



# NATURE HELD ME CLOSE

A ZINE ABOUT GENDER  
DYSPHORIA AND THE  
GREAT OUTDOORS

**VOLUME 1**

## Editor's Note

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*"Caw, caw!" A huge black crow circled above me in the air and landed on a rock nearby. We looked at each other in silence.*

*"Crow, are you a boy or a girl?"*

*"Caw, caw!"*

*I laughed and rolled over on my back. The sky was crayon blue. I pretended I was lying on the cotton white clouds. The earth was damp against my back. The sun was hot, the breeze was cool. I felt happy. Nature held me close and seemed to find no fault with me.*

- Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*

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*The idea for this zine was inspired, as most halfway decent ideas are, by a conversation with dear friends. It was the middle of winter and we were all feeling restless and yearning for some time outdoors: a chance to take a break from the constant cycle of terrible news, internet infighting, and our own insecurities. We got to talking about how much better we all feel when out in nature, both physically and mentally, and noted that spending quality time in the woods or by the creek or even in a garden lightened the weight of gender dysphoria significantly as well. I mentioned wanting to write (and read) about the subject sometime, but I didn't want to do it alone.*

*Luckily, after a call for submissions and 60+ responses later, I don't have to.*

*This collection of poetry, prose, art, photography, and mixed media work by trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming people is a testament to how nature itself can provide us with comfort, solace, and a sense of belonging. In a world where we're often made to feel that our very existence as queer people is unnatural, these stories are more important than ever.*

*As with many narratives about LGBT+ issues, there's some heavy subject matter involved. This collection contains writing that touches on the following topics: gender dysphoria, transphobia and homophobia, depersonalization/derealization, suicidal ideation, mass shooting incidents, and animal and human death, along with images of artistic nudity. Reader discretion is advised.*

*My heartfelt thanks go out to everyone who contributed to this zine: your talent, honesty, and passion have made this project something beautiful, and I'm honored to be a part of it.*

**El Green (Tumblr: @starfoozle)**  
Autumnal Equinox, 2020  
[natureheldmeclosezine.tumblr.com](http://natureheldmeclosezine.tumblr.com)

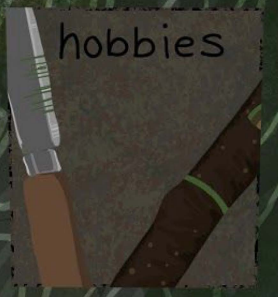
## Table of Contents

1. <i>there's a river in the woods</i> , Tony (@tontdraws) .....	4
2. <i>a seed in the dirt</i> , day.....	6
3. <i>I Have Forgotten How To Listen</i> , Soph.....	8
4. <i>Broke the Mold</i> , Jose Arias (@ultralowfi).....	9
5. <i>Towards the Light</i> , Tony (@tonyiswrong).....	11
6. <i>This is a poem about knowing yourself</i> , Sam Terry.....	13
7. <i>Mistaken</i> , Rook (@gayrachnid).....	14
8. <i>The Great Indoors</i> , Glaschwerw .....	15
9. <i>Mountain</i> , Olga (@thegoblinhour).....	17
10. <i>Summer in the Field</i> , El Green (@starfoozle).....	18
11. <i>Ascent and Peak</i> , Fen (@noonmarkart).....	22
12. <i>Bristlecone</i> , Adelaide F. (@wild-west-wind).....	23
13. <i>This Body Has Carried Me Up Mountains</i> , Noah Ulicki.....	27
14. <i>Untitled</i> , Anonymous.....	28
15. <i>In the Absence of Gender, A Metaphor Will Have To Do</i> , Jay Horton (@icaruskids) .....	29
16. <i>Mushrooms</i> , Jason Sheldon (@gay-for-ocypete).....	30
17. <i>The secret lives of roadkill</i> , Charlie Quinn (@dreamlogic).....	33
18. <i>Growth</i> , Tabitha (@squidfeathers).....	36
19. <i>Sour Candy</i> , Ayla Walter (aylawalter.com).....	37
20. <i>Looking Out for You</i> , Jay Horton (@icaruskids).....	39
21. <i>I remember walking away</i> , Newt (@blackersfirstname).....	40
22. <i>On the Wing</i> , Cro Cairns (@birdswithshoes) .....	41
23. <i>Bilateral Colors</i> , Basil (@not-louisa).....	42
24. <i>Yellow Cardinal</i> , Falcon (@_thunderstorm_).....	43
25. <i>Cardinal, Blue Jay</i> , Kim (frillbackstudios.com).....	44
26. <i>Reflections</i> , Grayson K. (@perhaps-a-dragon) .....	45
27. <i>Lord, What Fools These Mortals Be</i> , Nate (@astriiformes).....	46
28. <i>Simply Be</i> , Caitlin Hobbs (@caitlinthohob).....	48
29. <i>Climb</i> , Alex Orion.....	49
30. <i>Yellow Leaves</i> , A. Griffin .....	50

There's a river in the woods

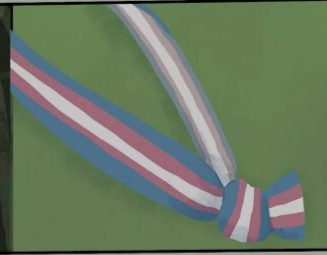
With stepping stones  
and a little beach

I bring many things with me when I visit





I leave my gender on my bed back at home



they/them

the water flows over my feet and

does

not

care.

**there's a river in the woods**

Tony (@tontdraws)

**a seed in the dirt**

*day*

a seed in the dirt

my skin is bared to the sun  
and the warmth i feel is the same  
inside as out.

there is the yellow of pollen,  
and there is the greenest moss  
cresting every other stone.  
(there is the blue  
of the river, too.)

mud tugs on my boots  
and paints little star systems  
on the backs of my legs.

i am not my body.  
or no— i am  
more than my body.  
is that right?  
i never could seem to get it right.

i think too much and i  
think too little  
and the sun will still rise  
every day this week.

it is hard, it is *hard*,  
trying to learn  
how to be myself.

no one can ever tell me why  
i feel like tv static  
all the damn time.

a songbird whistles for me at midnight  
and i'm not awake to hear it.

here is the bitter disconnect:  
a seed in my right lung,  
dirt in the left.

the light on a leaf

my skin is bared to the sun  
and the warmth feels just as good  
inside and out.

i feel yellow – i am the sun.  
i feel green – i am a sturdy growing stem.  
i don't feel blue.  
(but if i did,  
i'd be the sky.)

i stop to talk to a resting  
beetle, and i know we are  
a bit the same.

i exist in this world,  
and so does he.  
we may both be an oddity to some,  
yet very beautiful to others.  
and we are so, so, so, alive.

i am finding comfort in the answers  
i don't have yet,  
and even more in the ones  
i no longer seek.

i am learning every day,  
a new latin name, a new  
native flower.

tight petals are unfurling in me  
all the time.  
i let go. i breathe deep.

not having the right words  
is not the same as not knowing.

i have watered the seed,  
and loved it. i am the sun upon  
its new green skin.

## **I Have Forgotten How to Listen**

*Soph*

It was a strange relief to go to the backcountry  
deep into the heart of nature.  
I didn't worry how I looked  
my clothing was practical, not nice.  
Not feminine.  
A baggy t-shirt and cargo pants  
and I never washed my hair.

I was proud of my body in the backcountry  
when all that mattered was  
what I could do with it.  
Pulling my canoe through the lake-water  
stroke by stroke  
carrying huge packs over a long portage  
setting up my tent anew each night.  
Embodiment felt good.

Picture this:  
me and my sister  
lifting a heavy aluminum canoe  
high over our heads  
laughing  
just because we could.

Then the return to society.  
Still in those baggy grimy clothes  
and out of the habit of gender—  
confronted in a public washroom.

I learned to buy  
women's-cut exercise shirts  
a pink Gore-Tex raincoat  
form fitting quick-dry pants.  
I am an uncomfortable  
ambassador of gender  
the outdoors no longer an escape.

I'm still proud of my body  
how far it can carry me into the woods.

But  
I have forgotten  
how to listen  
to that great  
uncaring vastness  
of nature  
telling me I can leave gender behind.







### **Broke the Mold**

*Jose Arias (@ultralowfi)*

*"I am non-binary. Learning more about nature made me more confident in my gender identity. To learn of all the sexual and reproductive diversity in nature, of the male seahorse carrying their offspring to term; of the hermaphrodite fishes who change sex to secure their school's survival; the lionesses that grow manes; the asexual reproduction of fungi, made me realize nature is so wonderfully complex. I do not feel out of place or unnatural, I feel like another iteration of this diversity, which must be celebrated as the sacred creation it is. I feel much beloved by nature, who broke the mold with me to showcase the vast richness of its imagination."*

## **Towards The Light**

*Tony (@tonyiswrong)*

No body is just a body. I saw mine as a machine. A temperamental, ungrateful thing. It needed so much maintenance just to stay functional. Everybody else was made of shining metal and oiled gears, but I rusted more by the day.

