



NATURE HELD ME CLOSE

A ZINE ABOUT GENDER
DYSPHORIA AND THE
GREAT OUTDOORS

VOLUME 2

Editor's Note

"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*

When I initially put out the call for submissions for Nature Held Me Close, I was unsure of how many people would be interested in the project. I was certainly not expecting to have so many pieces submitted for the zine that I would have to split them into two volumes! I'm profoundly honored that this concept seemed to have resonated with so many people, and at the warm and enthusiastic reception of the first volume. Without further ado, I'd like to present the second.

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, brief mentions of self-harm, sexual content, and animal death, and images of artistic nudity. Reader discretion is advised.

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

El Green (Tumblr: @starfoozle)

Halloween 2020

natureheldmeclosezine.tumblr.com

Table of Contents

1. <i>The Shape Of This Soul</i> , Charlie Quinn (@dreamlogic).....	4
2. <i>being is a shadow</i> , Jose Arias (@ultralowfi).....	6
3. <i>Gender and Consumption</i> , Abrahm Thrasher (@abrahmthrasher).....	7
4. <i>o set aside, dark heart</i> , Fen (@noonmarkart).....	11
5. <i>Prairie Gender</i> , Sar.....	12
6. <i>Hermit Crab Drafting a Hermit Crab House</i> , Ayla Walter.....	20
7. <i>Are you a frog? Or are you a toad?</i> , Geri Ambrose (@mathysphere).....	21
8. <i>Tide</i> , c.m.d.....	22
9. <i>Water, Tears of Mania</i> (@tearsofmania).....	24
10. <i>Weird + Alive</i> , Jess.....	25
11. <i>my gender is the sea, and the sea is me</i> , Sho'cye.....	27
12. <i>Untitled</i> , Kai (@gyfen-mann).....	28
13. <i>Float Above</i> , Vincent (@4ratx).....	29
14. <i>For Silver Elan</i> , Pale M. L. Ranisson (@kingofthewilds).....	30
15. <i>I found a body in the woods</i> , Braigwen.....	32
16. <i>Time in the Backyard</i> , Lora.....	34
17. <i>Wings</i> , Heather.....	37
18. <i>I Move With The Trees in the Breeze</i> , Violet Clare (@periareolar).....	38
19. <i>The Meaning of Conception</i> , R. Tally (@tallyrunning).....	41
20. <i>Heat Lightning</i> , Phoenix Sandrock.....	42
21. <i>A Woven Gale</i> , Marley T. (@hickorymoth).....	51
22. <i>Sunset</i> , Grayson K. (@perhaps-a-dragon).....	52
23. <i>Relief</i> , Leigh Dawson.....	53
24. <i>No One Cares When It Rains, But I Do</i> , Datura Moth.....	54
25. <i>Taboo in Nature</i> , Joey Dean (@toadstoolillustrates).....	55
26. <i>The World Is Made of Eyes</i> , Robyn Barter.....	56
27. <i>Trees on High Places</i> , Jay Dearly.....	58
28. <i>Happy Returns</i> , Star (@knittingnoodle).....	60
29. <i>Things Vital to the Ecosystem of the Mind</i> , Jay Horton.....	61
30. <i>Dickson to Bonfeld</i> , Fen (@noonmarkart).....	62
31. <i>Nature Holds Me In Her Arms</i> , Sunny.....	63

The Shape of This Soul

Charlie Quinn (@dreamlogic)

the shape of this soul

is hard to describe. it is not a shape from a geometry textbook, not the shape of a flag or a letter of the alphabet, or even the shape of a person. how do you talk about something that precedes language? let us try, as best we can.

- a person stands in dappled shadow, ankle deep in the pooling current beneath a weeping willow's roots. the sun is high, the leaves swaying low. see how they break the water's surface just so? trace the person's shadow as it wavers upon the creek's surface.

- lay on your back in the tall grass, feel how the earth takes the shape of your shoulder blades. noon heat bakes the sweat from your flesh, but the grass strokes your blooming sunburn better. roll over onto your stomach, feel very keenly how these new blades of plant matter resist you, the cool pressure of a pebble in your stomach, the ants tickling peach fuzz hair at your wrists. look over at the human-shaped hollow you've vacated.

