsed asexual whose main goal right now is to spread awareness and gain acceptance for the asexual community. She has a bachelor's degree in Social Work from Ferris State University and an Associate's Degree in General Studies from Northwestern Michigan College. She has a passion for writing and social justice causes.

BODY SHAMING

BY MEHREEN QAISAR

My life is poles apart

In comparison with counterparts

When I was thin, I was considered physically weak

When I gained weight, I was labeled as meek

I wonder why body shaming is considered an art

By the so-called tarts

There is always a possibility

Fatness is associated with Asexuality

Why show just the negativity

When being "Plus size" is not disability

There should be just one goal

Love must come from the soul

Those who love someone's soul

Don't talk about body & troll

I would suggest to fellow aces to just follow one's heart

Because conforming to Society's ideal body image won't make you smart

Mehreen Qaisar is a young Pakistani Feminist & Researcher in the government organization; her area of interest is Gender & Human Rights. She is a Body Positive Ace born with Asperger's Syndrome; she has disdain for any feminist & human rights movement which is not inclusive. Can be reached at Twitter @Mehreen_Qaisar

ASEXUAL INSIGHT ON THE MALE HOMOEROTIC BODY

BY JOE JUKES

When articulating thoughts regarding asexuality, discussion often centers on those processes, structures, and politics which “other” us, as does this essay. This isn’t to locate myself and fellow ace-identified people definitively as a singular “Other”, but rather to interrogate far-reaching politicisations that cause us all to individually, as well as collectively, become marginal. Indeed, asexual writing can and does centre asexual experience(s), and learns “from” them. In this instance however, I place the starting point of this argument *as* the asexual experience, insinuating that such writing is contingent on an asexual involvement with the subject matter. An exploration of the asexual body requires appropriate understandings of the makings of sexual bodies. Attuning writing to marginalisation, ahead of experience (though the two are simultaneously linked) lays bare potential pathways for asexual reimaginations and liberation. This essay therefore attempts to unpack gay male sociality through critical markings of ‘desire’ and description of ‘markets’, amongst other observations, in order to highlight the profound entanglement of sex within gay male communities.

Bodies, it seems, are not as individual as one might assume. Moving through space, they sit within and disturb various threads that form a spun web of meaning pertaining to - for the purposes of this essay - the body, and whose effects play out there. One may refer to this web as “culture”. The body lies across it, and therefore is delineated by narrative threads of class, race, gender, ethnicity, normative ideas of ability, and the list goes on. It is informed by and transforms their influential threads in its very materiality. That is to say we internalise, consume, and embody a culture saturated with meaning and sex. Sex mediates in part through desire, which is both a product and a driver of the cultural capital afforded to/through race, class, gender, ability (...). Desire nests itself within bodies, and is also enthusiastically taken up and reproduced by them, such that it structures sexual inequities

psychologically and socially through an interpersonal, intercorporeal 'gaze'. The body is at once a *canvas* of desire - sexual, aesthetic, classed, raced (...) - that is detailed and coloured by an erotic gaze, as well as the *locus* from which desire might, and does, emanate and (pro-)create, and where desire is readily received. To elaborate, the individual acquires desire(s) out of sexed-culture, which connect the individual's body to other bodies psychically through erotic gaze. Desire, administered by socio-sexual gaze not only subjects the body of an(-)other but is also readily taken up by a subjected body in acts of conformity which too, are desired.

The web of culture that bodies hold themselves within and traverse is, then, spun from (sexual) desire itself and along the lines of social inequity that hold together a perilous, yet resilient, norm. However, placement and performances of bodies in relation to this context vary, as does a corresponding, corporeal value. A pursuant political economy operates, then, according to certain sexual-cultural laws. The asexual body - nonetheless sexed, classed, gendered, racialised (...) through extrogenous gazes and one's own performances - is denied the socio-sexual capital that desire dictates. By way of repetition: despite an erotically-driven plurality of sexualisations within (Western) culture, which is acted out of and upon bodies, those bodies which do not engage normatively with sexual conventions and attractions, if at all, are marginalised and valueless.

Culture is of course not singular. The contours of significance within economies of social capital fluctuate with context. Inequities are still reproduced or altered, like smaller or separate webs in reference to the aforementioned entanglement. Within the gay community, the context from which I write, such a thought proves useful. (Neo-)Liberalism and individual freedoms do little to liberate bodies from the meaningful strands that they operate along and across, rather, they engage in internalising and reproducing these strands. Masculinity remains coolly dominant, whiteness retains its assuredness, disability continues to be largely overlooked, and class, to name some examples, is exoticised or fetishised. Shifted, yet similar, powers within gay culture operate, by and for 'desire' - a desire still heady from recent decades of newly permitted sexual autonomy, freedom, and visibility.

Desire thus, crucially centres on the appearance and practiced behaviour of a 'body', and from a point of cultural specificity pertaining to the desirability of certain class(es), race(s), gender(s) (..), gazes. In doing so, desire is able to ascribe value onto gay bodies in a way that is specific to the community. The narratives that are concluded upon by and enacted out through a homoerotic gaze are taken up, learnt, repeated, practiced, and reified by those scrutinized bodies: perhaps in cathartic conformity.

Further, gay male bodily dynamics desire categorisation for consumption. Categorisation of bodies, allowing for variety in a strict production of typified figures: "bear," "twink," "otter," "geek," "jock," et cetera., originates both from a strict adherence to sexual and social capital within the community, but also for the utilisation of that capital within Western gay male political economy, through consumption. It follows that gay male bodily politics physicalises sexual literacy. This is to say that communication becomes contingent on mutual adherence to and understanding of (homo-)erotic bodily codes. To provide an example: a body endowed with little hair, fair skin, a slim physique, and youth will be categorized as "twink" within a homoerotic desirability framework, whether the occupant of said body consents or not. Within the name "twink" lies the aforementioned bodily traits as a kind of shorthand, but also expectations of behaviour, temperament, preferences, all imbued with sexual meaning. It is also worth noting the great variety of categorisation afforded to white bodies in contrast to a remarkable homogenisation of black and brown bodies. Thus, a culture of socio-sexual consumption emerges within gay male communities. Moreover, it emerges out of a "desire to desire", in which homoerotic desire is fundamental to gay sociability, and that operates through socio-sexual categorisation and capitalisation.

