



You and You

Keala Francis

After thinking about it very hard indeed, Zeus said, "I believe I've got a device by which men may continue to exist and yet stop their intemperance, namely, by becoming weaker. I'll now cut each of them in two," he said, "and they'll be weaker and at the same time more useful to us by having increased in number, and they'll walk upright on two legs. But if they still seem to act so outrageously and are unwilling to keep quiet," he said, "I'll cut them in two again, so that they'll have to get around on one leg, hopping.

—Plato's *Symposium*, The Speech of Aristophanes

The Gods

You.

With your long yellow hair. You're a man.

You.

With your gray eyes. You're a woman.

You are: two sexes, four arms, four legs, four eyes,
two minds in one head. You are a match for the gods.
You are you-and-you.

You-and-you are: welded bodies, two-in-one, backs
joined, soul mates melded back-to-back. Zeus feared
you. Hephaestus, he said, split twos into ones. Halve them.

Except for you and you.

You-and-you cartwheeled back-to-back out of the
blacksmith's shop and away from the slaughter.
You-and-you found a shallow cave and saved your
wholeness.

$1 + 1 = 1$. You are a mathematical impossibility
because you beat the gods.

You-and-you watched as Apollo sewed sundered
halves into half-wholes. He pulled the skin, stanching
the wounds, and hid the scars. The half-wholes wailed,
and pressed their bloody half-selves back-to-back,
then front-to-front. This orgy of lost love produced
half-children, half-children's children, years of half
generations.

You-and-you still have nightmares, fear the gods
have found you: Hephaestus strikes the dreaded blow.
You push your backs against each other, tie ropes
around your waists, weave your arms and legs together,
intertwine.

But you cannot: dream the same dreams, feel the
same pain, breathe the same breath, know entire
thoughts, love selfishly. For, to your horror, your halves
are selves. You-and-you are, for one moment, just you.
You-and-you are, for one moment, halves.

That is your nightmare.

You and You: One

You-and-you are cautious living in this modern land of halves. You-and-you only show one face in public: either you or you. It is not as difficult as expected, not so hard to hide after all. You-and-you learned over the centuries to accessorize, to coif and comb and fuss until one of you coughed from all the hair in your face. You-and-you learned to sew, and designed custom-fitted costumes to suit the fashion, loving gloves, which let you-and-you hold hands. Without gloves, one of you has to tuck arms flush against ribs and hips. You piano-tap you on the thighs with hidden finger tips when you're bored on the job. You-and-you find work deathly dull.

But at home, in your one-bedroom apartment, you-and-you are fully you-and-you. Hello, you say to you, and giggle. Hello back, you say to you. You-and-you are circular fullness, moving through life with your hoop-like gait. Together, accord and discord, hot and cold, wet and dry. You-and-you are opposite, yet not.

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You-and-you lie on your side in the twilight and tell stories to each other, knowing when to be silent and when to chatter. You-and-you get drunk together: completely, fully, equally drunk.

You-and-you dream of a whole population of you-and-yous: a salon in your apartment, a book club, a dinner party – table for six with a dozen side-saddle settings! You-and-you imagine a pancake stack of multiplied bodies writhing in a train of waves. Like watching sex in mirrors.

You-and-you climb the steps to your apartment. After you, you say to you, then wander in, eat dinner, and pull out your handheld mirrors: one is plastic green, the other plastic gray. You-and-you look each other in the eye and wink, multiplying winks like flipped flashcards. A beautiful hall of mirrored winks.

You and you are a wink at the gods.

You-and-you believe in the singularity of your oneness,

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a oneness so spectacular that the gods still want to tear you apart. Perhaps the halves will, too. But you-and-you have survived unscathed throughout the chaos of history, and now grow careless.

You-and-you cartwheel in Union Square. Everyone is crazy there. You-and-you allow sunlight to bathe your hair, and play cloud games, taking turns looking at the sky, choosing shapes, and telling tales. You-and-you are so happy that you-and-you forget to keep hidden in this land of halves and the gods who would halve you.

Humans

You-and-you watch them, the halves, as they search for their soul mates, finding or failing, but never again truly perfectly whole.

