



In the Sight of Akresa

Ray Wood

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Claire's lover has no tongue. A slave liberated from a heathen temple, Aya cannot tell the story of her stolen voice, or of her and Claire's unfolding love. She cannot speak her pain, her joy, or her sorrow. And if she sees that which eludes the blind goddess of justice, she cannot bear witness. "In the Sight of Akresa" is a tragic fantasy romance from debut author Ray Wood.

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From Reader Review In the Sight of Akresa for online ebook

Inês says

Oh, my love. I know so little of you.

Calling this story sad would be a huge mistake.

First of all, I want to congratulate the author for the second point of view writing. Not many authors use it in these days, mostly because it's harder to write. Second of all, the writing was stunning and the world-building and character-building was both simple and graciously made.

Now, the story itself was already an eye-catcher. A forbidden relationship between a high-noble and a slave. Between two women. But when the characters started to turn against each other and loyalties were broken, that's when the story got interesting.

The romance was intriguing but, at times, I felt like it was more of attraction than love itself. Love is often mistaken by desire. But then Claire spent more time with her lover and, eventually, it was crystal clear that it had become both love and desire. Then, Cycil came and Claire was torn apart, because she became fond of his company.

Each one of them gave her different things: one gave her peace and deep devotion, while the other gave her a trustworthy and enjoyable relationship.

I hated how it ended so vaguely and so coldly. The choice at the end blown me away and made me gape at my own computer screen. But, not even love can cross such boundaries, can it? The story really shows how people can be both selfish and selfless, in countless occasions, just to favor their own happiness.

Now, if you excuse me, I'll go cry in a corner.

S. says

(Hooray! My first 5-star short story of the year!)

“I picked you out eventually among the stable hands, near the foot of the Akresa statue. I must have seen the marble likeness of the justice goddess a thousand times, but I had never wondered, until I saw her next to you, what lay beneath the sculpted crinkles of her blindfold. Were her eyes meant merely to be closed, or were there gristly, scooped-out hollows in their place?”

Justitia stands in courtrooms across our world, blindfolded to assure us that wealth and status cannot hold sway over her... Are her eyes truly closed to the positions of accuser and accused or, lacking them, does she fail to notice the machinations of the powerful? From start to finish, Ray Wood has crafted a poignant and thought-provoking story that is a rejoinder to that question. There are no stray words in sight as every detail helps to reveal the many layers of privilege that shroud his characters, thus complicating readers' feelings towards his narrator-protagonist, Claire. We see the truth of his world early on, as Wood shows us allusively how it tramples on the already downtrodden.

"One of Father's lesser knights was standing trial for the rape of a peasant girl. When judgement had been passed and the girl was being led away, I saw Garrick squeeze my father's shoulder."

In such a world, we sense that Claire is twice demoted, first by virtue of her sex and again by her sexual identity. Now, in the sight of Akresa, she faces one further below her, over whom she has power afforded by money and birth. Here, she addresses this freed slave who became a bound villein to her duke father and, later, her lover. Tongueless and nameless, Aya—as the Duke of Rouchefort rechristened her—was brutalised during her past life amidst the Yovali tribe. This ritualistic cruelty is the opening note of the tale: so horrifically imagined that it can give you nightmares, yet so rivetingly described that you cannot look away.

"This is how they took your tongue:

There is a wedge, short and made of steel, used to prise apart the teeth. The skin on your lips splits as the slave-maker pushes it into your mouth. Hard Yovali hands hold you all over, keeping your arms behind your back, your knees on the ground, your face towards the sun. Metal crunches against your teeth, scraping, swiveling, pushing. Your incisors feel like they are bending inwards.

You part your teeth before you lose them and the wedge shoots in, followed by foreign fingers that hook into your cheeks. They taste of rust and salt. The blood-priest finds your tongue between his thumb and forefinger and grips it where it starts to fatten, near the root. He pulls. The slave-maker accepts a slender, silk-wrapped something from a loinclothed woman.

Saliva pools around your bottom lip.

*The something is the **haraad-kité**, the voice-cutter. The slave-maker draws it with a flourish from its half-moon sheath and holds it high, his fingers curled around its spine. He is still, his tall, lean body blocking out the sun. Then, all at once and with a scream, he plunges. The blade dips into the meat of your tongue like a finger into water."*

Voiceless, Aya cannot share her feelings. We can infer, but never be entirely sure, that their attraction is mutual. Their many covert, tender interactions in the woods neighbouring the castle, as they tread cautiously into a clandestine affair, are our only window to her persona. When forces worked to pry them apart, did Aya act out of fear for Claire or for self-preservation? We cannot know; we understand their relationship through Claire's reminiscences. From the moment Claire laid eyes on Aya, she was entranced by her exotic mien. Her deep fondness and lust for Aya are conveyed convincingly by Wood. But ever the reader is forced to question if she was exploiting her subordinate, treating her as she did a hapless beast, gaining its trust before

hurting it.