Yet, the self is an active agent in these processes too. One's own body is not just a site of construction (gazed and desired into certain sexual types), but becomes also a site of autoconstruction. Just as one consumes and desires within the realm of the gay male sexual economy, they also consume oneself. Conforming in gay male sexual markets is survival in as much as it is control, because of the way such politics have emerged unchecked by privilege within the community.

(White) gay male 'aesthetic' is a widespread, well-known, and importantly marketable phenomenon and practice, in which the body is the subject of homoerotic desire, *as well as* its host and form. The paradox of sexual politics is that one steps into being both a consumer and the consumed, the acknowledgement of which also leads the self to consume and appraise the body of the self against and in likeness to the subject/other. This is perhaps accentuated in the gay male circle, as physical likeness prompts bodily categorisation. The desire to be categorised, and thus affirmed, desired, and validated, embodies complicity in a process of bodily caricaturisation that the body, with its agency, tends to strive towards.

Consumption and autoconsumption become key themes when put against contemporary incidences of gay male eating disorder, self-harm, and over exercise (which needless to say, also overlap). The body, in being a site of homoerotic desire, is subjected (by the self) to commodification in a brutal process. These issues are too often not attended to in compassionate ways due to community-wide silence and taboo, owing to the complex structuring of gay male desire and sexual economy as a self-congratulating, self-regulating, and self-policing system that enforces and applauds conformity.

To centre the above in the asexual experience requires the acknowledgement that sexual proficiency, literacy and conformity demand to be learnt by all in the gay community, regardless to what extent they experience sexual attraction, if at all. An asexual criticism brings the powerful markets of homoerotic desire into question, and in doing so, highlights the way bodies are subjected and categorised in harmful ways. Gay and queer asexual masculinities could challenge erotic bodily regimes but at the same time exist precariously within them. What is certain is that critical asexual rigour can help to further explode and explain the wide, deep webs of sexual culture that we find ourselves tangled within.

Joe Jukes is reading for an MA in Sexual Dissidence from the University of Sussex, UK. Their research interests include gender and sexuality studies, cultural geography, and critical theory. They also direct theatre, and create video content to do with asexuality, academia, mental health, and more at the Youtube channel JoeeJayy (<https://www.youtube.com/user/joeejayy>).

WHEN YOU SAY “BODY,” I SAY

BY MARIBEL C. PAGAN

Water laps, nipping in the distance
 amidst the desert sands,
 an unborn vessel shriveling—
 a mirage in the desert.

My legs spring, pounding against sand,
 slipping it away beneath my bare feet.
 Before the mirage escapes my clutches,
 I try it on:

one	size	fits	all,
adapting	flesh and skin	sweater	
adopting	blood	dry bones	
brittle	withered	rampikes	
dotting	horizon	grey sky.	

Painkillers	body	pain
leaves behind	mind	

—a Picasso painting
 studded
 blemishes unsuitable
 for a god.

Maribel C. Pagan is a Latino homeschool graduate. She has appeared in *7x20*, *Cuento*, *Blue Marble Review*, *Zaum*, *Planted Word*, *Persephone's Daughters*, and others. She has received the Junior Reading Giants Award, has made the President's List in Mohawk Valley Community College, and has received 5th Place in the Word Weaver Writing Contest, among many other awards and scholarships. Additionally, she is the Editor-in-Chief of *Seshat Literary Magazine*, a Prose Reader for *Apprehension Magazine*, a Poetry Reader for *Frontier Poetry*, and a singer and musician for The Angelic Family Choir. Visit Maribel at <http://therollinghills.wordpress.com/>.

CONSIDERING INTERSECTIONALITY AND (DE)SEXUALIZING ASEXUAL BODIES

BY MICHAEL PARAMO

Disbelief is the immediate reaction I have most often received upon revealing my asexuality to others in my life. There is a sense of shock that envelopes them as the root of their belief in the innateness of a sexual drive or desire for sex is unconsciously unearthed. How can people with no interest in sex possibly exist? Of course, some asexuals actually do have sex and possess sexual desire, but they are absent from societal perceptions of what asexuality is or should mean. On a societal level, the “naturalness” of sex is pervasive, and therefore asexuality is largely deemed an impossibility. At the same time, invalidation applies differently to asexuals based on how their asexuality correlates with perceptions of their physical body. Under oppressive systems of white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, anti-fatness, able-bodiedness, and other hegemonic systems of oppression, certain bodies are inherently sexualized or desexualized. This applies to asexual bodies as well. Asexual people must navigate identifying and expressing their asexuality differently due to how their body is understood in this manner. The nuances of how this may actually function for every asexual person in the societal equation of sexualization versus desexualization is a complex consideration that requires far more in-depth analysis than this short essay will provide. As such, this discussion merely serves as an introductory framework discussing how asexual people must navigate expressing their identity in relationship to how their body is perceived differently based on their embodiment of overlapping social identities.

For the asexual whose body is inherently sexualized, they may be deemed to be too inherently *sexual* to be *asexual*, directly conflicting with their ability to claim and have access to the identity of asexuality on a societal level. Thus, the asexual that is sexualized under hegemonic gazes not only counters understandings of asexuality as an impossibility, but also must navigate a heightened level of disbelief, invalidation, interrogation, and subsequent violence that may be initiated by the non-

asexual who objectifies their body as a sexual object. This is especially true for asexual women whose bodies are innately perceived as sexualized objects under the male gaze and are thus not only forced to navigate expressing their self-identification as asexual because of its existence as a force that counters the sexual objectification placed upon their bodies, but also must consider how openly expressing their asexuality may be perceived as a threat to the fragile masculinity of men who invest their identity as a man in the sexual domination of women's bodies. Women of color are subjected to heightened levels of sexualized objectification in comparison to white women, just as women's bodies that are perceived as thin or attractive are sexualized over women's bodies that are seen as fat or unattractive, and just as younger adult women are sexualized to a greater degree than older adult women. All of these variables are of absolute necessity to consider for the asexual who exists in a society where sex is seen as a prize that provides sexual value to bodies that are perceived as desirable under hegemonic gazes.

