



a gift
of
naming

k. a. cook

a marchverse short story

imprint

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blurb

If one's parents provide a shirt that tears when tugged over their child's shoulders, isn't it cruelty to force the wearing, however well-intended the gift?

Even in the best of circumstances, it's no easy thing to tell the parent who named you that your name no longer fits.

Contains: A genderless gardener wishing for a name that better describes hir and the trans mother who knows that such gifts should never become obligations.

contents

dedication	5
content advisory	6
author's note	7
a gift of naming	8
additional works	12
about the author	14

dedication

For Briar, chosen kin, who gave to me my own heartname.

content advisory

This short story contains references to cissexism, particularly as it surrounds a change of name, both historically and from the protagonist's great-grandfather.

author's note

This stand-alone work is set in a village in the lower Crackenbush Ranges on the border of Greenstone and Astreut, a few hundred years before the other Marchverse stories.

I'll mention for new readers that children in this universe are given a secret "heartname" from birth, a name shared only with trusted kin (blood and chosen). This is seen as a way to lessen the risk of magical and eldritch binding by perfidious magic workers, and many Marchverse cultures deem it essential for religious and legal obligations.

Most cultures provide an additional common or shroudname for general interaction, which can be given by others, chosen by the bearer or changed by the bearer at any time. People can change a heartname to one better suiting if consenting kin (blood or chosen) will present them, in priestly and legal ceremony, their new name.

a gift of naming

Ze looks down at hir muddy boots, mumbling the words. “I want, I need something different. This name isn’t...”

Me.

Names don’t possess inherent gender any more than pronouns, but even in Ajille they’re not free of historical assumption. Hir current name, meant to bind hir to the Sojourner, tastes of sawn wood, hot metal, the ring of hammer against nail, the bitter-salt smell of sweat. Qualities, too, that are no more gendered than any other, but there’s something ineffable and unique in how a name rings in its relationship to that person’s gender. Hirs doesn’t. Not to hir, and isn’t ze the only one able to judge?

Ma didn’t give hir a bad name at birth. Good or bad are boxes into which names shouldn’t fit, a reckoning both irrelevant and simplistic.

It just doesn’t speak to hir of a new life, one of hir now sidestepping gender as relevant to hir shape and sense of personhood. A new name, a new beginning, a new turning in the road. Ze wants a name that sounds like early morning dew, the soft drape of cloth over hir forearms and legs, the green vibrancy of an unfurling leaf. A name that feels like walking under dizzying cathedrals of mountain ash, their straight trunks exuding a strength indifferent to human concerns and fears.

Ze finds the Sojourner closest to hir when a distant canopy dapples the sunlight.

Priest Illa says a soul bears only their name from this world to the next, so shouldn't it sing to the person that bears it? If one's parents provide a shirt that tears when tugged over their child's shoulders, isn't it cruelty to force the wearing, however well-intended the gift?

Names should be offered in generosity and kindness, taken back without resentment or bitterness. Does love truly lie in the giving if a child cannot return a present that no longer sits comfortably on their skin?

I love you, Ma. It just doesn't describe me.

Names, in binding child to parent and soul to god, weigh more than shirts. Ze sees no mistake with the metaphor in theory, but sweat slicks the calloused skin of his palms and fingers, his nervousness putting a lie to the ease of comparison.

Ma, still in her chair, says nothing.

"I want," ze blurts into the silence, "something that better matches me, now that I'm not... I..." Ze draws a breath, releases and wipes his hands on his skirt, the new one with the lace trim. Ze felt green the first day the soft floral fabric swished over his knees and shins. Green in the sunshine and shade alike, loose and free. "I'm scared Ze ... the Sojourner, that They won't find me, if my name isn't..."

Me.

"Please."

Ma rests her hands, a contradiction of narrow phalanges and swollen knuckles, on her knees. "My first name belonged to my grandfather. He wasn't angry that I asked, but he never forgave me that I had Mother change it to something outside the family." She lowers her velvety voice, echoing a man known only to his by Ma's memory. "If you're going to change, have the decency to use another family name!" I could see the anger in his eyes, every time I corrected him, as if I'd dismissed *him*."

