



the  
SORCEROUS  
compendium of  
POSTMORTEM  
query

k. a. cook

a marchverse short story

# imprint

*The Sorcerous Compendium of Postmortem Query*, © 2019, K. A. Cook.

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# blurb

Necromancer Mara Hill has waited weeks for the Thinning: the one night the dead walk freely amongst the living. Her wandering great-aunt, Rosie, was wise in the way of magic and the world, and Mara knows of none other to ask. Books and magic alike haven't restored her fading love, and Benjamin Lisabet is too wonderful to risk losing. Why can't Mara keep herself from falling out of love whenever the girl she yearns for dares love her back?

She's sure that Aunt Rosie's spirit will offer up needed advice. She just doesn't expect a deluge of deceased villagers set on unravelling everything Mara knows about what it means to love and be in love.

Contains: A sapphic, lithromantic trans witch fearing her shape of love; a bisexual aunt who adores girls; an aro-ace trans brother armed with pokers; a wealth of casual queerness; and a world learning to be bold about its own diverse aromanticism.

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# content advisory

THIS STORY CONTAINS AN ALLOSEXUAL protagonist, love interest and mentor. While there are no explicit sex references, there are references to having sex and experiences of sexual attraction. Discussions of amatonormativity and the internalised hatred experienced by a lithromantic character are a given. Please also expect non-detailed references to gender dysphoria and depression, as this story sets up further examinations of both in **Love is the Reckoning**.

It should be noted that this piece also contains discussions about romantic attraction and (unlike some lithromantics) the protagonist doesn't object to being subject of romantic interest. I don't recommend this story for people who experience severe sexual and/or romantic repulsion.

# the sorcerous compendium of postmortem query

WHEN THE HOUR APPROACHES ELEVEN, Mara Hill pushes back the covers, slips her feet into her boots, stands and buttons a cloak over her nightgown. She reaches towards Saluria and Sillemon, drawing power from the demons that bind her to make both hands glow a soft rose—light enough to tie her boot laces and arrange her pillows under the patchwork quilt in the suggestion of a sleeping body. The ephemera of her craft covers the small desk under the window, the expected clutter of herbs, oils and candles; she ignores them in favour of the loose board at the back of her wardrobe, concealing a small leather satchel. She swings the satchel over her shoulder, returns the board to its usual spot and, leaving the wardrobe door ajar like usual, creeps for the hallway door.

A village witch has better reasons than most to leave her bed at night. None of them involve demons, necromancy or the talking dead.

Outside, soft snoring emanates from her fathers' bedroom, Pa and Da grunting in rhythm. Mara shakes her head and tiptoes down the hall. She halts at Esher's door, but she scarce has time to draw breath before she hears the restless tug of blanket and creak of bedframe. Another bad night, but she can't remember when her brother last had a good one.

She didn't realise how poorly Esher sleeps until she began these secret forays.

How does she mention this to him or her fathers without betraying her own violations and failures?

She saw a boy who spoke seldom but smiled while kicking balls, climbing roofs and exploring the spider-ridden corners of the cellar shift, so gradually Mara feels shamed by her obtuseness, into a reserved man. Now Esher spends his free hours avoiding village and kin alike; even his enthusiasm for Benjamin's books has faded into a weary indifference. Esher works and eats and reads, but Mara has the sense that he acts on the stage of his own life—akin to the performance of love she makes for Benjamin and the village, a desperate portrayal of normality.

Something needs to be done, but what?

If she can't help herself, if she sought demons and Dot Hickmann's arts to avoid succumbing to despair at the faltering rhythms of Mara's own life, how can she help him?

Even her new brace of demons, Saluria and Sillemon, only confirmed her brokenness.

No. She'll find a solution. She has resources, power, stubbornness. If love spells aren't the answer, something else will be. She just needs to be patient, persistent. Hopeful.

Isn't Benjamin's love worth that? Shouldn't it be?

Mara breathes out long and slow, waiting for a lull in Esher's movements before heading down the stairs—taking the steps two and three at a time to miss the creakiest. Once downstairs, she returns her power to the demons, navigating by the moonlight shining through the front windows and the banked coals in the fireplace. Tonight, the cats don't approach her; three nights ago, she almost betrayed herself when Sooty thought it a fine game to twine himself through her legs and then drape his tail, prime for treading on, over the doormat. No cats screech tonight; nothing stops her from easing the oiled latch, opening the door, slipping the string through the hole and closing the door behind her.

Only a blacksmith's house, she thinks, is yet to upgrade to lock and key!

Outside, only a few guttering lamps made from carved turnips with wicked, grinning faces break the night. Crooked shadows fall on the glass and wood of windowsill and doorstep, twisting the light and dark. Woodsmoke, hay, wool and manure scent the air, failing to obscure the crisp scattering of stars before a velvet backdrop. Mara tips her head back, revelling in the night's brisk kiss, thanking the Sojourner for the kindness of a clear sky.

She's always revelled in the initial bite of a frosty autumn morning or a sharp spring evening. That love, at least, doesn't fade.

She tugs her cloak about her and walks past the open shed and yards of Pa's smithy, a hulking shadow in the dark. Nothing moves beyond a cat slinking past the draping peppercorn trees framing the hill end of the village square and a wisp of bluish shadow flickering past the public house. While Mara used to move with hesitation, afraid of being seen by lategoers at the pub, two months' midnight wanderings taught her that nobody marks her passing but cats, rats and owls. Graziers rise before the sun, and the rest of Dead Horse Hill rises with the graziers.

