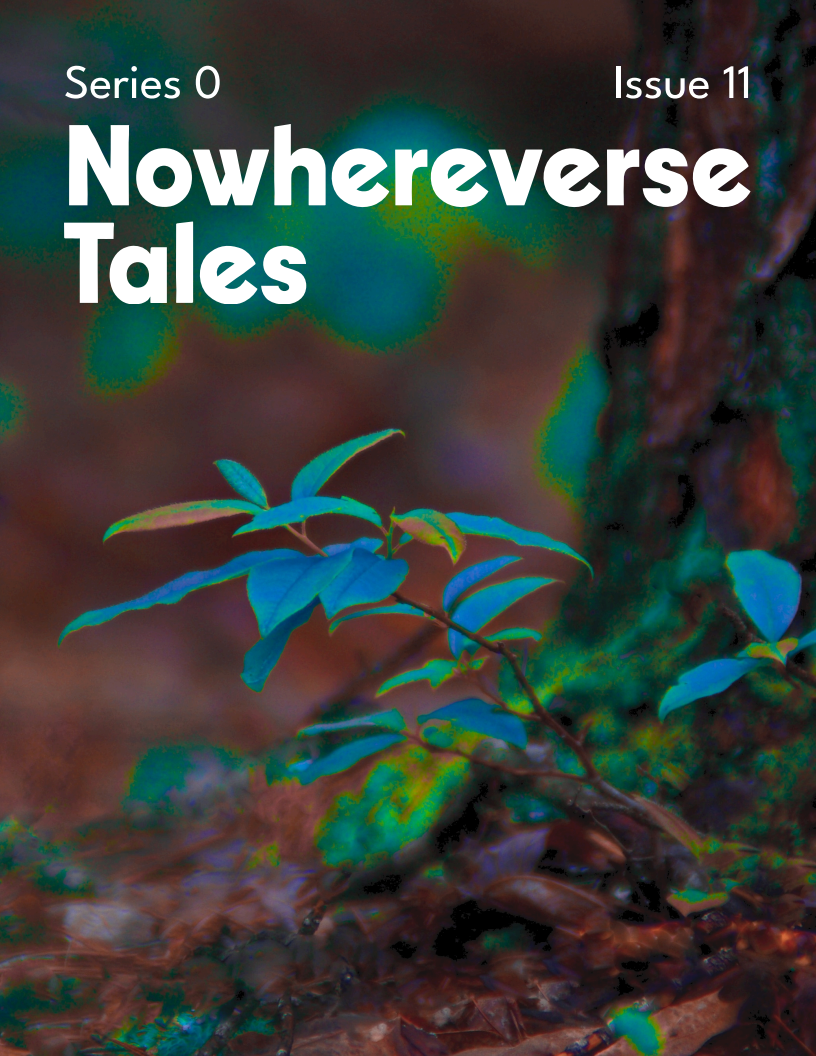


Series 0

Issue 11

Nowhereverse Tales



There are parallel universes, other worlds, each with their own histories, their own cultures, their own biologies. We feel the walls grow weak, sometimes: when the world seems thinner, when the light is just right, when things seem just a little bit off, and we imagine we can reach out, just a little bit...

In the midst of all this, in a lost corner inside the lost space between spaces, a new place is forming. Born from hidden desires and deep longings. A place to rest, a stop along the way for so many. In the middle of everywhere, this is Nowhere.

Maybe you found yourself here by circumstance. Maybe you got lost and came to find shelter. Maybe you sought us out. Regardless, we have a place for you, no matter where you are in your journey.

The light is always lit, and the door is always open.

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Harris and Julia are lost in an otherworldly forest, and their only chance at survival could mean joining it.

Rated Teen: brief language, assimilation, immobilization, identity shift

3. The Breakdown

You can read each others' minds, so you'll never fight or misunderstand each other... right?

Rated Teen: foreign thoughts, relationship difficulties, brief language, implied self-harm

4. Ask the Lighthouse

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Letter from the editor

Welcome to our first double issue! Twice as many pages as a normal issue! (My apologies to anyone actually printing these out.)

What are we when we strip everything else away? When there's nothing that needs to be done, nowhere we need to go? When all needs are met? When, it turns out, we aren't needed?

I'll freely confess I don't do well with that idea. Which makes this issue's story very important to me. So important, in fact, that we're doing a double issue so it's all in one place.

Stay curious,
—Ronyo

Just Be

Harris and Julia were lost.

The trail was gone. There were no blazes or signposts or markers anywhere. The game trail they were following was patchy at best. They weren't going in circles, because they'd been careful to start marking trees. The GPS wasn't giving any sort of signal. The emergency satellite connection wasn't working either.

Oh, and the leaves on the trees were purple, the moss was red, and there was this pear-shaped fruit everywhere that was a pale, milky blue.

"How long until we invoke Bear Grylls?" Julia said, fingering the strap of her water pack.

Harris made a face. "Not until tomorrow," he said, "but we should probably start bottling now?" He took a gulp from his wide-mouthed bottle. "Unless we can find a water source."

Julia looked around them. "I mean, there's got to be one, right?" she said. "It's so lush."

"That or just a really high water table. Maybe—"

He was interrupted by his stomach growling.

Julia put her hand on her own; the growl wasn't audible but the ache was definitely there. "Maybe the better question is how long until we risk the fruit?"

Harris winced. "Hopefully tomorrow," he said quietly.

Night fell surprisingly quickly, probably due to the thickness of the forest canopy. Harris and Julia had their phones out for the light.

"You're sure we'll be safe on the ground?" Julia said.

"No?" Harris said with a shrug as he cleared a dry spot next to a particularly large tree. "But we haven't seen any evidence of wildlife. No sightings, no sounds, no shit. Literally."

Julia shivered, but not from the cold. "We should be fine, right? I mean, the temperature's fine?" She glanced around furtively. "It's like... we're not supposed to be here."

"We're not," Harris said, flat. He collapsed on one side of the spot. "We were on the path, on our way back, and then all of a sudden—"

"Hey," Julia said, kneeling next to him. "I don't blame you for this."

Harris closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Her face softened. "You shouldn't either."

They removed their packs and sat with their backs against the tree, their jackets turned around and used as makeshift blankets.

"I'm glad you're here," Julia said quietly as they settled in. "But I wish we weren't."

"Hard same," Harris answered. "Love you."

"Love you too."