For the asexual whose body is desexualized, they may already be understood as existing in a state of being that does not include sex, and may therefore be societally understood as "asexual" already, even though this would be flawed understanding. Still, in a society that glorifies sex, the desexualized asexual is already understood as undesirable or a "failure" due to their perceived nonsexual state of existence attached to how their body is perceived. Because a desexualized body under systems of oppression may already be understood as sexually "worthless," for the desexualized asexual, expressing their asexuality openly does not necessarily conflict with hegemonic gazes, as it does with the bodies of sexualized asexuals. For example, the bodies of fat asexuals are already subjected to being understood as worthless sexually by hegemonic gazes, and thus, claiming or asserting one's asexuality in the presence of those who reinforce societal narratives will only result in a further state of worthlessness being placed upon them. This is because, under hegemonic gazes, fatness is generally already desexualized and perceived as "disgusting." Thus, for the fat asexual, because their body is already desexualized, expressing their asexuality may already be assumed in a manner that is meant to be demeaning or insulting, and thus, self-identifying as asexual may be met with less outright resistance in

comparison to the sexualized asexual. Similarly, this can be applied to other groups, such as older asexual people and disabled asexual people, whose bodies are generally desexualized under hegemonic gazes. However, it is critical to emphasize that while self-identifying as asexual may be met with less overt disbelief or resistance in comparison to the sexualized asexual, the desexualized asexual also remains invalidated, trapped in a compounded state of perceived worthlessness due to their identity and perception of their body. The desexualized asexual who engages in sexual activity and/or possesses sexual desire, as some asexuals do, will have to navigate greater levels of invalidation, both in relation to their sexual activity as an asexual and as someone who possesses a desexualized body, both within and outside of the ace community.

While this essay has reduced the sheer complexity of this issue to a few general examples for the purposes of brevity, the central point remains: in either state of existence, whether sexualized or desexualized, the asexual person is not validated or empowered. When considering intersectionality, while the sexualized asexual must counter opposing forces of sexualized objectification forced upon them due to their embodiment of overlapping social identities that has given them "sexual worth" under hegemonic gazes, the desexualized asexual may have to navigate being understood as "sexually worthless," left to deconstruct the notion that they should even be validated or invalidated based on societal measurements of sexual attractiveness. In conclusion, I plan to expand this discussion regarding how the asexual whose body is inherently sexualized or desexualized must navigate interpretations of their identity in relationship to perceptions of their body differently based on their embodiment of social identities further in the future through incorporating scholarly research, interviews, as well as my personal experience as an asexual person.

Michael Paramo is an asexual Latinx demiguy located in southern California. They are currently a graduate student who has been selected to present their research at national conferences, such as by the *International Association for the Study of Popular Music's U.S. branch*, the *Popular Culture Association*, as well as the *National Women's Studies Association*. They are the founder of *The Asexual* and the Editor-in-Chief of *The Asexual* journal. Twitter: @Michael_Paramo

INSIDE OUT

BY MS. ACE

My Body

Is a mess of muscles and joints

A calamity of bullet points for a doctor to look at and tell me what's wrong

To sing me a song of diagnostics and treatments to make me seem typical

When we both know that typical is something I'll never be

My Brain

Is a catastrophe

A wasted scene of hopes and dreams that'll never be achieved

Leading to a series of highs and lows that go on like a rollercoaster

Leaving me a shattered and shaking mess in a matter of minutes

Wanting to imagine the dreary days away

My Body

Is a calamity

Wracked by the grief of being disabled

And the numbness of being too small for my own good

Stomach churning, never yearning for something everyone seems to want

Body blooming, everyone zooming ahead

Except for me

Left to crawl along

My Brain

Is a catastrophe

Waiting for one more anxiety, fear, or urge for pain

To push it over the edge

For one more prick to turn to shove me over

Into the sea of "you're just confused"

Or "you'll never know until you try"