Eventually, I accepted that my body was not static. Instead, I saw my body as an eldritch horror. A shifting, unstable thing. I had no idea why it felt so alien, or why it changed the way it did. It warped and curdled. It hurt me, subsumed me. I did not know the first thing about myself.

Eventually, I accepted that my body was not my own. I saw my body as the Other. A separate thing. I saw my body as an opponent, and I fought it bitterly, resentment driving me to deprive it of delight. I hid it away in the dark--a shameful, repellent burden.

As you can imagine, none of these conceptions were... helpful.

I started getting into plants at roughly the same time as I started to think:

"Maybe it's not usual or healthy to conceive of my body as a fundamentally unknowable, alien opponent?"

In retrospect, this shouldn't have taken me more than twenty years to figure out. Naturally, after thinking about this for a while, I buried it as deep as I could and hoped the problem would go away.

Plants are wonderful. I thought about them a lot instead. I only had two or three at first. They were small, pointed succulents, and I admired the way they changed and grew--the way they sought the light unerringly, shifting over time. The way a small bud or pup could be so different from its parent plant. How they changed with the seasons, shifting in colour, growing slower. How some would throw out stems with violently-coloured flowers, deciding it was their ordained time to shine.

And oh! Their resilience!

The animal body has so many irreplaceable moving parts, so many fragile components. Plants, if you'll excuse my bluntness, don't give a shit. Any part of most plants, given time, could probably become an entirely new, self-sufficient thing--and they can recover from most any loss. Through drought, bugs, cats, moulds, uprooting, and even the errant lawnmowing of a housemate, my plants lived on.

I spent a lot of time looking for more. Markets, at first, but the front gardens of my local suburbia have a lot of succulents--and each dropped leaf or surreptitious cutting can, with time and patience, become a whole new plant. Two became five, became ten, became more than one for every year I have lived.

What was once opaque became intuitive. Too much sun, too little water. That potted soil is too loose, this soil has no organic life. Cycles of care and observation. There was no particular

use looking up endless instructions or care guides. Beyond a certain point, you have to pay less attention to the theoretical construct of "this kind of plant", and more to the entirely non-theoretical needs of your individual plants.

I found myself wanting to be a plant. To grow, to have simple needs, and to be nourished. To grow and change and shed whatever became dead weight. To adapt, to extrude garish colours, to sink my roots deep. To throw out the prescribed guidelines and have my categories matter less than my needs.

Without my knowing it, plants had become practice. They became something else to think about, something other than the intrinsic wrongness of being perceived, of having a body. I spent more time worrying about them than I did myself--and when all I thought about was plant-related, it became so easy.

I saw my body as a plant. Sitting on my balcony as the day ended, with all of us drinking from the same bottle of water, one by one, it was the most natural thought--and if I was a plant, should I not take care of myself as fluidly and attentively as any other?

I'd like to say that I had my revelation there, on the balcony, bathed in afternoon light--but that would be a little too much artistic license, even for me. It took me a few months more to unpack my feelings enough to work out I was nonbinary. Also, my balcony only really catches the morning light.

Even now, years later, I still think of my body as a plant. The way I am categorised matters far less than my needs, and I am doing whatever I can in order to flourish. My self is allowed to shift and change, to grow beyond what it is. With care, my body is resilient--and what I put into it can change how it grows. And, of course, I can throw on as many garish colours as I damn well please.

I see my body as a plant, and I grow towards the light.

## This is a poem about knowing yourself

Sam Terry

I stare into the trees  
and the trees don't look back.  
I name the leaves as I walk:  
*Quercus alba* – white oak, *Asimina triloba* – pawpaw,  
*Fagus grandifolia* – American beech.  
There is a power in names.  
It can help,  
to know where things belong,  
to find connection in a few fractured syllables  
handed down through time  
or recently discovered,  
to know who you're linked to  
by growth pattern and experience  
by habitat and history,  
to define the niche you occupy.  
I struggle to define myself,  
to find the names that fit like all the Latin in my field guide,  
to learn the shape of who I am  
and put words to it.  
The trees do not know their names.  
They will grow anyway,  
if they have sun and water and the right soil.  
Nameless, the forest thrums with life.  
And life? It continues,  
complex and messy and boundless,  
tangled and weedy and  
green.  
And the words I try to find fall short,  
don't even scratch the surface,  
but still it all grows.  
I marveled in the beauty of the cardinal's song long before I could pick out the artist.  
And more than that, it moves me  
with a song of spring evenings and buds unfurling.  
My heart blooms at seeing splashes of color in the undergrowth  
even when my mind goes blank trying to label the flowers.

I practice casting my names to the wind,  
the trees and frogs can't speak them anyway  
the syllables too rough for the wasps and mushrooms.  
With each step on damp earth,  
I am remembering what it was like to watch and listen and breathe  
without trying to hold it all at once,  
and I like the way that feels.



## Mistaken

Rook (@gayrachnid)

*"People simplify soil into a void. Soil, to the inexperienced, is a nothingness. Overcast, empty landscapes are bleak. They are also nothing, if only given a cursory glance. I am non-binary – when people hear this, they assume that my gender is nothing. Non-binary defaults to agender. But, much like the soil or broad, grey worlds, this is not always true. After all, as I study soil, it is complex and brimming with elements, and, as I look in toward my own gender, it is multifaceted and more than binary. The times I stand in fields, in fog so thick I cannot see the bottom of the hill, it is the calmest I ever am. Not because there is nothing, but because there is innate understanding, and the open space that is mistaken for nothingness holds me close."*

## The Great Indoors

*Glaschwerw*

I never expected to be a caver.

I am probably the least likely person you would pick for an extreme sport, for any number of reasons: I once won a competition for most books read in a year when I was thirteen, and am now training to be a librarian. I was consistently in the bottom class for all physical education throughout my school career. Caving is a social sport: you never cave alone, and I have had problems with social anxiety for as long as I can remember.

And the last, worst thing: I am non-binary, and dysphoric. I dislike my body. I dislike people touching my body, and if preferable, even looking at it. The less awareness others have of my body – the less awareness I have – the better I feel.

You wouldn't think this is a problem. But the thing is that caving, if you've never been caving in my area, can be a very messy business. Caves are universally damp places around where I live, and are frequently intersected by streamways, and at some point or other you will usually find yourself entering a cave by shallow river, or wading through a pool, or crawling through a half-submerged tunnel. And the end result of all of this, when you emerge triumphant from the ground having faced your fears of heights or the dark or small spaces or any of the numerous aspects of caving that are absolutely terrifying, is that you're soaked through. So before you leave the area, you will need to change.

I didn't think about this aspect of caving before I really got into it, because it's one of those things you just learn as you go. But with a few key exceptions thanks to some well placed caving huts, getting changed into dry clothes is usually a kind of scramble next to a car, out in the middle of wherever you are. Usually a plain or a field or an open hill, which means stripping off with a group of others, right out in the open.

The first real trip I went on, myself and my group ended up being trapped in a cave.

It wasn't very long, and it wasn't very dramatic: we stood and shivered under a waterfall for a few hours until the safety callout we'd left expired, and Cave Rescue was alerted that we hadn't checked in. They came and lowered down a rope to replace the ladder that was missing, and they pulled us out into the night air. But it's an experience that I love to think about – both for the trip itself, which was hours and hours of fairly complex manoeuvring through a difficult system, and not, as a more experienced caver complained, the beginner's trip that had been promised, but also for the feeling I got when I stepped outside and started to strip off by the car: too frozen to care about who was around me, and too keyed up on that sense of community to worry about what they were thinking. And a little bit, too proud of my body for what it had achieved – for getting me through the crawls and down the rifts and keeping me warm and safe for those long hours under the waterfall. So without thinking too much about it, I stripped off in the middle of a plain, surrounded by those who'd been underground with me and those who had gotten me out.

When we got back that evening, frozen but triumphant to the camping site, everyone was holding a round of caving-themed games. Who could squeeze through the smallest hole? If we get two people together, how tight a loop can you slip over the two of you from heel to head? Can one person climb over and around another standing person without touching the floor? *Did you want to have a go?* said one of the other cavers. *What do you reckon you'd be good at? Can we take a look at you?*

And still high on that feeling – of having survived something, of feeling more than myself, part of something bigger – I let two strangers look my body up and down and evaluate it purely on how functional it was.

*Try the loop with me, one of them said. I reckon from the look of you we could make a pretty good go of it. And I said okay.*

Caving can do that for you, I've learned over and over again in the years since I've started. Every time I go underground, I don't have to fight against the way I feel like my body should be: it's a few sweet hours where I get to use my body, every part of it, to get over all the obstacles in my way, and to help others do the same.