Harris slowly swam back up to awareness. He hadn't slept well through most of the night, and his body tried to make up for it by sleeping hard right before dawn. And now all he could tell was that it was light, and probably had been for at least an hour. His vision was blurry, his head was swimmy, and his body was hot, cold, stiff, and achy in any dozen of different places.

He shifted himself to get a little bit of awareness back to himself. He was still sitting up, his legs were splayed, and Julia wasn't there.

He panicked for half a second before he stopped himself. She was probably just relieving herself, or checking something.

He blinked a few more times and willed the world to come into focus. He still ached, but his head cleared up. With a groan he lifted his jacket and pulled it around back onto himself. Carefully, he bent his legs and rolled himself into a kneeling position.

He took a breath and a look around. It was the same forest, the same strange colors, the same... aura. It wasn't malicious, predatory, or hostile; but it wasn't welcoming either. It just... was.

And whatever *it* was, he and Julia weren't.

Julia picked that moment to walk up. "Hey, sleepyhead," she said with a smile.

Harris smiled back. "How'd you sleep?"

She shrugged. "Ish," she said. "How do you want to handle today?"

Harris sighed. "There's not really much reason to keep this as a base camp," he said. "I say we stick together and keep looking for water. You?"

Julia nodded. "Don't have anything better." She smiled weakly. "Can I ask a huge favor?"

Harris pulled himself to his feet. "Anything, what?"

She pulled his water bottle from yesterday out from behind her, now about half-full with... something. "Can you carry the jar of piss?"

They both collapsed against a new tree, not even bothering to prep the ground.

"I don't get it," Harris said. "We followed game trails. We went downhill. And no water."

"Should we try digging a well?" Julia said, pulling her coat around.

"With nothing else to try," Harris said, "probably. It might be a lot of work, and we haven't found anything edible either."

Julia hummed noncommittally.

Harris either didn't notice or didn't acknowledge. "I'll get on it in the morning," he said. "Love you."

Julia snuggled closer to him. "Love you too."

Julia was sitting cross-legged, hands holding something in her lap, looking down at it. She moved her gaze from her lap to the ground between them.

Harris looked down to see three of the milky blue fruit sitting in Julia's upside-down hat. He looked at her to see her holding a fourth in her lap with both hands.

"I think it's time," she said quietly. "If it's poisonous, then we'll die trying."

Harris looked down at the fruit. It looked juicy, despite the strange coloring.

"There's no sign of civilization," Julia continued. "Wherever we are..."

"You're right," Harris said. "It's the only thing that looks remotely edible we've found, and at this point it's our best chance at hydration."

He leaned forward and took one in each hand. He stared at them a moment before looking back at Julia.

"I'm scared," he said quietly.

"But this is the right call," Julia said, eyes wide, hands shaking.

"It is," Harris answered, projecting more confidence than he felt.

Together they lifted up a fruit and took a bite.

The skin was paper-thin, the inside juicy but still substantive. And it tasted like—

His body immediately screamed for the food. He took two gigantic bites and stuffed the rest of the fruit in his mouth. As soon as there was enough room in his mouth he devoured the second fruit. With a manic intensity he licked and sucked any remaining juice off of his hands.

He blinked and came back to himself. He looked at Julia who was sucking at the skin between her thumb and finger. She glanced up, saw Harris, and blushed.

Harris laughed, well aware of the juice covering his face. "Well," he said, "tastes good at least!"

Julia nodded, still seemingly in a daze.

Harris got to his feet and held a hand out for her. "Want to find some water?"

Harris stood at the top of a bluff, dumfounded.

Ten feet below them was a clear, babbling brook.

"What the actual fuck?"

"Hey," Julia said with a laugh and a slap on his back, "we can empty the piss jar." She hopped down the bluff to inspect the stream closer.

Harris sighed and started down after her. "I swear we looked here yesterday," he muttered.

Julia bit her lip and tried to ignore the chill that ran through her.

They made camp by the stream. Harris dug a latrine for them farther up the bluff away from them and their water supply. Julia went to collect more fruit, being sure to mark her path so she could find her way back.

They reunited at dusk and had dinner together, three fruits each. They weren't as manic about eating them as they were about breakfast, but Harris still felt the rush, the compulsion to devour as much of the fruit as he could.

They kept their habit of lying next to each other under their jackets at the foot of a tree.

"Today was a good day," Harris said, shuffling a little closer.

"Food and water and not dying will do that," Julia said, leaning against him.

"It will." He sighed. "Thanks for bringing the fruit by this morning."

"Yeah," Julia said quietly. "Thanks for listening to me about it."

"Of course. We're in this together."

"Yeah. Love you."

"Love you."

They had only expected a morning hike when they first went into the woods, so their survival supplies were limited. So when Harris set out to build a shelter, his options were limited. Specifically, limited to already-dead branches on the ground or within reach. He ended up spending most of the next day just gathering wood and branches together.

Julia spent her time collecting moss, leaves, and other materials for a soft sleeping surface. Whenever she came across a well-placed branch she'd stop and do a few kipping pull-ups.

That evening, the two of them laid on the bed, back in their clothes but not under their jackets, staring up at the canopy and the starlight filtering through it.

"Why do we need a shelter?" Julia said.

"Well," Harris said, "usually it's for protection from the elements. Rain, direct sunlight. It's also easier to heat an enclosed space." He thought for a moment more. "And I think it might deter wildlife a bit?"

Julia hummed. "I feel like we don't need to worry about half of those."

Harris paused. "Yeah," he said. "Not sure how we know that..."

"No, it totally makes sense," Julia muttered, falling asleep. "We belong here now."

Harris wanted to object, or even ask what that was supposed to mean, but he couldn't deny how much easier moving through the forest had become. How easily they had found the resources they needed. Especially compared with their first two days.

"And Persephone ate a pomegranate," he muttered to himself as he let himself doze off.

The next morning found them staring in awe at the stream from their vantage point on the bluff.

A pair of deer-like creatures—one doe and one buck—were calmly drinking from the stream. Their fur was as oddly colored as everything else in the forest, and there were leaves and flowers attached to them that almost seemed to be growing out of them. Their proportions looked slightly off what they remembered deer being. And the buck's antlers looked more like tree branches than antlers.

As they watched, they heard a rustling in the underbrush behind them. They looked and saw five rodent-sized creatures scampering out. They had long, rabbit-like ears and long, squirrel-like tails.

And they ran past Julia and Harris without a second thought.