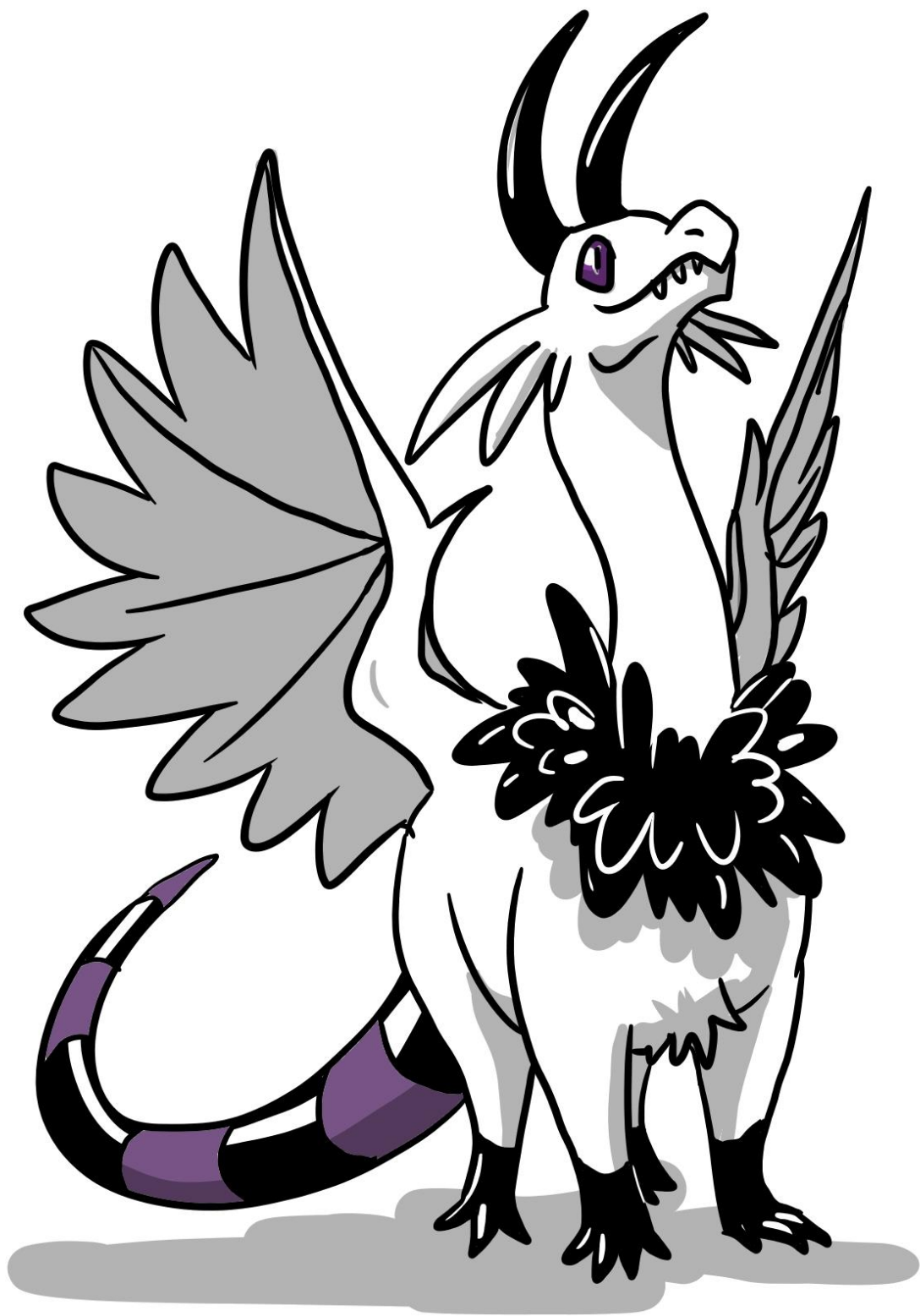
Run and hide, can't let it slide

No matter how much I want to

So, I trip
I fall
I stop

Until determination gets me back on my feet.
Love helps me to keep going.
And my Heart helps me to fly.

Ms. Ace is an asexual biromantic high schooler and writer who has three goals in life: to become a journalist for a magazine, to destroy ableism and acephobia, and to live in an apartment with her partner and three sphynx cats. She lives in St. Paul, MN and one day hopes to go to college to major in Creative Writing.



COLORS OF THE DRAGON

BY DIANE RAMIC

Photoshop
1175x1674 px

I've always loved dragons ever since I was introduced to them when I was a child. I've noticed that recently, people in the ace community have also been compared to dragons. I'm not sure exactly where this idea came from, but I'm not complaining. I think it might have started as a joke on the idea that a lot of people don't believe in asexual people existing the same way they don't believe in dragons existing, equating ace people with these mythical creatures? Maybe it's a joke on asexual reproduction, because Komodo dragons can reproduce that way? Who knows, but what I do know is that I love dragons regardless, haha. I drew this little guy with the ace flag colors, some of which are my favorite colors (black, white, and grey).

Diane Ramic is a freelance illustrator and designer. When she was 7, she wanted to be a Velociraptor when she grew up, but eventually decided that being an illustrator was an even more fulfilling career choice! A lot of her works are inspired by paleontology, astronomy, sci-fi, and fantasy, and she also loves working on children's books, especially if they have an educational element. She likes using a variety of media, both traditional and digital, in her work, but usually you'll find plenty of watercolors and inks in her art. As for where exactly she fits on the spectrum, she is just about as aro/ace as you can get, and was actually hoping she'd end up that way since she was little. Even today, she thinks even something like kissing and holding hands is kinda gross, but hey, you do you (or don't, haha). If you like dinosaurs, aliens, and dragons, you can find more of her work on her blog at dianeramic.tumblr.com.

THE ACCEPTANCE OF QUESTIONING

BY EMMA HUTSON

Growing up, you thought you might be a sociopath. You'd learnt the word in a novel and it sounded like something that might apply. You didn't feel things the way that you thought other people did. They seemed to feel things so deeply and immediately. For a while you thought you might have Asperger's, but that was quickly ruled out. You thought that maybe you were just a little more reserved than the others at school. For a long time, you thought you were broken.

You thought about sex a lot. You and your friends would whisper in the back of classrooms; giggle at naughty books in the library. You'd stay up late and watch risqué programmes with the volume on low. You'd all talk about who'd do it first, what it would be like. The braver girls would sneak condoms around, passing them palm-to-palm like illicit substances. You thought about kissing like they did in films, hands cupping cheeks, the slide of lips, the tumbling into bed, the panning away and a soundtrack of gasps into the next scene. That never really changed: the panning away.

At fifteen you had a strictly over-the-clothes boyfriend who you eventually dumped by text. On nights out, when you were too young to drink but did it anyway, you and your friends would all kiss, grope, move to the next person. Sometimes you wish that you could go back to that. You were at the forefront of exploration then. Slowly you fell behind while making token gestures of keeping up, have another boyfriend, have a girlfriend, profess your TV crushes and bemoan your looks as holding you back.

Escaping the town you grew up in meant escaping your lack. It meant being able to start new lies, more easily excuse the absence of fresher's lays. After all, who would even want you? Your body was a cushion between you and the world. Your knees hurt, though. And getting to class on the second floor meant leaving early enough to have time to

catch your breath at the top. You lost weight over summer. When you returned, the pressure was back. There were more expectations. You got set up. You got drunk. You slept with them. You ignored them when they tried to contact you. You complained that the big-city gay scene was too intimidating, which it was. You missed the tiny, grimy bars at the back of neighbouring towns where you could have a quick flirt and kiss and leave early for the last bus home.