Ze stiffens, jerks a nod. An elemental terror has his look to the closest door. How many people before his, in asking to change a heartname or pronouns, needed to know the fastest escape from dismissal and denial? Names have a history of gender; that history was once deemed inflexible. His teacher spent lessons highlighting the differences, the

damages wrought by a binary culture held up as an example of *never again*, but now ze feels that ze walks in the footsteps of transgender people not quite a hundred years past, their terror still hers.

Sometimes it's enough to know of the songs of hate, as though one can never be free of their scars until the lessons are so universal history needn't serve as a warning.

Sometimes it's enough to know that in the north, in Astreut and Ihrne, this conversation still can't take place without rejection.

"Ma...?"

"I'm sorry! I was trying to think how to say it. I understand him a little better, now, but I promised myself that I'd never do that to my child. Never."

Ze looks up to find Ma's eyes fixed on hir face.

"You're not dismissing me. How can it be your fault that I named you before you knew who you were?"

Relief dizzies hir. Ze steps sideways and leans against the kitchen bench, trying to steady himself.

Ma brushes a strand of grey from her cheek, her fingers stiff and clumsy. Something ephemeral and sad, like regret or memory, flickers through her wavering brown eyes, but her voice rings sure and gentle.

"Do you have a name in mind?"

Ze swallows, struggling to find hir voice. "Ash for the heart." It feels sweet and loud on hir lips, *good*. Not enough to yet erase all doubt, but enough that ze thinks the name will become, given water and sunlight and room to grow, the right one.

"Ash. And?"

Ze nods, thinking of the pictures ze's seen in books—the tree relying on another's strength for its own immensity. One day, ze will see it with hir own eyes, touch it with hir own hands. The name, then, if not hir real one, will shape a promise between hir and the Sojourner. "Fig for the shroud."

Ma's lips curl into a laughing grin. "You would!" She stops, nods. "You would, Ash."

The word sounds loud and stressed, raw like a scab peeled away from the itching skin beneath.

Tears still burn hir eyes.

Ma raises her hands, beckons. “Come here, Figgie. We’ll have Illa tomorrow, and then you can write out all the letters to the family.”

Ze creeps closer to her chair, entwining hir fingers around hers like a banyan around its host tree.

“Do you think Illa will complain overmuch if we walk her and a notary out onto the trails?” Ma’s eyes glint above a wicked smile.

“Yes!” Ze laughs, tracing the deep grooves of Ma’s palm with hir thumbnail. Ma’s ankles, thick and swollen, keep her in the kitchen chair most days, yet she won’t offer up such a gift, the naming made under the canopy, unwillingly. Priest Illa, possessed of unwavering health, dislikes any venture not held inside walls and roof and says as much with frequent enthusiasm. “She will. *Thank you.* I’ll lead your pony out. And I’ll promise to weed Illa’s garden to make up.”

“You’ll be weeding for months ... Figgie.” Ma squeezes hir hand. “I name you, now and tomorrow before the Sojourner, Ash Fig Walker, so that She will know how to find you.”

Fig sinks down to the tiled floor, resting hir head against Ma’s bony knees.

Ash Fig Walker.

Me.

additional works

mara and esher hill

The Sorcerous Compendium of Postmortem Query
Love is the Reckoning

amelia march

Old Fashioned
Conception

efer and darius

Certain Eldritch Artefacts
Love in the House of the Ravens
One Strange Man
The Adventurer King

the eagle court

Their Courts of Crows
A Prince of the Dead
The King of Gears and Bone

Crooked Words
The Wind and the Stars
Hallo, Aro

about the author

K. A. Cook is an abrosexual, aromantic, agender autistic who experiences chronic pain and mental illness. Ze writes creative non-fiction, personal essays and novels about the above on the philosophy that if the universe is going to make life interesting, ze may as well make interesting art.

Ze is the author of several short fantasy stories combining ridiculous magic, cats, disability, bacon, mental illness, microscopic gnomes, aromanticism, the undead, verbose eldritch entities and as many transgender autistics as any one story can hold.

Ze blogs at **Queer Without Gender** and runs the aro media blog **Aro Worlds**.