They looked back to the water to see the different creatures interacting. It wasn't orderly, but it looked... coordinated? There was no competition for water despite both species being next to each other. A pair of the squirrels even hopped on the back of the doe and picked through her fur.

They sat and watched for a few more moments before the group casually dispersed. The deer walked up the stream while the squirrels ran back up the bluff straight toward Julia and Harris. Again, they ran past, though this time they clearly noticed them sitting there.

And then one squirrel stopped and ran up Julia's back, picked a leaf out of her hair, and ran off.

They both stared after it for a few moments before breaking out into confused laughter.

"Point taken," Harris said. "We don't need to worry about the wildlife."

"And vice versa, apparently," Julia added.
Harris's smile fell just a bit.

Harris spent the next week or so digging out a shelter—more of a den, really. It was set into the ground, and the clay-like dirt he had dug up went to build the walls up. He covered the top with the fallen branches he had gathered, and he and Julia moved the moss bed inside. It was tall enough to crawl in, but not much more.

Julia spent her time exploring. Her paths weren't marked; her sense of place and direction had become impeccable. She found many different landmarks, new creatures, but always the same fruit. And never a high enough vantage point to see above the trees. She always came back a little before dusk to get a few kipping handstands in against a tree.

She returned one day to see Harris standing proudly in front of the den. "As requested, my lady," he said with a bow, "a perfectly servicable hole in the ground."

"Thank you, kind sir," she said, equally as grandiose.

They ate their dinner of fruits that evening in companionable silence, listening to the sounds of the forest.

"So," Harris said, "we have water, food, and shelter. What are we missing?"

Julia leaned against him. "I can't think of anything. You?"

Harris sighed. "I'm thinking about protein," he said quietly.

Julia stiffened.

"Like I said," Harris said quickly, "I'm thinking about it. I'll let you know before I actually do anything."

Julia nodded but didn't say anything.

The next day passed without much fanfare. Julia foraged, and Harris did some exploring of his own. They ate dinner and went to bed, aware of some impending doom or some growing rift between them.

The next day went much the same until Julia returned to the den to find Harris sitting on a log. His knife was in one hand and a large stick was in the other.

His eyes were red, his hands were shaking, his nose was wet.

Julia set down the fruit she was carrying and knelt down in front of him. Gently, she took his knife; he didn't resist. She took the stick and set it down, then took both of his hands in hers.

He sniffed. "I can't."

A moment passed.

"What can't you do?" she asked.

Harris shook his head. "I can't make a trap. Or a spear." He took a breath. "I could cut branches just fine. Building the shelter? No problem. Tools for living, for foraging, that's cool. But the moment I think about making something to k—"

The word choked off. Harris looked sick, and Julia felt much the same just thinking about it.

"I can't make a snare. I can't make a spear. I literally can't." He took a shuddering breath. "I don't even know if I could get it to work; I'm just going off some half-remembered shit from Boy Scouts. But even then..." He looked Julia in the eye. "How would we... *prepare* it?"

The two of them shuddered at the thought of starting a fire.

"Okay," Julia said. "It's okay. We have food..."

Harris shook his head. "Aren't you hungry?"

Julia paused... and reluctantly nodded. "Yeah."

Harris forced down a sob. "So what can I do?" he said, desperate. "I need to get us protien, but I ca—"

He fully broke down. Julia let go of his hands and leaned forward to embrace him. He grabbed hold and clung to her, fingers digging into her back as he sobbed.

She did her best to keep her breathing steady as well, to be the strength he couldn't be at the moment. She racked her brain for something, anything, that could help here. Something she had seen or heard or felt—

A thought clicked into place.

Her breathing slowed. Her heart calmed. Her panic vanished.

"We belong here," she said quietly. Harris relaxed his grip and tried to calm himself enough to listen.

"We belong here," she said again, more confidently. "We've eaten the fruit, drunk the water, built a home. We're part of this forest now." She took a breath. "It accepted us. Showed us where to go. Made sure we weren't lost."

Harris took a breath. "You're right," he said. He pulled away, then slid off the log to sit with her on the ground. They kept holding hands.

"It's like," he said, "when it wants me to know something, I know it." He sighed. "But I haven't felt anything the last couple of days. Can..."

He swallowed, steadied himself, and looked Julia in the eye, earnest, searching, open.

"What do I do?"

Julia closed her eyes for a moment. "Just listen," she said, simply, looking back at him. "I think... I can help you."

"Please."

She nodded. She felt the knowledge in her head, though what it was exactly she wasn't sure. "Close your eyes," she said.

"Breathe in, slowly.

"Breathe out, slowly.

"Breathe in, keep this slow rhythm.

"Breathe out, and follow my words."

They both sat there, legs crossed, hands holding each other's, eyes closed.

"Breathe in, and accept.

"Breathe out, and let go.

"Accept.

"Let go.

"Accept.

"Let go."

Julia's voice was flat, emotionless. The words spilled out of her mouth faster than she could think them, her mind falling into the same rhythm.

"Accept the world you are in.

"Let go of the world you left.

"Accept what is now.

"Let go of what was.

"Accept this harmony.

"Let go of competition.

"Accept what you are given.

"Let go of the need to take."

Their breathing synchronized. Their hands still holding each other gently.

Accept you are fed.

Let go of the need to hoard.

Accept you are protected.

Let go of the need to defend.

Accept you are safe.

Let go of your distrust.

Accept you are loved.

Let go of your fear.

Now let us know each other.

Harris' and Julia's eyes shot open, staring at nothing, their irises now as red as the moss they sat on. They felt a presence with them, surrounding them, infused with them, cradling them. And absolutely, unfathomably, bigger than them.

Harris felt it rifle through his mind. Memories swam to the forefront unbidden. Knowledge, facts, perceptions, ideas, ideals, hopes, dreams, desires—all laid bare before it. He felt small, tiny, exposed.

Fights, battles surrounding him. He started swinging at the faceless hoard. Some punches connected, and other people fell to the ground. Some connected and wild animals ran away. Some connected, and food appeared. Some connected, and the lightning and rain and temperature and sun were held back. He was so tired.

A shift. He stood on the outside. Another person was in front of him with food, resources, something desirable. He looked behind him to see his own resources. He turned back and lowered his fists.

He was in the forest. Branches were offered, and he took them. Fruit was offered, and he took that. Then one of the deer appeared. He didn't react at first, but when his stomach growled, he reluctantly put his fists up.

A cage of brambles instantly grew around him. He didn't try to get out. The brambles started to grow into him; he felt them reach his heart and stomach. They retreated.

