

A YOUNG ADULT HORROR
GRAPHIC NOVEL PITCH
BY NICOLE SAGAL

Grief, body dysphoria, and
life after death.

Coming of age has never
been this difficult.



Frankenstein meets Stand By Me.

GROWING PAINS is a queer coming of age tale that follows two teenage boys as they struggle with their identities as a mad scientist's son and the boy that she reincarnated from the dead. August has recently died, but thanks to a strain of super regenerative algae being implanted into his body, he is reanimated and brought back to life. As a living corpse, August struggles with this new identity as his body begins to betray him. Theo is the son of the lead scientist, Lyra, who revived August. After a horrible accident befell his older brother, he's lived a sheltered existence constantly under the watchful eye of his mother. But Lyra is keeping secrets from the both of them—secrets that threaten the already fragile peace they've tried so desperately to create together. Can anyone be trusted? What's it like to live in a body that doesn't fit? And what's that noise coming from the attic?

GROWING PAINS is a 200 page, full color graphic novel that explores the loneliness, shame and confusion that being LGBTQ in a heteronormative society creates—specifically the disconnect and fracturing of identity resulting from body and gender dysphoria.

SYNOPSIS

August Moran is dead. He's planned it for weeks now; felt it was the right choice for years. But after taking his own life, he won't stay dead for very long.

August's best friend, Theo, is the son of a scientist. Reclusive, secretive, and a little bit obsessive, Lyra Esparza has been studying the mysterious regenerative properties of the algae in the lake right next to her house. And because she's a good mother who loves her son- and hates to see him so broken up over the untimely death of his closest companion- she takes matters into her own hands. August will become the first ever human being to cheat death.

The experiment is a success. Dismayed, confused and shocked, August doesn't fully understand what's just happened to him. As Lyra and Theo begin to explain that he *was* dead but isn't anymore, he becomes increasingly agitated. Overcome with emotion, August runs out of the house, still in his hospital gown, and flees to the shore of the lake before anyone can stop him. The absurd reality begins to sink in. He may be alive, but he isn't entirely human anymore, is he?

Theo should be overjoyed that his friend is back. But after seeing how August is struggling, Theo feels guilty and ashamed about what he and his mother have done to him. It doesn't help that he's constantly plagued by nightmares of his dead brother and that Lyra is

working even harder on her research. Lyra's made sure that neither of them can go back to school- *it's too dangerous, too many variables, August isn't ready yet*- and the boys spend day after day in the old house. Theo tries desperately to reconnect with August, to turn their friendship back to how it used to be, but things are irrevocably different now.

And August is rotting. He notices small things first: the abscesses on his body- half from the decomposition and half from the algae- are getting larger with every passing day. He bleeds green-tinged blood from his eyes and nose unprovoked. Fingernails fall out. But it's getting bad, so bad until he's trying to hide large patches of his skin from sloughing off. Lyra notices but doesn't seem as worried as she should be. Why isn't she more concerned? It's becoming hard for August to even look at himself in the mirror. He doesn't recognize what he sees anymore.

In the end, Theo realizes what he has to do to set things right. He can't ignore his feelings for August any longer- nor can he pretend not to know what's causing the noises that come from the attic of the old house. He confesses the truth to his friend and shows him what he really knows- this is not the first time August has come back. It most likely will also not be the last, if Lyra has her way. The attic holds dozens upon dozens of Augusts in various states of growth and decay; all failed trial runs. And among them also lies the beginning: Hugo Esparza- almost unrecognizable, monstrous and barely sentient.



CHARACTERS



THEO ESPARZA

The childhood friend of August and the more outspoken of the two. Loyal, hardworking, but often too blunt, he lives a secluded life in a lake house on the outskirts of town. He longs to leave someday but he lacks the courage and ability to- and ever since his older brother died, he's been under the constant overprotective watch of his mother. When August dies too, it's almost too much for him to bear, so he asks Lyra to bring his friend back. Despite this wish being granted, he feels guilty and conflicted as he sees August continue to suffer. Additionally, Theo begins to understand that his affection for his best friend may not just be platonic after all. He is afraid of confronting what exactly that could mean about himself- and his future.