After another two years of laughing about how long it'd been, you went on a night out. Two people asked for your number. You felt obliged. The boy left early; he had work the next day. The girl, you spent the evening kissing, before escaping between the bodies and bodies and bodies of the club. The boy texted you, you texted back. You dated. He lived in the town over and had to drive back and forth. One night you offered him a drink, he couldn't drive if he did, so you asked him to stay. You slept together. A lot. You stayed together for longer than you'd ever stayed with anyone, which wasn't really that long at all. You kept having sex. You would have preferred not to. Not that you told him. You stopped kissing, all couples do. You found your patience for him waning. You told him it was over, but he tried to stay, you reiterated. He cried. You didn't. You didn't really miss him. You'd rather spend your time with friends, with laughter on sofas and no pressure. You moved again. The system started over.

Moving meant not knowing a soul. It meant joining a walking club, getting flirted with by men old enough to be your father and never going back. It meant not having touched anyone in months. Your skin was starving and you couldn't pretend that the hand stroking your head was anyone's but your own. It meant more expectations. At work you slowly made a friend, and then another. You joined a gym, a yoga class. You got asked about your love life. Over and over like it was the only thing you were good for. You were married to your work, you laughed, like Queen Elizabeth married to England. Maybe she was like you.

You don't seem to feel things the way that other people do. It's been ten years; fifteen, and that hasn't changed. Friends talk about passion

overcoming reason. You've never had that, you don't want it. You can't imagine intrinsically linking a person and sex in that way. You find love in your friendships. You can only imagine really spending your life with them, rather than a lover. An online quiz says you're asexual. You read about it, research it. You feel like you're doing it wrong. You research some more, meet some people online. You hope that one day someone else's story will tell you how things work out in the end, what life looks like when your identity bucks the trend. But until then, you'll live as honestly as you can.

Emma Hutson is an aromantic asexual who is currently completing a PhD on trans literature at Sheffield Hallam University. She has work published in *C Word: An anthology of writing* from Cardiff, *Severine Literary and Art Journal*, *CrabFat Magazine*, and the *Harpoon Review*. Her short story 'Footsteps' came second place in Sheffield Authors' Off The Shelf short story competition. She is available on Twitter @Emma_S_Hutson

BLOOD ON MY HANDS

BY MOIRA ARMSTRONG

we bear children, create life, spawn the next generation-
so it's fine, then, to bleed out every month. except, what
happens when we refuse? then, with no noble purpose,
does the blood become abominable? do I suddenly lose
my token for acceptability when I declare I am not satisfied
with menstruating as a child and teenager for the end game of
birthing babies?

we are locked in a perpetual battle with our own bodies, trapped
in an awful, monthly bloodbath where there is no victor, but when
I say I will not be having children-I am never going to have sex-
then I have become the vile thing, committing suicide against
my own gender.

an asexual doesn't deserve her femininity. she doesn't aim
for motherhood in a world where our worth as women is
defined by the children we bring into existence. that two-
kids-and-a-dog version of the American Dream, the think-
of-your-mother card to pull.

put the blood on my hands.

remind me it's my fault, I'm
killing the traditional family,
killing the values and maternal
instinct I'm supposed to embody.

just put the blame on me.

Moira Armstrong, who identifies as asexual lesbian is a senior at Howland High School in Ohio, where she enjoys stressing over honors classes and extracurriculars. Her favorite is the speech and debate team, where she competes in original oratory and serves as president. Her work has also appeared in *Blue Marble Review*, *The Asexual*, *Sprout Magazine*, *After the Pause*, and *805 Lit and Art*, among others.

ON MOTHERHOOD, NUCLEAR POLITICS, AND OTHER RELATED TOPICS

BY AMANDA AMOS

To say that my relationship with motherhood is a complicated one is to say that nuclear politics are a bit dicey.

On the one hand, I have a phenomenal mother who has a phenomenal mother and I would love nothing more than to carry on that unnamed tradition of women who raise the next generation of girls to be loud, unapologetic, intelligent, and funny. On the other hand, the idea that a man would accept me in all my faults, quirks, and sexuality, is one that seems farfetched at times.

This isn't to say that I couldn't be a mother without a man, or without sex, or anything like that. At the tender age of thirteen, I started parenting friends without parents before I knew anything about boys or sex or my tendency to avoid both of those things. But now that I am older and have explored myself more, now that I know what I want from life, even if I don't know how to go about it, those dreams, and the reality I see on a day-to-day basis, seem to be at odds.

My body can nourish life. I'm reasonably certain of that. My mom was so good at carrying kids that she did it accidentally - three times. Two of those times (including with me, hello) were when she was on birth control. Her mom, my grandma, had similar conundrums. I want to experience pregnancy. I haven't always, but I want my own children made of a mutual and deep love and respect.

The issue comes with that the female body is a sexual object and nothing more. To be sure, this is changing. Inch by loving inch, public perceptions of women are shifting. It started on the college campuses and liberal media, has moved to the high schools, and hopefully will continue to spread to every facet of communication until finally I can be seen without having my hips or waistline appraised for desirability.

But like with all things, the struggle is twice as hard for queer women. So much of the queer and feminist movement has focused on reclaiming female sexuality to allow women to be as openly sexual as men are. And the ground being claimed by this movement has been

long overdue, but as an asexual woman, this focus excludes me from the fight. The community says that we fight for the right of women to have sex or not have sex as they want to, but too often it focuses just on that first part. It's hard enough to be recognized by my own community. And if this cutting-edge movement, that only just now came to the obvious conclusion that trans women belong with us, how much longer will it take for them to acknowledge that my body is valid? Much of asexuality becomes dismissed - either as not real, or not important. Until the LGBT community that surrounds me stops telling me that I am an ally, that I do not belong to their struggle, that I am a part of a straight couple despite my constant crying of "But I'm not straight!" I can't blame those not in the community for not understanding what it is I am.