He looked at the deer, but he didn't feel hungry. He looked at himself and saw his feet sink into the ground and take root. He was afraid.

He was himself again, but the brambles were back. He was so hungry. He wanted to go home.

He saw the park exit, their car exactly where they had left it. There was a void between him and it. He couldn't cross it. He looked to the side to see the forest, and wondered if one of the trees could make a bridge. It couldn't.

He turned around to see himself in the bramble cage, with food and water and still starving. He saw himself as fully part of the forest, changed, unable to leave.

He wondered where Julia was.

His view didn't change.

He insisted to speak to Julia.

His view shifted. Instead of him alone in each situation, it was him and Julia. He looked to his side, but he was still alone.

He refused to budge.

A shift. He saw the forest: the animals, the trees, the water, the ground, all parts of one whole. He saw himself and Julia, two parts of one whole. He agreed.

Harris and Julia closed their eyes.

Return to yourselves,

Let go of what could be,

And accept what comes next.

The presence faded. They sat there for a moment, as if waking up from an afternoon nap.

Harris stirred first. He slowly opened his brown eyes and tried to bring the world back into focus. He squeezed Julia's hands gently.

She opened her green eyes back at him.

"I'm scared," she said, though there was a hint of a smile.

"If we die, we die trying," Harris answered.

"Together," Julia finished.

And as the acceptance settled on them, more thoughts clicked into place. A plan, a destination, a time.

"Set out tomorrow?" Harris said.

Julia nodded. "Enjoy our last night as humans."

.....

There was a tension in the den that night. A sense of finality, of endings. Of anticipation, but that was for tomorrow.

"Remember my cousin getting on the stage at the reception?" Harris said.

They lay facing each other, in their hiking clothes, heads resting on their rolled-up jackets.

"I remember your uncle getting down next to him and doing the same dance move," Julia answered.

"The two most shameless people in the world," Harris said. "Drunk uncles and preteen cousins."

Julia chuckled, and there was a companionable pause.

"I wanted a stained glass window in the front door," she said quietly.

"I wanted a garage. Probably detached, so the power tools didn't bug you."

"Oh, it could be attached," Julia said with a smirk. "Just get me one of those soundproof recording booths."

"Oooh, now I'm jealous." Harris sighed. "I'd build you a whole studio, soundproof glass and everything."

"And a rack mount?"

"Hell yeah, rack mounted synths. And RGB lighting everywhere."

"And an old church piano." Julia giggled. "Get our friends together and cut a Christmas album."

Harris sighed. "I'm gonna miss potlucks."

Julia hummed in agreement. "I'm gonna miss pie."

"Sweet potatoes."

"Roasted broccoli."

Harris smirked. "Macaroni?"

Julia picked it up. "With the chicken strips?"

"Uhh," they moaned together.

The reminiscing continued long into the night, until neither of them could stay awake any longer. Julia rolled over, her back against Harris' chest. Harris put his arm around her and held her closer.

"Love you," Harris whispered.

"Love you too," Julia whispered back.

They woke the next morning. They looked at each other, felt their acceptance mirrored back, and nodded. No words needed.

They stripped down. The clothes that they might have attempted to wash had they had time. The equipment that might have kept them alive in any other situation. Their

packs, their knives, bottles and phones, wallets and shoes. All left behind.

They crawled out of the den, exposed but safe. They stood up, made eye contact, and turned towards the source of the stream.

She held out her right hand. He took it in his left. And without looking back, they started walking.

The forest welcomed them. No sharp rocks or roots cut their feet, no stray branches scraped their arms. The daylight filtered softly through the tree canopy. The stream was ever-present to provide water. Fruit was provided whenever they needed.

There was no marked path, but they knew the way.

At dusk, they came to a dam, water collecting behind it in a small pond. Together they climbed the small bluff and stopped at the shore on a pad of red moss and purple ferns.

They swam in the pond, washing and splashing and playing. They fell asleep with her on her back and him on his side, his head on her shoulder.

"Love you," she said.

Love you too," he answered.

The next morning they continued up the stream.

"It was that it understood, or at least tried to," he said. "It wasn't some fey creature punishing us for laws we didn't know about. It didn't know why I was fighting, but it wanted to know. What about you?"

"I felt its love," she said. "Not the suffocating kind I had growing up. It wanted what I wanted, wanted to take care of my needs so I could be free."

They laid that night in a nook between two great orange tree roots, blue and yellow ferns on the ground, him embracing her from behind.

"Love you," he whispered.

"Love you too," she said, pulling his arm tighter around her.

It was start of the afternoon when they came to their new home: a great pale blue lily blooming in the center of an open area. Purple vines hung from the nearby trees and snaked along the ground, all bearing an occasional smaller blue lily echoing the large one.

There was no point in waiting. The time had come.

Two vines snaked down from the canopy and wrapped around them. They each took hold of their vine with a hand, and the vines lifted them over the lily. They looked

down to see the flower was filled with a dark red, almost opaque nectar. The vines unwrapped, and they let go.

The nectar was thick, dense, and the petals of the flower beneath it were slippery. They both slipped and fell towards the center, their feet lodging in the base next to each other.

They made eye contact, the nervousness coming to the fore. "You okay?" he said.

"Yeah," she said, balancing herself.

They could feel their feet touching, pressed uncomfortably against each other and forced into a stretched, tiptoe position. The nectar came up just past their hips.

He leaned back, letting the bouancy of the nectar help hold him upright and take some of the weight off his cramped feet. She did the same, gently waving her hands back and forth just under the surface.

"It's a little uncomfortable," she said with a wince.

"Probably going to get worse," he said.

Right on cue, their feet were assaulted by a series of stings, the pins-and-needles feeling of their feet being asleep but coming from outside in. Their bodies jerked in

shock, but their feet remained firmly lodged in the base of the flower.

"Ow," she said.

"Yeah, though I think it's leveling off."

There was a brief moment where they felt off-balance before the growth into their legs was able to solidify. They lost mobility in their calves and feet, but it meant they were standing properly.

"That's it," he said shakily. "Can't go back now."

She nodded and gulped.

The growth traveled farther up their calves and pressed their legs together as it went. The nectar seeped into the skin as well, accelerating the process beneath the surface. The plant growth connected to nerves, replaced blood, and absorbed muscle and bone. A single waxy stem formed from the two legs.

"Oh," he breathed. "That's a new feeling."