If you've never been caving, it can be difficult to imagine being in a place so uniquely unsuited to being shaped like a human person. I expected, on my first trip, to be waltzing through passages with flat, walkable floors, with comfortable head-height ceilings, marvelling at the incredible sights. But caving isn't like that, and I didn't realise until I got underground how used I was to moving through spaces that had been created for the purposes of able-bodied people like me. The passages and drops in caves are created mostly by dissolution of limestone within rock, movement of rock and rubble, or by gradual erosion of streamways, but definitely not by human effort. Which means that going underground, you need to adapt your body to whatever shape the cave has decided it's going to take.

This means that at its core, caving is about shoving and pushing your body into whatever shape it needs to be able to tackle what's up next: bracing your body as big as you can in a rift so you can climb across easily, squeezing in as tight as you can so you can make it through a crawl, pressing yourself low to the ground close to an edge so you're not in danger of falling. You need to make yourself big, and small, and strong, and tall, and flat, all depending on the situation.

And so almost every part of my body that I hate when I'm above ground is something that I can use, somewhere, under it.

It's not an easy fix. There are times when being so physically connected to the way my body moves and feels is a stark reminder of all the ways that I dislike being inside it. But most of the time, the rewards of doing what I do – the sights I see, the things I achieve, the ways I scare myself and still get on with it – is enough to offset that feeling of discomfort, at least for the time that I'm down there and those sweet few hours afterwards.

Three weeks ago, I went caving with a group of friends in a system a few hours south, and it was incredible. We sat on a ledge by a fast-flowing river and watched it rush by, and we explored a nasty crawl, and we rifted a little over a small ravine – putting your back against one wall and your hands and feet against the other, and bracing yourself over the long dark drop, you shuffle yourself across.

And when we got outside and back to the car, we stripped off and changed in the open air. And buoyed up on that feeling, when the gang of young lads raced past on their bikes, I stood there mostly undressed and raised a hand in return without a trace of self-consciousness, without giving one single shit about the parts of my body that were bared.

I don't love my body. I don't think that I ever will. But every time I go caving, it's a necessary reminder to myself that I don't have to love it, or even like it: it can be useful, instead. And during that time at least, for me, I think that can be enough.





## Mountain

Olga (@thegoblinhour)

"I am an AFAB genderfluid person. Years before I knew words like those, I had felt intensely uncomfortable and upset with constant and often forceful expectations of femininity. I didn't want to "look like a girl" or "act like a lady" unless I happened to fancy it that day, and even then it always seemed that my ladylike was coming out askew, not up to a standard, and the world seemed hellbent on not letting me be fine with it.

But in the mountains -- oh, what joy! The summer hiking trips were an escape from everything: not just from the noise and ramped-up pace of living in a big city, but also from the expectations. A magical place where my unkempt hair and oversized shirts and unshaved legs and heavy boots and scratched knees and the mud under my fingernails were allowed -- were the standard, the uniform, as I sat with passing strangers around a fire, eating hot soup and laughing out loud and my heart was light. My heart always felt lighter up there, so close to the sky it almost felt like flying -- how could I hate a body that has carried me so far, and so far from the scrutiny of the little people down below? To sit in the cool grass on the top of a mountain was to be, for three weeks a year, absolutely free."

## Summer in the Field

*El Green (@starfoozle)*

### May

*A partial checklist of supplies for spending the summer doing botanical research in the rural midwest as a young scientist with a Gender Situation:*

- ❑ Lightweight, long-sleeved clothing to block the sun and keep the bugs off:
  - ❑ Military surplus fatigue pants, a shapeless fishing shirt, heavy gardening gloves, wool socks that won't rot your feet off when you step in the creek two hours into an eight-hour day, boots you don't mind ruining, a bandana.
  - ❑ A baseball cap from Tractor Supply Co., which is useful in a number of ways: keeps the sun off your neck, convenient for draping a bug net over, helps you pass as a Nice Young Man instead of... well, whatever you are.
- ❑ Waterproof sunscreen, the most powerful DEET-based mosquito repellent you can find, and that lemongrass-vanilla hippie bug spray that seems to be the only thing keeping the biting gnats at bay. Consider a permethrin soak for your gear, too. Lyme's no joke.
- ❑ Tecnu poison ivy wash. You will need it.
- ❑ A sports bra you can tolerate that's not a binder. You need as much lung capacity as you can manage when you'll be carrying a 40-lb pack all day in summer sunshine and the humidity reaches above 85%.
- ❑ An STP device, which is less gender-affirming than it is a way to keep ticks and poison ivy off your bare ass for when you will, inevitably, have to find a tree to discreetly pee behind.
- ❑ A menstrual cup, if you haven't successfully managed to hack your birth control pill packs to suppress a period for the duration of your contract. There's no toilets out here.
  - ❑ Bring Aleve, and extra jerky for the iron, too.
- ❑ The psychological fortitude to remove parasitic insects, splinters, thorns, cactus spines, and other foreign bodies from your own body with a minimum of complaint.
- ❑ A good knife.
- ❑ A way to square up with the following: you're the only not-man on your research team and will be spending the next three months in swamps and prairies and woods with no cell service, far from any road.

### June

*A list of things you are beginning to collect in your travels:*

- Herbarium specimens with excellent monikers. Some personal favorites: *Eryngium yuccifolium*, commonly known as rattlesnake master. The parasitic vine *Cuscuta*, which has a whole host of peculiar common names: devil's guts, witch's hair, wizard's net, strangleweed, dodder, hellbine. There's compass plant, dame's rocket, prairie blazing star, purple-headed sneezeweed. You decide that *Bromus inermis* sounds like the name you'd take in a Mad Max-style apocalypse.

- Souvenirs from your field sites. You find plenty of natural treasures, and some unnatural ones, when crouching in the dirt and counting plants all day: a number of shed antlers, a box turtle carapace, century-old discarded bottles, shotgun shells, a racoon skull that's bleached white and completely intact aside from a single missing canine tooth. Your teammates, surprisingly, are as enthused as you are about bringing home bones and shells and bits of worn glass, so long as nothing you collectively find is protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. It's nice to not have to explain yourself for once.
- Barbecue joint recommendations. Your colleagues, even the aging hippie, are insistent about their meat intake while on the road -- surprisingly so, for environmentalists -- and while you're by no means a vegetarian yourself under normal circumstances, you will probably have eaten an entire pig yourself by the end of the season. Manual labor makes you hungry. Aside from that one place where a bunch of drunk guys in matching gun-club polos were open-carrying at the next table over and you got stared at hard as you made your way to the bathrooms, everywhere you go is pretty good.
- Ways to wave off the confusion you inspire at the gas station or feed store or diner: you're passing, albeit not intentionally, more than half the time when you roll into an establishment in your grubby outdoor gear. The first time a waitress asks what she can get for you, young man, your team lead tries to correct her (incorrectly) on your behalf, but you wave both of them off with a *"don't worry about it, it's fine, an iced tea for me, please,"* and chug half your glass of water to try to bring down the nervous flush creeping up your cheeks. A server does a double-take at the info on your driver's license when you get carded for a beer, but you pretend not to notice. You startle a woman in the bathroom of the Rural King, pitch your voice up to apologize, and beat a hasty retreat without drying your hands. Under other circumstances, you'd feel great about being correctly perceived as ambiguously gendered. Out here, though, all you can feel is other people's eyes on you.
- New muscle. New calluses. New sunburns on your nose and ears when you sweat off your sunscreen less than halfway through the day. A new mask of freckles across your cheeks. A new sense of confidence, as the weeks go on, that you can keep up with the men who have been doing this for their whole career, that you can haul your heavy pack with its flags and quadrats and bundles of pressed grasses and measuring tapes and metal detectors and all the other gear for miles every day in the blazing sun. A new sense of confidence that yes, you *are* a real live scientist at last: the night you all stumble into the lobby of another roadside motel to check in, caked with mud and reeking of sweat and decaying plant matter from the wetland site you'd been sampling earlier, laughing and exhausted, a guest inquires as to what on earth you do for work. "We're biologists!" your team lead says cheerfully, and you turn it over in your head with pride: finally, an identity you can claim that nobody could possibly fight you on, at least given the current state of your boots.
- Snapshots of rural Illinois: advertisements for the world's largest wind chimes and world's largest rocking chair in a field of pumpjacks bobbing for oil. Soy and corn stretching to the horizon, a monoculture that defies your team's biodiversity survey. A

water tower shaped like a ketchup bottle. Burma-Shave style signage proclaiming “guns save life.” A cypress swamp at sunset from the window of the truck. A town called Moonshine, population 2. Unsettling phrases posted on the roadside marquees you drive by: WALK-IN RABIES CLINIC. GUNS AND LIVE BAIT. PRAY FOR THE ARK OF THE COVENANT. LOWEST AMMO PRICES. IF IT DOESNT CHALLENGE YOU IT DOESNT CHANGE YOU. ABOVE ALL ELSE GUARD YOUR HEART.

