November's Cross-Word For Puzzled Southeast Asian Nonbinary Femmes

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November’s Cross-Word For Puzzled Southeast Asian Nonbinary Femmes
1. **Down. Clue A.** The first time you see two women kiss, you’re still a boy named John, ten and learning about lily stamens and ovaries and trying to not to blush when you have to say “sex” in front of your whole fifth grade class. The two women are your neighbors, the ones that when you did a magazine sale for school, ma told you to skip their bright blue house. When you’d asked why, ma told you they were ________. You believed her stern warnings, despite the women’s distinct lack of wrinkles or warts.

This night in October, the moon is full, and ma and pa are fighting in the kitchen. You could sneak out the window of your bedroom, but ma planted a rose bush there, which later on you’ll realize was to deter such escapes. You inch down the hallway toward your mom accusing your dad of not being able to ride a bike alone, and he replies, Well I like the two person bike better. Why is this such a big deal? When you’re older you’ll look back on this as your dad throwing a tantrum, but right now they’re slamming their fists on the counters and it makes you want to run and run. They don’t see you as you walk into the mud room at the front of the house. You pull on the wizard robe ma bought you for Halloween in a week, and you pretend it’s an invisibility cloak as you gently close the screen door, leaving the wooden door ajar because it always creaks loudly when you shut it.

You run down the cul-de-sac and into the woods to the basswood you’ve climbed during so many arguments. The bark scrapes your hands as you pretend to be Bilbo Baggins a burglar jumping from tree limb to tree limb to escape the giant spiders of Mirkwood. That’s when you see them. The two neighbor women dressed like the lilies your class project is on with long petal-pink tights and peplum party dresses that stick out like sepals on their hips. Now, in the dark that fell too early in fall, you wonder if maybe your mother had called them the wrong magical creature. These women are more like werewolves as they run under the trees, pushing one another into puddles of full-moon light. Their eyes glint over their shining teeth, howling their laughs so that it fills all the space in your head. You cling to a branch and watch as one woman grabs at the other’s torso, pulls her in and kisses her. It isn’t like the kisses grandma gave ma at Sunday dinner; it’s more like a kiss that you’d watch between your dad’s fingers when you two watched the kind of movies ma wouldn’t approve of.

You hold your breath as the women break apart
and continue their drunken hike deeper into the woods. When their howling leaves your ears, you look around to see if your mother followed you into the woods. When you realize you’re alone, you clamber down to the forest floor and stand on the pocket of earth where the moonlight manages to slip between the bare trees. You crouch where the two women stood and try to feel that same wicked magic coursing through you, letting yourself feel as enormous as the full moon overhead, and howl.

**Clue B.** Your freshman year of college, you take a history of film class to fulfill that dreaded history credit. The professor is a big Whedon fan like you, and tells the class that the first ever televised lesbian couple kiss was between two _______ on the episode “The Body” of Buffy The Vampire Slayer in 2001. He clarifies that previous to this episode other shows have used one time woman on woman kisses for ratings, but networks wouldn’t allow gay characters in a committed relationship to kiss on air. Unlike when you were in high school, every time the teacher says “gay” you don’t flinch or feel people’s eyes on you. Just like in high school, when you go home to watch “The Body” and see Willow and Tara break the 73 year long streak of only straights kissing, you think of those women in the woods.

2. **Across. Clue A.** The number of guys on Grindr who ask you for pictures, and then say they’re not into “exotic” boys. Sophomore year you give up on gay dating apps and start eating your Subway sandwiches in the LGBT Center. At first you sit in the corner and don’t talk to anyone. Everyone smiles when you enter, but no one talks to you until a cute boy named Geo introduces himself. He noticed you because of your Stranger Things demogorgon tee, and you bond over Dungeons and Dragons (which you’ve never played but you pretend you know what he’s talking about) and Netflix all-nighters. He asks your name and pronouns, and you tell him John, and then ask, Pronouns? You like the teacher voice he uses when he explains that pronouns refer to people in place of their name, and there are more than two genders and thus more than two sets of gender pronouns. Does that make sense? he asks, and you can’t help but smile even though you’re still confused, and he seems to take that as a yes.