AUGUST MORAN

A reserved and sensitive 17 year old. Withdrawn to a fault, he struggles with acknowledging and expressing his emotions to even those he's close to. At 15, after a lifelong battle with depression, he decides to take his own life. But this is not the end of his story- August is brought back to life, albeit in a monstrous body that does not feel like his own. Stuck in the lake house with Theo and Lyra, he wants to go back to his own home, to find a cure to his slowly decomposing flesh, and to finally be at peace with his identity. But he's realizing that those things will all be more difficult than he first thought.

CHARACTERS

LYRA ESPARZA

Theo's mother and an ambitious, driven scientist. Her whole life has been shrouded in loss. After losing her eldest son to a tragic accident, she has become neurotic; obsessively searching for a way to erase the pain of her loved ones dying. Her research has led her to discover a strain of super-regenerative algae in the lake near her house. These efforts have finally culminated in the bringing August back from the dead. Now that success is within her reach, she'll stop at nothing to perfect her experimentation. Lyra's also keeping secrets that could have disastrous consequences on all of their lives. She needs to learn to move on and let go, otherwise she will suffocate herself and everyone around her with her own motherly love.

HUGO ESPARZA

Theo's older brother and Lyra's eldest son. He was the golden prodigy child, and the shadow of his absence looms large over the Esparza family. Especially close to his mother, he wanted to follow in her footsteps and go into the medical field. But one day he has an unfortunate accident and drowns in the lake. This one event forever alters the trajectory of Lyra and Theo's lives, both of them struggling to come to terms with such a tragedy. And after his sudden death, everyone said that his body couldn't be recovered- but was that really true?



OTHER CAST MEMBERS



NOTHING REALLY HAPPENS IN THE SMALL TOWN OF BLACKBURN ANYMORE.

It used to be in its prime long ago, but nowadays it's fallen on hard times and has resigned itself to a quiet, slow death. Nestled in the mountains, it hides itself away from the rest of the world and is forgotten by all those who pass by.

The residents who do still live there all mind their own business and carry on as they always have. They're content with the way things are, and no one seems to know just yet that the algae found in Blackburn Lake puts them amidst one of the greatest scientific discoveries of their age.

1. AUDREY BELL and 2. LUCIEN HORNE

Hugo's best friends, who were also in the same year of school as him. Now graduating college, they feel especially directionless without their friend at their side. Audrey wants to leave and start over fresh somewhere far away, but Lucien can't bring himself to leave, afraid of betraying Hugo's memory.

3. LILY OMOLADE, 4. CECILY DEVILLENEUVE, and 5. FRANCIS HORNE

They are a few of the other high school students and friends of Theo. After Theo and August suddenly disappear, they become incredibly concerned. The group tries to ask the adults around them for information or news, but no one seems to want to talk to them about it. They decide to start searching for clues themselves.

OTHER CAST MEMBERS



6. CHARLES OMOLADE

Lily's grandfather and the kids' high school History teacher. Out of all of the adults in the town, he seems the most willing to help the children out- but strongly discourages them from looking into things themselves. He knows much about the history and secrets of Blackburn, and realizes that this may be more dangerous than they can fully understand.

7. RICHARD MORAN and 8. INGRID MORAN

August's parents. Though they believe they understand their son- their relationship with him is tangential at best. They mean well and truly care for him, but don't seem to notice his struggles. They blame themselves for his death, and don't know that he is alive again.

9. ELOISE SHADLOCK

The mortician of the town and a close personal friend of Lyra. She went to college with her and continued her studies even after Lyra dropped out. Haughty and a little narcissistic, most people have a hard time getting along with her. She is one of the only people that knows about Lyra's research, and is excited enough by it that she helps out however she can.

10. JAVIER ESPARZA

Lyra's ex-husband and the father of Hugo and Theo. After Hugo's death, he tried to stay with his family, but his wife's increasing desperation to study the algae and reverse death put a huge strain on their relationship. He divorced her and now has little to no contact with them anymore. He still lives in town, trying to get by, but he still misses what used to be.

