



TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

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Beneath the Almond Tree

Abstract:

“Beneath the Almond Tree” is a creative exploration of sapphic historical fiction and an attempt to provide an alternative to historical dramas where homosexuality presents the story’s conflict. These texts – including *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma, 2019), *The Price of Salt* (Highsmith, 1952), *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (Reid, 2021), and *Tipping the Velvet* (Waters, 2011) – play an important role in portraying queer heartache and the struggles queer people have endured for so long, but their saturation in media may leave us with limited avenues to imagine what queer sexuality and queer joy might look like in the past, present, and future. This short story and exegesis follow the logic of Linda Garber (2021) who points out that with the exclusion of women and women-loving-women in historical records, historical fiction lets us reclaim and validate our existence amongst centuries’ worth of forgotten, unwritten history. Perhaps historical *romance* fiction – with its imperative, satisfyingly optimistic “ever after” (Roach, 2016, p. 167) trope – can expand our imagination, whether by situating us in a time that precedes modern conceptions of queer identity or by letting us believe that queerness need not signify impending doom.

Biographical note:

Payton Hogan is an emerging writer, PhD candidate, and Student Ambassador at Flinders University. Her PhD research revolves around satirical fiction and the spread of misinformation. She’s a proud member of two research hubs (Degrees of Love for popular romance scholarship and the Creative Histories Collective for historical fiction scholarship) and a producer/recurring host on the *Amy &* podcast, a virtual book club spearheaded by award-winning author and Associate Professor Amy Matthews. Recently Payton’s short story “Afterbirth” was published at *Island* magazine online.

Keywords:

Sapphic romance, historical fiction, queer theory, Linda Garber, happily ever after

She appears in my garden one morning, as novel a sight as the flowers on the almond tree she sleeps beneath. I have never seen her nor the flowers before, not in my entire eight-and-twenty years living in this cottage. I am close enough to see how the leaves' shadows raise bumps on her skin – she is real. Cold and breathing and real. She will be petrified if she opens her eyes to see a barefooted witch of a thing craning over her. I leave her and rush inside, pretending to break my fast in the kitchen.

Two cups of milk, two plates of bread and cheese. Ready whenever she decides to wake.

The sounds of a stirring world are always lovely, but rarely do they make my heart flutter. Today the organ is positively *humming*.

The charge quickly collapses under the fist that knocks on my front door. I jump, eyes flicking through the window to *her*. She sleeps soundly.

A man is at the threshold, also a stranger. I crack open the door, ensuring that all he sees is a sliver of my face. His skin is stained black from his hands to his elbows. The pores on his nose are enlarged with dirt. He smells heavily of copper and sweat. I expected no guests today, and now I have two.

“Where is she?” are his first words.

“She?”

“Alvina.”

It takes everything in me not to react. I know this man is hunting for the woman beneath my almond tree. The hand he used to knock – the fingers still curl into a fist.

“No, now farewell. Ble—” *Blessed be*, I almost said. “God be with you,” I say instead, a good Catholic.

He disappears behind my door. I hover, breath held, until his footsteps fade away.

*

Alvina is the name I gave to a feline that appeared here months ago. She would lounge in the garden and glare at my goats. Her fur was orange all over, from the points of her ears to the fluff between her toes. She was the colour of candlelight reflected on pale stone.

I tolerated her presence for she kept the vermin away – is what I told myself.

Alvina hissed when I drew too close. I could hardly begrudge the rejection when a chunk of her left ear was missing. Occasionally I joined her out of doors, lowering myself down onto the dewy clover and staring into her amber eyes. She would blink slowly at me and I would blink slowly back, as if to convince her that I was one of her kind.

With time, I could be an arm's length away before she would bare a fang. With more time, I could sweep the back of my hand from her chin to her ear – once. Then twice. Then she started leaning into me, begging for more, abandoning the façade that she was better off alone. Giving me permission to do the same.

And then she disappeared.