You give him your number when he offers to include you in the next D&D campaign his roommate DMs, even though you don’t know what those words mean.
Clue B. The number of days in a week. You spend each of these texting Geo.

Across. Clue A. The first time you wear ______ and short kitten heels, you show off to the cat that lives in the parking lot by your dorm your sophomore year. The cat won't let you pet it, but it talks to you, meowing at the edge of the parking lot where asphalt crumbles into woods. You’ve tried being at the cat’s level, but it still backs off when you army crawl toward it. You sigh, pushing up from the warm pavement. It’s not too far into fall to stop wearing crop tops, and you flick off the tiny pebbles pushed into the soft skin of your belly. The tabby yowls, and you roll your eyes. You scoop a mound of Fancy Feast onto the yellow line painted on the asphalt, and then retreat a parking space away. You’ve been measuring how many parking spaces the cat will come close to you, and it’s finally narrowed down to one and a half. The cat walks up, its tail flicking. You smile when the cat finally crouches down over the Fancy Feast mound, its eyes closed contentedly.

“I’m going by November now, by the way,” you mention to the cat. The cat’s head bobs over the grey chunks, and you take that as a nod.

“And I still haven’t figured out your name, huh? I shouldn’t though. Ma says you’ll get too attached to something if you give it a name.”

The cat finishes the last chunk of tuna and starts licking the pavement for the lingering paste. You cringe at the rasping noise the cat’s rough tongue makes against the asphalt. You feel a sudden flash of anger and think about flinging the $9.98 Meijer can opener at the ungrateful, noisy cat. Instead, you try to take a deep breath. You think about all the other things you could be angry at, your ignorant professors and classmates, the inability to change your name in the school grade system, and you wonder at how you almost lost your temper at a cat. Despite holding your anger, the cat decides it’s full and runs back into the pines. You sigh and walk back to your residence hall.

You pretend the cat cares enough to watch you as you use the yellow lines to practice walking toe-heel, toe-heel. When you slide your key-card to enter your hall, you imagine the cat has returned to lick the wet spot on the pavement. You forgive the cat for not trusting you, but it takes a while before you stop thinking your makeup scared it away.
Clue B. Your character, Ursus Maritimus wears ______ unabashedly without wondering if any damn cat or stranger across the street or RA thought she looked funny in it. She’s a tiefling, half human, half demon, and rejected by both sides. Geo helped you create her with a character sheet template, and he wasn’t judgy at all when you didn’t know the difference between cantrips and spells. When you tell him your character’s name is the species genus name for polar bears, he calls you a nerd and then kisses you on the cheek for the first time.

The campaign starts, and you’re not sure if anyone in the room even knows your name or pronouns. They don’t even bother learning your name or pronouns; they just refer to you as Ursus, and tease you about your lawful alignment (apparently all the cool kids are Chaotic Good). You start wearing ______ to the meetings and no one bats an eye, except for when the DM pointed out that it was smeared on your front teeth.

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4. Across. Clue A. A month into your freshman year, ma visits you. Luckily, there’s nothing you need to tear off the walls of your dorm room, because you haven’t yet been to the pride parade where you’ll buy your first pride flag. When there’s no decorations to comment on, you two chat about how the dorms were originally built as prisons, which is why the windows are so small. At this point in the semester you’re pretty sure this is an urban myth, but you’re grateful for any conversation topic that isn’t your love life.

When you go to the food court and you see two men walk by holding hands, you hold your breath and hopes she doesn’t call them this word. Instead, she continues ranting about how your father got a part-time job as a bartender where she works to keep an eye on her. You wonder if she didn’t notice the boys holding hands. Or maybe she didn’t mind, but you’re not hopeful enough to seriously consider that.