The difficulty is that asexuality is a spectrum that tends to be much more diverse than other sexualities are. It is a wholly individual experience - you will almost never meet two people who experience their asexuality the same. For me, I have no feelings, positive or negative, towards sex. It simply doesn't cross my mind. Romance based on friendship and born of mutual respect and understanding and having a family, however, is my fondest fantasy. Being accepted by the men I might marry becomes a game of Russian roulette where my easily influenced heart is the one constantly on the targeting board. Being accepted by other queer people becomes the luck of the draw or the cast of the dice on if they will recognize me as someone who has been at their party this whole time, even if they don't think I belong there.

My hips are made for pushing out to one side to express impatience. My hands are made for wild gesturing, and my mouth is for yelling, yelling louder than anyone who tries to drown me and those like me out of the conversation. One day, I will choose to allow the sharp jutting of my hip bones to soften with skin stretching to accommodate new life. I will carry children and toys and all the hopes of a childhood that my mother once carried for me. My ink-stained fingers will become Play-Doh stained, and the stories I tell will give hope, not only to nameless children across the world, but also to my

own at bedtime before they even think to fear the monsters in the closets they will never have to hide in.

My body will be empty, and I will be asexual. My body will create a whole new person, and I will be asexual. It has been this way since longer than I can remember, and it will remain this way until I can't help but forget.

Amanda Amos is a college freshman in the Midwestern US. She is a short story and novella writer, a fierce storyteller, and the designated "Dad Friend." Her work has appeared in *The Asexual*.

BARGAIN

BY ELYSSA TAPPERO

take my voice, sea witch
grant me fine legs in return
a worthwhile bargain
even if each step pains me
at least I'll be like the rest

take my voice, sea witch
after all, what use are words?
brief, untouchable
yet flesh is warm and solid
bone and blood make us human

take my voice, sea witch
I just want to be normal
feel the things I should
I long to walk on the shore
but now longing's not enough

take my voice, sea witch
change the self I never chose
give me sensation
for I've given up on words
and now I'd give anything

Elyssa Tappero is a queer asexual living in Gig Harbor, Washington with her wife, elderly dog, and two extremely spoiled cats. She is an avid writer of poetry and prose whose work can be found on www.onlyfragments.com. She is far too obsessed with *Hannibal* and *Steven Universe*, hates tomatoes, and somehow always rolls low during encounters in DnD. She runs the ace blog www.still-a-valid-ace.tumblr.com, where she fends off angry exclusionists and tries to provide good advice to those who ask.

YOUR ASEXUALITY IS NOT A PROBLEM

BY AURORA THORNTON

My boyfriend broke up with me today, and the worst part is that I'm not even surprised.

I got back from visiting him (several states and two two hours flights) for the past week at 2am this morning. Around six this evening, he called to say this:

"Time to be upfront about it - I'm in a relationship with someone else. So whatever we had is over."

He was at the someone else's house (also in another state and plane trip away) for their child's tenth birthday. I'd picked up the wrapping paper and bows for him over the week, and helped him pick out a card yesterday. We watched Netflix while he wrapped the present.

I wished him well over the phone, but told him I was going to hang up. I didn't know - I couldn't think of anything else to say. My stomach felt like a pit, and there was something thick but permeable in the back of my throat. I want to say I was blind-sided, but I didn't feel blind at all.

I spent the next few hours angry. The other person had visited him earlier that month. They were his ex. I didn't think anything of it - he was close with a lot of people, and was close with their kid, too. I wasn't angry at him. I wasn't angry at me, although I maybe should have been. I thought about the long hair I'd found in his bed. I have short hair. I thought he just lent them the spare comforter I was using when they visited.

I don't feel stupid, but I had thought maybe something was amiss in our relationship. I have anxiety, so after talking to him about it, wrote it off as my mind's insidious whispers. He'd been working late for a while, and I assumed he was just tired. But he never really reassured me.

I am asexual. He is not. We talked about it. When I first brought it up, it was the first time I had realized it myself. He claimed to accept it, but I don't

think he really did. Because I am sex positive, I don't think he really understood. When I explained I didn't find anyone physically attractive, including him, I knew it hurt him - but I was just being honest. After a while, he came to realize that I really was asexual, and actually understand that. I know, because we talked about it.

He told me that he wasn't sure how I could differentiate my love for him from my love for my friends, and that he felt like our relationship was more like a friendship. Without sex as a backdrop, I didn't know how to explain that it *felt* different. That even if it seemed the same to him, I could tell the way I loved him was different. It was romantic, and not platonic.

We were together for about four years. I had never dated anyone before him.

We had been dating a few months when I realized I was asexual. I came across someone talking about their experience, and it led me to research more. And I had that moment - the *there's a name for that* moment. If you're also queer, you know what moment I'm talking about. My ex-boyfriend is straight. He'd never had that moment. He didn't understand why I felt like I needed a label. I tried to explain, but it never stuck. He didn't mean it in malice, and I understood his point of view - I wish we lived in a world where acceptance was so high that labels for orientation were superfluous. But we don't, and it's really *fucking* hard to explain the way it feels to know you aren't alone in something treated as an outlier or variance from the norm to someone who has never felt that way. We talked about me being asexual then. He asked if I was sure. I was mostly sure, and only grew more sure after. I am asexual.

We had sex pretty regularly. Like I said, I'm sex positive - I greatly enjoy sex. It just has its own box for me - a box separate from romantic love. He told me that for him sex and romance were tied together, and I understood. I worried that our incompatible orientations would lead us to breaking up - this was still in year one. I never once wavered from considering myself asexual from that point on.

