

was just misplaced when building me. And it certainly didn't help that each time I would politely decline someone, I seemed to receive a barrage of ...

'You're so cold-hearted.'

'Don't be a bitch, you could just go on one date.'

'It kind of makes you seem like a hoe.'

'You just haven't met the right person.'

But I'm not cold-hearted. I love love. I love my family. I love my friends. I love the way the sunset paints a new canvas every day. I love the way people talk about their passions. I even love how people get when they talk about their own romantic escapades. Whether it's platonic or familial or self or whatever else – I feel it. Just not romantic. And, finding out that there was a whole group of people who felt the same, that there was a way to describe how I felt, made me feel so whole. Not broken, not damaged, not a bitch or a slut, not cold-hearted or lacking. Just different.

Unfortunately, misunderstanding and rejection of aromatic and asexual people is still quite common, even within the queer community. But, in the same spaces, I've met multiple people who, after discussing my own experiences, are quick to pull me aside and whisper their own confusion about similar ones. Some felt they were bisexual because they felt the same level of attraction to everyone (spoiler alert: that level was none). Others told me they loved their partners romantically but were struggling with whether they felt sexually attracted to them. I guarantee you, whether it's someone in your life or yourself, there are people all around who have similar questions about aromatic or asexual experiences and identities. So, I encourage you to keep on exploring, with the confidence that there are always people who have the same thoughts, experiences, and questions as you.

Love,
Annie

WOMEN, WEED & THE SEA

BY ANGELINA SOKOLSKY

There was something in the water with me. The wind dug under the surface, flicking up little tongues of water. Behind the railing of the rockpool's perimeter, the sea continued to swell – an overflowing drain, gushing into the pool. In each wave's whitewash, little brown strands would peak out, then drown – lurking in the grey salt, treading with me. The stench of fish, sweat and rain before it falls burned my nostrils. There was something in that last wave. It was here, now, in the pool.

Something bigger. With limbs. Brown. Flexible. Thick. The last car was exiting the carpark at the top of the stairs. I stayed low, my shoulders submerged, magnetic, a pull of the moon, a yank from the sea floor. I sank under, peering into the murk, my eyes red, though no longer stinging – then it was there, peering at me, big limbs, brown, flexible, thick. First, a flame of fear licking my ribs. Then satisfaction, knowing it really was there. Then a mutual recognition that we were both meant to be there – we were the same, we were all three: women, weed and the sea.

WITCHES

Apparently, women are witches. Women are reincarnations of the devil, temptation personified. They are also angels, too. They, when they have time in between, are also mermaids, sent to deceive and drown men. But, they are weak, too – of course – because of their emotions. *Too big, too much.* They are muses, with bodies shaped *just so* to help artists sculpt candles that will never be lit. They – and this is an ancient one – are also seaweed.

ANGELS

Although the correlation between women and seaweed is ancient, the 21st century couldn't give a clearer lens to see it through: modern dating. It only takes a few minutes of scrolling on the dating app Hinge to notice a few recurring 'dating intentions' on female profiles: 'short-

DEVIL REINCARNATE

term relationship,' 'figuring out my dating goals,' 'prefer not to say.' The commonly feared 'strings attached' in sexual and romantic relationships give a clear indication that many women do not want – nor require – tendrils of commitment rooting them to one strict place. One of the biggest similarities between female homo sapiens and macroalgae (seaweed) is that, in order to survive, they do not require stems or roots. Mouritsen (2013) explains all the substances algae need are found dissolved in the water. These small and underestimated molecules provide seaweed with nutrients, energy, and life. Similarly, women can access equivalent 'substances' which revive, motivate, and uplift them on their Pinterest and Tiktok feeds without the dire need for romantic relationships or validation. What seaweed and women require in order to nourish themselves and live fully are not large, expensive, hard to obtain, or limited to certain areas. Instead, they are found in the immediate environment that they live in.

For example, I have found myself feeling energised and 'fed' by one particular TikTok account which posts stop-motion clips of tiny felt animals in miniature kitchens. I pump serotonin when I watch a surfer catch a wave. I experience orgasmic dopamine when my favourite fruits are on sale in the supermarket. These little moments – similar to the natural, life-giving substances in seawater – can elevate an organism from existing to thriving. Water is – obviously – fluid, meaning that seaweed has what it needs to flourish wherever it flows to. In comparing algae to women, we can recognise that life-elevating 'substances' can be found wherever a woman chooses to go. We can debunk the myth that a woman can only grow in a singular, controlled environment – confined to one home base, one cage, one hometown, one social media page – as it is through movement, without roots, that women can breathe, live, swim, float, exist, date, love, and flourish.