## July

*Things that have alarmed or injured you so far this summer:*

- Every mosquito in the greater Midwest, apparently. Biting buffalo gnats that go for your lips or the corners of your eyes. Thickets of wood nettle that you have no choice but to wade through while your legs itch and burn from a million formic acid-laden stings. The threat of poison ivy’s toxic oils clinging to your clothing, which gets dumped in the washer the minute you get home. Black raspberry and wineberry and greenbrier and dog rose and thistle and prickly pear and, god help you, a black locust with thorns longer than your thumb that you almost grabbed for balance while slipping on a hill. Stumbling into a patch of quicksand on the shore of a creek and almost losing your shoes in the extraction process. A thousand ticks, though only one managed to latch onto you without you noticing, and with them the looming horror of lyme disease, babesiosis, rocky mountain spotted fever, and alpha-gal syndrome, the latter of which would put an end to your barbecue days for good. A 2 am tornado warnings on your phone while lightning strobos from the window of a Ramada Inn. A 115-degree heat index on the shores of the Mississippi River, your vision tunnelling as you realize you stopped sweating ten minutes ago and your brain’s starting to cook. Two different copperheads gliding past you at the marsh site off the railroad incline and vanishing into the water. The Christian talk radio hosts thundering about the evils of gay marriage, legalized in the US less than a month ago, when your colleagues go flipping through radio stations on the drive home.

*Things that have not alarmed or injured you:*

- Anyone on your research team. The prospect of a difficult day’s work. The prospect of existing inside your own body, for the first time in a very long while.

## August

*An excerpt from your journal, August 2015:*

*“...I’m getting off track here. I have such a love-hate with the work I’ve been doing this summer, but it’s really mostly love. It’s the hardest work, physically, I’ve ever had to do: constant unavoidable minor injuries, constant threat of major injuries, constant exhaustion due to all of the above. It does not take a lot of brainpower, standing in a swamp and counting plants, but that’s been weirdly good, to just follow directions and put my own physical form to work.*

*(For the record, it’s hard to be dysphoric when you’re hauling heavy gear or just trying to stop yourself from passing out in the heat. Puts you in touch with your body in a different and positive way – I might have some hangups about the way mine looks, but it works just fine, and that shouldn’t ever be taken for granted. Also comically ugly neon field gear and general grime makes you stop caring about your appearance really fast, and as that one text post*

*says, plants will never misgender you. Nature as a whole doesn't care that you're trans. You're just another big animal blundering around in the weeds, and that's...really kind of nice.)"*

The end of the field season is drawing near: just a few more sites to sample, and then it's back indoors for you and time to learn to redomesticate yourself. Grad school starts at the end of the month, and the prospect of trading all this sunlight for a fluorescent-lit computer lab in the windowless cinderblock tower you'll be working in casts a pall over your heart.

You have a few things to attend to first: in a week or so you'll trade your sun-bleached scrubby work clothes for your very first suit. You're flying to the East Coast to be a groomsman in a college buddy's wedding -- a fact that will produce no small amount of consternation among his Southern Baptist relatives, especially when you appear with your beloved former roommate (who is also not a man) on your arm. A few days later you'll fly back into O'Hare humming with excited nerves: you're meeting your Canadian penpal for the first time in the terminal after a summer of writing to her about your travels, and you feel a strange, delirious lightheadedness at the concept of finally seeing her in person, though you're not *quite* out to yourself enough yet to recognize what this might mean. But for now, as the dog day heat settles in across the prairies and the quality of the light through the trees begins to shift from green to gold, you are as close to feeling at peace with your own body as you've ever been.



**Ascent and Peak**

*Fen (@noonmarkart)*

## Bristlecone

*Adelaide F.*

Hooves beat hard on the dry earth. A young boy stands, arms outstretched like Moses at the Red Sea. A herd of cows parts around him. He thinks, like many people do, that he has some special connection with these massive beasts, unaware that cows, being reasonably intelligent creatures, would not choose to run headlong into the small stand of Sugar Pine behind him.

The young boy is certain, in this moment, that he will never go camping again. He has thought this on each of the four trips he was on previously. He is on the edge of puberty, and he has never been more afraid. The cows don't help.

\*\*\*

A young boy arrives at his uncle's house in Vacaville. He is going camping. He has no choice in the matter. His Grandpa, Father, Uncle, and Brother are all coming as well. It's a Men's trip. Where the boy, he is told, needs to Man Up. He is told that he will do this by sleeping in a tent with two other Men, and killing a fish. He doesn't understand what any of that has to do with being a Man. After nearly driving their RV into a reservoir in Stanislaus National Forest, the Men celebrate their manliness by failing to catch a fish and cooking hot dogs badly over a campfire.

The young boy cannot sleep. He had the dream again last night. Most nights he is haunted by nightmares. Violence, suffering, terror, pervade his sleeping moments. He's not afraid of those for long once he wakes up. It's the good dreams that scare him the most. The ones where he isn't himself.

\*\*\*

A young woman is standing by the side of the road. She is a Park Ranger. You can tell because she is wearing a large flat hat and a little brass badge that says "Park Ranger" on it. She watches as bison graze in a distant field. Forty-nine in all, a mix of yearlings, red dogs, and cows. They feed in silence, interrupted only by rare grunts. Cows chastising their busy calves, yearlings getting in teenage squabbles. She watches them, and she smiles, and she laughs as a red dog tries to suckle a cow that isn't their mother, and the cow swings her haunch into their side and they jump a foot straight up into the air. The wind blows cool down the river valley. The lodgepole pines sway gently and whistle their eerie tune.

\*\*\*

A young boy makes the decision to have a different voice. He's been thinking about it lately and, to be frank, he's not a fan of his current one. It makes him afraid. He's not sure why. He's worried he likes the fact that it hasn't dropped yet. He's worried that everyone else made a choice to sound a certain way, and he was behind the pack. He decides his should be deep. He decides this as he is hiking what he believes to be an excruciatingly difficult trail that was probably less than five miles of flat desert terrain. It's not even hot out. He has chewed the nipple of his camelback to the point that it is unrecognizable. He is dehydrated, but much less dehydrated than he thinks. He decides that will be his excuse to test out different voices.

He will do this again, much later in life. He won't see the irony for a while.

Walking among the Joshua trees, chewing on a chunk of silicone, he responds to a question, and the girl who asks it laughs at him.

\*\*\*

A young woman walks through the woods. Woods full of bleached white bones and jagged rock, and a mountain a treasure hunter fell off of a few years back. It's a canyon full of hope. Over winter the elk hide out here, mostly free from predation by wolves. Free to live or die by luck alone. And most live. White flakes of bone, old winterkill, are pounded into the soil, feeding the plants that feed the elk who will die here one day. A young woman laughs that she didn't bring enough water. She laughs that she'll end up like these ruined remains of elk, some decades gone, some who suckled calves who might now stand noble on the hills above the hot springs. She laughs that she never learns, and her friend laughs with her.

\*\*\*

A young man arrives at the edge of Inyo National Forest. A sign there reads "Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest." The young man is supposed to see the trees. Gnarled, ugly things, or so they appear in the little visitor's center with a huge piece of LA aqueduct in its center. He stands inside it and looks up. A young man hears that the road up ahead is closed. A freak snow storm, they say. He doesn't really care. They're just ugly trees. He doesn't want to be out there at all. He hates camping. He hates the lack of privacy, he hates the comments he gets when he carries his heavy pack, he hates the rough feel of hair on his face.

\*\*\*

A young boy rests his nose in a crack in the bark of a sugar pine. He breathes deep, inhaling its sweet scent. He isn't thinking then, just smelling the tree. You can tell the difference, he has been told, between ponderosa and sugar pines by scent alone. He wraps his arms around the tree, and holds it tight. In this moment, the sun setting beyond the south fork of the Kern River, he feels like the sugar pine. Dwarfed by the world around him, however huge he may grow. Hard, but somewhere, if you are willing to look and be open to it, sweet.

\*\*\*

A young man decides that he had a pretty good run. He is driving ninety miles per hour toward Antioch, California. Well, he thinks to himself, he's had an okay run. Fields and fen stretch out in the moonless night, lit only by the single headlight on his dark blue Chevy S-10 pickup. Signs warn travelers not to throw cigarette butts out their windows, lest they ignite the rare, undisturbed peat left in the San Joaquin Delta. A young man throws his steering wheel to the right, just the moment that a highway patrol officer flicks on his lights. The young man doesn't know why, but he pulls over. He thinks about the bristlecone pines while he watches the flashing lights play against the loamy earth.

\*\*\*

A woman watches a black bear dig through the pine duff, single-minded, looking for food, overwhelmed by the smell of a worthless candy wrapper laying by the roadside. Some days she feels like the bear. Some days she feels like the roadside garbage. Some days she feels like the lodgepole pines, beautiful and stoic and ever-changing. All impermanent and perfect in each moment that they stand, though they may not stand long.