A female with fur like hers was a rarity – I loathed to think of what people might do if they apprehended her. The alternative was, oddly, equally upsetting: that she had simply tired of this place and moved on.

Her favourite place was beneath the almond tree. The very one that has today birthed a woman with hair the colour of candlelight reflected on pale stone, and who stands in my kitchen, glaring at my goat's milk and cheese. A woman named Alvina.

*

She insists that she does not know who I am.

“No matter. Alvina could not have known me very well.”

Her cheeks flush deeper, the red centre of an almond blossom. “*I am Alvina.*”

“Yes.” I present her with clean clothes. “The weather is mild, if you would like to bathe outside.”

“No.” But she takes my clothes.

*

She seems taken aback by the prospect of sharing my bed. Her mouth hangs slightly open, but no words come forth. I gaze around my four-walled cottage – its bench and three stools, its hooks holding pots, the small fire pit in the centre, the bed frame in the corner – wondering where else she expects to sleep.

“Are you accustomed to having a bed of your own?” I ask. “This one is large enough, I assure you. My father built it for three.”

Mother and Father endured the sting of my frosty toes behind their knees every night for so long. Their snoring sang me to sleep. When black boils started to appear on both of their necks, they had me move to the floor. It was cold and uncomfortable, but I had no need to endure it for very long. Both were dead four days later.

I begged my widowed grandmother to live with me soon thereafter, and she yielded. I propped my bed frame up with bricks and piled the hay high so that she did not have such a distance to lower herself. In the mornings I would half carry her to a stool, kneel down, and rub warm rose oil into her calves while she took a comb to my knotted hair. I scrubbed her back when she needed to bathe. I scooped a generous amount of honey into her milk. It was a way to thank her for leaving her beloved home for mine.

Grandmother did not snore. She barely made a sound in her sleep, and she hardly moved a finger. She was always so still and silent; I did not realise one night that she was gone. It felt like I should have known the moment it happened, like the departing of her soul should have woken me. The discovery came with the rising sun.

After that, there were no lullabies or rituals. Eight years of lonely silence. The space between my four walls could not have been emptier, not even if I were the next one to die.

*

The first night, we are in bed naught for an hour before Alvina's back is pressed against mine. I gape into the dark, my mind leagues away from slumber. The woman truly has never shared a bed before; she does not know the etiquette. I should speak. I should tell her that it is improper to touch. Unnecessary, at that, to be touching in a bed of this size. But no words come to me. I hear her soft breaths, steady exhales collected by blankets, and find myself too hypnotised to so much as whisper.

*

She eventually accepts my offer to bathe, so I prepare the tub, filling it with a sensible amount of rainwater and then a little bit more, just for her. I boil a pot with chamomile and bronze fennel, but when I bring it out, I find her already submerged in the bath.

I gasp and spin away, nearly burning myself. "Forgive me."

She seems not to notice my clumsiness. "Will you comb my hair?"

I turn back around, praying to whichever God might listen that she blames my blush on exertion and not on the sight of her skin dancing in the ripples of a liquid gown.

"Of course."

My hands feel weak as I pour the water from my pot into the bath. Sweet, spicy aromas of liquorice and apple envelop us. Alvina sweeps her hair over the back of the tub and I collect the comb, kneeling on the dirt behind her.

“Who was that man?” I ask, detangling the ends of her hair.

“My husband,” she says.

The comb gets stuck on a knot. We both hiss.

“Sorry,” I whisper. “Was I right in pretending not to know of you?”

“I do not want him.”

The water sloshes. I keep my eyes narrowed on her locks, which now slide more easily between the comb’s teeth. She tilts her head back. The fiery fans of her eyelashes are damp. I drag the comb slowly down from her hairline in one languid motion – until I notice her left ear.

A tiny chunk is missing.

I trace the jagged top with a pinkie finger. It looks as if it was bitten off.

Jerked out of shyness, I take more of her in, noting even the yellowest of bruises and most unsuspecting of scars.

“I do not want him.”

