

FIRST TO SEA

ALEX CONDIE

ABSTRACT

*Inspired by studying books such as *The Ethical Slut* by Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy, *Stars in My Pockets like Grains of Sand* by Samuel Delaney and *Homos* by Leo Bersani, “First to Sea” explores cultural and gender topics through a fictional lens. By examining alternatives to ideas of family, relationships and gender, a world is imagined where the norm is drastically different and has fostered the creation of a great civilization. But is this other world one that can change the bigoted mind of the traditionally leaning main character? Or does it simply showcase the difficult journey of opening some people up to new possibilities?*

Keywords: cultural studies, equity studies, gender studies, non-binary, non-traditional relationships, science fiction.

I have never lived like other men. With a name like Hatchet Harlow my family must have known I would cleave expectations for men asunder.

Yet, living as myself, even I have met unlikely adversity in the only place possible: outside our world. I do not expect you to believe me when I say where I’ve been or of the horrors I have seen, nonetheless I beg you to consider it. If only to leave you with the lasting impression that wherever and however you came to find my journal, you must turn around and go back home. On the morning of a balmy June day, I awoke to

a sun of pure orange glow. My soldiers were in beds all around me. I began most days with a morning march alone but this one became a maiden voyage with no farewell. Parting evergreen branches and stepping on soft, damp dirt, somehow took me not deeper into the woods, but onto bleached sand underneath a white sun. And a blue sun. And a pink sun.

I woke up in our world, then somehow walked into *theirs*.

As difficult as this is to believe, it may be harder for you to swallow the fact that I did not panic. What use was there in doing that? Not, for a man with warrior's blood, I had only the desire to charge forward. I walked through this desert of sharp sand cutting up my boots with every step. The sky was impossible to navigate with as the suns came in and out of existence seemingly at random. As though large, towering pieces of the grey sky were closer than others.

I don't know how long it was before I was found. Who could tell time with so many suns mucking up the sky? Just before I wandered right into dehydration, a group found me. As I approached the edge of the desert, a group of people unlike any I had seen before approached me. They had faces like mine, but with horns on their head and hooves instead of feet. Their arms were hairier than any man I had seen. In addition, they wore very little clothing and draped themselves in metal strands hanging from their neck down to their fingers.

Would I go willingly with a pack of wolves? Would I swim closer to sharks if I spied their fins in the open sea? Of course not. Which is why I stood my ground against these people. With my shoulders pressed back and chest puffed out, I must have impressed them with my strength. They approached me slowly, with hands held high to show they carried no weapons. I have always said that looking tall starts in the

mind and rarely requires the body. This confirmed it, for as these people approached me, I saw that every single one was at least a foot taller than I. Though, this gave me pause for only a moment, it did not stop me from following them out of the desert.

No words were spoken between us as we walked, making the day it took to reach their home feel that much longer. When our feet pressed against hard stone, they stopped and turned to me. I thought they were strange from the first moment. Little did I know how truly odd they were until they started to speak.

“Where did you come from?” A voice came to me seemingly out of nowhere. I couldn’t pinpoint which one of them said it, so I turned around quickly to look them each in the eye.

“Do you know where you are?” Again, none of their lips moved, but each of them watched me with a strange intensity. “Who is addressing me? Step forward!” I said. One amongst the dozens approached me. In their strange soundless speech, heard only in the mind, this one told me their name was “Iriao”. Speaking for all the people there, Iriao told me we were on the northern coast of Eris. When I told him I had never heard of it, he tried describing every landmark around. The Opal Deserts I came from were strange to me. I had never heard of Minerva, Wyr’s Home or the city of Incradorum. It was clear Iriao needed to expand our horizon.

“You are on the planet Ariscia, in the Kyros system.” Iriao said. Still I recognized nothing. “We do not know you either. Please, come with us.”

I hesitated a moment before following but in time we moved into their village, a humble place along the seashore. Not unlike any other fishing village back home, I

immediately felt more accustomed to this place. They were clearly a simple folk and should be easy to work with.

“Rest here,” he said, pointing to one of the small homes. Though I have called Iriao a ‘he’ I cannot say it is correct. When asked about gender, he was at first confused by my inquiry. As though it had never been spoken of before.

“How do you live without gender?” I asked, “How do you...mate?”

Iriao sat with me in the simple stone hut and explained the ways in which they lived. It was only my years of experience as a leader and diplomat that I did not show any sign of my disdain.

The people here are called Ari. My initial impression of a confused gender identity was not misplaced. Iriao told me that the Ari do not have genders. Though they differ in sex, it is possible for any Ari to accept and give genetic material to grow their young. Iriao told me that my concept of gender could never develop with them.

“When one day you are one sex and the next another, how could this ‘gender’ come to be?” he asked me.

“How does this affect your young? Surely, no family could form when you live as you do.” I asked Iriao.

“Family? Hmm...is that what you call the unit who raises the young? Yes, we have ‘families’. My family is all of this place. Many of us may contribute to birthing young but it is done in pools at the centre of our home. Those who raise the young are skilled practitioners. It is a complex job, not unlike fishing, sculpting, or even fluid weaving. Could you imagine an amateur attempting to turn water into moving art? They would drown themselves if they tried! We do not let just anyone do it.”