Despite this scientific classification and its notions of completeness – and, therefore, equality with other organisms – a second characteristic braids women with seaweed: the words, terms, slurs, and lines blurred. Most macroalgae are benthic, meaning they are tethered to the sea floor, though 'there is no need to be so formal in talking about benthic macroalgae. We commonly refer to them all the time by the single term seaweeds, and we make use of them more often than most people realise' (Mouritsen, 2013). *Females, ladies, women, girls, chicks, birds, sheilas, bitches, sluts, whores.* Whichever is convenient, whichever is fun to say, whichever gives you a thrill to yell on the street.

A salesman for a company walks through the office with its chief executives, *good morning girls!* A married man takes a sip of beer in his local pub, *plenty of pretty birds 'ere mate.* An upcoming musician writes

his first lyric of his first song, pullin' bitches so fast until they hissin'.' A teenager creates his first online dating profile, thinking, *the chicks on here are all chat, no cap.*

Central to this comparison between women and seaweed is ecofeminist theory. Val Plumwood, a pioneer in ecofeminist philosophy, explains how the theory is based on the premise that women are seen as the environment itself, where they construct the conditions necessary for male achievement to take place (1993, pg. 22). This power to control entire ecosystems should then arguably set women on a high scale of power in this discourse, yet the 'very idea of a feminine connection with nature seems to many to be regressive and insulting, summoning up images of women as earth mothers, as passive, reproductive animals, contented cows immersed in the body and in the unreflective experiencing of life' (ibid, pg. 20).

According to Mouritsen, "algae, including the phytoplankton [also known as seaweed], are jointly responsible for producing 90 percent of the oxygen in the atmosphere and up to 80 percent of the organic matter on Earth" (Mouritsen, 2013). They construct the conditions necessary for animal nourishment to take place, including the human diet. We harvest it, cook, ferment, blend, crunch, and slurp it for our personal fulfilment and growth. Yet what does the seaweed get?

A woman's egg only contributes to 50% of a new human life, yet a woman's uterus is 100% responsible for maintaining and producing that life. After so much work, what does the mother get post-birth? Interestingly, 60% of Australian mothers with a partner were unemployed in order to raise a child under one year old in 2021, according to the Australian Institute of Family Studies (2023). Meanwhile, stay-at-home fathers made up 3.8% of the Australian population in 2022. According to Plumwood, these statistics are a result of 'the idea that women have special powers and capacities of nurturance, empathy, and "closeness to nature," which are unsharable by men and which justify their special treatment, which of course nearly always turns out to be inferior treatment' (Plumwood, 1993, pg. 8).

Women construct the conditions necessary for male achievement to take place. How different are they from seaweed? Beds of kelp silently sway under water, peering up at the wet, glass ceiling, waiting to be next. Stay-at-home mothers stare out kitchen windows, waiting to be told to take a breath.

..HUMAN?

MYTH? WOMAN.

On the evening before her wedding, Antonia Fuentes parks at Totoralillo beach, Chile. The sky bruises like a plum, while Antonia walks onto the sand. Watch out! Her future father-in-law always teases her fiancé. *Don't let La Pincoya catch you after dark!* Behind a polite smile, she always replies in her head: *I wish she would.* The mythical woman, always on the coast, always dancing, always seducing, covered in kelp. Apparently, it's going to be a good day for fishing if she dances towards the sea, and a bad one if she dances away from it (Baklarz, 2022). Wherever she dances, though, she will always seduce men, dragging them to the ocean, braiding them into the bed of kelp on the seafloor.

Antonia pitches her legs in the wet sand, letting the sea's mouth grope her ankles. She hears a thud on the sand behind her. Then more thuds, quickening. Like someone running. She turns. There's a figure, moving sporadically. Long, seed-speckled leaves droop from their limbs, echoing a slight rattle as they sway. They squat and leap, spin and jab, creep, bend backwards, a human thunderstorm ... human? Myth? Woman.