- a bolt of fabric catches your gaze in a thrift store, buried on a middle shelf between heaps of grimy curtains and old portrait frames. dig it out without toppling the entire pile, feel the heft and grain of its weave. there are permanent wrinkles as you unroll this fabric, reminders of the crushing embrace of its time spent forgotten. does a metallic thread catch in a fluorescent light? is it a tapestry? is it beautiful? let it spill across your lap, let yourself think about the events that would lead such a thing to become abandoned, second-hand.

- on a long car ride, a friend once asked me, "what is the state of your soul?" how elegant, this question: a question that can only be asked from a place of love, because its answer must be listened to carefully. this is a question that can only be answered honestly, when the one answering trusts the person asking it. i stopped listening to my soul a long time ago, when i realized it didn't fit inside my body, and i am still trying to remember its voice.

- spread an old quilt in a field of wildflowers. see how the wind wants to carry it away like a kite? like a wing? this is a blanket that will get muddy and grass-stained, one that must have already seen enough use to be worth sacrificing it to the ground. how long did you spend finding a place for its corners to stretch out, one that would not trample any of the flowers beneath?

- the shape of this soul cannot be held, can barely be touched. it must be watched from the corner of your eye while you sit very still, like a deer who is still determining whether you are a predator or the stump of a tree. this is the shy yellow heads of rabbit brush blossoms when your palms skim over their surface. this is the cool skin of a lake after you have taken a breath to plunge into it, but before your body breaks the calm. my skin is the skin of a peach, and you must press your thumbs into its hollows to determine its ripeness, but not so hard as to bruise.

- a moth is battering itself against your kitchen lightbulb, and you cup it in your palms to take it outside. there is dust from its wings left on your fingers, proof of the fact that life is so easily crushed. my soul is a thing as fragile as a cirrus cloud over the moon, as strong as the night surrounding it.

- if i go somewhere far from the traffic sounds, far enough that there is no human glow on the horizon, will it be quiet enough there to hear myself? i will hear crickets, and the wind's sly voice, and perhaps this is close enough to the truth to put onto a page.

- the shape of this soul, as i learn it again from scratch, is like a skein of yarn between my fingers. will it be a blanket? a hat? a sock? how can i describe the tension as it spools through my fingers, becoming its own tangible thing while i unwind it from around my heart? each loop is itself a whole world contained, held in orbit by the stitches surrounding it. the unfinished edges of it are suspended on a filament so fine i cannot bear to perceive it, but i must trust that it still exists when i am not looking. what fine work it is shaping up to be! the color of a marsh in november! will it cloak me in a second skin when its shape has finished revealing itself? will it shroud my shoulders when i die? it looks like the pelt of an animal i have only dreamed about, something that cannot exist in the same lifespan i occupy. i love it ferociously. i want to devour it. i fear the shape of this thing, because if i put it on, i will never take it off. everyone will know the secret trick of it, and its nature will change.

- look! there, quick, where the horizon meets dusk. do you see it moving through the shadows? a stag? no, not a coyote either. must've been a trick of the light, a branch in the breeze or a falling star. anyways, it was only there a moment.



being is a shadow

Jose Arias (@ultralowfi)

Gender and Consumption

Abrahm Thrasher (@abrahmthrasher)

Back when I took a photography class for my major, the professor told me that I had a habit of abstracting things.

There is no "great outdoors" here, or whatever approximation of it you think should be sold to you. We are bordered on all sides by train tracks, so even in the middle of meadows you can hear trains. There is no untouched land. Even while surrounded on all sides by wilderness there is some hulking beast of concrete and steel just beyond the tree line. Trash; glass shards, entire bottles, pieces of homes torn down, are so buried in the dirt they may as well be a part of the natural geology.

There are bits and bobs, pieces left over from failed projects and abandoned architecture. Things that used to have a use that now just twist into the dirt and stand as a support for saplings. Trees that will grow intertwined with abstractions of society too expensive to rip out of the ground. They are puzzle pieces that form a part of a whole that in all honesty doesn't matter.