They kiss, lip-to-lip, sharing spit, tongues lashing. Their hands fumble with buttons and breasts and blue-jean-stuck zippers. Sometimes they look at each other, eye-to-eye, wink at one another, laugh.

They come together and push against one another, arching backs and thrusting. You-and-you watch them through your telescope, taking turns to peer from each set of eyes. They use separate arms to encircle one another. Some find a fleeting unity. Some don't. They struggle for that former oneness that is you-and-you, you-and-you think.

You-and-you pull out your mirrors and look into each other's eyes. You see the same look: Curiosity. Jealousy?

Then, just for a moment, you-and-you wish to kiss like the halves, wind your tongues tightly together: tight, together, like your body. You-and-you could feel the smoothness of each other's teeth, and the light, soft hairs on each other's cheeks. Butterfly eyelashes. You-and-you pull out your mirrors and pucker lips at each other. Echoing kisses.

You-and-you wander into a flower shop. A man uses a credit card to buy a dozen red roses. He has them wrapped in white crepe paper, and smiles as he leaves

the shop. You-and-you follow him, skipping sideways on the gray sidewalk. He walks into a restaurant with a red-and-white awning. He hands the flowers to a woman in a black, pin-striped skirt suit. Her hair is prettily pasted back into a ponytail. You-and-you never wear ponytails; you-and-you have to cover your extra set of ears. The man hands the woman the bouquet of roses, and she kisses him. As if flowers were love.

You-and-you begin to follow people from the flower shop to see what happens when they buy gardenias, or lilies, or tulips, to watch how these flowers create a shared, singular emotion. But you-and-you don't understand. You-and-you are dual emotion, a full circle. Do flowers create a circle for halves, create a way back to you-and-you?

You-and-you take a field trip to The New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx – purchase only one ticket! You-and-you sit in different flower sections, wondering which flower personifies you-and-you.

You-and-you pull out your mirrors and present flowers to each other. I'm sorry you say to you. What for? you say back. For there is: no sorry, no sympathy, no friendship, no love. Not in the singular sense.

You-and-you dig your twenty fingers into the dirt, tasting the earth, trying to understand what is missing. What do they have that you-and-you don't have? Why envy humans?

Eventually, you-and-you were kicked out of a garden for lying in the dandelions. The humans looked bewildered, unsure what exactly to think. You-and-you had dressed in an oversized business suit, and looked silly with a yellow flower behind one ear.

You and you feel alone together.

One day, at the Bethesda Terrace with its fountain and view of the boat pond, a wedding ceremony takes place. You-and-you watch as the he-half and she-half place circles on their fingers. Rings are you-and-you in gold

or platinum, they say.

You-and-you follow this couple through the years, and watch in dismay as kisses become confused with love. They are wrenched apart a second time, fighting in court over houses and children. They tear each other apart. They cleave one another into quarters. You-and-you half expect to see them hopping on one foot, with one eye, one arm, one leg. They are more destructive than Hephaestus ever was with his anvil and his blade. Lips that kissed say fuck you, you bastard, you bitch, you ass hole, you goddamn piece of shit.

You-and-you have never said a harsh word to you. You-and-you have never made up.

You-and-you watch television, taking turns with your mirrors. A live birth, an expulsion from the she-half. The mother screams as if she knows she is pushing out her chance at wholeness. This is violence. This is oneness ruptured. The small half-child, goopy and bright violet, opens its mouth in a wide cracking O to scream.

As you-and-you would scream.

Afterwards, you-and-you go for a walk around the reservoir, then sit in a favorite spot, watching the halves: hold hands, walk alone, talk face-to-face on a park bench, explain what they are thinking. You-and-you think, no one can tear you-and-you apart. Even the gods have failed.

You and You: Alone

You-and-you have grown isolated over the centuries, watching humans multiply as you-and-you remain singular. You-and-you become reckless.

You-and-you want their envy, so begin to play games with your building superintendent. He thinks you-and-you are a transvestite.