Another shadowy spirit, undeterred by the toothy faces children this morning carved into root vegetables, flickers down the lane towards the Hayes's cottage.

Few windows and doorsteps rest unadorned this night. If living relatives cause trouble enough, why invite the dead ones across the threshold?

She draws a slow breath, both appreciating and fearing the quiet as she passes the last of the houses and heads out across the feed yards, the hill sloping down into the surrounding plain. Out here, the world smells of dust and sheep, the scent and movements of the latter her remaining link to the town. The schoolhouse is but a small silhouette against a sea of stars, the suggestion of a building at most. Only a few trees, flattened shapes of pitch black, speak of a world beyond the Great Southern Plain's endless grass and sky.

In daylight, the flat that surrounds a rise only deemed a hill in this sun-baked land stretches forever, cloud-scattered blue above racing the yellow-brown below. Only a scattering of thin gums, shepherd's

huts, farm carts, kangaroos, emu, cattle and sheep relieve the eye. At night, the bewildering space feels as wild and uncontainable as the long-distant ocean: no roads, no lamps, no human-wrought shapes to offer an illusion of restraint. Just a vastness both unknowable and untameable, forever reminding Mara that her people—even so many generations after the cataclysmic Change—are guests here. She'll never be more than a visitor flitting across the plain, the soil beneath still hoping for the returning tread of its true guardians; each night teaches her again that dark lesson.

“Thank you,” she whispers to the stars, for the owners’ dead walk tonight as well as hers. “Thank you for welcoming us as much as you have, even if we’re not yours.”

A few flashes of bluish-grey, little more than bright sparks on a distant horizon, head northwards.

Mara inclines her head and glances back towards Dead Horse Hill, seeing nothing but the silhouette of the rise and its framing sky. This night of all nights, the night of the Thinning when the veils of this world and the next press tight against each other, her summoning must work.

If she can't reach Aunt Rosie tonight, Mara never will.

How, then? How can she ask after something the Accords deem immoral and illegal?

The quick, hissing cry of an overhead barn owl makes Mara jerk, and every so often she hears a rustling in the grasses around her, but she reaches the graveyard and passes through its rusted-open gates with nothing more than a pounding heartbeat. Now she calls on her demons, both hands glowing rose, as she walks through the scattering of gravestones. A tumbledown stone fence and a copse of trees frames all sides of the cemetery, as close as Dead Horse Hill will ever come to bush or forest. Rough mounds of dug-up and grown-over earth surround the headstones, and Mara keeps her eyes cast downwards to navigate the hazards of rabbit holes, knee-high grass, blanket weed and thin patches of bracken fern.

The gravestones, mottled grey and white granite, bear shallowly-carved names: her kin, her neighbours, her schoolmates' grandparents and forebears. Patchy grey-green and yellow lichen, fern fronds and fallen gumnuts decorate the oldest, and she heads for a cluster of stones at the northern corner of the yard.

The crunch of her boots on the leaf litter rings abominably loud in the windless night, making Mara think of feet walking over generations of bones.

In a way, she supposes, that's true.

She stops beside the stone naming her great-great-great grandmother, the engraving of her name so weathered that Mara can scarce read it in daylight, and opens her satchel. A flask of Da's favourite whiskey, a small porcelain cannister of salt Da gave Pa as a courting gift, three candles, several sheets of crumpled paper, a pencil and a tarnished silver hairbrush sit inside. Most precious is the battered book that sent Mara stumbling down this road: *The Sorcerous Compendium of Postmortem Query*, written by a necromancer styling herself as Dot Hickmann.

Mara found it in a Malvadan bookshop on the yearly shopping expedition with Jackson Kell. Her fathers will read anything from pamphlets on the keeping of parrots to thick tomes on elfish history, but Mara wanted more than the simples and the tricks taught her by Mother Hayes. After grabbing anything thick and inexpensive for Pa and Da, she idled through the magic section, possessing money enough for one more book, unsure which will offer her the most. Browsing through a spine-worn botanical encyclopaedia and about to give up in her indecisiveness, she happened upon a curious half-sized book tucked inside its hollowed-out pages. How the seller didn't notice, Mara couldn't and can't say, but she closed the encyclopaedia around the smaller necromantic grimoire and went to make her purchases. A book hidden inside another must be special, and she spent the next few days on the drive home itching to investigate this eldritch secret.

She knows people will judge should they sight the book: its slanted, Northern-style script so obviously heralds the forbidden. Some shapes of magic, like drawn spells and herbs stashed in embroidered sachets,

are useful, important and accepted, in no small part because visible limitations bind the magic worker. Some shapes of magic, like blood witchery and necromancy, position a magic worker as a dangerous, seemingly-boundless master of artifice and power, a disruption to the natural order.

Mara intended only an informed onlooker's curiosity—the hope of gleaning new understandings of power between instructions she laughed at the idea of following. Her secret: in a small village where everyone thinks they know everyone else, even simple, ordinary conversations can fast become dangerous. Witches are accepted. Sorcerers are terrifying—and blasphemous. Why give them fuel for an already-burning fire?

Benjamin then pronounced her love for Mara; she found no other solution to her fickle heart than the dead.