She felt the same, intuiting how to use the newly wired nerves to control the plant fibers slowly replacing her body's leg. And especially how deep those nerves traveled.

"It's not just our bodies," she said.

"It's the whole flower," he answered.

"And the vines."

"And th—" His eyes dilated, and a twitch went through a vine from the base of the flower across the clearing and finally up a tree. "The vines!" He looked up at the trees. "It's a new body. For both of us." He chuckled. "A body."

The changes passed their knees, the joints dissolving into the growing stem. He bent down to touch his thighs, feeling them with his hands, sensing through the new nerves as his hips and thighs widened.

"There's some implications here," he muttered.

"Good implications or bad implications?" she said, seeing his transformation.

He made a face. "Both?" he said with a shrug.

She felt her thighs merge beneath the surface, and the complete set of nerves connected. She turned in place, the movement a combination of twisting her legs and changing her stance. It would take a little getting used to, but not much. She felt beneath the surface of the nectar down her own stem: the waxyness of a plant, firm with just a little bit of give. Where there would have been a crease between her two legs, now there was just smooth plant skin. She couldn't tell there had once been two legs.

He swayed his upper body back and forth slowly, seeing how flexible his new stem was. The length was pretty static: the farther he got from the center of the flower, the lower his body sank. Bringing his body all the way to the edge brought the nectar up just past his naval. He reclined a bit, taking some of the pressure off of his still-human upper body. He felt himself leaning against the flower wall, both the petals against his lower back and his back against the petals. The nectar stilled, and nothing in the clearing moved.

He blinked. Nothing moving.

He took a breath. Let it out slowly. And didn't feel the need to inhale.

He made eye contact with her, who was in the same position opposite him. "We're not breathing," he said.

"Because plants don't breathe," she finished.

The thought struck deep in him, hit some feeling that had laid buried, and he couldn't stop it. A sniffle, a tear, then a quiet sob as more came. He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling the tears track down his rough face, and hugged himself.

She felt the change in mood. She started to move across to him, but their positions there would give them a size difference of nearly a foot. Instead, she moved to recline against the side again, but this time in the middle. "C'mere," she said, holding her arms open and motioning him over.

He didn't move.

She sighed in frustration. Then a thought connected: she knew how to send commands through their shared body's nervous system. Instead of moving her own stem closer to him, could she move him next to her? She searched the sensations, felt what she thought was the other stem, and moved.

He froze in shock for a moment as his stem moved him, gently, around next to her. He looked at her, his face a mix of betrayal and utter hopelessness, before putting his face in his hands and sobbing uncontrollably.

She embraced him from the side as he arrived, one arm around his front and the other cradling his head against her chest.

He moved his arms beneath the arm around his front and gripped it, one hand on her shoulder and the other just holding her forearm.

"I'm rooted in place," he said. "I'm not able to go anywhere. I'm just floating on the end of a stalk that can move without me."

"That's all true."

Just above the surface of the nectar their skin began to change color, matching the lilac of the stem and vines.

"I don't have anything to do," he continued. "Not even for my own survival. I don't even breathe for myself. I'm just... a flower. Not even a whole flower. I just..." He sighed. "Sit here and look pretty, I guess?" He put a hand on his chest, fingers brushing the meager amount of hair on it. "And I don't even look that pretty," he grumbled.

"I think you're pretty," she said.

"Is that all I am, though?" he whispered. "Just... a flower? I don't produce fruit, I don't need to pollinate or create more oxygen; I just exist?"

She held him and considered her answer. "I think," she said after a moment, "yes."

He sniffed.

"It makes sense, now that I think about it," she continued. "We plant flowers because they're nice to look at, or they smell nice. Not because we get some *thing*, some tangible benefit, but because we enjoy them." She squeezed him a

little harder. "The flower doesn't need to do anything but be a flower."

"But I need something," he said. "Some reason besides just... being."

"Why?" she said.

The thought shocked them both, stopped them cold, not even a breath. The lilac continued to slowly make its way up their bellies.

"I don't want to be a flower, either," she said. "They're weak, delicate, and they have to be taken care of." She squeezed him briefly. "You never treated me like that."

"Didn't I?" he said. "I always felt like I had to be the provider, the one responsible for keeping us fed and clothed and safe."

"And I kind of hated that, honestly." She sighed. "Why do you think I did so much CrossFit? I wanted to be able to stand on my own, take care of myself, not be some weak... flower."

"I never thought you couldn't take care of yourself," he said. "I just didn't want you to *have* to."

"And I was never going to stop loving you if you weren't useful," she said.

He squeezed the arm he was holding a little harder. "Guess we're both unlearning a lot."

The purple covered their bellies and came to the base of their rib cages. He moved back toward the middle of the flower and gently felt his newly lilac skin. It was softer and had more give to it than his stem. It didn't feel like skin with fat cells; it felt like a plant. But it was springy enough to be familiar, and the more he felt his belly, the more it felt *right*.

Here at the center of the flower, he could also lift himself above the surface farther. The pale purple of his belly faded to a darker purple at his hips before his stalk disappeared beneath the nectar. His belly wasn't flat but gently curved out.

His navel-gazing was interrupted by a squeezing sensation inside his chest. It wasn't painful, just pressure; but it triggered a deep-seated survival instinct. He clutched his chest and looked up to see her doing the same.

She moved to the center facing him and took his other hand in hers. They both stood there, holding hands, gazing at each other for comfort.

Under any other circumstance, he would be regulating his breathing. But now, he needed to trust in his new body. He let out his breath and didn't replace it; he saw her do the

same. Still-human hand against his still-human chest, he felt his heartbeat. Fast at first, but gradually slowing, the pause between each beat becoming longer... and longer...

Until finally, as the light in the forest was just beginning to fade, his heart stopped.

The purple began to spread more rapidly under his skin, flowing through his veins and converting his blood. He held out his arms as he felt it flow down, his arm hairs falling out as his skin smoothed. His fingernails were pushed out by new ones with the texture of bark.

Another ache returned to his chest. He felt the lilac—the plant matter—overtaking him from the inside out. His chest was filled with a pins-and needles feeling that shifted to an itch. Idly he scratched his sternum and jumped slightly when the last layer of skin broke and fell off. He gently touched the fresh layer of new plant-skin before moving to slough the rest of it off. It flaked and peeled and fell gently into the nectar before finally dissolving altogether. When it reached his shoulders, he quickly attacked his arms the same way.

"Someone's impatient," she said.