\*\*\*



A teenage boy walks into the woods. He's neither excited nor unexcited. He's ambivalent. He tells himself he likes the quiet outside. His friend, who will one day say that people like him are mutilating their bodies and making themselves into freaks, argues that it's really quite loud outside, between chatter in other tents, buzzing insects, the incessant song of crickets. The teenage boy does not mean the noise. Not that noise, anyway. A constant thrumming roar sounds between his ears. A fear, and a hope, and a fear that his hope might one day come to be, and a hope that his fear might one day bleed away. Outside, in the woods, in the precious few moments he can be really alone, it wouldn't go away, but it might grow quiet. It's easier without other people around. Easier when he doesn't need to choose, and she can just be.

\*\*\*

A young boy is told that he'll be visiting the bristlecone pines. He doesn't know what they are. There is a bullet in his pocket, one that he is certain fits his father's .44 pistol, hidden in an unlocked box in the garage, one drawer above the drill. He rolls it over in his fingers. He isn't listening. He is thirteen years old, and he is fairly certain he won't live to be fourteen. His class gets out at the little visitor's center with the big piece of LA aqueduct. He stands inside it and looks up. A truck is overturned on the road up to the trees. It's blocking both lanes. The boy leaves the visitor's center, as his school group heads off on their adventure. He reaches in his pocket, and the bullet is gone. He doesn't mind.

\*\*\*

A young woman is now a geologist. She had to take minerology for her environmental science major, and she had never been so excited by a class. She decided to be a geologist less than a month ago, and she's already TAing an intro geology class. She's outside Copperopolis, climbing an old mine tailings pile. She's looking for serpentinite. It's common in the mountains out here, but most is mediocre. She's also looking for flashes of teal in the rocks. Ore that slipped past the miners. Copper miners. Hence the name. She isn't 'she' yet, she won't be consistently for a long time, but sliding down the pile she hears a joke and laughs with her standard goose-meets-hyena-meets-donkey howling laugh and a boy in the class asks another "what's *her* deal."

\*\*\*

A woman hikes her 170<sup>th</sup> mile in the park she lives and works in. Lodgepole pines tower above her. Young Douglas firs and subalpine spruces grow low beneath them. A new generation. A young forest becoming an old one. Some days she feels like a lodgepole pine. Sometimes she feels like the forest, once burnt, now returning, not to normal, because there is no normal, but reaching a new equilibrium.

Sometimes though she feels like a tree she's never seen. Twisted and beautiful and broken and despite setting down roots in stones where they will find no sustenance, refusing to die.

\*\*\*

A teenage boy sits at the edge of a meadow. He has been in the South Sierras for two weeks. He will spend the next three days totally alone. He's thinking about getting into World of Warcraft again. He's trying to avoid thinking about the other thing. He knows that there is only so long he can avoid it. He's not ready, but he prepares for the storm nonetheless.

When he was in third grade, sleeping, or rather not sleeping, in a pup tent with his father, he knew. When he stood in the part in the stampede he knew. Something was wrong. He knew the word for it, but he wouldn't dare think it.

\*\*\*

A woman in the woods hikes further through the old growth forest, until it opens up to a scenic vista, looking out toward a lake, still miles in the distance. She sits down on the stump of a tree killed by some long-extinct hot spring. She watches the geyser at the lake's edge erupt, a tiny blip of steam only visible to someone who knows what to look for.

\*\*\*

A teenage boy lays under his tarp. It's snowing. His backpack sits on one side, a pile of pine duff and stones on the other. The wind rips past his head and feet. He closes his eyes. He has the dream again. It's always *the* dream, even though it's different every time. He's different there. She's happy. Her mind is quiet. He wakes up, and despite the biting cold, he paces a rut in the ground. He paces until he is sore. He paces until the pine duff and pebbles become static under his feet. He watches the sun rise over his meadow, and he eats three bites from a wretched sphere of salami that is his only food. He has not eaten salami since.

The teenager makes a decision, whether knowingly or not. It wasn't hard, not really. At that moment, in the quiet meadow, in the moment the birds awoke and began to sing their morning songs to the fresh fallen May snow, the choice didn't seem to matter. The teenager needed to change, because the alternative was worse. Something was wrong, but the teenager was starting to think that 'wrong' was not the right word.

\*\*\*

Bristlecone pines grow where nothing else can. They grow in barren soil, without rain. They grow, however slowly and with countless setbacks, steadily. In circumstances that should kill them, in circumstances where everything is against them. In circumstances they did not choose, but in which they will thrive, god damn it.

\*\*\*

A teenage boy set up his tarp at the edge of a meadow. He felt the snow on his face. He listened to the birds sing and dance through the trees above. A teenager walked to the stream through the middle of it all, and sat in silence at the edge of it. Sitting, and listening, and feeling the water feed back into the earth. A young woman walks back to her tarp, not quite whole, not quite well, but growing regardless.

\*\*\*

*Adelaide F. (She/Her, He/Him at work, experimenting a bit with They/Them) is a Park Ranger at a park you've probably heard of. All these stories are true, but in the long tradition of Park Rangers telling stories, some are more true than others.*

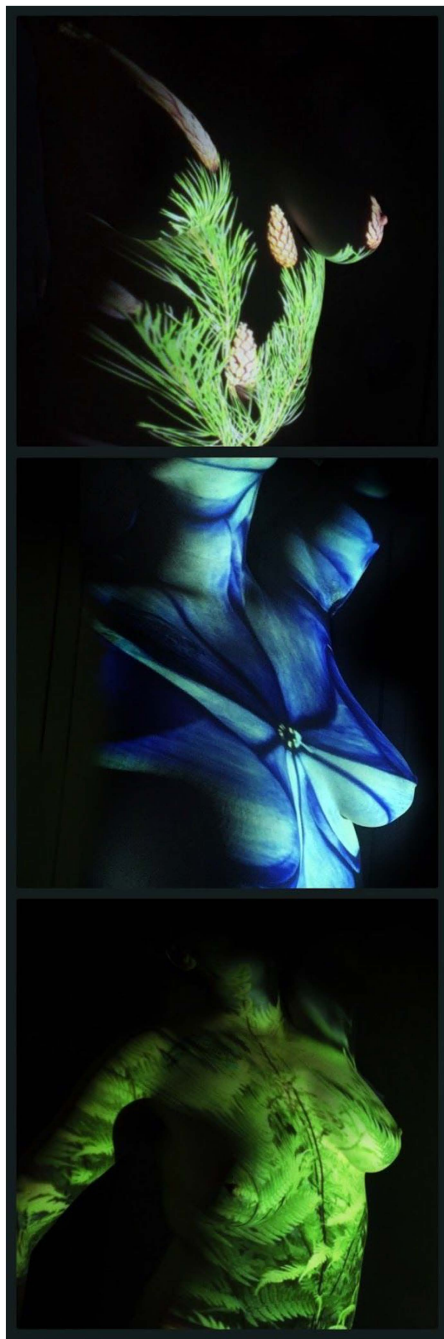
*After finishing this essay, she thinks that it would have made more narrative sense if she had gotten into forestry, but the siren song of rocks was too great to bear.*

*You can follow her @wild-west-wind on tumblr, and @wild\_west\_wind on twitter for more writing that she worries is overly heavy-handed, and pictures of animals she sees.*



**This Body Has Carried Me Up Mountains**

*Noah Ulicki*



### **Untitled**

Anonymous

*"I've been a practicing photographer for years, and I have never had a problem approaching my subjects' bodies as art. That did not hold true for self-portraiture, unless I was able to transform myself into something that could be detached from, well, me. By projecting something else across my skin, I can transform my body into a blank canvas, something that has no connotations, just lines and curves and shapes to play with. Being outdoors has a similar effect for me, but the sensation there comes from the stripping of societal projections away from my body in the first place, removing the connotations created by having witnesses. I'm just...me, with a skin that moves over the shapes and curves of muscles and bones that let me move through the world. Nothing more, nothing less. This project aims to merge the two in one work."*

## In the Absence of Gender, A Metaphor Will Have to Do

Jay Horton (@icaruskids)

\*\*\*

I have spent several years of my life trying to figure out how to explain my gender to others. How do you come out to family when 'genderfucked' is the closest word you can find to describe what you are? How do I talk about what I can barely put words to?

*"Mom, Dad, I'm fungi. I know you birthed and raised an animal, and you watched me grow into something more plantlike. You didn't mind the green I wore, as long as it was camouflage. As long as it blended in.*

*The truth is, I'm somewhere in between. Maybe you can see the animal in me, and maybe you can see the plant in me, but I'm outside of that."*

I'm the largest goddamn organism in the world, but nobody can fucking see me.

Nobody wants to let mold grow in their house anyway.

\*\*\*

## Mushrooms

Jason Sheldon

When do you learn about death for the first time? Is it a nagging awareness that sneaks up on you like a distant infection, something slowly coloring your consciousness from your first breath? Do you learn about death after some brief atrocity experienced too young for a child -- a sudden death in the family, perhaps, or a friend inanelly torturing an animal, or the car strike of a beloved pet? Do you learn about it like a poisoning, something tasted, something turning inside you, a brief view of something too malicious or too monstrous for your tiny thoughts that festers and burns you until you've remembered death by morning?