Clue B. The English equivalent of the word pédé, the word your grandma calls you when you tell her you’re not her grand-son, can she please just call you her grandchild? You want to tell her that pédé is not a Vietnamese word, that when France left Vietnam they hid it in their Trojan horse they called the French language. Instead, you pick at the mascara crumbs on your eyelashes. She says You’re not a boy, but you’re not a girl? That doesn’t make sense. And you say, So what? and you think that sounds confrontational, but she giggles.
She never refers to you with “they/them” pronouns; she calls you both a boy and a girl, she and he. When you buy dresses at Forever 21 that are too tight on your shoulders, she offers to let out the seams for you. The two of you never talk about gender again, or sexuality, and definitely not politics, but she helps you make curtains for your east-facing apartment bedroom junior year. She explains to you how to thread the bobbin of the sewing machine and she rubs her thumb against the dry wrinkly skin of her palm. You cringe at the rasping of dry skin, and are grateful for the hum of the machine when she switches it on. Over the chomping of her sewing machine, she complains to you about your grandfather whose dementia is getting worse. He always seemed loving when you drove the half hour to Holland to visit her, but she tells you that he won’t let her walk their poodle alone, or go to the grocery store alone, or do anything without him. This makes you want to say Divorce him or Just leave. But it’s not that simple.

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5. **Down. Clue A.** Geo tells you that he found ______ at the LGBT Center after he told his conservative family to go to hell. He flicks his blonde hair out of his eyes and explains how going to Thanksgivings where people pretended that he’d never come out felt like being back in the closet again. I’m happier now, he tells you with an encouraging smile. I’ve learned to let go of people who don’t accept me for who I am.

**Clue B.** You find ______, too, when near the end of your junior year you go to the Queer People of Color group. They’re making friendship bracelets that day, and it’s comforting to have something to do with your hands. You choose Geo’s favorite colors and start to make him a red and gold bracelet. They go around the circle and ask everyone What or who do you consider to be your family? A lot of people in the group say their friends, and that nuclear family is a vestigial social group from more primitive days. Someone else says that being close to their family is staying close to the Latinx ______, which they’ve had a hard time connecting to in West Michigan. When it’s your turn, you tell the group that sometimes you feel like your family is something you should give up on. But, you tell them, I can’t let assimilation take them from me completely. You’re too embarrassed to say that you like bitching with your mom about your dad, and that you spend every other weekend at your grandma’s.

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6. Across. **Clue A.** Two months into your freshman year and before you’ve met Geo or ever mustered the courage to enter the LGBT Center, you’re totally alone. You find out that the 8am chem lab you’ve slept through twice automatically fails you after the first absence. Your roommate, the only friend you have, started dating a girl with a sweet off-campus apartment and never comes home anymore. The only class that you enjoy, intro to painting, you completely forgot to go on the field trip to the professor’s studio and now you’re on your favorite professor’s bad side. This sunny day in October, you let yourself feel like a ________. You lace on some tennis shoes and start to run north, toward the parking lot and the woods. You find a maple and clamber up its limbs. Now that you’re 140 pounds, you can’t reach the top branches, but you get pretty high up there. You think about falling through the branches, but instead roar into the wind, howling at the top of your lungs. You lean forward and back and start to shake the top of the tree, and the red leaves rain down on you.

That’s when you hear the cat yowl for the first time. You almost fall out of the tree when you hear it hissing from the branches above you. When you look up, a mangy orange tabby with eyes rimmed with black flecks glares back. You immediately stop your howling and shaking, and coo at it, trying to coax it down. You can’t tell if it’s stuck or just pissed off, so you try climbing up to grab it. This is a mistake, and the cat swipes at you, leaving 3 streaks of angry raised skin on the back of your hands. You take off your flannel, standing shirtless in the tree, and throw your shirt over the cat’s face. Quickly you grab the cat and wrestle until the shirt cocoons around its writhing figure and covers its nails. You climb down the tree one handed, and when you get to the bottom branch, you let the cat wriggle out of the shirt and leap to the gravel. It hisses at you and runs into the woods. You jump down and collect your shirt, which smells like a mixture of cat and gasoline. Instead of spending the rest of the day beating yourself up over your ________, you take the dreaded bus trip to Meijer, even though you have a meal plan.