To work a spell on an unconsenting party violates the Accords, despite love spells figuring so prominently in folklore, fairy tales and childish teasing. What if she consents? Why do magicians and witches so fear being thought purveyors of an illegal trade that they won't reference the art of inducing love, even when Mara wishes it only for her own use? There's nothing right in forcing a woman to necromancy for want of a simple love spell a witch should be able to work with her soul intact! Why does she have no better option than to deal with demons and ask the long-dead Great Aunt Rosie?

What will she do if Rosie doesn't know? Or, worse, refuses to answer?

Mara strokes the cracking cover in an effort to calm herself, removes the salt cannister and pours the white grains out into a thick line, approximately a circle, around her ancestor's grave. She holds her breath as the two edges of the salt circle join in a rough blob—the mark of a clumsy amateur, says Dot Hickmann in writing that Mara finds wonderfully instructive and unbearably condescending. Amateur or no, Mara sits, cross legged, before the headstone, straightening her nightdress and cloak over her knees before scrubbing away at the grass. She places a candle in the patch of bare earth, followed by a breath of magic to light it.

The top of the candle glows a soothing yellow-orange, the light from the flame and her hands birthing shadows on the grass beneath her feet and knees.

She draws a steeling breath, taking the hairbrush from her satchel. She has no bones, no hair, no fingernails, no part of the deceased body to link necromancer to spirit. Mara has only the hairbrush, one used by so many women that there's no reason to think it will speak first to Aunt Rosie. Her ashes returned from Khaloun in an urn, any bones remaining from her pyre left there, and never before has the brush shown affinity enough to summon her, even with Mara speaking Rosie's heartname.

When better a chance will she have to ask than the Thinning?

A shadowy blue-grey ghost, a ways beyond the cemetery gate, flickers and fades into the depth of the night.

She quests towards the demons. This time, the pair push magic into her skin without pause or hesitation. Mara wills it down her hand, through the hairbrush and out into the salt circle, her fingers tingling.

The demons who refused to give their power to change her love will let her speak to the dead. Does that mean her asking has no hope of success?

"In the name of Saluria and Sillemon, let me today reach through the veil and speak with Great-Aunt Olive Rose Amara."

Dot Hickmann lists the most common demon singles, pairs and triads in the back of *The Sorcerous Compendium of Postmortem Query*. One doesn't choose a demon; Mara drew a circle in this same place and recited, from chapter three, the traditional request for any interested demon or demons to accept her soul in service, on her natural death, in exchange for their service in her life. Her childhood religious teachings talk with intent seriousness about the need to preserve ownership of her soul, so that she may travel from world to world on the Sojourner's unending path, but no witch or magician possesses power enough to break the boundary between living and dead. Sorcery does. Death must be sixty years off, so what does a soul matter when the dead can help her keep a life's love?

Benjamin told Mara she loved her, and Mara recited the speech by candlelight only for a pair of answering demons to weave themselves into the back of her mind.

“In the name of Saluria and Sillemon, let me today reach through the veil and speak with Great-Aunt Olive Rose Amara.”

Saluria and Sillemon, according to Dot Hickmann’s knowing evaluation, are one of the older braces—demons born in and sacrificed to the Old World’s burning earth and flaming skies. Common in Ihrne and Astreut, regarded as cantankerous or particular, middling powerful, best avoided. Hickmann named them the Champions of the Loveless, the Guardians of the Heartless and the Defenders of the Indifferent—choosers of the strange, the disconnected, the isolated, the damaged. Mara wept, shaking and bitter, on a night when she should have been thrilled at the newfound power answering her summons. Why would such beings choose Mara and then deny her the power to change herself if not to gainsay her labour towards normality?

Their selection of her provided only a dreadful, sickening confirmation, as if her fickleness should be protected!

She keeps them as far out of her mind as she can, fearing their possession of her given the least foothold, fearing their nurturing of the brokenness in her. Despite her expectations based on Uncle Sascha’s lay preaching, they don’t push at her or fight her for control. Mara may as well be driving a team of well-trained horses—often willing, yet sometimes given to baulking or hesitancy. Hickmann wrote five chapters on demon management and the ways a human sorcerer should expect them to contest mastery, but Mara feels that Saluria and Sillemon are simply, even kindly, sharing their power.

At times their presence seems akin to a wriggling, tail-wagging puppy greeting a new houseguest, all brilliant and unbridled enthusiasm—with one unnegotiable exception.

A true sorcerer may be able to make them mind her in all things.

Isn’t lovelessness what leads people down that road to domination and darkness?

“In the name of Saluria and Sillemon, let me today reach through the veil and speak with Great-Aunt Olive Rose Ama—” Mara jerks as the hair on her forearms and neck rises, the air inside the salt circle pressing against her cheeks and forehead. She gasps, for the world feels sharp and pregnant, not dissimilar to the moment just before and during a flash of lightning. No bolt slices through the clear sky above; the thunderless moment, the magic pouring through her skin and out into the circle, doesn’t pass. Never has she felt force like this; the air quivers as though ten, fifty, a hundred lightning strikes are gathering to strike the earth in a single, terrible bombardment of energy. Her skin prickles, her eyes sting, her hands burn with a buzzing fire. Even though she’s shivering, she drops the hairbrush and reaches up to untie her cloak, unable to bear the weight of the wool over her shoulders.