\*\*\*

*Amanita bisporigera*, *Amanita virosa*, *Amanita verna*. A triad of species referred to by amateur mushroom collectors by the name "destroying angel". The most common fatally toxic mushroom in the Eastern United States -- a clear mirror of the delicious Eurasian button mushrooms, sitting on our side of the Atlantic like a poised poisoner. Others, of course -- the death cap mushroom (a related *Amanita phalloides*) and its tasty "paddy straw" doppelgänger. The insidious webcap mushrooms, presenting as food poisoning before destroying your kidneys over an irreversible 3-week period.

*There are no -- no more, at least -- inexperienced mushroom foragers.*

*Amanita* poisoning starts small. Food poisoning 6 to 30 hours from ingestion, with the typical unsightly food poisoning symptoms. This is caused by the lesser of two toxins, phallotoxins that cause most mushroom related digestive distress, latching onto the membranes of your insides until your body has to purge the toxins. Not so for the amatoxins, friendly and giving proteins absorbed easily into the blood and filtered easily out by the liver and kidneys.

\*\*\*

All fungi are obligate heterotrophs -- they can only obtain energy from other living things. Deprived of photosynthetic ease like plants, they connect in grand networks of subterranean mycelia, slowly breaking down decaying matter and, more importantly, forming a network of a forest. Every tree in the forest communicates with one another, shares with one another, and shares with the fungi at their roots. Mycelia under the soil pass packages of sugar and water from tree to tree, snacking nominally in order to maintain themselves, like a postal system of forest care packages.

Not all fungi are so beneficial, of course. When spores land on rotten or damaged wood, shelf mushrooms grow. Much slower than their cousins under the soil, they grow their fruiting bodies -- the mushrooms we all see and know and love, just glorified baby dispersal- from a tiny patch of tree-bound mycelium. These too feed on decay, like all fungi do. Slowly converting dead matter into something usable, minerals washed down into the soil and sugars and fats repurposed for the snails and insects and mice and humans that eat the mushrooms. Fungi are like gravediggers, burying nutrients no longer in use to keep us living in cleanliness that much longer.

\*\*\*

Amatoxins are beautifully simplistic -- clusters of hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon in a series of interlocking rings. When absorbed for cleaning into a liver or kidney cell, they go

straight for the cell's nucleus, not with a purpose. but rather drawn and delivered by autonomous chemical processes. When they get there, they're taken up by the enzymes that fabricate the building blocks of our body. But they stay there. They block up protein production, block up the DNA reading, and soon affected liver and kidney cells stop being able to maintain themselves: with no maintenance, they collapse and die. When the first wave of toxins are purged, *Amanita* gives us a moment of safety -- a day of relative ease from the vomiting. This is an illusion of safety, though, because what follows is the end.

\*\*\*

The association with death gives mushrooms -- even non-toxic ones -- a bad name. We think of them as a death to fear, not a death to embrace. But fungi come for us all, and we should be grateful -- as with the flies and the vultures, someone needs to take the bodies away. Ammonia fungi thrive in the forest, growing rapidly and producing their spore dispersal structures where dead animals fall, breaking down the hard-to-digest ammonia and repurposing it into the soil. Some grow in mole burrows, breaking down long-abandoned excrement. The mycelia lie in wait for years until an animal dies or excretes just above their buried threads, and then it becomes a race of who can absorb ammonia the fastest and produce brilliant and bizarre fruiting bodies: violet colored "amethyst fungus", "dead man's fingers" that look like a deceased hand reaching up for air, and the familiar-looking excrement-loving *Hebeloma*, with its round white cap and long white stalk.

\*\*\*

*Like other Amanita species, A. bisporigera is thought to form mycorrhizal relationships with trees. This is a mutually beneficial relationship where the hyphae of the fungus grow around the roots of trees, enabling the fungus to receive moisture, protection and nutritive byproducts of the tree, and giving the tree greater access to soil nutrients.*

\*\*\*

You always remember first learning about death, I think. Like how a mushroom remembers to grow from a cluster of root-like mycelia, you always remember a little bit of poison.

\*\*\*

When my mother was a child in a small town in upstate New York, she remembers learning about death. She remembers ambulances and policemen outside her neighbor's home -- a family from Eastern Europe with children older than her and their eyes full of wonder for the future they now would have in the US. As a child she tells me of the button mushrooms they harvested for their salads, how they had told her father about their family tradition of foraging. She remembers days passing since then, without any word, and then that morning with the emergency services. She tells me this as I stoop over in the woods, inspecting an *Amanita's* long ghostly stem and translucent flared cap, maybe. Or maybe in a living room as I hold a giant round puffball fungus up to her, my face lit up. She definitely tells it to me every time I go to forage with her, as we clamber up old oak trees to cut down orange salty-tasting chicken mushrooms, or as we dig in the leaves for morels or scrape black fungus off of birch trees to make tea. She tells me as we watch a friend cut up mushrooms that turn from orange to blue when you touch them, tossing them in a pot, and she tells me as she tells me her plans to start growing oyster mushrooms in the damp basement.

\*\*\*

**Author's Note:** *although not on the surface directly about gender, my mushroom essay was written at a time of deep dysphoria and comes from a place of deep trans anxiety about death and body.*

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## the secret lives of roadkill

Charlie Quinn (@dreamlogic)

*In memory of the Orlando Pulse shooting, June 12th 2016.*

remember the unsettling lurch when you reach for a light switch in the dark,  
but the bulb is dead?

it feels a little like that, except—  
you know when you aren't paying attention to your feet,  
and roll your ankle on a loose rock?  
no, it isn't quite that, either.

when i first heard the news, i ignored it. i had work in half an hour,  
and without comprehending the horrid weight of those bodies,  
( still don't, still can't )  
i knew that whatever that clickbait headline hid,  
i would not be able to smile at strangers for six hours if i found out.

you know the bloody, pulpy impulse to wriggle your tongue into a split lip?  
the urge to dig deep enough to find out what's on the other side of that rawness in your  
cheek?  
i was chewing on a wound i hadn't even opened yet.

when i was young, i would lay on my stomach in tall grasses,  
under sharp, unforgiving junipers,  
high in lofty willow limbs,  
and imagine myself something wild, watching the world through a veil of green.

*something wild* has always been preferable to myself.  
even before my vocab had words like "dysphoria" and "systematic oppression" in it,  
i knew this world didn't fit.  
speaking, moving, skinned knees—all three felt the same:  
Gravel-scrubbed, tainted.

there's a certain kinship here, shared between me and the deer in headlights.  
after one too many mundane situations have forced me to reevaluate my safety,  
i begin to understand that while we both are perfectly capable of bolting off the road,  
the truck's high beams seem too big, too blinding, to ever possibly escape from.  
so we wait, still, wishing for a thorny thicket to hide us,  
hoping this predator coming from all directions won't smell our vulnerability in the air.

i don't want to know what that first crackle of gunfire sounded like,  
drowning the music.  
i don't want to think about the silent aftermath.

once, i thought i wanted to be a crime scene analyst,  
but how could i, how could anyone, willingly walk through that carnage and not leave a piece  
of themselves with the dead?

it's cruel that those i love dearest must live their lives  
squinted against oncoming headlights,  
tucked in the shadows between street lamps,  
reaching for love in the dark like scavengers for scraps—

now i want to become an ecologist,  
because riparian zones and indicator species don't give a shit about my gender,  
or how fucked my head is after twenty-some years of surviving other people.  
but i still see crime scenes wherever i go,  
the natural hacked back and neglected:  
choked throats of prairie between highways,  
each new condo development a fist in the soft flesh of raccoons and garter snakes,  
cottonwoods, toads, solitary bees and barn owls and me,  
caught in the middle no matter where i go.

fish in a barrel,  
cattle in a pen,  
foxes lost between chain link fences.

if only it were so easy for us  
to cross out the stigma on our lives,  
as easy as pulling a trigger.

rewilding devastated landscapes is an act of faith between generations,  
placing trust in the next to care for the tentative seeds you sow in the scars inflicted by the  
previous.  
how long will it take to rewild orlando?  
how long till our beauty, our pride, is no longer seen as a weed,  
to be hacked back, scorched earth, left to rot?

i've started moving roadkill off the asphalt to the nearest grassy patch whenever i can,  
so that the bone-pickers looking for a meal don't become their own  
smears of blood on the pavement.  
i don't know the proper blessings to give urban pests,  
or what happens to a squirrel's soul when it goes,  
but i know that like me, they're just trying to cut it in an ecosystem that's hell bent on their  
extinction.

it isn't just the stone-throwers and SUVs who swerve to kill,  
it's the shelterless concrete deserts lit up with LEDs as clear as neon:  
*WE DON'T WANT YOU, WE WILL MAKE CERTAIN YOU CAN'T BELONG.*

with every resource i rely on being choked into nonexistence,  
pushed further into the periphery, i can relate,

and i live for the days when i don't have any lost, hungry things to bury in the weeds.

when she learned about the massacre, my mother wept for days.