I didn't understand how this was possible. Iriao said they lived like the water by their home and the water in their art. Always moving and changing. Sometimes more than two individuals provided the genetic material to birth a young, and sometimes a person was bonded with up to a dozen others in unique romantic, loving or sexual relationships. The lack of structure and rigidity in their ideas of family, love and even gender baffled me. How could they go day to day with such fluidity amongst them? No two Ari approached these concepts the same way, yet somehow, they lived together harmoniously.

"You must squabble endlessly. What with so much...conflicting views." I said to Iriao. Usually, the responses came promptly and without a studder or hesitation. But this one took Iriao some time to formulate a response.

A great deal. That is behind us. We do not fight over differences anymore. Not since we learned to...I am not sure how to think it in your tongue. Not since we learned to share our minds." Iriao said.

"You speak telepathically, yes I gathered that." Poor thing couldn't even explain his obvious power to me.

"No, that's not correct. We do not often share words as I am with you. To each other it is different. Watch."

Iriao leaned down and began running his finger through the sandy floor. In time it took the shape of an odd symbol, unlike anything I had seen before and extremely intricate. With one quick movement, Iriao wiped it away, leaving behind no trace.

Without moving, Iriao seemed to call another of his kind into the hut. Let's call this one a 'she' but as I've explained, no description seems right for these people.

She and Iriao didn't look at one another, nor give each other a signal. Instead, they immediately passed in silence as Iriao left and this new person knelt down in his place. She began to run her finger through the sand, just as Iriao had. She curved and swiped with perfect precision.

“My name is Coron, visitor Hatchet, the one found in the opal desert. Has this helped clarify Iriao's comment?”

“But-no, I don't understand. How did you know to do that? It is the same as Iriao's symbol.”

“Just as we share feelings, hopes and needs, Iriao shared with me the image of making this and his desire that I come in to do the same.” Coron said.

So, they did more than simply speak through their minds. They could share more information in one second than any transceiver we had back home. It would pose an immense tactical advantage in any conflict, yet they showed it to me as evidence for why they don't fight. They do not understand the gifts they have!

I dared not say it, but I felt within my gut that this tiny civilization was destined to fail. All I had seen was a fishing village of a few hundred. They had shown me nothing that rivaled my people's technology and with a society built like this, they never would. It was sad to stand amongst such generous yet ultimately doomed people. Perhaps, one day I would figure out how I got here and bring real order to them. I could show them how to use their mental transference to real effect, and what a dedicated family could do for their young. With my soldiers behind me, I could really whip this place into shape.

Iriao and Coron spoke with me well into the night, but I dared not interject any of my plans. They were best discussed when I had an army behind me. Despite all I had heard they showed me one more thing: what they lacked in structure they made up for in nerve.

Iriao said that I could stay with them.

And I laughed.

“This is no place for man!” I said, barring my teeth in a childish smile, “Someone like me cannot stay here. What would my people think? A general living amongst the frail, where there are no husbands and wives, rich or poor, strong or weak? If they saw me live as you do, they would not see it as simply different, but wounded.”

“Could you not explain to them? Show them?” Iriao spoke up amongst the crowd that had gathered within the hut. I could see in their eyes they all thought as he did.

“As I said, they will see me as wounded for advocating this life. How could I explain that damage is a good thing? I may as well come back with a missing arm and tell them of its splendor! No, it is a ridiculous thing. This place is not for me. Tomorrow I must leave.”

Iriao told me I was already wounded. That I had been suffering all the days I have walked. It was another sentence spewed from their minds that I quickly tried to forget. Nonsense, every bit of it.

The next morning, after restless sleep, Iriao took me to the water’s edge. They pulled out a raft that looked little better than a hollowed-out stump. No matter how much they reassured me that it would never sink and take me wherever I wanted atop the

sea, I couldn't help the hesitation I felt when leaving. I didn't know where to go and was far from happy with this boat, but if it would get me away from this place, I had no choice but to love it. They tried to explain how to use the small raft, but I waved them away. What could they possibly tell me that I didn't already know?

As I turned around, confident in my choice to leave these savage aliens behind, I finally got a glimpse of their village.

All of it.

What I had seen was a few sheds along the shore. The city lay behind the hard stone beach. Behind the sharp sands of the desert. What I thought was grey sky blocking out the suns were buildings. Towers that connected planet and space, cutting right through the sky. Hovering around them were ships bigger than any in my country's navy, and they floated amongst the clouds with ease.

Their city was greater than anything I had ever seen before. It was awe inspiring.

They were not primitive at all. They were...miraculous.

But if getting wonders like this required living as they did...was it worth it? No, of course not! I paddled my small raft out into the dark water, happy to leave behind this utopia in the sky. My hardy, traditional world waited for me somewhere. And I'd suffer any stormy sea to keep it.

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At the water's edge, where wild and thunderous ocean connects the land of Eris and the land of Minerva, walked two Ari. Hand in hand, they shared endless feelings in the

time they spent on the beach. But when they approached what looked like a hollowed-out stump, with a lifeless body beside it, even they were frozen in thought.

In time, one of them reached down to touch the body. They were long dead. Likely drowned in the storm, which shocked both of them. Why had they not activated the raft's storm-resistant features? Did they not know?

Who was this person?

Clutched in their hands was a small book, with a finger stuck between two pages. The language was unknown but absorbing the emotion from the pages was all the two needed to know to understand this person. This alien who had died on their shore, running away and towards something all at once.

“Why did he die trying to get back to his home. What does this Earth have that we don't?”

“It feels like they have a lot we don't have. A lot we don't want.”