No lightning strikes her, just a gust of bone-shattering cold as though the void between worlds spills its vastness out into Mara’s circle. She grasps her demons tight, her heart hammering out her fear, but the salt holds and the candle burns steadily. A score of bluish shadows, growing more distinct the longer Mara looks at each, forms a circle of their own inside the salt line, like small children clasping hands to play a chanting game.

Spirits? Why so many?

“Who calls me?” A single spirit hovers above the candle, perhaps peering down at Mara but possessed of nothing more than a floating, translucent vagary of humanoid shape. A suggestion of long hair merges into what may be a dress or coat; an inwards curve implies a head and neck followed by a larger swelling for chest and belly. “Don’t you know I’m busy? Too many damn relatives to look on and only one night to do it in!”

Mara picks up the hairbrush in trembling hands, running her fingertips over the engraved pattern of entwined grape vines, but there’s no comfort to be found in the familiar touch of skin on silver. She draws a slow breath, trying to ease her chest and shoulders, before resting the hairbrush on her lap, raising her hands and signing the question using Aunt Rosie’s heartname: “Are you Aunt Olive?” She stops, pushes away

the previous question with still-shaking hands and asks the question again in full, fingerspelling the shroudname “Rosie” and signing the true name “Olive”. “Are you Olive Rose Amara?”

“Yes. Who calls me, child? Which bloody one are you?”

Without bones or blood to bind spirit to necromancer, Mara can’t know if the spirit answers truthfully—or if she even *is* Rosie. Mara can ask questions and hold a free spirit inside the salt for a time, but she can’t compel honesty.

She frowns, considering. Hickmann insists that the human dead have no power over the living, and another necromancer can’t bind Rosie’s spirit to force from her Mara’s own heartname. She should be safe. “I’m Mara. Hela Mara Hill.” She fingerspells “Mara” and signs the secret word for “Hela”, her fingers skipping through the name that means her and her alone—a mingling of signs for “herb”, “walk” and “speak”. “Your great-niece. I’m Thomas Jess’s daughter, named for my brood father, Hill Cassia.”

Even then, Pa and Da knew her as a witch.

Rosie crooks the suggestion of a head to one side, as if studying Mara. Her face appears as a featureless oval framed by that pale swathe of hair; nothing indicates eyes, nose or mouth. “Last I knew you, you weren’t a niece.”

“Now you know I am,” Mara says aloud, resting her hands in her lap. “Esh decided that he is a nephew, if you still want one.”

Not to mention Lis Sascha, although Mara appreciates why he goes forgotten.

Rosie sniffs. “Neither were you a...” She hesitates. “A witch.”

Never before has the word “witch” sounded so much like “necromancer”.

“I learnt.” Mara swallows, for while she owns decent ability at small talk, this exchange won’t get her anywhere. “I want to ask you a question. May I ask you something personal?”

For a moment, she hears nothing but rustling and a soft thump from the grass behind her. Kangaroo, perhaps?

“If you’re calling me here, bothering at me—you’d better have bloody good reason.” A small protrusion of wispy light shifts away from Rosie’s ghostly form, perhaps a hand beckoning towards Mara. “Speak, girl. You’ll catch your death of cold out here in a *nightgown*. You aren’t getting up to any panky, are you? Cute person? Cute boy? Cute girl?”

Somehow, Mara forgot Rosie’s habit of asking sly questions and grinning, her lips horrifically broad, while her victim blushed and stuttered in response. Perhaps this wasn’t the best idea, but who else has the potential for both understanding and knowledge? Just her great-aunt, Rosie the wandering adventurer who spent more time travelling anywhere reachable by horse and boat than she did at home telling stories. Rosie died on the road she adored, a fitting end for any follower of the Sojourner—and she died without the love others regard as natural.

Pa and Da believe Mara worthy of such affection, but they love each other with a quiet, deep passion. Too much and in the ordinary way, despite their lives being extraordinary in other ways, to understand what she feels and why she needs a solution.

Mara can’t bear another month, another week, another day of pretending.

“Just the hanky,” she says, since, in a way, that’s the problem. “Aunt Rosie, I—”

“Why are you talking to a ghost, girl, when you should be out getting some?”

“If you’ll let me *explain*—”

“*Oooh*,” Rosie says, her bubbling voice insufferably cheerful, “and when you were a little girl, you’d stomp your foot and scowl at anyone who annoyed you, just like that.” Two small protrusions extend from her body and merge together as though she clapped her hands. She often did when living: a loud, self-satisfied clap followed all her worst evaluations and pronouncements. Mara no longer doubts the spirit’s identity. “Thought you would’ve grown out of it by now!”

Mara stills her expression as best she can and indulges herself in reaching towards Saluria and Sillemon, less for their power than for

magic's warmth—their presence comforting despite their denial and Dot Hickmann's warnings. The tingling heat helps steady her enough that Mara decides to ignore Rosie and plunge straight into the question. "There's a girl. Benjamin. She's pretty, she's clever, she's honest, she's new. She thinks I'm pretty. And we can talk for ages—she's the new schoolmarm and she *reads*. I'd like the panky. She does, too."

Benjamin Lisabet rings somewhat autistic, enough to fit in with Mara's family. Enough to say what she thinks and wants, unbothered by any social expectation that dating should involve suggestion, hesitation and the awkward game of trying to presume another's wishes. She stared at Mara, leant forwards and announced, far too loudly for the public house of a village where everyone has a terrible and unsuppressed interest in the goings-on of everyone else, that when Mara wants to move past hand-holding and walking out, she's willing. Unashamed and unselfconscious, one booted foot hooked around Mara's leg, Benjamin paused only to shoot Lis a dark glare when Mara's cousin started choking on his beer at the next table over.