“I spent an hour with the falcon tethered to my wrist, cooing and crooning until she grew used to me. When she was settled enough to consent to my touch, I took out the knife and snicked along the roots of several crucial-looking feathers.”

Wood leads us gently through the rocky terrain of the human heart, as Claire is by turns pitiable and monstrous. The secondary characters are similarly complex, fleshed out almost imperceptibly. Cecil, for instance, who expresses an interest in Claire, can't contain his prejudice towards foreigners, learned though he is. With such subtle insights, Wood reasserts the nature of his world and its inhabitants. He points us to their essence with economical writing; only Claire's mother remains ornamental. As things come to a head, he quickens the pace, sending the reader hurtling from a cliff, though one minor detail cushions the fall: (view spoiler) It was a failed attempt to soften the blow, or balance the odds, when there was no need to do either. But oh, how wonderfully the story draws to a close, recalling seemingly inconsequential observations that all along warned of events yet to befall, keeping us guessing which way the tide would turn.

“A secret lover came forward to provide an alibi for the accused at the last minute, her voice trembling under the council's gaze.”

The editor described *In the Sight of Akresa* as a “tragic fantasy romance”, but it's not so different from reality, is it? An impossible choice between love and self-interest—tragic, but with a high incidence. A fresh but familiar setting, fashioned on medieval times—fantastical, but like a slice of history. A forbidden love between two social unequals—romantic, but only to the one who holds the cards. I expected to find a controversial take, but Wood delivers a taut yet expansive tale, just the kind I like. His story is never drowned out by his themes, not even when he employs evocative language to leave us with timeless questions... Can love, truth and justice prevail in an unfair world? Are our hearts black, white, or a morass of grey?

Makhda says

Heartbreakingly beautiful.
Goosebumps all over me.
I would really love to see this in movie screen.

Oh, my love, my heart, my Aya. I am so very sorry..

Karlyflower *The Vampire Ninja, Luminescent Monster & Wendigo Nerd Goddess of Canada (according to The Hulk)* says

This short was exquisite torture.

He would not tell me where he found you. Had he plucked you from some heathen temple? A blackened, back-breaking mine? The reeking pleasure bed of some Yovali blood-priest? Each was an abhorrent thought.

Imagine, if you will, falling in love with a tongueless slave. A strong, beautiful woman with no way to express herself through voice because some barbarians removed her tongue *to prevent blasphemy against their heathen blood-god*. Imagine the horror and joy at finally having someone/something of your own to relish in and enjoy. And then imagine the realization that that which you love can never really be yours.

I don't know how to express the utter love I had for this short story.
I guess that five up there will have to suffice.

Molly says

The writing was great, but the story left me with more questions than answers (what was with the cut
bridle?).

Maybe I would have enjoyed it more, had I not disliked the MC almost from the get-go.

The decision that Claire makes to stay silent and so let her lover perish, did not surprise me.

Someone that gains the confidence of an animal, just to maim it at the first opportunity, for the sole purpose to approach someone that sparks his/hers interest is repulsive(not forgetting that Aya's been maimed herself in the past- her tongue ripped out). I was actually hoping against hope that Aya kills her. 32 pages that almost gave me ulcer. Guess the story didn't left me indifferent at the end. I'm still mumbling.

The link <http://www.tor.com/stories/2014/08/in...>

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Shelby *trains flying monkeys* says

I should have run from this story. I'm an emotional mess right now so what do I do? Read this.

This story packs a whole book into just a few pages. You go through every emotion known to man. Then I ended up crushed.

Go read it here.....<http://www.tor.com/stories/2014/08/in...>

Nenia ? Queen of Literary Trash, Protector of Out-of-Print Gems, Khaleesi of Bodice

Rippers, Mother of Smut, the Unrepentant, Breaker of Convention ? Campbell says

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Don't get me wrong - this is a beautifully written story, and part of the reason this story gets such a low rating is that downer ending. It was so unpleasant that it impacted my ability to enjoy it.

IN THE SIGHT OF AKRESA starts out with a descriptive passage about one of the main characters, Aya, having her tongue cut out to prevent her from blaspheming one of the gods. She's then taken and sold as a slave to Claire and her people.

