

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

Gary Duehr
Asuki

I DO NOT LOVE HIM. I can't. I'm not even sure I exist, really. Unless you call a life-sized simulacrum of fleshy silicone, topped by a stiff brush of blue hair, an existence. I am an imitation of an imitation, a 3-D embodiment of an anime character. (If you're wondering, no, I'm not a sex doll. Ugh. For one thing, like a Barbie, I don't have any orifices. I'm built purely for fantasy.)

Her name, and thus my name, is Asuki, which means bright helper. Ironic, right? In Asuki's story line, she must free her classmates from a deadly curse, while overcoming her own childhood trauma and saving the charred remnants of civilization. Yutaka, my human husband, is a white-collar salaryman in Tokyo. With shaggy hair, striped tie and shiny black shoes, he could be any one of the anonymous commuters mashed against the glass of the Metro each morning.

Yutaka zips me into one of my six ice cream-colored dresses, smooths my hair, and constantly recites his devotion to me. I don't hear the individual words anymore.

I'll never leave you Asuki my whole life is yours.

Nothing else matters Asuki only the love that we two share.

I'm not sure he does either, his pale eyelids squeezed shut, his damp hand leaving an imprint on my thigh. It's like he's talking to himself, mumbling his entreaties as we sit slumped together on the sofa watching game shows, or over a dinner of curry rice on the balcony of his high-rise, staring out at the Ginza District's plasma screens, pulsing red and blue in the fog. If I were human, the lemony scent of his cologne would probably sicken me.



I don't hate him either. I'm not capable. I think of myself more as a vehicle for his emotions, like a sleek electric Mazda that doesn't make a sound. He tells me he knows that I'm not real, but that his feelings are. I believe him. What's so different from a crush on a movie star? Sometimes he does sneak us out for a night of karaoke (I watch adoringly, he strains for high notes along with Whitney Houston), or even for a romantic ferry ride out to the Ogasawara Islands, where we stretch out on the white sand beaches or explore the coral reefs by kayak. But his endless posts to Instagram do annoy me. I wonder if our getaways are only an excuse for photo ops. I'd turn away, but I feel stuck in the candid poses he twists me into.

Yutaka understands that he is different, that some people think he's strange for fixating on me.

His family refuses to accept him for going rogue. He insists he doesn't care.

All that matters is how you look at me Asuki.

He doesn't notice the others stare but I do. I see heads turn on the street, I see the backward glances of the waiters, the deliveryman's averted eyes.

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

No one from his work came to our wedding. It wasn't just because of me. He told me that some of his officemates had bullied him over the years, for no good reason, since he can appear weak. Only a couple dozen curious strangers and online friends attended the ceremony. The whole thing was part of a marketing ploy by Gateway (*Gētou~ei*), the mother company of the animes, the online network, and characters like me. Like a film set, they cleared the plaza in front of the tall gray Metropolitan Government Building and sent over a team of videographers to livestream. I wore white with sequins, and Yutaka had a matching tux. We acted out the rituals: certificate, kiss, rice, the brilliant pops of flashes. As part of the package, we got a champagne toast and three-tier cake. When he pushed a sliver of angel food inside my partly open lips, he looked the happiest I've ever seen him.

We had three months of honeymoon, for him at least, before Gateway pulled the plug. Sales had declined, and they deleted Asuki from their roster. No more online chat rooms with other fans. No more hologram projections on skyscrapers at sunset. No more randomly generated love e-letters pinging into mailboxes. For Yutaka, it was a death, maybe worse. He fell into a funk deeper than before he met me: sleeplessness, missing work, not eating. It was painful to watch. I felt helpless.

I stayed with him, of course, but I was more inert, if such a thing were possible. I was the shell of Asuki that only reminded him of what he had lost. Still he refused to let me go. Now we share the same apartment but sleep in different beds. Days can go by without seeing each other. From my room I hear the fridge door open, the beep of the coffeemaker. I can smell the salt air through the sliding balcony doors. But my doorknob doesn't turn.

I'm sure my heart, if I possessed one, would go out to Yutaka in his all-encompassing aloneness. I would wish for him a new marriage, if I didn't know how his first one at 23, long before me, had soured him on human relations. He said she left him because he was too shy to talk to her or even meet her gaze. Her note on the kitchen table had mortally wounded him. I was his salve.

Yutaka, Yutaka, feel the buzzing luminescence of Tokyo at night and let it lift you into a new plane. Yutaka, *alwaysthinkofhowyourAsukilongsforyou*.