While Mara admits herself entranced by Benjamin's plump figure, dimpled chin and short-cropped red hair—just the right length to run a hand over—that declaration, along with the three chests of books Benjamin brought with her to Dead Horse Hill, should have stoked the smouldering fire in Mara's heart.

"I love you," Benjamin said, her cheeks flushed, her hands flapping, her green eyes bright even in the flickering light of the burnt-down candle stubs on the windowsill, her bodice and neckline tugged low for Mara's appreciation. "I love you, Mara. When you want to do things, I want them. Say when."

Why isn't that enough?

Benjamin knocked on Pa and Da's door shortly after she arrived in Dead Horse Hill. Mara watched, entranced, as Benjamin introduced herself with a terrible curtsy, dropped her bonnet on the floor and flashed a goodly amount of creamy bosom in trying to retrieve it, bosom angled right at Mara. Only then did she announce that Reggie Sara—publican, mayor and font of all local knowledge—told her that

some of the villagers communicate in sign language. “I’d be obliged if Masters Cassia or Jess or someone can teach me. So I can understand all the students.” Benjamin looked right at Mara as she spoke the word “someone”, her gaze intense enough that even Da noticed and elbowed Pa out of the room. Mara found herself in the kitchen, demonstrating a few common words, while Benjamin did her best to copy them.

She laughed like a snorting pig, swishing her hands and fingers, every time Mara corrected her, and Mara couldn’t help but giggle as well.

On that wonderful, blissful morning, Mara Hill fell in love with Benjamin Lisabet, just as Mara once fell in love with nearly every other girl of age in and around the village. That night, she placed her candle on the windowsill and prayed to the Sojourner that her love, so weak and fickle, remained strong and true for the dream girl who knocked on her door.

It didn’t, because Mara is a heartless witch claimed by Saluria and Sillemon, unable to remain in love with the girl she yearns to bed. She stared at Benjamin that night in the pub, hearing that precious declaration, fearing what must follow.

Their love sounds the death knell for hers; the passion that flared in the kitchen, wild and heady, faded after that moment to lust and friendship.

A month after that cursed night, Mara took Dot Hickmann’s book to the graveyard in order to become a sorcerer.

When sorcery offered no answer, she resorted to necromancy.

“Girl,” Rosie says, with a short, tired-sounding sigh, “when you got a girl like that, you bloody take her out behind the schoolhouse. So why are you talking to *me*?”

“Ben said she loves me.” Mara hesitates, pressing the hairbrush’s bristles into her palm hard enough to hurt. “I loved her, at the start, but it doesn’t ... doesn’t *last*! I feel for a girl, *everything*, all at once, and it’s ... like being drunk, all warm and wonderful and happy, and I love her so much, and then she tells me she loves me, because she thinks I love her, because I *do* at the beginning—flowers and kisses and hand-holding, the excitement and the bubbling, I want all that, the way it’s

more important than anything else in the world ... and then it's gone. Every girl, *every girl*, and if there's any girl I should love, it's Benjamin, but it's gone, and I don't know how to love again! I want to stop lying, stop pretending, because she deserves better, but I can't bear to let her go, to see her with someone else. I want to love her like she loves me and like I used to love her, and I can't. I *can't*."

So many awful words, bottled up for Mara's adult life, spill out into the world like a flooded river breaking the dam.

She sits, shaking and dizzy, the truth indelible.

Rosie sighs, now long and deep. "Do you like this girl? Do you care about her?"

Hasn't Mara suggested as much? "Of course!"

"Do you want to be with her in some way?"

"Yes! But I'm not in love with her—"

"Who cares about love as long as you're both kind to each other?"

Rosie claps her hands again—or, rather, allows two protrusions of her ghostly attempt to mimic the living body to merge, soundlessly, together. "Does nobody bloody *talk* about how they feel? Is a conversation so bloody unfashionable now? Take your girl, sit down, tell her that you don't love her romantically, that your romantic attraction fades when it's reciprocated—girl, do you mind that your girl loves you romantically? You don't sound like you do?"

Mara stares, blinking and bewildered, up at the bluish spirit hovering above the flickering candleflame. "I don't understand what you're saying."

"Of *course* you don't." Rosie huffs. "If I'd known this nonsense was going to happen! Girl, do you mind that your girl loves you romantically? Or do you only mind that you can't love her this way?"

"The problem," Mara says, her teeth gritted, "is that I don't love her—"

"No, you don't mind. Easy, then! Sit down with your girl, tell her that your romantic attraction fades when reciprocated, that you're not and can't be *in* love with her, but you still care about her, you still adore her and you still want to be with her—mention the panky.

Definitely mention that you want the panky. Tell her why you think she's wonderful, and then ask her if she minds that you can't feel one thing for her, because if she really likes you, how does this one thing matter? It doesn't. And if it does, that's on her and you find another girl!"

Mara runs her tongue over her lips, too stunned to know what best to say. "That isn't how—"

"Girl, you don't know *anything*. If she's flashing that much glorious bosom at you while you talk history books, I doubt your missing one teensy bit of attraction matters. Just talk. If you admire her directness, be direct in return! What *are* you people learning in school, if not this? Long division? Prepositions? The ten duties of a Malvadan notary? How bloody pointless are those things if you don't know how to talk attraction and preferences with another girl?"

