

Stygian Blue

by Astin Campbell

I. You've never been to a drag show, but you know what they are. They're performances. They're loud and glittering costumes, going into the stage lights and putting your whole self out on stage. They dance, and they're joyful, and people clap along, and flirt and laugh and cheer. If you're one for loudness, if you're one for staring and whooping and wonder, it's like a home. You are at a drag show, and you are at the drag show because your friends invited you. They thought you might like to come along. They thought you might enjoy it. Come on, they said, come to the drag show – music and dancing, and people like us. Loud and strange and full of pride, turning spirals with their genders, bouncing eyes off them like light off their sequins. Like you, too, right? Come on. People like us. And you wanted to see people like you.

You blink the blue shapes out of your eyes. The lights have come down, and you are waiting, you are waiting for the show to start. You are cramped up, in the back of the theater, and the wooden armrests of the seats are too close together to be comfortable. Your friend beside you lets out a sharp laugh, leaning forward. Her phone screen lights up your friend sitting in front. They laugh together, and you crane your neck a little, you want to see it. The cold blue light bounces off his face, makes his teeth glint as he smiles. He nods at you, and you feel your mouth curling to match his. She tilts her phone screen, and you giggle, despite yourself, at the outdated meme. She rolls her eyes and puts her phone back in her pocket.

You, well, you only really tagged along here. But you wanted to be here, yes you did, you wanted this watertight darkness. You wanted to be alone-not-alone. You made these friends yourself, you came up to them and introduced yourself and you were part of their group. You understand them, in a hanging-back sort of way, yes. You understand them enough for this. You walk a few squares behind them on the sidewalks.

The fuzz of the seat back is rough on your shoulders, bare in the colorful glittering clothes you picked from their closets. In the anticipant darkness of the moment, you can't see its color, but you know it is blue, you know because you saw it earlier, when the lights were up. The lights are not up now, it is not time for them to be up, it is not time for watching. Your clothes are not colorful and glittering now. It is time for sitting in friendship, because you are friends, here, all of you, and you are the kind of people, this is the kind of show, where you are all friends here. Secrets only need to matter when the light is up, and right now is for the dark.

II. If a honeybee watches a small yellow ball with black stripes and wings on the end of a stick push a ball through a goal for food, it will push the ball through the goal as well. If an orphaned baby bird is fed with a puppet that looks like its mother, it will return to the wild. Squirrels can learn from small scuttling robots how to climb a birdfeeder. You are drawn to these stories. You see pictures of the puppets online. They seem too soft, too plastic, beaks warped, tiny splinters in place of fuzz. You understand that they are not what they pretend to be, and it is obvious to you, with what you can see. But the honeybees still learn, and the baby birds still grow.

It was scary, approaching your friends. You watched them from a distance for a while, how those two flirt with each other and don't do anything else, how the sun catches in this one's curling purple hair. You watched them out of your eyes and not, and you wanted to be like them. You wanted to be with them. Hang out with them. So much it hurt. It hurts to put yourself out there, is what they said, after you all became friends, after you admitted your anxieties for the first time and pretended you were human while you did it. It hurts to tell people about yourself. But it's good, sometimes. It feels better later, and then you're not alone.

You are holding a person on the end of a stick. Like a human, almost, but not really. It's a poor imitation, of course. Its seams are rough, and the face you painted on yourself. You used your claws for the littlest details, but you can never get the second eye quite right, so this one has some thick tinted glasses. It has hair made of the stems of autumn leaves, and when you bend over it makes rattling noises as the stones inside it run to its head. Its teeth are chips of charcoal from the grills in public parks. You made the first one of these when you were little, back when you were still in the dark. You showed it to the people only it was a bad, bad version, even worse than this one, and it was made of things that you have learned hurt. See, you learned, people can't understand looking at you all the way, like you can't understand them. So you make little puppets like this.

The first few people you made for this broke. They exploded, or they just sort of popped, and people saw what they were. Some people even saw the real you, the one in control, and that hurt them a lot, you think. You know. You learned. You're not something that people can look at. And you're trying very hard with this one. You know, you know, not a lot really rides on this – this person breaks, you leave this place, you go back to your home in the dark. You try again, later. You keep getting better. So. There really isn't a whole lot riding on this. You do not have to worry. You do not know why you are worried.

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You are moving the person's arms when you talk, you have learned this, you taught yourself. You move the person's arms and you jiggle its legs back and forth, you tap its fingertips on the arm of the chair, you chew off dead white nails. This is how you make friends. This is you, performing. Not the dark thing you used to be, not so much, the one that hurt people and only wanted to exist in the blackness. This is like you, on that scary stage. Showing who you aren't. What you want to be. You move the person's arms and your friends laugh and you feel their love. The person on the end of the stick jumps and dances like its feet don't touch the ground.

Your friends say things like, wow, you could be up there, if you wanted to be. In the light, they don't say, but you're fine down here, with your person you made yourself. Although of course you see yourself, your maybe, in those shimmering costumes.

No, you know why you are worried. Of course you do. In its own small way this is everything.

You really want this show.

