

FELICIA MITCHELL

NEED SOMEBODY TO LOVE

My lover is a ghost. When I need to turn to him in the middle of the night, I open the front door and step outside to face the sky. I whisper to him, and he touches me with his wisdom the way he used to hold me with his arms. He knows something I do not know. I feel a need for this knowledge well up inside me like desire. The stars sparkle. I am not naïve enough to think that the biggest star is his sigh. He is dead, voiceless save for the words I give to him. I know the sighs are mine, my sighs, my voice burning in light that is shining here light years from a past that I can barely fathom it is so far gone. He can fathom everything. He knows what I cannot know.

He knows me now. I know it. He knew me then. I know it. There was a time when he was here with me, my lover, taking my clothes off on a quilt in the backyard where we would lie near the chicken coop and take each other's clothes off and put them back on and take them off again before dawn. Those nights, the stars felt heavier, like heartache, a reminder of how small we were in the face of infinity. We held them off with our talk. Our whispers about this and about that, about everything we wanted to say to each other, were a tent protecting us from the entire universe. We lived in our own world. We were innocent together in our need to be immortal for each other, even if we were also worldly enough to know that we were the opposite of immortal. We wanted to keep each other safe from harm and delusions. Who knew when we first began our story that my cells would multiply, his brain would bleed, and one of us would leave this earth before the other?

It is a true story. I got sick when we first found each other. He held me closer. For him, I wanted to survive. For him, I learned the who-who-who of the Great Horned Owl and other codes for longing that nature gave us. For me, he learned the language of poetry. We reversed our roles. He became the poet when we made love, I the scientist who experimented with his rhymes. We reversed our roles. He remembered he was the scientist and asked me

to explain how much I loved him in so many words, with great precision. I pointed to the Milky Way. I said, "There it is. I want to survive."

Words could have failed us. They almost did when he said he liked me better with long hair, hair that would fall around his shoulders when we slept outside or inside, warming him with its weight, the weight of our world. Before I lost it, I would lay my head on his chest and drape this hair across him, the two of us hand in hand even with our hands far apart. After I got sick, I had no hair for him to caress, only the memory of hair and small breasts on a thin body. Sometimes before it was time to sleep, to take off my scarf, I would take my scarf off my head and unwrap it, laying it across his shoulders like a shroud. Sometimes he would touch my scar. He did not want me to become his ghost. To cheer me up, he called me his space alien. I was a space alien without having to travel to outer space but instead into clinical rooms where I sat wired into my future. He said he loved his space alien even if she did not have long hair. I laughed and cried and tried hard not to become a ghost. I took my medicine. He kept trying to love me the way I was, different and the same.

Some nights when we were still together, here, before we were here and there, together, the moon would be full. We loved the stars, and we also loved the moon with the stars. It would make us drink wine and go outside, leaving a warm bed and woolen blanket to listen for the breathing of deer while sticks and rocks poked through his mother's faded quilt. One of these nights, drunk not with wine but my fear of my fate, I let go of the earth. I let my time come before it was time for me to go. I was ready to launch into outer space. As I was levitating, he grabbed me hard and hovered there a time with me before I was convinced I would not float away. He held onto me the way I would later let go of him: hard and fast and crying in the face of what life gives us, death. The sky was close that night, and far away, and it was quiet in the woods next to the place where we finally came down to earth, or the ground, and slept with the owls and deer and chickens. We were where we were supposed to be that night. I am not sure we are now.

I was the one who was supposed to die, or not die. I was the one who was sick, her hair falling out, her breast excised, her cells multiplying fast the way time flies and wrinkles in time. Even before it was my turn, I wanted to be the first to die. I wanted to die in his arms. I wanted to be his memory. What did he do with the long blond strands he found in the house during that time, other than telling me that he had found another hair? I wonder if I