Never did Mara, in all her imaginings, see the conversation going like this. She wants a love spell, not instructions for colloquy! "I never mentioned any of that! How are you *knowing*—"

"You should have," Rosie says, the words followed by another spiritual handclap. "I never loved a girl romantically, or wanted it either, but oh did I do quite a bit for a night or two with a girl who has a chest like that. *Especially* when she isn't shy, although I prefer boys who are. Girl, you've always got to mention a girl's bosom—and her legs, especially when they're thick and muscular. Always mention the legs."

Mara hasn't considered Benjamin's legs in any way but that of holding up the rest of her body, covered in thick layers of skirts and petticoats as they are, but Rosie's pronouncement does make Mara feel better about her own. Maybe Benjamin will like—shades, how does this help?

"But I'm still not in love, still brok—"

"Were you this unnecessarily stubborn as a child? I think you were." Rosie jerks both arm-like protrusions, although this time Mara realises she glows a little brighter about the head and chest, the energy swirling closer to the centre of her spirit. "You don't experience romantic attraction when it's reciprocated. I don't experience it at all. Didn't experience it? Don't. Shades, I hope the Sojourner hasn't made me

*romantic* in the next life!” This time her whole body, from shapeless hair to the fading light of her legs and feet, quivers like jelly knocked from the dining table. “You do relationships however best suits you. You seem to want this girl as a partner, so ask her how she feels if you regard her as a best friend, sharing hanky, panky and books. If she’s got the least amount of sense, she’ll realise there’s nothing better in the world than bedding and marrying a friend. If she doesn’t, she isn’t worthy of you. This isn’t complicated, girl!”

Mara shakes her hands, frustrated. How can Rosie ride roughshod over Mara’s anxieties, as though she’s ridiculous to fear her inability to feel, consistently, something the world of books, songs and poems reckons vital to humanity? She drops the brush and signs, hands held close to her body, arms trembling hard enough that she struggles to place her fingers. “Not...” She fumbles the sign and sweeps her hands to clear it away, starting afresh. “It’s not normal!” She stops, stills her hands again. She came to ask a question, didn’t she? “You’ve travelled. I know you spent time with magic workers. Is there magic to fix me? Is there magic or sorcery to make me love the way I should? Do the Grey Mages have love spells they don’t tell people about? Or are there blood witches who deal in them, ignoring the Accords?”

A pitched howl, two voices crying in twain, sweeps through the circle. The scream rings intense enough that Mara moans and claps her hands over her ears. Yet there’s nothing to hear in Saluria and Sillemon’s rage, only a screech that reverberates in Mara’s mind and every one of her bones.

Even when they last rebuffed her, they didn’t react like this.

“Girl, you’re a bloody—”

“Excuse me.” A quiet voice sounds from the circle—and Mara realises she forgot the other spirits, paying a heretofore silent witness to the conversation. One of them flickers brighter, shifting perhaps half a step closer. “*I* don’t fall in love with someone unless they’re near close as kin. All the boys wanted to go out walking with me in my day; I only ever felt anything for one of them when I did. Darrel helped me bury Boots in the back garden when I was five. Only him.”

Mara remembers that voice—how can she not? Mother Orrin, sire mother to Isa and Ida, sat out in the square almost every day for the first eleven years of Mara’s life. Curled up in a blanket-covered wicker chair under the hanging peppercorn trees, she was the grandmother to the village entire. She corrected sloppy stitches, fed magpies breadcrumbs, mediated arguments between squabbling children and never failed to insist that one should sip, not gulp, water.

A frantic susurrations sounds from the ring of spirits, too quick and soft for Mara to parse.

“I married my wife,” says the deep, cracking voice of Kell Sunita, the man who taught Mara and Esher how to cheat at dice and cards, “but I never felt any kind of attraction to her. I just wanted that kind of relationship with someone for children, but I didn’t feel it myself.”

“I only fall in love with strangers. It doesn’t last when I get to know them!” Older Ned cackles, a spirit flickering and pressing close to Mara; she flinches as she feels the ghost of a hand brush over her hair before he backs away. “I married the notary anyway. Turned out he wasn’t in love with me, but he liked my cooking. He laughed when I fessed up; he was trying to figure out how to tell me that he’d rather I didn’t come home Fridays with another bunch of flowers! Maybe your girl is the same? You go ask her, Mara!”

“I fall in love,” says another, slow and hesitant.

Mara freezes, for Grandba Jess Amara passed when Mara was seven, little more in Mara’s mind than the click of knitting needles and the smell of dried lavender. She does remember how ze spoke aloud, awkward and formal; like Da, ze best preferred talking with hir hands. “I do love that way. But it comes and goes. Some days it spills over everything and some days there’s nothing but cracked earth. But even people who love like the stories say don’t love like that all their lives. Build your house on something else.”

For a moment, Mara thinks she smells something that isn’t melting tallow, grass and eucalyptus leaves. Must-tinged lavender, the fragrance that clung to Grandba’s clothes whenever Mara sat in hir lap. The smell still ghosting Mara’s stockings and drawers for a few moments after

dressing, for she stores her underthings in the same wooden chest in the same house Grandba Jess and Great Aunt Rosie must have played, slept and fought in as children. The same house in which every spirit here must have once taken tea; the same house past which every spirit must have walked hundreds or thousands of times. Old and a little warped, the floorboards have been worn smooth by generations of feet before hers—none free of memory’s scars, none untouched by her family’s history.