Claire is immediately attracted to Aya and contrives to be alone with her *by mutilating her pet hawk after taming it* and then taking the poor hawk to be cured by Aya. To me, this was the first red flag that Claire was not going to endear herself to me as a heroine. Anyone who purposely hurts animals is not to be trusted.

They have a romantic and sexual relationship of sorts - a doomed one, trust me, you can sense the doom from the start - but Claire is much more cavalier about it than Aya is, and the power between them is never equal. Claire seems to view Aya as a thing that is her right to use as she wishes, and of course the fact that Aya is mute and never is able to voice consent adds an extra layer of ick to it. Especially since our narrator is an unreliable one. When she says Aya wants her affections, does she really? Or is that what Claire wants to have us, the readers, believe?

It is no coincidence that Akresa, their goddess of justice, has Claire firmly in her sights.

Oh, my love. I know so little of you.

Can it, Claire, you never loved her, or you wouldn't let that happen, you hawk-maiming, consent-waiving, traitorous cowfart.

2 to 2.5 stars

Kruti says

This story has all the hall marks of a great story but when told in the space of 8,000 words or so, it seems somewhat...lacking - hence the lusterless 3 stars. It left me with more questions than answers.

Aya's character fascinated me and made me want to find out more about her, and if possible read her perspective.

"I was expecting a hunched, shrunk creature, grubby head bowed as if in shame at the emptiness behind your mouth, but you stood with your shoulders back. Your mass of unwashed raven hair fell several inches past the base of your neck. Your skin was tanned. I remember how you held your hands: clasped in front of you...Torches burned behind your eyes."

I can't decipher her. I don't know whether she is this deranged lunatic (as the story hints at times) and guilty of the crimes she is tried for or whether she is simply another victim of the things humans are known to be capable of (the story does not tie up some of the loose endings so you never know). Despite this, there's one thing that I truly enjoyed - unlike most of the novels I have read, this is the first time the protagonist was painted as the villain. It was refreshing to see this.

Read it for free here - <http://www.tor.com/stories/2014/08/in...>

karen says

Oh, my love. I know so little of you.

wow. this one is really brutal.

it opens with a detailed description of the tongue being removed from the mouth of a young slave girl, and that's the least emotionally scarring part of the story.

claire's father - the duke of rouchefort, and her brother garrick, are among those returning from a campaign in the yovali lands. the knights have come home laden with many spoils from the conquered yovali people, including a former slave girl, whose tongue had been ripped out by the yovali *to prevent blasphemy against their heathen blood-god*.

she is now considered to be a free woman, set up as an assistant to the man in charge of the falcons, and called "aya," there being no way to communicate with the illiterate girl to determine her preferred name.

claire is fascinated by her from the start -

I was expecting a hunched, shrunk creature, grubby head bowed as if in shame at the emptiness behind your mouth, but you stood with your shoulders back. Your mass of unwashed raven hair fell several inches past the base of your neck. Your skin was tanned. I remember how you held your hands: clasped in front of you as if you were in church, in what would have been your lap had you been sitting down. Your breasts pushed against your tunic.

Torches burned behind your eyes.

and while others see her as a freak, a witch, someone to be avoided and feared or - at best -

“A whore without a tongue,” Garrick murmured in my ear under the ensuing applause. His breath was spiced with wine. “Now there’s a treasure for you, Claire.”

claire does see her as a treasure - sees her lean, strong arms and muscled thighs, the strength in what she has endured.

but also - quite possibly, as a whore.

because while what soon blossoms between them appears to be a mutual attraction and even love, claire acknowledges the difference in their stations and that while aya may no longer be a slave, claire still has more freedom, which means she has more power.

You touched my hand. The room was too freshly thrown in darkness for me to see anything, but I could feel your strong, calloused fingers squeezing each of mine in turn, probing for the wound. You lifted my hand up to your face. Your breath shivered on my broken skin.

I moved the finger to your lips.

“It’s all right,” I whispered. You had gone very still, like an animal backed into a corner. “It’s all right.”

You had more to lose if your instincts were wrong: I had to be the one who crossed the threshold. I slid my free hand behind your neck. “It’s all right, it’s all right.”

Your lips opened like a flower. My finger slipped between them, softly, until it was submerged up to the knuckle in the warm wetness of your mouth. Your damp, empty mouth. My eyes strained in the darkness, but I didn’t need to see. You drew my finger in until I felt the slightest touch of a shrivelled, shorn-off tongue against my fingertip.