**Clue B.** Synonyms for this include defeat. You suffer this word and its synonym at the end of a D&D campaign the summer before your senior year, just a few months before your 2 year anniversary with Geo. Your party was paid by a mysterious dwarf in a tavern to retrieve the talons of a harpy, and the five of you had charged to the oceanside cliffs...
without stopping to buy wax to fill your ears. The three other party members roll low wisdom checks, and you and Geo’s elven princess, Arcticus, end up being the only ones spared from the harpies song. Your friends slowly walk toward the five harpies perched in giant nests on the cliff edge. The older harpie’s skin is splotched with brown feathers, and her balding neck is exposed as she sings your friends to their doom. Your character Ursus goes to cast a cantrip to summon a swarm of bees to sting your friends ears so they go deaf, but their saving throws are too high, and each player manages to swat each bee out of the air. “God damn it, why’d they all have to have high strength modifiers?”

It’s Geo’s turn, and Arcticus runs toward the closest harpie, who launches into the air. It’s not quick enough when Geo throws a perfect initiative roll. Arcticus swings her longsword at the siren, slicing off her taloned toes.

“Aren’t you going to save them?” you ask Geo, but then you realize his character’s chaotic neutral, and that he’s probably going to abandon your entire party. “We can’t just leave them here,” you tell him.

“Oh yes I can!” he laughs, and all the other players groan, throwing goldfish and fruit-roll up wrappers at him.

He ends up running down the hillside, and you can’t decide whether or not to follow him or stay with you party. In your indecision, you cast a spell of protection over your teammates, and then have Ursus run after Arcticus. Two of the undamaged harpies follow you both, and you end up battling back to back, and then dying. Your campaign was a _______, and even though it’s just a game, it feels a bit like Geo’s fault.

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7. Across. **Clue A.** The creek you wade through in the bio department’s waders is named after the color of the water, which you learned appears this color because of the tannins released by decaying leaves shed from trees lining the edges of the stream. You’re going bug catching with with you stream ecology lab the fall of your junior year, and the waders are definitely leaking.

After fifteen minutes, your left leg is completely numb, but you’re so excited about doing the same field work you’ll do in your marine ecology career that you don’t care.

You feel like a total nerd when you shriek to your
professor that you caught a crawfish. He comes over and gently pulls the crustacean from your D-net, holding it up in front of the four girls in your lab group. He uses his pinky finger to point out the crawfish’s mouth extending down the thorax before flinging it back into the water. “Nice catch, ladies,” he says.

When you go home that Sunday for a family dinner with your parents and grandparents, you’re excited to find that your grandma’s cooking lobster. You pick up the crustacean by the back just like your professor did, and point out its mandibles to her. She humors your ecology geeking session with her lips pursed in a smile. I’ll show off, too, she says, and without looking away from you she makes a rapid stab downward through the mandibles. The lobster stops waving its claws, and she informs you that’s how to split the brain without losing too much of the tasty roe. She waves the knife playfully at you, saying never to mess with a chef, even a retired one. The lobster stops waving its claws, and she informs you that’s how to split the brain without losing too much of the tasty roe. She waves the knife playfully at you, saying never to mess with a chef, even a retired one.

After dinner, before you drive back to your college, she hands you a tupperware box with leftovers and says, For your little friend. Geo’s a vegetarian, but you still hug her, and you smell like lemon juice the whole way home.