*

I am ready for his return. His fist hammers at my door much more aggressively than the first time. “Open, witch!” is his muffled roar. “I know she is here.” He will not be deterred again.

I collect Alvina’s trembling hands in mine. She smells of lavender. She had been stripping stems of the purple buds while I scrubbed at the stubborn cake of dirt under my fingernails. My hands are as clean as they can be, but it is futile; after tonight, I doubt I shall ever rid myself of the stench of soil.

“Come,” I say, hushed.

I take up an abandoned bundle of lavender and lead her to the back garden, steadfastly ignoring her husband’s vicious tongue lapping at the front of my house. We stop at the base of the almond tree.

“Will you wait here?” I try to be soft for her before seeing that there is no need; her eyes are as violent as I imagine mine to be. She nods. I scatter lavender stems in a wide ring around her bare feet. “Do not step a toe out of this circle.”

“I shan’t.”

“Trust me.” I say it like a demand when, truthfully, I am begging.

I very nearly miss the brush of her lips at the corner of mine. Now it is I whose hands are trembling. She squeezes them still.

There is no time to explain. His voice is suddenly louder – he broke through the door. He is about to find us.

I release Alvina and run. I run until the darkness takes me, feeling her wide, fearful eyes on my back.

*

“Alvina.” Her name is an oyster that he savours in his mouth. His steps become drunken when he sees her beneath the almond tree, a veil of its flowers around her shoulders. “There you are. This is the second time you’ve run from me. It will be the last, woman.”

Indeed, it will. I hiss from my hiding place, hackles raising, daring him to take one step closer to her.

“And you cannot claim that the witch stole you, wife. Where is she?” He makes a grand show of looking around, calling out to me.

“I would not tell you any such thing, husband, for it would be a lie.”

He homes in on her again, growls escaping his clenched teeth. He is so absorbed in his vitriol that he pays no mind to the tiny shadow creeping behind him.

I latch my needle-like teeth into his ankle. He yelps and jumps and kicks, but I hold strong, my brandished claws staked into his meaty calves, jaw clenched around his tendon like a handle. His blood gushes into my mouth.

“Demon! Get off!”

I acquiesce, releasing him just as his balance completely abandons him. I jump away, hackles raised, tail swishing, flesh rippling on my back, watching as he wheels around on his unwounded leg to catch me and then trips –

Into a giant hole in the ground. A giant hole that is invisible in the dark, hidden even from moonlight underneath the tree. He disappears, a cloud of dirt puffing up from the impact of his landing.

Alvina scurries backwards, understanding now why I warned her not to stray from the circle. She gives the hole a wide berth and comes to me, approaching with an offensive amount of caution – as if I cannot discern between her and that *vermin*. She scratches my cheek and lifts me, and I melt like black treacle in her arms.

*

In bed that night, and through every night hereafter, she and I kick away from each other, awkward and restless, only to come back together again, settled into a new formation of limbs and hair. Her chin digging into my shoulder blade. My hand holding hers against my neck. Her arm thrown over my chest. Together we dream about our favourite place in the garden, beneath the almond tree. Day after day, I awake to Alvina's amber orbs.

Those eyes tell me what her lips refuse to: she remembers me.

Exegetical statement

Linda Garber points out that historical fiction allows women and lesbians to reclaim and validate their existence amongst centuries' worth of forgotten, unwritten history:

Without much concrete evidence of sexual activity between women in the past ... and with a widespread understanding of 'lesbian' as a recent historical category, what more could be said that wasn't speculative? (2021, p. 3)