Some days, you-and-you walk out in a deep black trench coat and tie your hair back, covering the gray eyes and two of your ears. The He of you carries a briefcase. You give the superintendent your card: Mr. Bennett Rose.

The next day, you-and-you wear a bright pink boa, white fur coat, fancy gloves. The She of you curls your hair, paints your eyelids blue, flutters eyelashes. You say, Hello Mr. Superintendent, in an alto voice. You say, Could you please tell anyone asking for me that I'll be right back? You tell him your name: Rose Bennett. You wink at him.

The superintendent always runs to the bottom of the stairs when he hears your footsteps. You-and-you wallow in his curiosity, teasing him, but fearing him, too. For one day, he shows Zeus's icy eyes of blue. Some days, his hair is curled in locks, and he looks gray and carved in stone. But that's just silly, you-and-you think.

Then, one day, your superintendent winks back.

You-and-you run from the building to the park, and sit, licking a lollipop thoughtfully. Children fall off swings and skin their knees. They hit other half-children over a blue pail in the sand. But one of these half children sees you-and-you. He is not yet aware that

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there can be no you-and-you. This is dangerous.

You-and-you will never have children. You-and-you decided never to let your seeds grow in the ground. You-and-you have seen what children do to love. They take oneness away. They create selflessness and anger.

Kids would not understand anyway. As they grew up, they would call you-and-you a freak. They would go to college and refuse to write. Your teenage daughter would run off with the wrong guy. And when she came back and asked you-and-you to give her away, you-and-you would not be able to. You-and-you would never give a part of you away.

No, you-and-you are better alone. Powerful alone, living exponential half lives.

Whereas humans die. At different times. He dead on the surgical table of a quadruple bypass gone wrong. She hit by a bus. You-and-you go to a funeral to see what it would mean to die, and watch as the living half, dressed in black, lays a white flower on the coffin.

You-and-you follow this widow, wondering at how

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she was still alive. How she could go on. She plants fresh flowers at the gravesite, digging with a small trowel and gently brushing dirt with her finger tips. A few years later, there is an unbelievable transformation: She meets someone else. There is another. For you and you, there is no other.

You-and-you are happy, you-and-you think. One day, an old woman sees you-and-you cartwheeling in the park. This old woman screams, stretches her wrinkled lips into a wide cracking O, a toothless, gapped mouth. You-and-you thought only children could see you-and-you.

She grabs onto you-and-you. You, with your gray eyes, stroke her thin pallid arm and speak in soft tones. The old woman claws at your hair, searching for your other set of ears, searching for the man in you. She spits in your face and stares at you through Hera's big, brown eyes. You grip her scrawny shoulders tightly, and she screams until her eyes turn pale blue, vacuous. You

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smell her stale sweat and run away.

He : You and You : She

Not long after this day, you-and-you wake up half-drenched in sweat, feel a pain, and find a lump. The She of you is afraid. The She of you grows weaker. There is an imbalance that you-and-you cannot comprehend. The He of you asks what is wrong. The She of you does not know what to say.

Can you not feel me? She asks.

No, He answers. What is happening? He asks.

You-and-you think of the gods, for who else could separate you-and-you? You whisper to you in your mirrors. What are you thinking? You ask at the same time. It is all so foreign.

You-and-you begin to understand the halves. The nightmares grow more ferocious. The He of you dreams: He is at your funeral. He dreams He is a you without a you. He dreams you-and-you are human, halves.

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The She of you is too tired to dream.

You-and-you know empathy for the first time because, for once, you-and-you feel curiously separate. You-and-you feel like two. You-and-you cannot make the lump multiply and mirror onto your He side. There is separateness in your emotions. But both of you feel despair.

You-and-you are afraid of yourself for you want more than ever to: rub noses, see face-to-face, touch lip-to-lip, have a moment half alone so you can't hear you cry. You-and-you want for just one second to be halves, to be human.

You no longer understand you. You-and-you watch a television special on Mother Theresa and, for the first time, are moved. The He of you uses a mirror because the She of you will not give. The She of you will not play fair, will not let the He of you watch TV.