**Clue B.** The color you wear to your grandma’s funeral your senior year.

8. **Down. Clue A.** You feel this word all the time. You feel this when you wear makeup and when you don’t. You feel this word on the doorstep of your mother’s house after the funeral when you’re wearing leggings and a dress, and you think about going back to the car to change into the emergency suit you brought. Geo tries to hold your hand, but you pull your hand back.

You feel this word when you ask Geo “Is it okay if we don’t? Not today, not in front of my parents.”

Geo shrugs, and he flicks his blonde hair back in what you hope isn’t annoyance. You tell yourself he didn’t just roll his eyes at you.

When you walk into your home on Veruca Drive, you kick off your shoes in the mud room, and brace yourself. First your mom comes up to hug you, ruffling your hair that’s past your shoulders now. You’d made a point to avoid her at the funeral after she told you, “Johnny, if you needed money for funeral clothes you should have told me, you didn’t have to wear this.” But now with her hands
buried in your hair, you’re so glad you’ve come home for the wake. Your Wisconsin cousins are here, the two girls that used to play hobbits with you in the woods when they visited Michigan with your uncle. They’re all both in college or have graduated, and the younger one, Ty, is sporting a faux-hawk and a pantsuit. They come up and sandwich you in a hug, and you realize that they’re both taller than you now.

Carrie, who’s in a painting MFA program, leans in and whispers, “I’m happy for the two of you.”

You’re startled that someone would congratulate you on your closeted relationship at a funeral, but then they giggle together, and Ty pulls away first and introduces herself to Geo.

“Did John ever show you where we played hobbits? He had this tree that he was obsessed with. Let’s go see it!” Ty squeals, and Carrie agrees with her.

Ty seems to notice Geo’s reaction, and she looks back at you, taking in your clothes and hair.

“Oh shit, are you still going by that? I just thought because your mom still calls you that-”

“It’s fine Ty, you’re good,” you say. “I go by November now.”

Your cousins coo over your name as you all walk over to the front door.

“I like your dress by the way,” Carrie says. “So I don’t mean to be rude or anything, but are you like a girl now?”

Geo’s face goes white, but you start laughing. “Not really. I’m kind of done with the whole boy/girl binary thing. It’s okay if that doesn’t make sense.”

Carrie’s face lights up, and she tells you how her roommate is “like you,” and how her roommate uses neutral pronouns, and do you use those, too? You wonder when and why you’d pigeonholed your cousins as homophobic, or why you were too afraid to tell anyone in your family but your grandma. It’d just made you resentful when they’d called you the wrong things, and maybe you should have given them all a chance.

Ty tells you that she’s pretty sure she’s “bi or something” as the four of you walk into the snow, and you make jokes about how queer this funeral ended up being. Geo slips his hand in yours, and you allow it.

You show him the giant basswood, and you two decide to race, one person on each of the two split
trunks. You don’t tell him this, but you give him the easier trunk to climb, and when he wins he crows into the wintry dusk. Your cousins look around for the old granite mortar and pestle you used to grind nuts and berries to make potions. Geo jumps branches until he’s on your side, and kisses you above your cousins, above your house, above your neighborhood. You can see the spot where the two werewolf witches kissed, and you show him.

“It was the first time I ever saw people like me,” you say, and he tucks his chin over your head and holds you.

Finally, you climb down, and for childhood’s sake, you and your cousins take turns grinding some frozen acorns and walnuts in the mortar and pestle, which was probably the oddest birthday present you’d gotten from your grandma.

On the way back to the house, you consider dropping Geo’s hand before walking in, but this time you continue to hold it. You walk in and all of your older relatives laugh at you and your cousins when you tell them you just went tree climbing. Your dad mutters something about how that’s not appropriate for a funeral, but your mom shushes him.

After an hour of reminiscing in the living room with your family over cheese and crackers, you and Geo decide to leave before the roads get any worse. Your mom gives you a hug and Geo a hug at the same time.

“Take care of my son,” she whispers to Geo. He nods curtly.