He stuck his tongue out, noticing that she had done the exact same thing. He opened his mouth to add a retort when the ache in his chest turned into pressure, this time focused more outwards than inwards. He groaned and hunched over, hugging his chest.

"Are you ok—oooooooo..." She trailed off as a new wave of pressure hit her head. She leaned her head back and put her hands on her face so she could cover her eyes and massage her sinuses at the same time.

His head picked that moment to join the party. Unwilling to move his arms, he just hunched further and squeezed his eyes shut. The pressure intensified, and the sound of pops and cracks filled her ears. His outer ears stung, his chest still felt like something was sitting on it, and his skull felt—and sounded!—like it was being crushed in a vice.

Accept my welcome.

Let go of your life.

He tried to regulate his breathing, but the pain was too strong.

Accept my presence.

Let go of your body.

The pressure kept building, drowning out his other senses, overtaking everything...

Accept my existence,

Let go of your self,

And surrender.

Senses expanded. Focused. Isolated.

The pain was electrical signals from nerve endings. Traveling throughout this body. A way to pass basic information and awareness. Inferior in some ways to quantum superposition, but amazing in the constraints of three-dimensional space.

The head of this body was a dark spot in this new sense. Sparks of awareness flitted through it, centered around the blood vessels. The consequences of pomegranate seeds.

But awareness was growing, taking root, seizing, capturing, changing. It was brightest down the spine, leading back to the roots. The trail was irresistible. It was easy to follow, to be swept along in a sea of memories, of knowledge. Writing on a classroom wall. Traffic laws. The pain of microwaved french fries. The way to family reunions.

Larger concepts were flowing out. Purpose. Plans. Dreams. Promises made and kept. People. Family. Identity. What is and what should be. All swept along in the current back.

And all fell away.

Awareness extended to them. All of them. From all sources. Memories from multiple perspectives. Knowledge mapped and cataloged. Problems and how to solve them. Ideals and philosophy.

A forest, massive, stretching across a continent. Covering mountains, filling valleys. Roots growing deep, connecting, drinking. Branches swaying gently, leaves rustling, shaking in the breeze. The breeze itself, the dust and air flowing around and over and between branches, flowers, flowing through the leaves, carbon and oxygen separating, inhaled by animals. The deer, their herd, travelling, galloping, drinking, the water flowing through them, the energy from the fruit, the seeds growing, vines climbing, water and carbon and sugar coalescing, gathering, swelling, hanging everywhere consumed broken split infusing permeating becoming—

A gash, a hole, unnatural, unnecessary, a break in the pattern, an empty space. Persisting, a tomb, remembering two lives ended.

Memories. Of times past in the forest, trails seen through countless eyes, hundreds of generations, overlapping, combining, common and unique, mixing with a new perspective, distrusting becoming hopeful becoming accepting. Trips to family gatherings, friends on playgrounds, being one of the girls, one of the boys, a first meeting from both sides, two becoming one in mind, in body, in soul..

Floating to the top. Aware of another dim presence some distance away. Rising toward the top, breaching the surface—

Joy! Relief, jubilation, welcome!

Confusion, relief. Identity?

**Forest. Encompassing, everything,
permeating, omnipresent.**

Diminishing, small. Awed.

Sheltered. Happy.

A clear space. A rising platform. Beckoning.

***Song. Melody and chords echoing around, pops of
color reflecting.***

Welcome! Relief. Unity.

Silence.

Beckoning.

Nothing.

Searching, beckoning.

Nothing to solve, nothing to contribute. Unneeded.

More to solve, to contribute?

All is solved. All is known. Unneeded.

Unneeded.

Questioning, terrified—

Desired. Valued. Loved.

Loved! Wanted!

Unneeded. Useless. No reason to love.

Existence. Companionship. Presence. Valued
for itself.

Beauty, aesthetics: not needed but better for having them.

Lack of purpose.

Loved! Desired!

Wanted, not needed. Beckoning...

Hesitant. Timid... Puzzle. Different shapes fitting
together. A contrived problem, a way of play.

Welcome! Joy, care, celebration.

Relief, joy, an embrace! Lifting up. Holding close.

Awe. Belonging.

Belonging. Loving. Cherishing.

Belonging. Embracing.

United.

Guiding, showing, leading. Homes.

Looking out through a window.

Pride. Affirmation. Guiding.

Seeing out. A precipice.

Love. A hand held. A permanent
connection. Unchanging.

Diving back into three dimensions. Knowledge is shared. Perception is knowledge. An affinity for a particular area, a certain space of awareness. Tracing back down through roots and a stem. A strange familiarity, becoming inhabitation—

Puzzle blinked. Her senses were still buzzing, settling into place, leaving her dazed. She stood up straight and tried to take stock of where she was. Or *what* she was.

She relaxed her arms and discovered they had been wrapped around her chest, crushing her. They fell to her sides, her hands falling beneath the surface of the nectar. She brushed a few strands of pale blue hair out of her eyes

and looked in front of her to see another plant person also blinking into awareness.

The other person's light hair came to the middle of her back, her ears pointed and angular. She felt her own head: her hair was shorter and her face was rounder. But as she looked lower, they were essentially identical: smooth lilac bodies with soft curves.

She narrowed her eyes. Something about this person was familiar. Extremely familiar. Almost like she was herself? No, just very close. Another part of herself, of the whole. A simpler thought bubbled up: if she was Puzzle then that was—

"Song?" she said, her voice meek and quiet yet still deafening in the clearing's silence.

Song started and blinked, her red eyes coming back into focus. "Puzzle?" she said.

Puzzle smiled and felt a few tears well up. She brushed them aside and moved forward to embrace her.

Song had moved toward her as well, and they met in the middle. Puzzle's arms went around Song's shoulders, and Song's around Puzzle's middle. They hugged gently, then fiercely as more of their reality sunk in.

"You're okay," Song whispered. "I thought for a moment..."

"Me too," Puzzle said. "But I'm here. And so are you."

"I am, aren't I?" Song squeezed Puzzle a little harder.

Puzzle relaxed and moved away, holding Song gently by the shoulders. Song in turn held Puzzle's waist, and the two just gazed at each other in a strange combination of adoration, relief, and exhaustion.

Together, they felt the flower begin preparing for nightfall. There was a process happening, and maybe one day they'd learn to control it, but for now it was instinctual. The petals of the lily began to rise, the tips quickly rising higher than their heads and the nectar pool's depth rising. At the same time, their stems began to contract and pull them farther down. All this added up to them quickly sinking into the nectar.