You-and-you desperately want to find that old woman who saw you-and-you. To see if her eyes are brown or blue. To convince yourself your fear of the

gods is unfounded.

You-and-you want to show this dust-covered old woman all of you-and-you, fully let her see a smile from ear-to-ear-to-ear-to-ear. You-and-you look for her in the park, handing out bread to the park bums, plying them with cigarettes.

But the She of you grows too weak to search, so you-and-you spend days in bed, telling stories and humming harmonies.

You-and-you are you or you.

Fear makes you-and-you brave the world of halves. The admitting nurse stares. The scientists are called, and interview you-and-you. You-and-you have the same thing to say: You are sick. You are made to stand on a platform. Pictures are taken from every angle. You are pressed against cold-plated glass and x-rayed. The She of you is diagnosed with breast cancer.

You-and-you are now internally separate. That

is what will kill you-and-you. The doctor discusses a splitting operation. He has a long, regal Greek nose. He has tight black curls and an aged face. His skin is flint. He wants to completely separate you-and-you. How can you explain to him? There is no separation. You and you are you-and-you.

How do you tell a god no?

You are burdened with your sick self. You-and-you know the She of you is dying. The He of you sometimes pulls the plastic green mirror out of the drawer to see if He can see how the She of you is. The She of you will not look in the mirror.

Can I be you? He asks.

Any envy of humans is gone. You-and-you want your circular fullness back. But your She arms are too tired to cartwheel. Your She body is too thin.

The doctor decides to put you-and-you in hospice care.

Are you sure you won't go through with the operation?

The doctor asks the He of you.

No, you-and-you both say. No. No.

But alone the She of you asks: Why not?

Because I am you, the He of you says.

But if you weren't me, She says, you could hold me.

But I am you, He answers, I am always fully completely you.

A young man feeds the She of you pain pills and morphine. He makes the He of you beg for the pills, too. I have pain, too, the He of you says.

You-and-you have never said "I".

The young man sneaks his friends into the hospice room and makes them pay \$20 to see you-and-you. Time Magazine publishes a story about you-and-you, citing scientists and psychologists: You-and-you are an unusual case of Siamese twins, some of them say. The tabloids call you Princess Diana's alien baby. Neither you nor you care. You-and-you are only interested in you-and-you.

Dead You

One day, you wake up and you are He and she. The she of you does not chatter. Her arms weigh you down. Her legs are leaden. She does not talk because you need her to. You wiggle your half body, and she sways with you. But she sways with you because she is attached, not because she is you.

You sneak out of the hospital, the back of your robe partially open, revealing your dead half. It makes you sick to your stomach, this half death. Your death in half is always with you. You can't even go grocery shopping without her.

You cartwheel only right-handed now. There is no playful tug against you. You do not debate which side of your body to sleep on at night. You feel her half dragging behind you. You cannot escape her.

You are given nothing, no one to mourn. You cannot weep at your gravesite or put your ashes on the mantel. You cannot search for another like a he-half or she-half

would do. You do not want to.

You go to bars, order a double Scotch. You order one for the dead you. You pay a fat prostitute to lie next to you, but you scream when she touches the dead you. You call her a bitch. She calls you a freak. You beg the she of you to come back, not to leave you, but she hangs limply, quietly tied. No longer you-and-you. Your hair has grown matted, and you no longer care if her dead gray eyes show through the strands.

You begin to believe in the power of the gods, but you cannot believe they were so patient. These gods who you-and-you had so easily defied. These gods who had thundered around the world in search of you-and-you. So fruitlessly, you-and-you thought, because of your double strength, your unity.

You do not care if they see you now. You are filled with a consuming hate: for halves, for gods, for anything unwhole and unyou.

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The Gods

In the end, you drag yourself to the gods. You climb and kneel in the doorway of the blacksmith's shop and beg Hephaestus to halve you. He asks if you're sure.

No. Yes. You are so sad.

Yes, you say.

Yes.

His blade falls, and you feel your dead self peel away. You see her, wrinkled and scrawny with a bloodless wound down her back. But your blood flows freely. You and you are two. There is no Apollo to sew you up. Your back bleeds.

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