I would ask him if he thought I looked pretty - after telling him I didn't find him physically attractive, I thought I was being unfair, so I stopped asking

when he wondered why someone that was asexual would wonder why they were pretty. Because I didn't want to drive in the knife that I wasn't attracted to him that way. I still thought he looked handsome in a suit. I didn't understand the difference between aesthetic and physical attraction then, even though I could identify other people as pretty and handsome. Just nothing beyond that - I couldn't tell if someone was sexy, and had a hard time telling the difference between levels of beauty without a dramatic difference. I can find people ugly, but never repulsive, because to be physically put off by someone, I have to have the ability to be physically put on.

He said he was working through things. By things, I mean my asexuality. He was figuring out if it could work. I was trying to make it work. He was pulling away. He was always introspective, so I let him. I told him the week before my visit I was excited to see him soon. He didn't say the same. I figured he just forgot because he was tired and busy.

I stayed at his house for a week. I ran errands while he was at work to help out. We started to have sex the day I got in, but I was so tired I was passing out in the act. I apologized, he said I had nothing to apologize for. I was comfortable, and didn't feel the urge to start anything the rest of the week. Neither did he. I thought he was tired. He played Starcraft while I watched TV. I asked him to join me at some point each night, because I didn't want to force him away from his stress relief after working ten plus hours. We watched *Ever After*, one of my favorites, because he hadn't seen it, and *The Seven Deadly Sins* anime, because he hadn't seen that either and didn't have anything else he wanted to watch.

His ex that he's with now reached out to him after breaking up with an abusive spouse. He'd showed me the conversations they'd had. They were benign. His partner now was on track for a much better life. He had always liked to help people in bad situations, so I didn't think anything of it. I knew about this ex before we started dating. They deserved someone supportive like him. When we first started dating, I thought I wouldn't measure up to this ex if they wanted him back. I guess I was right.

I have anxiety. I had finally gotten to the point in our relationship where I'd quieted that voice telling me I wasn't good enough, that he deserved

better. I had finally stopped worrying that every serious conversation would end in a break up. I knew there was a possibility that things would end, but I was no longer afraid of it. And I trusted him.

I am asexual, and my partner of four years told me that our relationship felt like a friendship because it lacked a sexual component on my end. And when he broke up, he didn't call it a relationship - he called it *whatever we had*. I love him. Romantically. I told him so, but he doesn't seem to have believed me. And you know what? I forgive him.

Don't get me wrong - what he did was shitty. He cheated on me before I arrived to visit (over \$400 on the plane tickets) and didn't tell me we were breaking up until we were states away (I lost my luggage on the way back, and since it wasn't checked in, I probably will never get it back). I want to punch him in the face - and I have no doubt he deserves it. But I don't wish him any ill will beyond that.

I called my mom. She suggested whiskey. I hadn't felt like crying until I talked to her. I did my make-up, put on a short dress with a plunging neckline and went out to the movies with friends. I had two drinks, but enough food and water that I didn't even get buzzed. I felt tired. I feel tired now. Drained. I doubt I'm done with feelings about this. But I don't have regrets.

I was honest about who I was and what I felt. I tried to make him understand, and it's not my fault that he never did. I still love him right now. I don't know what's going to happen to my Friday night RPG games over Skype - all the other participants are his friends from college. I've come to call them my friends as well over the past five years (we were friends a year before we started dating), but they were his friends first and his friends longer. And he's in those games too. I don't want to give them up, but I also don't know when I'll be able to face him.

I'm not mad we broke up - I'm sad, and I'll miss our relationship. But I'm not mad about that - I'm mad that he wasn't adult enough to break up with me sooner. If he had broke up with me because he wanted to pursue another relationship, I wouldn't have been mad - that's life, and there's nothing wrong with admitting that. But that isn't what he said - he said he was

already in a relationship. That means he waited until after his new relationship started before breaking up with me. And that's shit.

We broke up once before, for a couple of months. I don't remember why - probably the same reason we broke up now. But he didn't cheat then, he was just honest. Said he'd needed time to get his own head straight. That's fair - I wasn't mad. I was upset, but I wasn't mad. It was mature. It hurt, but it was the right thing to do. This was not.

I remember why we broke up now the first time, but won't put it here, because it was personal for him. It was still the right thing to do at the time.

I don't regret a thing - my relationship with him helped me to grow as a person in leaps and bounds. I'm a more secure, confident person now than I was then. His friend told him that, being several years younger than him, I was holding him back as a person. He'd told me about it. I thought it was a shitty thing to say, and asked if he agreed. He'd said it was more like he was helping me catch up. He'd said it with a smile in his voice.

We were long distance for half our relationship, so most of our conversations were by phone and text. Staying in touch with him was easier for me than staying in touch with anyone else, family included. I have ADHD in addition to depression and anxiety - I have a hard time keeping in touch. For me, it was a marvel that it felt so natural to maintain our communication. But it got harder in the past few months, as I realized I was initiating every conversation - leading to gaps in communication. Sometimes a day, sometimes up to a week. Never longer than that, as I always reached out. I thought he was tired, but asked if he was pulling away. I already talked about that, though.

I'm writing this to share with other asexuals who might find themselves in a relationship with an allosexual that doesn't get it. To let you know to be honest about your asexuality, and how you feel. Repeat it if you need to. Don't run if they say they need time - they really might just need time. But make yourself heard, so that even if your relationship ends in a shitshow like mine did, your self-worth is intact. That you will never feel angry at yourself, or assume that you're not good enough because of your asexuality.

I know my story isn't as extreme as what other asexuals have faced - I wasn't abused, and he did try to listen. He tried to understand - he did. But his inability to reconcile my asexuality and his allosexuality isn't my fault, and I don't feel bad about that. I don't feel like I didn't love him enough, because I put in the effort. I tried to make him see the stars in my eyes, but when I compared him to the cosmos, he thought I was being co-dependent. I don't hate him. I know him too well. But I am disappointed.