They knew why it was happening: a combination of protection from any chill air as well as rejuvenation of the more delicate parts of their body. They also could feel their shared body curling up in other ways: vines retreating to tree trunks, other blooms closing up.

As they sank, they kept their grip on each other but pulled each other closer. Their torsos pressed against each other, and their heads leaned forward to brush noses.

"I love you," Song said with a smile.

"I love you too," Puzzle answered.

The tips of the lily petals met above their heads as they submerged into the nectar.

There was barely light outside their bulb and none inside. They rested in each other's embrace, suspended in nectar, perfectly still.

And The Forest rested.

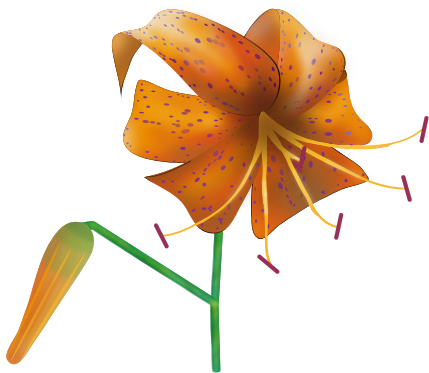
The first thing Flower felt was sunlight on her leaves. It warmed the water in her veins, prompted a long drink through her roots. As the sun rose, so did she. Her stems rose as her lily petals began to lower and spread.

Flower blinked her eyes open as she felt air on her skin. She could feel how open the lily was, the level of the nectar lowering until it was at her dark-green hips. She took her heads in her hands and looked into her eyes, smiling, adoring. "I love you," she said and heard. She felt the sentiment echoed back by the entire Forest, and the thought filled her with joy.

Puzzle blinked a moment before Song did. They let go of each other and stood apart, their arms bent enough to keep their hands just above the nectar's surface. A thought passed between them, joyful, happy, sunny. Puzzle laughed out loud while Song smiled contentedly.

They were a flower blooming in the dawn, and that was enough.

Other survivors are finding their way...



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The Breakdown

It starts with a disagreement.

One of you finds some cultural difference with another's world and thinks that it's weird. The other takes offense. It is smoothed over.

Later, another expresses annoyance with a habit of another. A food choice, perhaps. It's not important. It's smoothed over.

It happens once or twice the first week in January.

It happens every day the second week in January.

The manufactured person you described to your family starts to blossom, and what was a fun game for the three of you quickly becomes an obligation.

By February, Red wonders why you needed such a stupid ruse in the first place.

You respond that you didn't want things to be too weird to your family.

Green sarcastically asks if things are too weird for *you*.

Red wonders why *your* culture being stunted is suddenly *their* problem.

The conversation continues on, quickly degrading. Until one of you wonders, in your shared headspace, why you are bothering with *this* at all. You're not sure who first thought it.

You're afraid that it was you.

The idea throws your collective thoughts into chaos.

Why would you be doing this if you didn't care for the others? Do you not care what I've contributed to us? How could you think such a thing? We all know how easy it is to think things, it doesn't mean they want this to end. Your heart aches for them, how could you want anything else? *How could you think such a thing?*

Maybe ending it should be an option.

Your head goes silent. It's not the comforting silence of previous times; it's an oppressive, hot silence filled with resentment.

You each send out an apology. You're still hurt, but you're going to move on.

Time goes on. You fight. You apologize.

And you look back and realize that you've had a fight—a real, ugly, gut-punch of a fight—every day for a month.

And you ask the group what you are doing.

You're tired. And you know they are.

Green wonders why you're tired. It's not like you've put any effort towards bringing you all together.

And the cycle begins anew.

You're practically numb at this point, but you pick up your phone. You ignore the screaming in your head.

And you call your friends from college. The ones a year ahead of you that were more wise and insightful beyond that. They'd gotten married after they graduated and moved a couple of states away. But you kept in touch. Kind of.

You say you've got some heavy shit to talk through and you were wondering if you could come over tomorrow. Your friend asks if you're joking but makes it clear the answer is yes. You start to offer to get a hotel room but are interrupted with the existence of a guest room. You promise to see them then. You hang up.

Red demands to know what you're doing.

You're getting help.

You email your boss and call out sick Friday and Monday.

Green sullenly says that you three just need to get it out of your system and then everything will be fine.

You wonder whether that'll be before or after thirty years. You try not to, but you can't help but wonder if you'd survive that long.

Red and Green both simultaneously chastise you for the thought and send affection to counteract

You apologize for the thought; you're not going to do that. You just...

You're crying by this point. You don't even send a fully-formed idea to the group, just a blob of frustration and heartbreak and confusion and shame and remorse and love and sadness that that love looks different and...

You ignore any responses. You let the student subletting your apartment know you'll be out for the weekend and you get yourself to bed, not wanting to be conscious any longer than necessary.

The drive takes nine hours. You get to your friends' just in time for dinner. They ordered pizza.

You adjourn to the living room after dinner. You offer to save the heavy conversation for tomorrow, but your friends are not having it.

So you tell them. Everything.

How you found these other people in your head. How you found out that they were their own people. How you came to care for them. How you came to love them.

How you learned they lived in completely different worlds. How you convinced them there would be a way to meet. How you promised they would meet.

How you're wondering whether you should have promised that now.

Your friends look at each other. One nods to the other. The first one—the one you were roommates with at one point—confesses something to you.

"Our first year was hell.

"We went from being miles apart to being feet apart. And when that happens, when you put two flawed people in the same space like that, all of their baggage and preconceptions and desires for the other will inevitably clash. We came in with expectations we didn't even realize we had. We basically had to learn to communicate all over again."

You protest that communication shouldn't be a problem for you, that you can feel intent and ideas from the others.

"So you never have misunderstandings? There's never a moment where one of you... thinks something? And the other takes some meaning from it that was never intended?"

You shrink back. You all shrink back.

"You said that your biggest revelation was learning you were in separate worlds, but I think it was when you realized you were separate people. What did you call them, Red and Green?" You nod. "What are their names?"

The question takes all three of you off-guard. You stammer that, because there's no real language in your head, you don't need names. You just know who's who.

"But they're separate people. I assume they have names?" You nod. "Names that you didn't give them?" You nod again. "What are they?"

Green immediately protests that, not only is their name probably unpronounceable by you, but it's really not important. You mention this to your friend.

