The Blue Planet

On the blue planet, love is different from the way it is here on earth. On the blue planet, every feeling is mutual. An emotion is a perfectly symmetrical thing, and belongs to two people, not one. This has certain implications.

On the blue planet all affection is met with affection, all attraction with attraction, and people who irritate each other with their personal habits can be counted on to position their seats against opposite walls at community gatherings, studiously ignoring each other and sighing deeply whenever the other draws attention to himself. Weddings are conducted with only a single vow on the blue planet, for if one intends eternal love, the other is known to intend the same. There can be no jealousy, unless of course one knows oneself to be untrue; in that case, it is a fact that one’s beloved is also growing more restless each day. For the moment one lover begins to feel a flatness in time passed in the other’s company, notices the dampness of the other’s caressing palms and withdraws ever so slightly from that familiar touch, the moment she finally finds herself daydreaming about others, she knows that her beloved too will shortly follow suit. So it is that when she finally lies in bed with a stranger, she holds in her outspread hands the sadness that at this moment, her beloved too has imagined happiness with another.

It stands to reason that when wars begin on this planet, there can be no such thing as a surprise attack, the other’s intent being clear as daylight. Likewise when the armies have exhausted themselves and peace is proposed, there is no fear of bad faith, for those who have long hated each other are no mystery to each other, and trust between them is the most natural thing. On the blue planet those who love are quite secure in their bliss, and those who hate are never lonely, for they breathe in unison, and know the other’s vitriol by heart. Here there are no secrets; there is, in fact, no suspense. No fear of a loved one’s indifference, and never any burning hope-against-hope for reconciliation between those long separated: only the quiet anticipation of reunion, along with the fervent wish that some unforeseen traffic situation not delay it. People on the blue planet lie awake at night pondering not whether they are worthy of love, but whether they are capable of feeling it. Feeling it, they know that nothing remains but the consummation.

It is a matter of course that on the blue planet there can be no solace for pain. No peace-making so long as one party remains the least bit angry. Former friends and lovers may pass bitterly in the street without speaking: between them there can be no surprise apology, no unexpected kindness, no flowers to cheer the hopeless.

On the blue planet, love is never desperate. And although the planet’s art critics have speculated that this might inhibit the artistic fervor of the culture, the team of scientists assigned to investigate this assertion claim they need another five-year grant before they can come up with proper test conditions.

This is the way of love on the blue planet.

On the yellow planet, love follows one basic law of physics: for every emotion there is an equal and opposite emotion. Those who love are hated, those who hate loved. On the yellow planet, love is primarily a verb: it is a striving for what can never be reached. Thus the planet is filled with people chasing each other across days and months and years. There are those who say this constant motion across the face of the planet accounts for the silvery swirls that appear on the planet’s surface when viewed from a distance. And it is known for a fact that the endless circular motion of the lovers is what keeps the planet spinning and in orbit: preventing it from drifting into the frozen company of those stone-silent moons which have strayed beyond the warmth of their sun.

On the yellow planet, the most conservative choose to forgo love altogether, viewing it as too costly an indulgence. Most prudent adults, however, are content to love, here and there, in secret. Their veiled affection will be met with veiled disapproval, and they will never be overtly rejected. Judiciously they choose to care for some and dislike others, thus maintaining balance.

In extremely rare cases, among the planet’s villages and towns there can be found people who love not just openly, but extravagantly. *I love you absolutely*, they will say; *I love you forever*. These are the ascetics and monks of the yellow planet. Gaunt from their travails, embarrassing in their suffering, they are considered an impediment to social progress and a negative influence on children. They are exiled to a small colony in a remote locale, where they can contemplate the objects of their affection in eternal, trembling reverence.

Every decade or so, when the colony is populated by especially fervent lovers, those who are loved experience such a surge of hatred that they form a mob and storm the colony. Jeering and pelting the colony’s high walls with refuse, they vow eternal malice for the colonists, who can meet the onslaught only with dewy eyes and the recitation of poetry. Long after the mob has receded, the grieving colonists huddle together for comfort, and their murmurs of desolation and consolation can be heard beyond the colony’s walls.

