

SAY IT WITH MASTODONS

A project from the heart.

BY MARISSA LINGEN

It is completely implausible that people should fall in love with each other, but of course they do. I mean, we do. Even I do, apparently, although it makes no sense to me; the perfectly logical reasons why I should like you not being enough, although I can see no reason that they shouldn't be, that I should be weirdly tender towards you in addition to all of the ordinary human respect and, damn it, *liking* that you inspire in me. That I should not only think of you often but smile a weird wobbly smile when I do. That I should care so much, all of a sudden, about little things that make you happy, about how your week is going, about the way you read things over the top of your glasses and the way your eyes crinkle up when you smile. It's far more specific than a general fondness, very intense. It doesn't make any sense even though most people do it. It's pretty weird, and I really don't know what to do about it.

So I made you some mastodons.

I don't think this is just a me thing. I think it's an us thing. As much as I understand falling in love as a thing, I think part of it is that there are so many us things. Like mastodons. Or, more to the point, like soil restoration on the northern Great Plains.

We've talked about it so many times, sometimes in our labs and sometimes in charming cafés with thoughtfully concocted beverages, and sometimes in tree-lined parks. We talk a lot. We talk about this. About how we both grew up in small towns in the Dakotas — you outside Watertown, me in Wahpeton, close enough to marvel at now that we're not there. About how hope rose in us, in strange half-understood little kid ways, when the grazing programme to restore the soil really took off, when the crop yield went up and the air smelt of wet, green, growing things. Even though we didn't know each other then, we remembered how it was. We knew.

So we both knew the difference, when the blackleg hit. When climate change made its season longer and mutation made it rage

on. We knew what those farms could have been, what they were struggling to be in the newfound heat and tornadoes. They struggled, they stumbled, and we came of age — separately, but together — with the dusty chemical smell of failure around us.



We both went east for school, like so many people. We both turned away. Neither of us could help looking back, and then we found each other. And then all the conversations, while the blackleg spread to cow and bison. While no one could figure out what to do about it.

And then I fell in love with you and I didn't know what to do, and I thought of where we're from. I thought of the things we'd turned over in conversation. The tread of cattle on the plains, the natural fertilizer, the way it had all gone so right before it went so wrong. I know we're both focused on conservation, but the conservation attempts weren't getting the prairie anywhere. We needed another, more radical, solution and also being in love with you turned my brains upside down and then right side up again.

And so I thought: mastodons.

Just little ones. Not much over half a tonne. Compared

with their ancestors, that's small and manageable. But when you don't expect mastodons, it's still a lot. Kind of like falling in love when a person didn't plan to, I guess.

It's fun to collaborate, so... I left it to you to figure out what trees the farmers should plant at their field borders, for the mastodons to browse when they're not grazing. Almost anything would be okay, but surely there are some that they'll like best. Mastodons like soft shoots and fresh leaves in the spring. They're surprisingly focused on tenderness, although I shouldn't be surprised by anybody that way after recent developments.

They're still good grassland maintainers, though, I'm pretty sure. They should be. The lab tests show their manure to be rich and fertile and nitrogen-fixing. They've had a lot to process, these mastodons. I can relate.

I made them blackleg-resistant, at least as much as anyone can ever be sure they're resistant to anything. They haven't responded to any of the fatal strains that are common now, so we can hope for at least a reprieve. Some quiet time to do their job without worrying

about new developments. Wouldn't that be nice.

Anyway, here's the key. I hope you want to visit them, as I made them for the place we came from but really mostly for you. You can get right into the pens with them if you're careful. I know their long tusks look scary, but they're intensely affectionate when you get in past their guard. Not that I know what that's like.

I know this is going to feel sudden, even though it took almost two years just to gestate them, so I guess I've been squirming about this for some time. I'm sorry if I'm making you squirm alongside me — that's one of the things I actually *don't* want to share. It's okay if you don't want to talk about the love part. It makes me uncomfortable too. We can just talk about the mastodons. I like them best.

Well. Best except for you. ■

Marissa Lingen has published more than 100 short stories in venues such as *Analog*, *Lightspeed* and *Tor.com*.

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