La Pincoya meets Antonia's gaze with yellow eyes, then runs. At her. Past her. Into the sea. Her limbs of kelp descend under the seafoam, glowing white under the fresh moon. A pang of longing strikes Antonia's chest. *Follow her*, she thinks. She does not act. She cannot act. She is born in the wrong body. The human body is not the problem. She need not be mythical to survive underwater. The problem is her female body. *If I were a man, I could do anything. Indestructible, unpredictable, undeniable, unbeatable, unkillable.* She does not escape her life. She does not see La Pincoya again. She does not swim in the ocean again. The one thing she does is mumble, in a cream dress, *I do*.

..HUMAN?

MYTH?

WOMAN.

COMMERCIALISES

FEMALE BODIES

According to Mouritsen, what is known as 'the smell of the sea' is caused by small amounts of DMS (dimethylsulfoniopropionate), 'but in large quantities it results in the disagreeable aroma that is associated with rotten seaweeds and with fish that is no longer fresh' (2013). When taken in bite size and at an arm's distance, the 'faults' or the aspects of women that are 'hard to digest' – for example: fishy-smelling genitalia, menstruation, mental health issues – are romanticised by our arts and culture and put in candles to form the popular smell of bathrooms and homeware stores. Gwyneth Paltrow created a candle with the scent titled 'This Smells Like My Vagina,' which seems like a sort of feminist power-move, though she has still created a product which commercialises female bodies. At Woolworths, you can purchase a can of 'Pure Tropical Great Barrier Reef' spray for \$8, or 'Ultimate Getaways Amalfi Coast' for \$6.80 at Coles. Or would you prefer 'Hawaiian Breeze'? How nice – it would seem – that 'the smell of the sea' is widely desired in people's bathrooms and toilets.

However, when in large quantities, the stench of seaweed's presence becomes unmistakably raw, too big to digest, authentic, 'disagreeable,' and utterly feminine. According to Mouritsen, 'although we may find its odour offensive, many scientists think that the DMS generated from the decomposition of marine algae, especially phytoplankton, which plays a vital role in the regulation of the Earth's climate' (2013). So, seaweed and women smell 'bad.' But, the bad smell, according to science, is vital to regulating whole ecosystems.

At this point, the vitality of seaweed and women may seem everlasting, surely long-term. But, there is a 'but.' Climate change is causing seas to become more acidic due to the earth's rising temperatures. In an environment like this, seaweed inevitably suffers. How can this relate to women? Our socio-political environment – in which women cannot escape – has largely grown sour with a resurgence of misogynistic and sexist ideologies in recent years. Think social media personality Andrew Tate, think US president Donald Trump, think convicted rapist Harvey Weinstein, think the US Supreme Court. Rap music continues to sell misogyny to minors, millennials, the married and unmarried, the mad, and a list of other males. In a content analysis of 10 J. Cole songs, Sepehri (2020) counted the misogynistic slur 'bitch' repeated 108 times. Cole's song 'No Role Modelz' mirrors the souring attitudes of many men towards women. He raps, 'Out in Hollywood bringin' back 5 or 6 hoes/Fuck 'em then we kick 'em to the door' (2014). Sepehri reports that, 'of those 108 "bitches", 26 were positive, 62 were negative, and 20 were neutral' (2020, pg. 18).

Rates of domestic violence have been increasing in Australia, prompting Prime Minister Anthony Albanese to declare violence against women a national crisis in 2024. In this environment, women involuntarily suffer.

We mean it as a compliment. Can't you take a joke? You're lucky I'm calling you one of my bitches. I'm not sexist, I have sisters. The oceans are still rising. The acidity is intensifying. Seaweed is still suffering. Don't try to excuse your slur with dark humour. Don't just put a few ice cubes in the water. There is acid in the words you spit, the Tweets you post, and the boiling water you spill on your partner who didn't iron your shirt.

Boil the sea, burn the witches. If they float, they're guilty, forbidden from resting on the shorelines. If they sink, they're innocent. When I learned about the Salem witch trials in Year Nine history, I felt nauseous. But, after we had moved onto the next topic in class, I kept researching at home. I imagined beds of female hair at the bottoms of rivers, lakes and the sea, anchored by dead bodies, and floating up with the current. I had a nightmare once. I was underwater in a river. I could see a crowd peering

through the surface from the bank, waiting for me to float or sink. When I looked below me, I saw a bed of women, lying on the river floor. They were staring up at the surface – not trying to swim up for air or dislodge themselves from the rocks, but just staring up – and I realised they didn't want to swim up. They didn't want to exist in that same world where their persecutors breathed down their necks. They would rather live, grow, graze, and wither in an underwater forest, their manes of hair flowing with the current.