These are tense times for the yellow planet. A popular myth holds that if even two of this tiny minority of passionate colonists could turn their eyes from their malevolent beloveds and instead fall in love with each other, then the shock to the planet’s natural laws would be so great that not only would the world abruptly stop spinning, but electrical principles would cease to apply, rain would fall upward, and everything--women, men, children, potted plants and framed photographs--would fly off into space.

This, of course, is absurd: the physical laws of the planet forbid it, and scientific equation after equation clearly demonstrates that the colonists, after a period of recovery, will only sacrifice their hearts once again.

Orbiting the same youthful star as the blue planet and the yellow planet is a third planet. On this green planet, love is another matter altogether. On the green planet time is divided into seven-year periods, each of which is referred to as a Vicissitude (and so in this way time is made intelligible: a man, for example, might introduce himself by saying he was born in the first year of the three hundredth Vicissitude, a period remembered for its cold winters and for a particularly good crop of grapes). During these seven-year periods, every couple cycles in perfect asymmetry: while one is adoring, the other is irritable. At the very same moment when the irritable one begins to ease into contentment, his partner’s happiness will begin to fade.

On the green planet, the luckiest are those who feel uplifted at the sight of a lover. Although they know they cannot be happy in unison, still they unselfishly rejoice in the knowledge that their partners will soon feel this same breath-catching joy.

The most miserable of people on the green planet are those who feel distaste for their partners. They know that soon they themselves will be mute with adoration and that their lovers, gazing into their shining eyes, will feel only hostility. Yet they cannot walk away, for in their lovers’ faces they see the radiant happiness that can be theirs, if only they are patient. Their own discomfort becomes endurable, suffused as it is with hope.

On the green planet some say that one must learn to enjoy the good, and patiently endure one’s own inevitable pain. Others protest that one must not be seduced by moments of lightness, for if a bond between two people can still bring such overpowering despair then surely it is a destructive thing, and ought properly be outlawed. This question is debated annually in an open-air arena, and the planet’s two major political parties shout slogans, organize chants (*cleave don’t leave*) and plaster stadium walls with flyers. Although the debate never leads to a firm consensus, still the attendance at these events is considerable, and one must travel a long distance indeed to escape the sound of the crowd.

Every seventh year, when the constellations align in just the proper way, the tides on the green planet shift so dramatically that houses and entire cities are stranded. Valleys flood to the brim, islands are connected by new land-bridges of unfamiliar contours and shades. From a distance, the marbled surface of the planet seems to shift like a kaleidoscope; all day and all night, while strange new continents emerge, cartographers on distant moons shake their telescopes in disbelief, then make busy with their pencils and erasers.

On this one day and one night on the green planet, symmetry is restored. On this occasion unions are forged, marriages are made, and separations are decided. The lovers look each other steadily in the eye and, with boundless fervor, they adore, curse, promise.

After this day, the planet is quiet for many rotations. Exhausted from the power of their own mutual passion, the people are content to lie quietly and live off the stores of produce they have accumulated for this occasion. Their glimpse beyond their own isolation has depleted them; they are glad to hibernate for the season, before resuming their usual cycle. In this way they pass from Vicissitude to Vicissitude, waiting for the alignment of

the stars to lead them to their next choice.

These are some of the many ways of love in our solar system. Lying here on this hilltop, we look on at the spinning planets with pity. Gently you whisper to me, your fingers woven with the fallen pine needles. *They say if you lie perfectly still, you can hear the music of the spheres.*

Gazing up into the bottomless swirl of galaxies, I strain to hear what you hear.

Together we will lie on this hilltop, our heads bathed in cool grass. Against the horizon the planets will rise and fall. And at the appointed time you will take my hand, and cling to it, and I yours: each of us holding tight against the moment when gravity will grow forgetful, releasing us to drift where we might.