i haven't been able to stop grinding my teeth, haven't been able to cry either.

she doesn't want me going out because it isn't safe, doesn't want me to become a statistic on the evening news.

she doesn't understand that by hiding away, i'm starving a vital part of myself.

i don't have the heart to tell her that i'm less afraid of mass shooters than of what i'm capable of doing to myself if i'm left alone with my doubts for too long.

why did the queer cross the road?

because they were forced out of their natural habitat, because

their survival depended on the hope that there may be good grazing on the other side.

in numb shock, i keep reaching, blind, for support.

isolation is a killer, producing the slowest, cruelest death,

and those who build wide roads through wilderness know it.

those who carve paths of carnage through the hearts of struggling communities know it, too.

it's no accident that so many of my loved ones relate better to

monsters, myths, wild somethings, than to other humans.

like scavengers forced into the corners,

we've been denied any sense of ourselves,

transplanted into a world that doesn't recognize our nature as its own.

i'm so tired of hiding from headlights, cut off from roots that run deep only in dreams.

i'm so tired of being treated like an invasive species.

if i speak in too many metaphors,

it's only because i'm seeking a tenuous home in an inhospitable land.

if i refuse to give death a piece of myself to keep,

price paid for carrying a crime scene in my heart,

it's only because i cannot believe that we are another slow-burn apocalypse.

i will not resign myself to the half-life of roadkill waiting to happen.

## Growth

Tabitha (@squidfeathers)

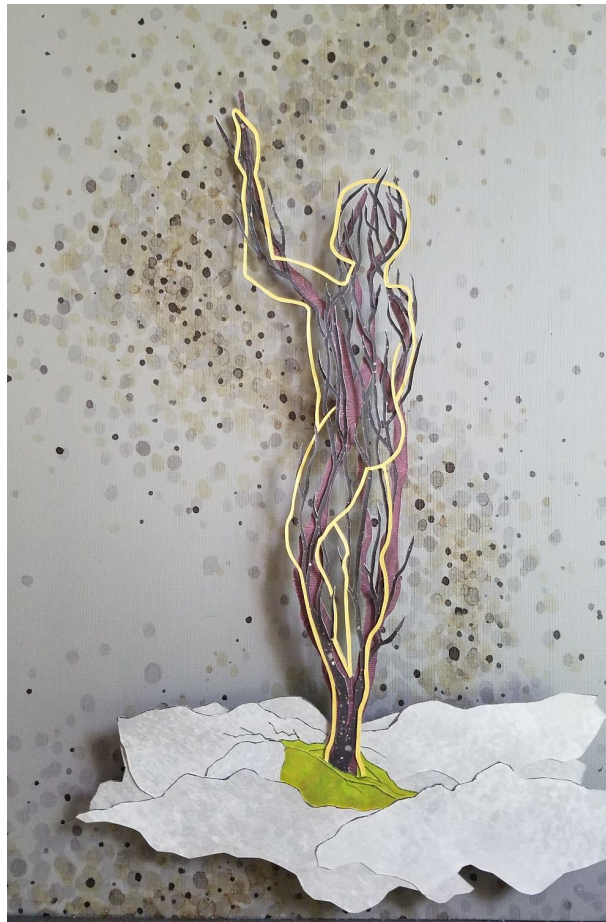
Traveling is slow but the sun keeps you company and gives you a direction. You roll and glide on the wind past others who have already grown roots and spread branches, and you wonder again when it'll be your turn.

Eventually you stop. The area seems inhospitable but you find yourself drawn to a tiny crack of green in the grey, dry ground. You squeeze past a small bundle of dried stems and flowers. You pause, your roots testing, a tendril probing. Maybe you *could* make a home here.

It isn't comfortable. You get cut down, snipped, re-shaped to better fit your surroundings. You are made a topiary of yourself. But every time your thin branches are cut you grow back in another direction. You are sometimes slowed in your progress, but never stopped. You knit your wounds together, and you keep growing.

Sometimes your new branches bear fruit and flowers. It becomes harder for them to cut you back. No more trimming you to fit the space you've carved out. Eventually the space must accommodate you! The greyness around you buckles and cracks as you make room, you push, you grow!

Looking down at yourself you see each healed scar, and each new growth. You gently bundle dropped fruit and dried leaves. You smile at the wide chasm of green in the grey that *you* are providing for the future to flourish in.



## Sour Candy

*Ayla Walter (www.aylawalter.com)*

*Girl* was the prison I grew up in even when I couldn't see the bars I was stuck here and it grew on me; as I grew into it, like a soft bed of moss. Like black mold to be reported to the housing agency.

For some years I grafted fresh branches to my back so I could offer limes, and grapefruit. If I could only bloom sweet cornucopia of citrus every season, then I'd be no trouble to anyone, everyone would like me. Would take my blood oranges and say thank you.

But mostly I grew crab apples, cultivated hard stone fruit. Imagine the complexity of a fig evolved for a specific type of wasp which no longer exists. I tried to climb along the trellis of womanhood for decades before I dared reach directly to the sun, before I even considered self-pollination.

There are more things in biology and earth than are dreamt of in the philosophy of man.

.

I crept up clinging to the plastic siding of this house, with its little fence, and the cable wires running in from the street. The city municipality offered high speed internet with utilities included, and a little shade on the south side wall in the afternoons while, underneath my leaves, I petrified.

Rotted, a little. Got fairy rings round my stomach, toadstools up the back of my neck. Birds made nests in the gutters I clogged up, lichen colored in my skin blue-grey and I never paused to think there could be another way to live besides this cul-de-sac...

I sunk into the swamp peat, and buffeted myself into driftwood. Anything so long as I could still be smooth on the outside. Yet as much as it may hurt I can't regret. I can be a decaying wooden pulp unable to sprout grief and still teem with life, still buzz and creep and crawl.

You farmhand reapers see decay as a failure, as opposite to every good golden bud but new growth needs not be green.

.

Maybe I'll grow out of this girlhood, like the warping trunk of a tree engulfing metal bars, bark flowing over the years layer by layer, roots cracking concrete sidewalks, branches spurting fireworks of leaves. Plant me wherever you like, in this rank pile of fertilizer: the window flower box—

a consecrated dumping ground for the furious wild cuttings we truly are.  
We chimera of destruction and regeneration, we squirmy things rutting the deep black  
earth and bulbs broken white shoots up to the sky.  
I own nothing of myself and still I am myself.

More than even, nature holds no concern for purity, for singularity. I am pieces of  
wholes conglomerate. A million protozoan cells, a colony of aphids farmed by  
another colony of ants eaten by an anteater. Who is to say we are not all part  
alien?

Take me as I am or rather don't take me at all. I'm no annual for your sleepy garden  
bed;  
go ahead and report me to the Homeowners Association, see what happens.

## Looking Out for You

Jay Horton (@icaruskids)



Lately, the closest I come to praying is kneeling beside my garden with my hands folded in the earth. Summer days when the soil is the startling temperature and texture of human touch, the earth reaches for me in ways religion hasn't.

John Muir said "I'd rather be in the mountains thinking of God, than in church thinking about the mountains", and if I'm being honest, the outdoors are the only god that hasn't abandoned me, and the only church that accepts me wholly as I am.

My god, I found by myself. I was, predictably, looking for a hiding place again. In the congregation of trees, I looked, and one looked back.

Bark split from the trunk revealing two eyes, and the two eyes were echoed in the bark hanging off.

*For you. To remind you I'm looking out for you.*

## **I Remember Walking Away**

*Newt (@blackersfirstname)*

I remember walking away, climbing over fences and wading through creeks, trying to escape the controlling city which was reality. I remember running down hills, shouting, screaming with joy at the simple notion of being alive. I remember taking off my shirt in the woods, because I didn't care, and neither would the trees. I remember dancing through abandoned farms, stones digging into my bare feet, crickets singing from the grasses. I wished for a world where I would not have to leave the town to dance. I dreamt of a place where I could take off my shirt on hot summer days. Pain should come from the rocks you tread on as you dance, not from the name people call as they tell you to come inside. To put your shirt back on. To be quiet and to stay as you are.





## On the Wing

*Cro Cairns (@birdswithshoes)*

*"I've always loved birds and bird watching, and since both my birth name and my chosen name can be tied to birds with significance to me, I've used them as metaphors in a lot of expression art."*

You're fourteen, you like birds and you are stuck  
Not a boy, not a girl  
There's too much of you and too little at the same time  
Birds can fly away and live their entire life  
not knowing what they are with full contentedness  
You are on the ground and feel all too heavy  
There is a story about a cardinal in the news,  
with bilateral male and female colors- it is neither gender  
And for the first time you think there might be some beauty in this.



### **Bilateral Colors**

*Basil (@not\_louisa)*

## Yellow Cardinal

Falcon (@\_thunderstorm...)