These 'underwater forests' are – as it so happens – the natural habitat in which seaweed first formed. They tend to collect into clusters and are abundant in shallow waters, where they can sit beneath the ocean's *glass ceiling* (Osterloff, n.d) – nod, nod. They form underwater, under the surface, behind the scenes, in the kitchens, under the sheets, hidden in emails, silenced by laws, buried in sacred scriptures. This is how they began. This is also how they died: women coerced in car backseats, murdered on linoleum kitchen floors, shamed inside packed courtrooms, executed in TikTok comment sections. Little deaths every day. Kelp off the coast of Western Australia was exposed to extreme heat waves in 2011, resulting in a loss of 43% of the leafy organisms (Wernberg, 2019, pg. 1). Yet, they continue to survive and grow. Heatwaves recur, kelp perish, then they survive, in time for the next heatwave. Circles of life repeating faster than the rate at domestic violence perpetrators are released on bail. Through this abstract theory, clear links can be tied between the abundant, flourishing, and suffering organisms that are seaweed and women.

A thirty-year-old man rummages through a metal basket in a City Beach store, deciding on a gift for a mate's birthday. He settles on a grow-your-own-girlfriend set. *Why go out and find one in their natural habitat when there's a more convenient option?* If men didn't want to venture into the real world to connect to the soul of a woman, then there were others who would: the women themselves.

Kang Ho-Sook pulls on her wetsuit at dawn. At the shore of the sea on Jeju Island, Korea, she says a prayer of safety to Jamsugut, goddess of the sea. *You should wear an oxygen mask, Halmeoni*, her grandchildren tell her. *Fah!* She thinks. Too late to change the Kang family tradition. All the Kang women have harvested seaweed as part of the Haenyeo, the 'women of the sea' (Baklarz, 2022). Ho-Sook's name itself means 'clear lake'; she was born with her future purpose funnelled into her liquid identity like undetectable algae. Ten metres deep, one minute of held breath. *I can do it myself.* The island is famous for these women, collecting kelp and

mollusks ever since their husbands left Korea – forced to leave due to issues with Korean taxes (ibid). Left on their own, they dove into the ocean, harvested leafy gold and rose back up, climbing out from the sea.

Before Ho-Sook takes a breath at the surface, she looks below her to the beds of seaweed. Slimy, cool pulses of care flow through her chest. As long as it is down here, where it takes just enough effort to reach, we can keep it the way it is. As long as women are bothered enough to dive. But, who wouldn't blame them for wanting to avoid descending beneath another glass ceiling? There are very few Haenyeo left.

In Indigenous Australian culture, the Bininj and Maung people of Western and Central Arnhem Land describe spirits called Yawkyawks, which resemble mermaids with locks of green algae hanging down their backs (Baklarz, 2022). They were previously sisters who built a fire too close to a watering hole, where the Ngalyod (also known as the Rainbow Serpent) was angered and ate them. The Yawkyawks remain in the waterways of Arnhem Land, controlling the weather and singing beneath the surface (National Museum Australia, n.d). Like seaweed, they live beneath liquid glass. Like the alleged witches, they watch from below as strangers peer into the water from the banks. But, like the Haenyeo, they can rise, breaking the surface. No longer women confined to one body like Antonia, the Yawkyawks grow legs on the shore and explore camps during the night. More than dancing silently like La Pincoya, they make themselves heard too, 'calling out loudly and eating yams and sugarbag' (National Museum Australia, n.d).

The green algae dangling from their heads does not tether them to the floors of the streams and billabongs. Seaweed is part of them, though it does not define nor limit their actions. Just as being female is part of an individual's identity, but being positioned as a woman in society does not have to define their potential.

I rise out of the saltwater, standing in the shallow end. There is a man now, standing by the border of the rockpool. He's looking at me. He's frightened. Tangled around my arms, from my shoulders down to my wrists, is seaweed. It caresses me, as if whispering: *what does he want with us?* The man registers for a moment, then bolts to the stairs. As he scrambles, I hear a voice coming from the algae garnishing my body: *the more they don't understand, the more power you have.*

THE MORE THEY
DON'T UNDERSTAND,
THE MORE POWER YOU
HAVE

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