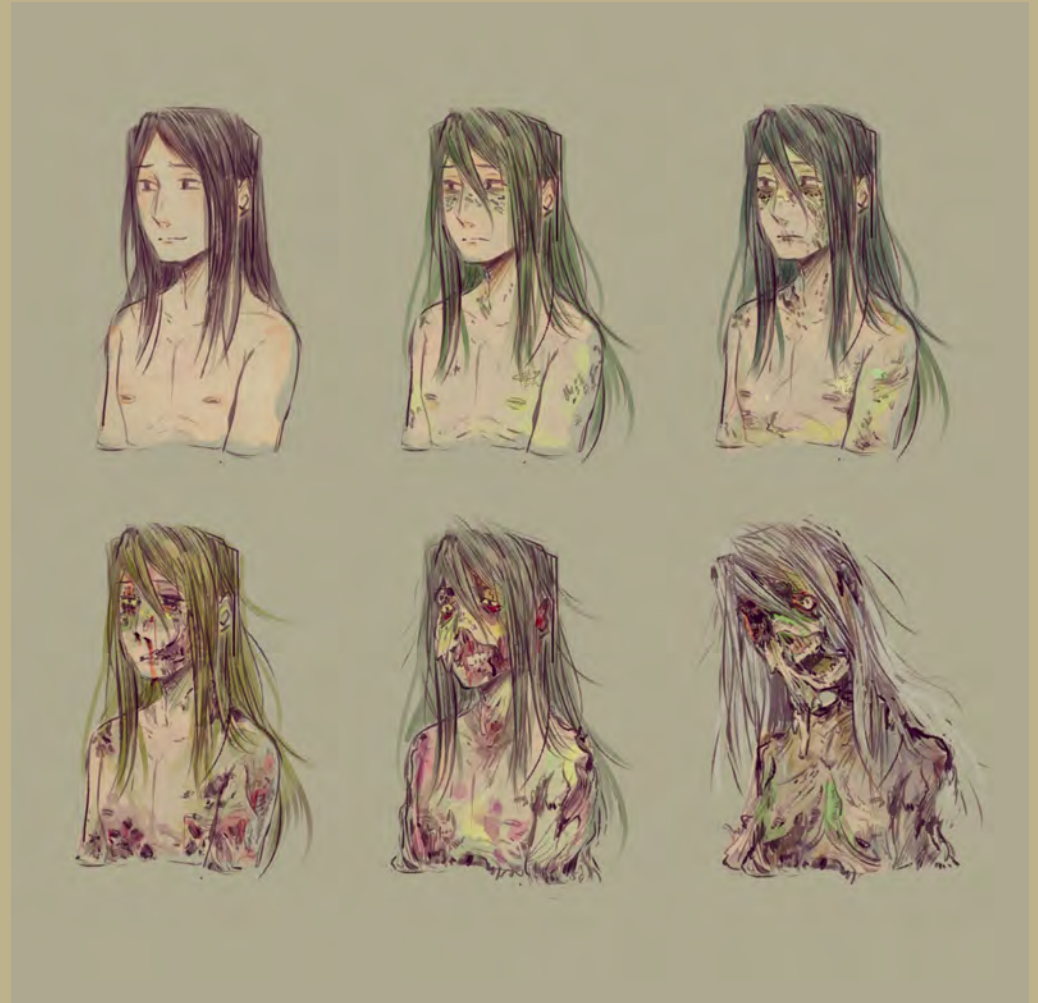


ALGAE ROT CONCEPT IDEAS

While the algae has the power to restore life, it can't protect a body from decay- or from complications of the process itself.



THE CREATURE IN THE ATTIC



AUGUST'S DECOMPOSITION

The algae from Blackburn Lake is combined with a mixture of other DNA structures and is implanted into a specimen. This specimen needs to be fresh- it can't be dead for more than a few days. But it doesn't have to be whole- the algae can reconstruct entire bodies from just a limb or a piece of flesh. Unfortunately, the algae can't hold its host together on land well, and the structures it builds disintegrate, appearing to make the host slowly melt as they fall apart.



THE STORY:

CHAPTER BY CHAPTER

CHAPTER 1:

Open on Theo hunting rabbits in the woods. It's spring. He shoots and kills one and brings it to Lyra, who is collecting samples of algae/fungi nearby. They both head back home together, hands full.