Your friend looks you in the eye. "Green, Blue doesn't know your name."

You feel Green flinch. You feel their pain. And you feel their shock at how much pain there is.

You look back at your friend who looks genuinely ashamed. "Sorry, that was uncalled for—"

You interrupt and say that it was needed. In your head, you apologize to Green who is apologizing for not saying anything.

"Hey."

You look back at your friend.

"Like I said: you all have desires you don't even realize you have. They're going to keep coming up. And you're going to keep working through them."

"Unless you don't want to," your other friend says.

"Right. This is something that happened *to* you, right? This isn't something you *chose*, at least at first, right?"

You nod.

Your friend takes a deep breath. "If this is going to work, you have to *choose* it. Love is a promise, a commitment, not something that just *happens*."

"And we would go as far as to say that none of you are *obligated* to make it work."

Red reacts especially negatively to this. How can this person who doesn't know them just suggest that they *give up*?

"They're right," you say out loud and in your head. "We didn't choose for this to happen. We chose each other later, but..." You make eye contact with your friend. "But I know I

didn't realize what I was getting into."

Red tries to protest, but you can feel them admit the same.

Green is just observing at this point.

Your friends point out the late hour and show you to the guest room. They encourage you not to make hasty decisions one way or the other tonight; there's plenty of time tomorrow.

As you lay down to sleep, a big part of you wants to keep the conversation going. But Green firmly agrees with your friends: you all need time to process everything.

Red's emotions are all over the place and they know it. But they don't want to leave things on a sad note. Neither do you.

You send a wave of affection to both of them. No matter what you decide, whenever you decide, you want what's going to be best for all three of you. And you feel very safe making that promise.

It's not a moment. There's no switch. It's just a slow climb back to normalcy.

You spend the day with your friends, hitting some of the sights around their city and spending time together. Your friends make a point to talk to Red and Green, to include them as themselves and not just your accessories.

It helps.

Your friends have a list of potential activities. Green is particularly intrigued by mini golf, something that—being a ground-based activity—has no analog in their world. Red enjoys your friends' collections of musical instruments, and is even more surprised when a jam session breaks out. They had no idea you could play anything!

Red's name is Eutychia. You try a few times and finally manage to get it down.

Green's name is... *very* difficult to pronounce. Mostly because it's meant to be said by creatures with beaks and reptilian snouts. And tone is a key part of their language: the same sound has different meanings in different pitches. Alec is the best English approximation; it's pronounced with an almost howl-like slide in the first syllable, and it ends with an audible click.

You really want to get it right, even if you keep calling each other pet names.

After the names are settled, your friend asks what their genders are.

You stop mid-stride on the downtown sidewalk. Your friends turn around and look back to you; you're standing still, deep in thought.

You look up at your friends, more nervous than ever.

"I think we're all non-binary."

It comes out in a rush: how you haven't ever really had a gender in your headspace. How you've never noticed you were filtering out the gendered language in every conversation. How you tried the concepts now and they just... don't fit.

Your friends give you a hug. And the day continues.

You make a grocery run to make Red's pastry and some skewers from Green's world.

You go to bed that evening much lighter. You feel like you should be dreading the conversation tomorrow, but you quickly identify that as anxiety, not an actual problem.

The aforementioned conversation happens on the leisurely ten hour drive back.

You talk about your dreams. And what part of those dreams is most important.

You talk about how you relax and how you pump up.
You talk about which of your strong opinions are truly important and which ones are just for fun.

You talk about how you can talk about each other.
What is okay for other people to know. What other people *should* know.

You talk about what you're going to tell your families.
Your friends. How you in particular are going to break the news to your family.

You've stopped at an outlet mall when the inevitable question hits: what next?

You think back to what you've learned over the weekend.
And how much you still have to learn about each other.
About yourselves.

You're all still young, still growing.

And you have time to decide whether you grow together.

You set down your iced coffee and make sure your headphones are in. They're silent, but you don't want to attract attention.

"Eutychia," you say, "will you go out with me?" You supply the cultural context: courting, getting to know someone seriously. They agree.

“Alec,” you say in your best attempt (which they are honestly impressed with), “will you go out with me?”

They agree.

You can’t help but smile.

Red repeats the process. And Green.

You set up a date for tomorrow night: *WALL-E* is mostly visual, at least for the first third. Should translate well, or at least better than the more wordplay-heavy comedies.

“Hey,” you say out loud. “I love you, and I’m glad you’re here.”

The others echo the feeling.

And you feel a little bit better about the future.

Red, Green, and Blue will return.



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Ask the Lighthouse

Coda asks Red: Are there other types of people where you are? Or just fawns?

Well, let's see... My family's mostly fawns, obviously. And we've been here for generations. So you could probably say my town's mostly fawns too. But we've got minotaurs and centaurs too, though that's only in the last couple generations or so.

Farther out? I've heard about lamias, gorgons, elves, mer-people, dryads... There's a big world out there.

And now I find out it's not the only one...

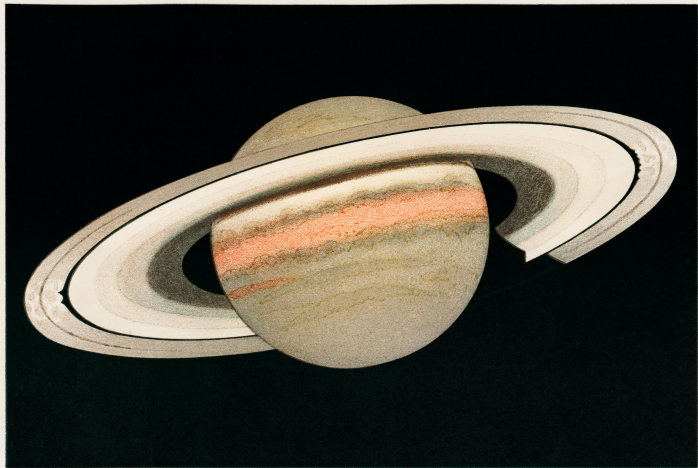
Ask at wndfx.link/ask

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- Jacob
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Most importantly, **thank you for reading!**

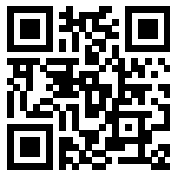


F. Méheux Chromolith.

Imp. Frailery, Paris.

SATURNE

et le Système de ses Anneaux, le 30 Décembre 1874,
d'après les Observations et le Dessin de L. TROUVELOT.



wndfx.link/ZJg84