The times you don’t feel this word are when you’re angry. You let yourself be angry when Geo calls your mother transphobic because she still calls you her “son.”

You feel this word when he says, “You shouldn’t put up with that.”

“It’s not that easy Geo,” you reply, pressing your thumb against the horn with just enough pressure it won’t honk. “Besides, she was really good about you and I.” You want to tell him that you thought tonight went really well, that it’s exactly what you needed.

“Yeah, she might have been good about us, but she wasn’t great about everything else. You shouldn’t have to compromise on your identity, November.” The sky is dark behind Geo, and the only light comes from the console, casting a green sheen on his hair.
“Since when has it been up to you what’s compromising my identity, Geo? You’re not the one being misgendered by her, or dead-named.”

Geo throws up his hands. “Whatever. I just think you deserve better.”

You go silent for the rest of the car ride, and wonder to yourself what “better” looks like to Geo, if someone like your grandma would fit this idea of family. You wonder if your cousins would make the cut, and you know your mom wouldn’t. By the time you drop Geo off at his living center, you tell him not to text or call you, and he nods, slamming the car door behind him.

Clue B. You feel this word when you find the stiff corpse of the cat. As your stolen shovel bounces off the frozen dirt, you remember that you’d stopped feeding it when you started spending the nights at Geo’s. If the cat was still alive, it wouldn’t rub against your calf to comfort you. It would not meow sorrowfully or lick at your tears. The cat would have listened to you in silence, and maybe that would have been enough. But the cat is dead, and it’s all your fault. And so is the break up. The cat would have approved of the break up, though. It would have meant more Fancy Feast and perhaps enough time for it to love you. The cat died not loving you, but you don’t know this. You think the cat had grown to understand you, had listened to your confessions of condomless sex and pretending you’d lost your phone so you wouldn’t answer your mom’s drunken phone calls and secretly disliking all the people you play Dungeons and Dragons with but Geo.

And now I don’t even like Geo, you would have sobbed to the cat.

The cat’s dead corpse shifted as the ground slowly disappeared next to its body, and you nudge the cat with your Sorell boot to keep it from falling into the hole. Before you begin to dig again, you kneel down next to the cat and peel off the faux leather gloves Geo gave you for Christmas. You reach out your numb fingertips and scratch behind the cat’s ears. You can’t feel the roughness of the cat’s orange fur from the dirt that had collected when the cat was too starved to care about grooming, and had simply crawled from car to car to find one where the engine was still warm.

You lay it into the hole in the woods and scoop the frosted dirt over its body. Later, you return the shovel to the janitor’s closet and return to your apartment. You close the navy curtains you and your
grandmother made together and take out your new eyebrow tweezers to pull out the splinter nestled in the life line of your palm. Edith Piaf wails in the background as you dab the blood away. You mouth the French words with her. You allow yourself to shake and sob and howl.

**Clue C.** Syn: humiliation, indignity, guilt. Sometimes, you feel these too.

You always wished life had an answer key, didn’t you?

1. Down: Witches
2. Across: Seven
3. Across: Lipstick
4. Across: Faggot
5. Down: Community
6. Across: Failure
7. Across: Black
8. Down: Shame

**Final hints:**

**Clue A.** Go adopt a cat and with the same orange fur and speckled eyes. Name it Ursus, what you might have named the tabby in the woods. Call your mom and ask her to go dress shopping with you. Tell her your name. Go catch some crawfish and leave them on grandma’s grave. Find Geo and ask him to stop being such an asshole, and then apologize and kiss him. Run into the woods together. Show him where you buried the cat, and cry and cry.

**Clue B.** Don’t expect your mom to understand what you mean by nonbinary, and don’t understand Geo to understand why your family is not something you are willing to give up. Labor. Explain to them what they won’t listen to, and then give up, and then come back to them and tell them you’re still willing to try. You’ll always be willing to try. You won’t leave.