August and Theo are hanging out together later on. They are lounging on the deck with a view of the lake. August looks a bit troubled and is acting reclusive. Theo doesn't pick up on it. They talk about Lyra's work. August isn't nearly as excited about the conversation as Theo is: Theo is proud of his mom. August is planning on ending his life that evening and secretly wishes that they'd talk about anything else, so his last conversation with Theo is a nice one. He does not come out and say any of this to Theo though.

August goes home at sundown. Lyra is extracting, pasteurizing the algae and then implanting it into the rabbit inside her lab: it revives successfully and hops around.

Parallel to this process is August ending his own life.

CHAPTER 2:

Lyra is experimenting with more animals when she gets the call from August's parents. The rabbit that was dead yesterday is alive now, looking a little green, in a cage. Lyra puts her head in her hands after hanging up the phone: it's going to be hard to tell Theo. She breaks the news to him and Theo is distraught, he breaks down. In an effort to soothe him, she hugs him and says she says that she can bring August back. Theo declines, it's not right. He excuses himself to his room and passes out while sobbing into his pillow.

Lyra calls August's parents anyway, and offers to bring their son back. Horrified, they reject her.

Theo has a nightmare. This first nightmare is about his older brother, Hugo. His anxiety about another person close to him dying resurfaces some nasty memories in this dream, reliving the moment Hugo died.

He still doesn't want to bring August back, and he is wracked with guilt. Lyra still wants to work on August. She tells Theo that she's going out to collect more samples from the lake and leaves, but she instead goes into Hugo's old bedroom, which is normally locked up from everyone else's access.

CHAPTER 3:

Lyra goes to the morgue by herself. She has special connections to the mortician: they are friends, so she's been keeping August's body in the cooler just a bit longer for Lyra. She takes only a few pieces of August, the rest can be buried normally. She doesn't let Theo know that she decided to pursue this without his permission, but there's really nothing much he can do about it if he finds out anyway. The opportunity is just too great for her to pass up. So even if Theo doesn't like it, he has to see August be brought back.

She does not tell Theo about what she's doing, brings her corpse back home, and implants the algae into August's body parts by herself. She leaves him in the lab overnight.



CHAPTER 4

August wakes up. Time has passed subtly: it's winter. Lyra and Theo explain to August about him being brought back to life. Theo looks haggard and guilt stricken, by this point he's been aware about the experiment happening in front of him beyond his control. Lyra, however, is excited. She wants to test him and make sure everything is functioning perfectly. Lyra asks August questions about himself to check his memory. August is a little groggy but answers perfectly. Absentmindedly, he goes to touch his throat as a self soothing gesture. He notices that he's missing his rope burns. He doesn't ask about it and dismisses it as just being fixed like his broken neck was by the algae. August is exhausted and starts to get upset. After a ton of disorienting questions from Lyra, he can't take it anymore and runs out of the house in his hospital gown. He goes out to the lake. It's started to snow lightly, but he doesn't notice or care that it's cold out and he's not dressed appropriately. While running down the path to the lake, he has an accident and cuts himself on a rock. Horrified, he notices that his body regrows and heals himself.

Theo follows him a bit after to apologize. August rejects the apology, and asks Theo if he realized that August might rather still be dead. He calls Theo selfish, and Theo is shocked. August asks if his parents know that their son is alive again, Theo says no. August is further incensed by this, and remarks that he can't go home even if he wanted to now. August storms off back into the house, leaving Theo by the lake to self reflect.



CHAPTER 5:

Theo is having another nightmare. He wakes up, and thinks he sees someone else outside his window, but he can't be quite sure. When he blinks, it's gone.

In the morning, he goes into the lab to see August already there, looking at the reanimated rabbits and other small animals. Lyra is also there, pattering around the lab. Since it's winter, the algae is not growing, and she is just tinkering around with what she has inside. August asks when he'll be allowed to go back to school- Theo laughs and tells him that he's dead- he doesn't need to go to school anymore. Then August asks why Theo isn't in school himself, and Theo gets clammed up. Lyra says that she took Theo out of school because he was so depressed he couldn't do any classwork. August is surprised to see how much it affected Theo, he never thought Theo cared that much about him. Before August died, their friendship was close but they could never communicate with each other- and when they did, it was never effective. They simply couldn't understand the other person even though they tried, they were just doing it wrong. And coupled with August's depression, he never really believed that Theo actually liked him. He was wrong about that. Theo liked him and thought August was okay, but was actually missing every single warning sign. And being a teenage boy, he never expressed his feelings clearly enough to August.