She didn’t imagine that those come before her bear their own unspoken secrets, their own truths erased from family and village knowledge. She didn’t imagine that they too couldn’t and didn’t love like one should. Mara hunches forwards, hot tears rolling down her cold face, unsure why she weeps but knowing the stopping to be beyond her.

Two spirit protrusions rest clammy on her shoulder, one scented of lavender and the other rose.

They pay witness, the ring of shades from generations past: people who never fell in love, people who never wished to fall in love, people who felt no attraction and died contentedly single, people who felt no attraction yet ringbonded others for a wealth of reasons, people whose love wasn’t strong enough to act on, people whose love waxed and waned, people who didn’t love at all, people who chose friendship or companionship over romance, people whose love couldn’t fit the uncomplicated shapes of poem or song. People who lived and laughed and died as proud villagers of Dead Horse Hill. People whose stories went untold in this place where everyone believes they know everything worth knowing, never questioning the worth of that assumption.

They talk over each other now in their enthusiasm, a cacophony of the chattering dead speaking everything unshared in life.

Mara knew nothing close to enough, and if so many people here tell stories new to her, how can the living be different? How can she be the only woman in this village who can’t love like a heroine from a storybook if her relatives and ancestors express a wondrous, human inability to do the same?

In knowing the truth of nobody else, how can she recognise her own?

Because it's there, shimmering and bright: if her heartless people lived how their hearts dictate, so too must she.

Saluria and Sillemon rest warm and quiescent at the back of her mind.

She doesn't know much time passes until the hubbub of sharing spirits lessens; Mara just sits, cold and quiet and shivering, until the spirits return to their silence by the perimeter of the salt circle. Then there's nobody near Mara but Aunt Rosie, floating above the guttering candleflame.

"Do you bloody well understand, girl?" Rosie sniffs. "It's not *normal*? Honestly."

Mara nods, swallows, decides that she doesn't trust her voice and signs one word: "Yes."

"Good." Rosie flows backwards to the ring, merging with the shadowy blue spirit beside her. Grandba, maybe? "Then get up, break the circle and go to bed, because tomorrow you need to talk to the girl with the magnificent bosom. Make sure your schoolmarm teaches something useful about people, too, because I've too many to fuss over. And talk to your brother. Listening at his door each night won't help, girl. *Talk*. Oh, the problems you'll solve if you just use your hands or lips!"

"Thank you," Mara signs, fearing to risk responding to the rest. "Thank you."

"Break the circle, girl."

Mara nods, leans forwards and reaches out to drag her hand across the ring of salt—and then she stares, blinking, at an empty, starlit night. Nothing remains of her visitors but the broken circle, one burnt-out candle, a faint demon-wrought purring sound and the soft rose glow of Mara's own hands. She pulls her cloak tighter, trembling, and plucks the hairbrush from the ground, brushing dirt and leaves from the bristles before stowing it in her satchel.

"Listening?"

She yanks at Saluria and Sillemon, dragging as much power as she can from the demons into her glowing hands. In the moment before her eyes snap shut against the brightness, just as she realises that she knows that voice, she sees Esher: leaning against the closest headstone, a poker clasped in each hand. He howls, dropped iron clanging where it smacks against gravestone, and Mara, whimpering herself, dulls the light back to a soft, gentle glow, unwilling to risk opening her eyes.

“Shades, *what*—”

“What are *you* doing here?” Mara shrieks back. “How *long*...?”

Did he see the book—no, it’s still in her satchel, safe. Did Rosie mention the words “necromancy” or “sorcery”? Does Esher know she isn’t only a witch?

Mara opens her watering eyes before Esher answers: he stands hunched over, his long-fingered hands shrouding his face, the pokers scattered on the grass before his feet. Like Mara, he appears an odd combination of dressed and undressed, wearing old breeches underneath a long nightshirt and his fleece-lined coat over the shirt, untied laces tucked inside his boots. Looking at him seems much like looking at Mara herself, since they’re both the spitting image of Da—tall and hazel-eyed with smooth sable hair, overlong nose, sharp cheekbones, soft sienna skin. Her hair hangs long and braided; Esher cuts his into a short tail. He stands slightly the taller, for which Mara is grateful; the Sojourner perhaps finds amusement in the truth that each possesses a body more commonly held to match the nature of the other.

Mara doesn’t mind so much; Esher does.

She scrambles upright, rests the satchel comfortably against her thigh, remembers Aunt Rosie’s opinion on girls’ legs and almost smiles before glaring back at her brother. “Esh! What are you doing here? Spying—” Mara stops, gulping, since Esher heard Rosie; perhaps that’s an accusation best unmentioned. “What are you doing here?”

Another shuddering moment passes before Esher lowers his hands, reaches down and grasps the pokers—lengths of twisted black iron with a rounded point wrought by Pa’s hands, neither weapon Esher’s preferred sword. Did he fear Mara’s going out alone tonight?

He draws a breath and jerks an elbow at her, so Mara stops and waits, giving him time. Esher pushes himself upright and turns towards the village, his boots crunching leaves as he falls into a ground-eating stride, the pokers thumping against his boot every few steps.