III. Sometimes darkness isn't real darkness. Sometimes there are colors in darkness that only exist because of the light. When human eyes close against the light some of the light stays with them. When they open their eyes again into the darkness the light stays there in shapes, for a few seconds. When human eyes stare at a lightbulb and then blink away, they see blue layered on the black, colors made from the absence. Colors that aren't really there. It's called Stygian blue, this color is, with the other unreal colors like self-luminous red and yellowblue and magenta. Human eyes see these colors all over, in half-crossed eyes and fluorescent lights gone dark. You read about it once on Wikipedia, then spent half an hour closing and opening your eyes again.

You don't know how many other dark, pointed things like you there are. Maybe a lot. In the audience, maybe, in this same dark as you. You've never met them. You see other people on sticks, sometimes, but whatever's behind those ones is disguised at least as good as you. All you do is look with jealousy at their porcelain and dainty strokes. The people on sticks that you see don't have rocks in them, or hair made of the stems of autumn leaves. Some of their stitches are thick and brash, some minute and careful. But the people on the sticks are all you have seen, not anything that might be behind them. You only see what they create for you to see. Almost like

the characters that will be up there soon, radiant makeup and towering heels, created for seeing, for being in the lights. Confident and powerful in a way where their real anxieties don't matter.

Maybe the others like you are better at making people. Maybe they're better at not being seen. Maybe they are in this audience, maybe, in the same dark as you. A muscle pulses in your leg, and your claws scrape the floor as you shift, curling slightly to the side. You try to sit still, and quiet, as crushed in the back of the room as you are. You have to hold yourself awkwardly, half over the doorway, so none of the light hits you and you can hold your person in place at the same time. Your leg cramps after a while, but once the show starts you know you'll forget about it. It's funny. If there were other ones here like you, they would have to be just as squished. You don't think of other ones like you as ones who squish.

You aren't one for squishing in the first place. You're one for yawning echoes and cold freefalls. You are for finding a beginning years apart from its end. You are one for the echoes of growls bouncing off stone for miles, and you are one for simple, endless dark. Adjustment has been hard. But the things that are home to you hurt people. You learned that very well, before you decided that you were done. Moving out, is what the people say. You moved out of the deep, your home, and you moved into new, squished-down darkness.

IV. You are used to your home, is what you are. You are used to the endless black catacombs. You are used to the echoes dying after hundreds of miles. You are used to the dark not needing to be constrained by rock, growing as it needs, changing as it feels. You are used to being one with your home, where time does not matter and you are the space. And it would be too much to say you do not miss it. And saying you do not want it back would be a lie. It still waits for you, if you want. It still hums, sweet and dark and quiet. Through and through it is still your home. You are just...moved out.

Your friend says, I can't wait to see London up there. They were nervous. But they're going to be great. I've always wanted to do drag, says another one, wistfully. What do you think my drag name could be? I haven't thought about it. You tilt your head. You know a lot of colors that would fit this friend. You know a lot of maybe names. You can tell them a lot of the things that you learned, and they can learn possibilities from you too.

Because dark is not quite your color anymore, is it? You cannot exist without darkness, and you are of the darkness, but the darkness isn't you. You are closer to the blue imprints stamped into eyes by hot yellow lights. Closed-eyes possibility.

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The lights are going up, and you press back hard against the wall. The intricate brickwork juts rough knobs to your skin. It still fizzles when it hits your sight, the light does, like crackling static, or the sweet thing you drank with the bubbles in. It hurts. It does hurt, and it does not hurt a little, and it hurts in a way that if you were in your home, in the dark, you never would have known. But as the music begins, as the cheers go up, it is worth it. Without question, it is worth it. You move your hands carefully to clap together, not too hard but hard enough to make a sound. You are different now. You know people now, you learned, you learned how to make people on sticks and meet real people through them. You learned a lot.

V. Since learning of the other, people have performed. People have watched how what they do changes what others see, what they are. Wailing masks in old Greek stories to Eurovision neon and double-sided sequins. People use performance as an escape, an art, a teaching. Hide behind something to get to know you. Performance is all people have to know each other, isn't it? If you learn, you have to have a face you show. If you laugh and love and cry and feel, you have to have a face. You do not need to have a face to be a person, you have learned. But what you show is how you say what you are, you have also learned. People perform in an understanding deeper than what it is they know. It's how they know. It's how you are learning to know.

The music sweeps you up into it, riotous and lovely, and you're in thrall of the dancers on the stage. The pumping bassline feels like the rhythm of the universe, and watching the light flicker off the costumes is like stretching a muscle after a long, cramped sleep. You are swept up in it, not your person on a stick, you, and you want the light to last forever.

And then – all of a sudden, you've got an idea. You think it was hiding, but now it is here, the music pumping joy in your gnarled chest, can't turn back, can't be put down. The lights on the stage fade yellow-green-blue as the key changes and the performer whirls, grinning, triumphant sweat dripping through their makeup. You bounce the leg of your person on a stick, and your friend turns and laughs and grins at you, says, I told you you'd like it. Your real leg, too, the one with the cramp, bounces along, joints clicking, the sounds of your claws lost to the music. What if you were out there?

In the light? In the glittering dresses? Your person on a stick. You would need a name. Something to become what you are. Something to become, yourself. Do you even have to think that far? Are there words for what you'd want to be? You think you know what you would call it,

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the name you would choose. You think you are going to say it right now. You are going to try this. You have a drag name. You're Stygian Blue.