I am proud to be asexual, and proud I stood by it even when I could tell it wore on my partner. Because you can lose a partner - but you'll always have yourself when it's over. Don't hide yourself for the person you're with, because if they can't handle who you really are, they'll leave no matter what. And you'll wonder if it was because there was something wrong with you, and that's hardly ever the problem.

My ex-boyfriend probably broke up with me because of my asexuality, but I don't see my asexuality as a problem. And I think others should know about that, too.

Aurora Lee Thornton is an asexual author of fantasy that lives in the United States. She's not overly fond of giving out much more personal information than that. Aurora also quite naturally likes books - she's been reading and writing since kindergarten (yes, writing too) and has yet to stop. Everything from cyberpunk to high fantasy is fair game - Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* sits next to Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* and Tamora Pierce's *Tortall* series on her shelf of favorite books (not physically, she sorts her books by genre first, but you understand the meaning). The one thing that has always captured her interest and stayed close to her heart, however, is dragons. If you've had any dragon sightings you'd like to share, she'd love to hear about it.

ACE PRIDE & QUEER ENOUGH

BY DERAMIN FOR RACHEL AND CAYDEN

Black is for every time I heard,
"When you meet the right lover
There will be fireworks
Bursting from your heart."

For the brokenness,
Of every failed relationship
Whose intimate demise was obvious
To everyone but me.

Grey is for every lustful movie scene
I cringed away from.
Wanting no place there
Among the intercourse of others.

For all the tears
When I felt I was broken.
Longing for the romance left,
Long after lust had died.

White is for every time I knew my heart,
But smugly told myself
I just adhered to a code of old morality
I never did believe in.

For the peace of being single,
Cuddling with the cat,
Thinking, "This is so much better,
For she wants nothing more from me."

Purple is for my friends
Brave enough to live their truth.
Givers of the language
To declare my own.

For your patience, dear.
Our struggle to understand
The hard path to meet half-way
When fireworks meet fairy lights.

This flag is for pride,
That I wave proudly now
Over the battlefield of identity
And live free to claim.

Because I'm queer enough.

Queer enough to note
When you erase me.

Queer enough to hear
You silently append normative to every hetero.

Queer enough to hide
Who I am from those that love me.

Queer enough to bear
A good friend say my love is just weird.

Queer enough to need
Better words to explain.

Queer enough to have
A letter and a flag.

Queer enough to tell
You to fuck off.

Queer enough to matter.

Deramin aspired to be an Information Security Architect until a chronic pain disorder aspired to make her miserable. They've compromised on poetry, writing, and art as a means of remaining joyously miserable, semi-productive, and spawning work that may outlive her. She discovered she was demisexual from D&D friends. Now in her 30s, she lives off a steady diet of tabletop roleplaying games, warm kindness, spite, gallows humor, kombucha, and farmers market fava beans in Eugene, Oregon. Twitter: @OTDDeramin // Website: <https://chasetheeling.tumblr.com/>



SLEEPING WITH SPACE

BY ELYSE JONES

Chalk pastel, acrylic paint

6 feet by 3 feet

I made this after experiencing a significant breakup. At least partially due to my asexuality, I have a very hard time opening up to people romantically/intimately. For this person, I felt entirely exposed, and so breaking up with them felt like the shattering of my world. This portrait is life size, physically exposing my body for its true proportions, mirroring the way I had felt emotionally and physically exposed to this person. The space represents the simultaneous emptiness I felt beside me as well as the infinite possibilities I now had, independent of this person. I wanted to empower myself while also acknowledging I had experienced a loss.

Elyse Jones is currently a college student studying English, Women's and Gender Studies, and Fine Art. She has loved reading, writing, and making artwork her entire life. She identifies as asexual, though she is not sure about her exact location on the ace spectrum. She loves Star Wars, her dog Jack, and educating people about asexuality.

A ROUTINE PROCEDURE

BY SARALYN SMITH

“It’ll get better when you start having sex.”

I had been doing deep, calming breathing, feeling the blood and color return to my face. The words were tossed out so casually but the reassuring tone sent my heart racing again.

I’d never used the word “asexual” with my doctor before, but she knew I was a virgin without plans to change. I had only started thinking about asexuality when I began seeing her and it never seemed relevant. I’d come in, answer the pointless questions about my sexual activity and the (im)possibility of being pregnant, and move on to why I was actually there.

When it came to my first pap smear, though, it turned out that being an asexual virgin mattered. I avoided it until my late 20s, figuring that not being sexually active was a good excuse. I finally scheduled one with my primary care physician in a fit of responsibility-mindedness. I was more comfortable with her than most doctors I’d had and she was very competent. I would be fine.

...I wasn’t fine. It hurt like hell and I felt something akin to shame that I was finding it so difficult. Why wouldn’t my body just cooperate? A pap smear is supposed to be relatively routine. We’re trying to normalize the procedure so that people with cervixes won’t avoid it, but here I was on the verge of passing out.

Less than halfway through, my doctor paused and asked if I wanted to just try again another time. I was doing all I could to relax, to breathe, to work my way through the intense physical pain and the emotions that came with it. When she asked, that all went out the window and I caught myself starting to panic. Try it again? Soon? Hell no. We powered through.

There was a big moment of relief when she said we were finished. I had done it. I closed my eyes and restarted my calming breathing as my doctor - soon to be pregnant for the second time since I started seeing her - prattled about being able to wait three years between pap smears once I hit thirty. Then,

“It’ll get better when you start having sex.”

Tears welled up in my eyes as she continued to fill me in on next steps and left the room, so casually. I got my clothes on, hopped back on my motorcycle, and headed back to work. Which turned out to be a terrible idea, because discomfort and nausea washed over me all afternoon. Discomfort and nausea, and frustration, and anxiety about the next time and the time after that...

Every couple of months, my insurance sends me a notice that I am due for my “important women’s health screening.” Every couple of months, I put it straight in the trash.

Saralyn Smith (she/her) is an asexual demiromantic ciswoman currently living in Washington state with her absurd pup, Grayson. Everyone is always surprised to hear she rides a small motorcycle.

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