Where historical fiction intersects with the queer love story, tragedy tends to abound. This isn't necessarily inaccurate so much as disappointing and overwhelming sheerly due to the frequency of such tragic depictions. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Sciamma, 2019) is a film beloved by critics, audiences and queer people alike (Kermode, 2020; Syme, 2020; Vicino, 2020) for its portrayal of a romance that is gripping yet fleeting. In this film, painter Marianne is commissioned to make a portrait of bride-to-be Héloïse – the two women fall in love, but ultimately Héloïse has to fulfil her family's expectations and Marianne departs, having completed the commission. The tragedy of the romantic love they share (and continue to feel for each other after their parting) is highlighted through explicit references to the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. *The Price of Salt* (Highsmith, 1952), *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (Reid, 2021), and *Tipping the Velvet* (Waters, 2011) are additional examples of historical Sapphic/queer fiction where the love stories unfold or end tragically. These stories feature queer relationships that have to be kept secret, fear of persecution, betrayals, and endings steeped in heartache or death. Homosexuality often presents the story's conflict in queer historical texts – the wedge keeping lovers apart, often the obstacle to romantic fulfilment.

This is not an indictment of these stories; I am not arguing that queer people's lives in the past and present have been free of such heartaches. I am not arguing that these stories should not be told; they should be. My concern is that problems might arise from telling only one kind of queer historical story, in being able to imagine only *one* kind of life trajectory for queer people. These concerns are:

1. The risk of reinforcing equivocations of queerness with taboo.
2. Making homophobia and the delineation of sexualities *feel* immortal and inevitable rather than contextually specific. In other words, perpetuating essentialism.
3. The foreclosing of queer joy by supposing that very few (if any) Sapphic lovers across history and geography were able to exist together in contentment.

This is where historical *romance* can enter the fold of historical fiction texts and assist writers and readers in imagining what unadulterated queer happiness might have been like in the past – and therefore (perhaps more importantly) what it can be like now, and what it can be like tomorrow. This is because historical romance not only allows us to engage in Linda Garber's reclamation-via-speculation but also necessitates the happily ever after, the quintessential "promise of happiness" (Roach, 2016, p. 167). In a historical Sapphic romance, the love of queer characters need not end tragically; the story's culturally subversive elements need not signify impending doom. In "Beneath the Almond Tree", I hoped to take this a step further and use historical romance not only as a vehicle to imagine a Sapphic "happily ever after" (HEA), but also to imagine a Sapphic romance where the conflict does not hinge on the characters' sexuality.

These are the questions I hoped to address in my short story, "Beneath the Almond Tree":

- How does the romance fiction genre challenge and expand a writer's imagination of queer stories in historical contexts?
- How can we write queer folks within distant historical contexts prior to the existence of contemporary notions of sexuality that emerged from the medicalisation of homosexuality/heterosexuality in the late nineteenth century (Ormand, 2024, p. 14) and notions of individual identity (for example, gay, lesbian, bisexual) that emerged from gay liberation movements in the 1970s (Chinn; Desai)? And therefore;
- What affect might we experience in stories where sexuality is depicted in this way?

In writing a queer historical romance with a HEA that depicts sexuality as a notion of "desire" and "practice" rather than as a specifically modern notion of sexual identity (Chinn, 2010; Desai, 2010; Patton, 2010), I believe I have succeeded in some ways but fallen short in others. "Beneath the Almond Tree" features two women falling in love (Betz, 2009, p. 16); lovers who do not "perform" a traditional heterosexual gender dynamic (Allan, 2020, p. 429); the patriarch's demise signifying liberation; and the hint of the protagonist's heresy as a rejection of sexist Catholic teachings about marriage and women's subordination to men (Cleghorn, 2022, pp. 45, 47; Bem, 1993, p. 1). However, these protagonists are very socially isolated, the

expression of their desire and love is constricted to the privacy of a rural cottage. More crucially, I sought to employ magical elements for stylistic purposes to metaphorically capture the women's freedom to unfetter themselves from heteronormative structures that feel so baked into their, and our, societies. However, these fantasy elements could alternatively imply that historical, queer "happily ever afters" are unrealistic or unable to be imagined in "real" history. In other words, did I end up undermining my own goal?

Overall, this short story is an attempt to balance out the aforementioned historical Sapphic dramas that make us wonder how queer people could have possibly been happy in the past. If all we have is informed speculation (Garber, 2021, p. 3), then surely it is reasonable to imagine two Medieval women in love.

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