Revulsion and desire rose in me like quicksilver.

a cynical reader can interpret this as claire just wanting a bit of strange. not only from a woman, but from a woman who is, essentially, damaged. and although the relationship that grows after this night appears, at least in claire's telling of it, to be a true, reciprocal attraction, claire is necessarily in the driver's seat, while we never know anything about aya. we don't even truly know if she understands she is free or if she is just responding, through a life of conditioning, to the desires of someone who clearly outranks her. as claire says, for all her chattering on, filling the silence and creating the conversation aya can't participate in,

I wondered sometimes if you even understood our language.

but that's all just an exercise in interpretive license. i choose not to read this story with cynical eyes, because it makes the ending much stronger to read it as a true love story, and aya does seem to understand what's going on in that final scene.

the only reason i went off on that tangent is to address the fact that this story could really only be told as a lesbian relationship without causing a kerfuffle. between the uneven power dynamic of a wealthy, titled

person, and one accustomed to servitude, compounded with the fact that the former slave has no way of communicating and has had even her name stripped from her, as well as what happens later - you put a man in Claire's place and you have riots in the streets.

just an interesting point to consider.

the story is shatteringly good. it's a real heartbreaker that keeps kicking you long after you are down.

brace yourself, but definitely check it out.

read it for yourself here:

<http://www.tor.com/stories/2014/08/in...>

Liz Janet says

This short story begins with one of the most beautiful and descriptive, as well as gross, scenes that I have read.

"This is how they took your tongue:

There is a wedge, short and made of steel, used to prise apart the teeth. The skin on your lips splits as the slave-maker pushes it into your mouth. Hard Yoali hands hold you all over, keeping your arms behind your back, your knees on the ground, your face towards the sun. Metal crunches against your teeth, scraping, swiveling, pushing. Your incisors feel like they are bending inwards.

You part your teeth before you lose them and the wedge shoots in, followed by foreign fingers that hook into your cheeks. They taste of rust and salt. The blood-priest finds your tongue between his thumb and forefinger and grips it where it starts to fatten, near the root. He pulls. The slave-maker accepts a slender, silk-wrapped something from a loinclothed woman.

Saliva pools around your bottom lip.

The something is the haraad-kité, the voice-cutter. The slave-maker draws it with a flourish from its half-moon sheath and holds it high, his fingers curled around its spine. He is still, his tall, lean body blocking out the sun. Then, all at once and with a scream, he plunges. The blade dips into the meat of your tongue like a finger into water."

I did enjoy the story, but I was left with too many unanswered questions, as well as too much injustice that only left me mad. I needed a bit more for deeper understanding, this author needs to make this story into a novel.

Aj the Ravenous Reader says

Beautifully written is this short lyrical fantasy-romance about Claire, a royalty and her love for Aya (a former slave without a tongue). The story emotionally and beautifully portrays a person's struggle in choosing love over power. With impressively complex plot and dynamically developed characters, this is one short story that is very hard to forget.

Thanks to Jonnie's review for making me read the story without hesitation. Thank you for the free link, Alice. Allow me to spread the love. Here's the link to the story. In the Sight of Akresa

Alice says

Such a short, but good story. You can read it here my link text , for free.

Oh, my love, my heart, my Aya. I am so very sorry.

Ivan says

Beautifully written but there where lot of issues I had with it. I disliked pretty much all characters especially Claire, the main character, and the one I felt sympathy towards is mute and in short number of pages there was no space for her to be more fleshed out.

Jonnie says

ALL THE STARS.

I picked you out eventually among the stable hands, near the foot of the Akresa statue. I must have seen the marble likeness of the justice goddess a thousand times, but I had never wondered, until I saw her next to you, what lay beneath the sculpted crinkles of her blindfold.

I just finished reading this, so the emotions are fresh - still, I have a feeling this is going to permeate my thoughts for a long time.

In the Sight of Akresa is soul-crushing perfection. Claire tells of how she met and fell in love with Aya, a tongueless Yovali slave captured after a victorious campaign. The narration is painfully personal, which makes it all the more devastating: "You must know how it pains me that it comes from Cecil's library rather

than your lips--oh, your sweet, battered lips!

Because it's short, I'm quite limited to what I can say here, just know that my heart aches for Aya. And I have an undying hatred for some characters. The symbolism that's expertly weaved into the story is what shatters me the most though - the justice goddess? What an absolute joke. I'm so fucking upset.

I cannot recommend this book enough.