It wasn't, Mara realises, a kangaroo.

"Esh, please try and word somehow. Please." She matches him stride for stride, for while Esher can outpace everyone else in Dead Horse Hill and does when annoyed, he'll never outwalk her. She lets her hands glow a fraction brighter, silently thanking her brace of demons for light enough to see the worst of the missing stones as they approach the tumbledown section of the wall. "I don't care how. Please. What were you doing here?"

"I don't." His words are slow and hesitant, his voice higher than his preference. He rests a foot on one fallen slab, places his poker-clenching hands on the top of the wall and vaults over, heedless of the footing on the other side. Only a soft grunt betrays that he may have landed poorly. "Love, romantically. Or want. Attraction, she said? I don't have it for anyone. And I don't want a partner, not like Older Ned. I just want to be me."

If he didn't hear everything, he heard enough to understand.

Mara heaves a long sigh, clambers over the wall with more caution and less ankle-breaking disregard, runs to catch up. Why didn't she think about Esher this way? She assumed that he hadn't found the right person or people, but even when he wasn't hiding from the town, he spent more time avoiding than he did going about. He works in the smithy and on the plain depending on who needs him most—he's spent the spring shearing and haying, but when summer quickens he'll go back to Pa—and he labours hard, always willing to lend a hand. Perhaps that's a way to avoid complications through the appearance of activity, a man too busy to walk out?

She knows, in a disconcerting, nebulous way, that there's something going on with him for which she doesn't have the language or understanding, something he doesn't voice any more than she dared

speak of her fickle—no, fading—romantic attraction. How much of his distance can be explained by his revelation? How much can't?

"I think I want to be with Benjamin. If she'll let me not be in love with her back."

"I think you love her," Esher says after another long hesitation. A soft bluish spirit flickers off to his left. "It just isn't romantic love. In love. Otherwise you wouldn't want to do anything not, well..."

Mara raises both eyebrows. "Casual panky behind the schoolhouse?"

"I never knew why people did that." Esher shakes his head, shuddering. "But if that's all you wanted, you'd be doing it. You're not, so you want something different. It just isn't romantic for you."

She reaches out, slides a hand underneath his forearm and pulls him close to her despite the threat of being hit by a poker, breathing in his sandalwood, sweat and wool. "I feel like I should've known about you. I should have seen."

"I didn't. Not with you." Esher softens and leans into her, and while Mara doesn't think he's all there with her, he doesn't push her away. He told her the truth about himself. He came out this night with iron in hand, even though he's never had the heart or patience for magic.

"There's two of us, now." Mara squeezes his arm. "And you don't need someone like that. Why would you? We've got Pa and Da ... and maybe you'll have me and Benjamin. If she says yes. Family." She isn't sure what's best to say, but Rosie told her to speak. "Wherever I am, whoever I end up with, there's always space for you if you want or need it. Promise. I swear by Olive Rose Amara."

A breath of sharp, cold wind tugs at Mara's hair—even though there isn't breeze enough to stir the grass or her skirts.

"Tonight. Before. She came to me, in my room. She told me to follow you out. She told me that if I followed you to the graveyard, I wouldn't..." Esher trails off, his head angled away from Mara's face. "Aunt Rosie told me to follow. Before you called her, before she came to you. She came to me, first. I didn't know you were going to talk to Rosie about all this."

For Esher, this is nearly a speech, but that isn't what has Mara staring. Did Rosie sense all the nights Mara tried and failed to summon her? Did she wait until this night, the Thinning, to cross over, to answer—to bring the deceased of Dead Horse Hill with her?

How much, Mara wonders, do the dead know of the living?

She drops her free hand inside the satchel, stroking the worn cover of *The Sorcerous Compendium of Postmortem Query*. She won't be able to ask anything of Rosie for another year, but some of the other spirits who bequeathed their stories lie within the cemetery, their bones accessible to a curious necromancer. There's no reason why she can't ask, now she knows that Rosie and Mara aren't the only heartless villagers to walk the streets of Dead Horse Hill. There's no reason why she can't ask to hear their stories about love ... and perhaps the bleakness taken root in Esher's mind.

They shared their secrets freely; why shouldn't they help her with more of the same?

What is loveless, Mara wonders, but the perception of those outside, knowing nothing of the secrets housed within? What is loveless in a world where those who don't love with that heady romantic abandon still care about the people around them, even after death? What is loveless in a world where a man who ghosts through his own life still comes after Mara with pokers in hand? What is loveless but a quality deserving of championship, even if only seen by the dead, by a pair of demons, by the rare people who dare speak their truth to another?

What does love, in any form, matter if its absence doesn't preclude people from kindness?

"And you *know*," Mara says, never more certain of anything, "that Rosie will make sure, at least one night a year, that I keep that promise."

Esher's lips curl into a momentary smile. Not yet the joy or ease she wishes to see in his face, but he lets her hold him close. They walk into the dark together, two heartless souls heading towards a village of people who may be more like her than Mara ever dared imagine or hope.

Tomorrow, if Benjamin is truly the woman with whom Mara yearned to fall back in love, perhaps they will be three.

# 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  
When Quiver Meets Quill

# about the author

K. A. Cook is an abrosexual, aromantic, agender autistic who experiences chronic pain and mental illness. Ze writes creative non-fiction, personal essays and 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**.