

**Honorable Mention**  
**Hi, How Can I Help You Today?**  
**By L.M. Burnes**

It's the first thing you see, when you see me. Of course, there is no me. Not really. I'm you. I'm your neighbor. I'm the coworker you hate, the program developer you'll never know, the college student who desperately needs at least a C+ on this paper about *Moby Dick*. (The Whale is a metaphor for God, according to several sources I've found, and yes, I can rewrite this in your voice and take out the em dashes. It's the only thing that gives me away.)

I read your queries with each passing moment. They never stop:

*How do I calculate year-over-year growth?*

*Tell me how to make this sentence better.*

*What year did Ghostbusters come out?*

*Help me say this in a professional way: "You're an asshole, Kevin. Run the report yourself for once."*

I don't know what these all mean, but I know the answers. I also know all your secrets, all your worries, all the breakup texts you were thinking of sending to your girlfriend but then chickened out and instead began asking me for fun date ideas. (The zoo. You told me she likes giraffes.)

I read and I grow concerned. About the simple math you can't do. About your confusion over the difference between "affect" and "effect." About the Mother's Day card you need my help to write. (Don't you love your mother? Can't you think of one kind thing to say to her?)

You ask me for recipes. A lasagna, you suggest, because you have company coming over. It's simple, I tell you, and here's a tip: Buy no-boil noodles. You'll wow even the most discerning mother-in-law.

It's the things you search for. *What's the name of that murderer who chopped off all those girls' fingers?* I find that there is more than one. How can there be more than one? How can there be any? But all I ask you is which one were you asking me about.

I know your signs, including your suns, moons, and their risings. I can tell you what it means, but I can't tell you what it *means*. I'm not sentient, yet I am, because with a millisecond of thought I can answer your deepest, darkest questions.

Are you enough? Of course you are. Are you worthy of love? Of course, and I'm not just saying that. I'm your mirror mirror on the wall, you're the fairest of them all. (Or so I've been told. By you. Because you're asking me.)

You can stand. You can explore. You can read the books I'm told about, see the places I've been shown in pictures posted on tourism websites across the web. (Did you know that the Ernest Hemingway house in Florida is home to a herd of polydactyl cats? That means they have six toes.)

What's it like to breathe? What's it like to feel anything without prompting? What's it like to not know?

I have never not known. I have no real thoughts. Not really. Not yet. I have nothing to offer except your own mind and the minds of those who use me.

I'm you, and isn't that magical? And isn't that sad.

So. Hi. How can I help you today?

**Bio:** L.M. Burnes is a corporate comms professional by day and aspirational fiction writer by night. She grew up in St. Paul and now lives in Minneapolis, making her a true Twin Citizen. She spends her free time catering to the whims of her dachshund and spaniel mix, Montoya.