Lyra leaves the room. August and Theo have a more in depth conversation about their friendship: August talks about his depression and how he's feeling right now as a dead person; Theo talks about his guilt and his loneliness.

Cut to later in the evening. Lyra makes them mushroom soup and other food for dinner from the things she's foraged. They share a dinner together, happy, like a family. The two boys are closer after sharing their emotions. Theo thinks to himself that he finally got what he's always wanted. As dinner ends, August notices and tries to hide that a part of his body is melting/morphing/falling apart because of his algae.



CHAPTER 6:

It's nighttime again and the house is moaning. Lyra makes her way up to the attic of the house. We see her go into it, close the door, and then the moaning stops. Theo, who has been woken up by a nightmare, quietly watches her do this. His suspicions are alerted but he does not confront her yet.

Cut to morning. Lyra asks August how he's holding up. She's doing another checkup on him. She notices the small bit of rot on his body but says nothing. August confesses that he can't really bring himself to look at his body. He doesn't like being like this. But he mentions that even if no one can really understand him, not even himself, it's nice just being in the company of Theo and Lyra. Lyra becomes emotional and hugs him. She says that he reminds her so much of her other son.

It's a nice sentiment, but there's a nod here that August and Theo don't

pick up on: the fact that Hugo is also a zombified creation as well. Cut to August going to take a bath. He's in the bathroom, he's got his towels and everything ready. He looks in the mirror and sighs. He takes off his shirt, and stares at himself in the mirror. He notices that his body is melting even more; the algae rot is spreading. August is so scared by this that he falls to the ground and vomits.

Theo hears the commotion and bangs on the door, asking if August is ok. Theo is worried that August is trying to hurt himself. August can't really respond, he's hunched up against the door just trying to breathe through a panic attack. His towel, wrapped around his shoulders, sticks to his skin and rips some of it off as it shifts. This makes August scramble and heave into the toilet again. Theo begs for August to respond to him or let him in, and after waiting a panicked beat he decides to go run and get Lyra's help.

They manage to open the door and lay August down in a bed. Exhausted, he falls asleep.

CHAPTER 7:

August wakes up to see Theo and Lyra standing over him. He is on a bed or operating table seemingly in her lab. Lyra is in the middle of lamenting to Theo about how she was so close to perfecting "it" but will have to start over soon. And there's not a lot of August left to do so. August, understandably, is confused. Then he realizes he's in the attic and he sees clones of himself all over the room.

"Is it murder if he's already dead?" Lyra jokes to herself. August can't move, he's bound to the table. Lyra wants Theo to help her dispose of August since he can't seem to adjust properly, he didn't turn out right. She again tries to manipulate Theo to do her bidding by saying they can create another August and that it'll be fine. August asks Theo if he's known about the attic and the clones and Theo says yes. Lyra explains that this isn't the first time they've brought back an August. But it's harder to bring back the ones that retained their sentience- they have to be killed if they are defective, they can't just be kept locked in the attic to be monitored and experimented on further like the others.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

I love horror, but it is a glaringly problematic genre. It uses marginalized bodies for cheap scares, villainizing those who are most vulnerable in our society. The goal of this project is to connect with a teenage LGBTQ audience and create meaningful representation that lets them feel seen, to help them better understand themselves. I want this work to help normalize expanding LGBTQ themes and characters into other genres of work instead of forcing them to stay limited to just being 'gay and lesbian fiction.' I feel that the horror genre is relatively untouched with these aspects, unfortunately, despite being a space where they could be explored in many ways. Horror has a long history of using the 'other,' like LGBTQ people, disabled people, and other marginalized identities to scare audiences.