Yesterday, I drew a yellow cardinal I saw in a picture.  
Yellow cardinals are incredibly rare -- most of them are red, as many people know.  
But you looked at my yellow cardinal, and you said it was beautiful.  
Special, even.  
You loved it because it was different.  
But then you look back at me and see wrongness,  
A discordant note,  
A color out of place.  
I know how you see nature.  
And this just doesn't match up.  
When you see me,  
I confuse you,  
Perplex you,  
Disgust you, perhaps?  
It's not me, disgusting you --  
But the fact that I say I belong to a group  
Which disgusts you.  
You say you'd accept me, if it weren't for that group I say I belong to.  
And then you blame me,  
Tell me I just painted myself yellow,  
That it's a choice.  
And that if I asked God he would wash me clean and I would be a pretty red cardinal,  
Like you always thought I should be.  
But why would I beg him to do that?  
Why would He even want to do that?  
God *made* the yellow cardinal,  
He painted it those fiery colors of happiness and warmth!  
He loves the red cardinal, of course He does.  
But does that mean He doesn't love the yellow cardinal? I think not.  
He loves the yellow cardinal, sitting on a branch like a beacon of happiness  
And I know He loves me.  
Why don't you treat me like you treat the yellow cardinal?  
God made us, and we are loved,  
And we are different, and we are loved *because* we are different.  
That yellow cardinal and me.



### **Cardinal, Blue Jay**

Kim ([www.frillbackstudios.com](http://www.frillbackstudios.com))

*"The absolute wonder of a half male half female chimera cardinal is rare and beautiful. And sometimes I wish I had the confidence to present in such a way that makes everyone turn their heads and question. I'm also happy just being a blue jay still ambiguous and colorful. Just in a more ordinary way."*

## Reflections

*Grayson K. (@perhaps-a-dragon)*

If the unyielding rocks  
can hold water  
in liquid veins  
then can the moon  
itself  
hold memories?  
I am not a girl  
but I hold the truth  
within myself  
yet I am not a boy  
either  
I am not stone  
and I am not air  
I am the dappled sunlight  
that dances  
through the leaves  
between light and dark.  
if nature is not  
static  
then why shouldn't I be  
fluid  
in reflection  
as well?

When I was 11, I played Puck in my elementary school Shakespeare club's version of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Prancing around our makeshift stage in a craft-store plastic leaf crown, it was the first time I ever really played at being two things: a forest sprite, and a different gender.

"Midsummer" is a story of chaos, discovery, and transformation where everything gets turned upside down and yet still turns out okay - everyone learns things about themselves, the confusion gets sorted out, and then curtains. At least, that's how it goes for the humans. The faeries are a lot more inscrutable. It's the difference between stopping by the forest for a while - a place that serves as a metaphor for disrupting societal norms - and living there.

I relate a lot more to the latter.

After all, I played Puck.

Did you know that neither of Tolkien's Elvish languages have gendered pronouns?

In Quenya, he/she/they/face/eye are all just "se." Sindarin is mawder (it always is), but it still doesn't differentiate based on gender. It makes me wonder about the experiences of a WOL (Westron-as-a-second-language) speaker like Legolas. All his friends in the Fellowship use he/him pronouns for him, but does he feel any connection to those words? What would they even represent to someone like him?

I, of course, am not from Middle Earth. I grew up speaking English. When I switched from she/her - the pronouns assigned to me - to he/him - the one I chose, it was a big deal to everyone around me. But the truth is, at someone loosely transmasculine in a place not-quite-north of gender, the ones make a lot more sense. I tried out "ey," dabbled around "they," and ultimately picked pronouns that, to me, are all about everyone else's perception and not some internal connection.

Would the elves, in their forests, where "he" and "she" are foreign words, feel the same? I'm sure Tolkien never considered it. He used to complain that people didn't draw Legolas masculine enough.

Lany: maybe they drew him just right.

For the last 3+ years, I've been really into Dungeons and Dragons.

I play a high elf ranger named Ewyn who turned out to be a little okay, a lot more of a self-insert than I originally intended. He's anxious like me. He doesn't really get the human idea of gender, like me. He went to wizard school and there were all these expectations on him to be really good at it except he wasn't and no matter how hard he tried he was no wizard so he dropped out and became a ranger.

CLASS & LEVEL	???
RACE	elf
BACKGROUND	???
ALIGNMENT	???
PLAYER NAME	???
EXPERIENCE POINTS	???

—okay, not exactly like me. The wizard school is a metaphor. The running away to go to the woods to escape is not. (At least, not entirely).

Gender feels a lot like an expectation placed on me. It's not something I WANT to perform, but everyone else tries to get me to do, or assign me one, or make it a part of my life anyway.

For me, however, it's no more yielding than a dream  
—diminishing into the west  
—a critical fail  
?

SUCCESSES ○○○○

FAILURES ●●●●

gender

DEATH SAVES

I think a lot of trans people like to turn to fantasy (the literal kind) for a certain escapism. Stories set in worlds other than our own don't have to have the same pressures as our culture. For me, that tendency has dovetailed with my own love of the outdoors. The woods aren't just a place I can disappear and think about elves or other far folk for a while — they're a place I can test my budding naturalist skills, as a biologist-in-training, and go foraging and listen to birds or hop over rocks or climb trees, too — but it'd be lying if I said it wasn't a part of that appeal.

I'm not an elf. I'm a genderweird human, and sometimes I don't know what to do with that. But spending time somewhere where the lines between folklore wizardry and my own feel like they start to blur has helped me make some peace, in a way, with being a "something" in a world full of other people with better sense of self. I love the woods for their liminality, and for the creatures humans have assigned to them, at a result, for hundreds and hundreds of years. The vision of them as a place where chaos is encouraged, a transformational realm, a place with different rules, or where you can run to become someone else entirely, every addition to the story another metaphor for my own metamorphosis.

And, of the woods are nothing else; a place where I feel for once allowed to step back from my humanity and the performance it tries to force on me, and instead look on and act those lines I recited as a child:

“SHALL WE THEIR FOND PAGEANT SEE?  
LORD, WHAT FOOLS THESE MORTALS BE!”

### Lord, What Fools These Mortals Be

Nate (@astriiformes)

## Simply Be

*Caitlin Hobbs (@caitlinthehob)*

There is a certain comfort in gardening.

Flowers care not about who is gently patting the soil around them, simply that it is done, and they have a place to grow. Weeds care not about who pulls them from the ground and shakes the dirt from their roots, only that this must be the end. The sun cares not the gender of the skin it warms, it only knows it must burn.

They go their entire existences without thinking about their gender. They simply exist.

How lovely it must be to simply be, to not live with the expectations of others, to simply follow the path of the sun as the day grows long.

It is nice to go out and be part of that world for a while, to exist in a world where the only expectation is to survive, to be able to exist amongst the bees as they bumble from flower to flower and birds sing gleefully in the trees. They don't care about gender, or sex, or any of our silly human concepts.

And so I garden.

I enter that world for an afternoon, where I don't have to concern myself with how others view me: I can work, feel the sun on my back, hear the birds chirp, pat the soil around the flowers as the bees visit, and simply be.



## Climb

Alex Orion

The tree does not ask who I am.

There are no questions when my foot finds a low branch, my arms stretching up to meet strong limbs.

I shake the branch, but it does not budge.

The tree is strong enough.

I am strong enough.

I pull myself up, my hands and feet moving with ease.

Finding my footing in the tree, I am more certain than I've been in years.

The movement, the exertion, the satisfaction of lifting myself, my body and brain finally ringing with harmony on the word *climb*.

A spring snow muffles the sounds around me until all that remains is my breath mixed into rustling leaves.

It is too easy to forget that this body I avoid was once trained for grace and endurance.

I have spent so long curled tight in my attempts to shrink and un-become that the simple joy of spreading my arms and legs—reaching, striving, pushing towards the grey sky— is exhilarating.

Near the top, the branches diverge from the sturdy trunk and form the perfect seat.

I could keep climbing, but I was meant to be right here.

Settling in, I rest my chest against the trunk.

The bark absorbs my heartbeat as I watch the swirling white specks drift around us.

Comforted by the unyielding embrace, I sigh my doubts into the tree and it sways softly in the wind, its leaves whispering tales of storms weathered and the pain that comes with growth.

In the stillness, I feel us growing together ever so slowly.

We live in this unity until my lungs burn and my fingers turn red from the cold.

Reluctantly, I suspend myself from limb to limb until I am back to solid ground.

One last press of my hands to the wood: *Thank you*.

(It is only fair to be grateful.)

Lighter, taller, strong and newly-rooted, I take one more deep breath and let my body carry me home.

A. GRIFFIN



WHEN I TAKE WALKS,  
I ALWAYS LOOK FOR  
LONE YELLOW LEAVES

AN UNEXPECTED FLASH OF COLOR



A DIFFERENCE THAT MAKES  
EVERYTHING BRIGHTER

A GENTLE REMINDER  
THAT ALL THINGS CHANGE



AND OFTEN FOR THE BETTER

## Yellow Leaves

A. Griffin

*Thank you again to everyone involved with this project.*

*Volume 2 coming soon.*

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