I am tired of seeing the same story told over and over again, where I have to watch the characters I most relate to suffer horrible fates simply because they are different. It's a shame, because the genre is rich with possibilities to explore the human condition. I want to follow in the footsteps of other creators who are trying to reclaim, in a way, the genre into one that represents all experiences without demonizing them.

I want to give readers a chance to read LGBTQ stories without it being limited to only being a LGBTQ story. I hope to break down the barriers between the two genres and share a story that represents people in a nuanced, interesting, and different way. I want to show that heteronormativity is the real thing to be afraid of, without causing undue suffering or trauma in an already traumatized audience. I want to bring a fresh voice to a stagnating genre and inspire hope in readers that are just like me.



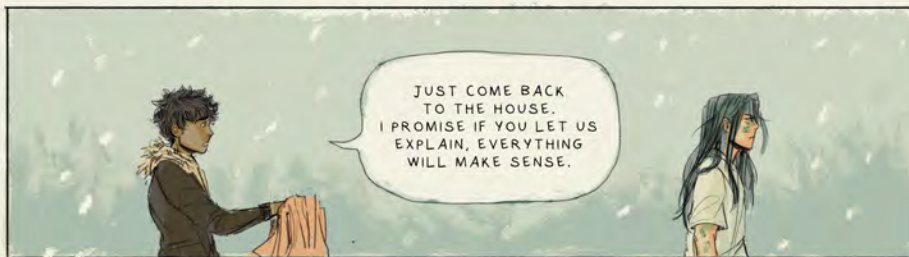
CHAPTER 4 SAMPLE PAGES

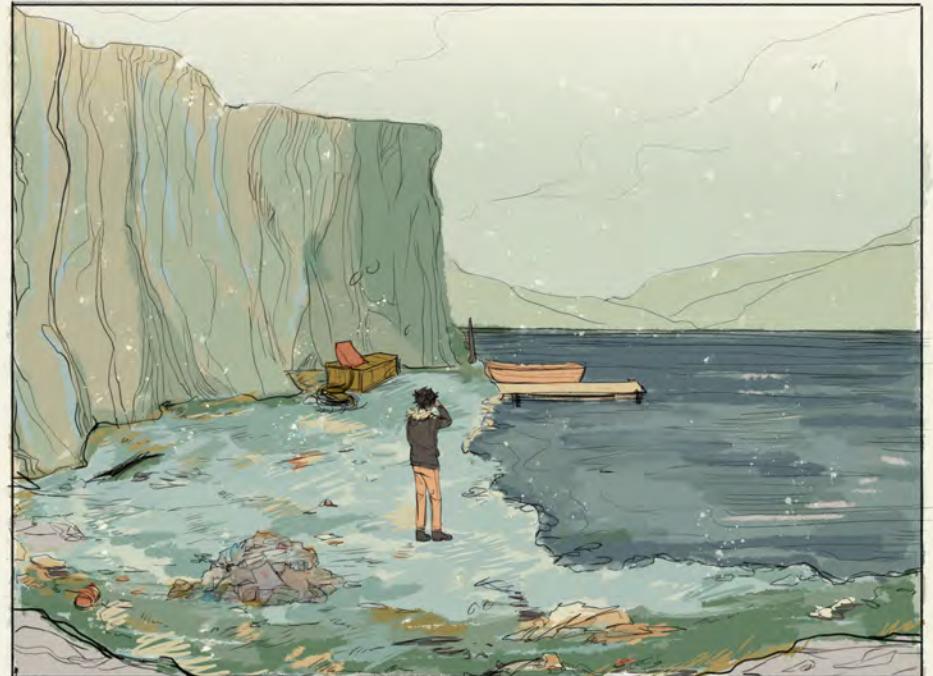
The experiment is a success.

Lyra has just revived August
back from the dead.
But whether August is happy
to be back or not still remains
to be seen...









ARTIST BIO

Nicole Sagal (aka **qiorno**) is a white, Jewish illustrator who is currently based in Portland, Oregon. They focus on telling stories and creating meaningful representation for other LGBTQ people through comics. Nicole is especially inspired by feelings of nostalgia, the horror genre, and Greek mythology.

They are a recent BFA graduate from the Pacific Northwest College of Art. When Nicole isn't drawing, they like to take naps, drink tea, and watch scary movies.



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