There is a bridge that I liked to take people out on. It's in a park built on the remains of the old water plant. Rust and steel and concrete were dug out of the ground to make room for pine forests and rough paths. One of them floods every time it rains. On the back of this path you can reach the old maintenance bridge that reached out to where the tanks would have been. Now the tanks are gone. Grass eats up the first step, and one has to use logs as stepping stones to reach the concrete slabs that stretch over a ravine choked with native plants. The third slab is loose. It wobbles and is crumbling under the forces of weather and time. The bridge stops abruptly at a concrete platform overlooking the lake. Vines and branches take up most of the head space and try their best to claim the overlook as their own. The bridge has become one with the landscape.



I know that bridge like I know myself. The railing on the right is intact but vibrates at a low C if you so much as touch it. The third concrete slab slides and shakes; it must be tested with every first step to ensure that this time isn't the time it cracks underneath your feet to drop you into the lake below. The rust has become like a second skin. More than one person can comfortably stand at the end, but to sit there feels dangerous. On all sides is a thirty foot drop into the water. The left railing has long since fallen away into the ravine to become a part of the twisting mass of branches and ivy.

I don't know the history of that bridge. I also don't know the history of myself. I lost most of my memories of my younger years just before my sophomore year of college. I don't remember growing up here, I have no real connection to the person I used to be. I'm like that bridge. The plant was open for sixty years before they abandoned it to the elements. It processed a million gallons a day from 1934-1994. They tore that bridge down in December of 2019, tearing down saplings with it and leaving rubble behind. On a damp South Carolina summer morning, with the 90 degree heat pouring into my room through the open blinds and cicadas singing their mating song, I woke up with nothing but rubble too.

I came out as trans in 10th grade. My friend gave me a name that was fine for a while, but that I don't use anymore. I've done this several times, losing attachments to names and leaving them behind like so many antique bottles in the clay. I used to be the captain of the debate team. When we went to meets, only two of us would wear pants. I was not one of them.

I had a purpose as a kid, in that I was being developed for purposeful use. Refined and pruned and landscaped to fit other people's desires. I was meant to be impressive but consumable, pretty and palatable, to be interacted with in measured doses.

There are gaps, large ones, in my personal history. Like the bridge, I have no way of voicing my first-person account. I have a pronoun button bought at a pride I don't remember attending. But I remember meeting this bridge for the first time while out working on a reporting assignment. I was covering the accessibility of the park spaces before wandering away from the public side of the park. It was hidden off the path, and it was beautiful. I had to work up the bravery to cross it alone.



I know objectively that I grew up in a town that wouldn't have taught me about transness. Life here is as complicated as the network of old barbed wire fences that divide up the land, but gender is meant to be simple. Girls dream of weddings on manicured lawns and boys make ruts in the mud with pick up trucks. I know without needing to know that it was a journey I would have made on my own.

This place has an odd geography. Land was only developed as it was needed, so centuries-old conifers tower over decades-old buildings. A rolling hill of native blue grass sways in waves over a train yard full of screaming locomotives. They blend seamlessly into one another, the hill ending in a valley of metal and people only to turn into a forest on the other side. Brush slowly consumes the bridge overlooking the tracks.

You would think that it would be easy to separate what doesn't belong from the body of the landscape. In abstraction it is. A forest is a forest. Industry should be out of sight and mind, tucked into its own corner and not threaded into the land. Likewise it should be easy to separate what is me from the abstract projections that people put upon me. I am not a vegetable garden, and I am not consumable.

I know instinctively, in the way kudzu devours a trailer left undefended. Year after year I grow closer to myself, I get more acquainted with the way I'm growing with the foundations I have left to me. Like a sapling leaning on rust and concrete to grow straight, I become more at peace with the crooked pieces of myself every year. The twisted steel bars that were left behind can never be a bridge again, and likewise they have been turned into something dangerous and jagged. The bridge was removed because the park committee wants to turn the land into something our home doesn't have. There is no pristine landscape, there is no

postcard-ready scenes of nature they can sell the experience of. Fun fact: every lake in Greenwood County is man-made. Does this make the fish that live in them less palatable?

I feel the same pressure. There are parts of me I'm not comfortable with. I wish I had a deeper voice, or a more boyish figure. However, I have found the most discomfort with the acts of other people's attempts to make me more pleasing. I am comfortable with the fact that my voice sounds like tree branches scratching against tin. No one has the right to rip things away from me, to tell me that I should be more or less masculine, that I should look this way or that. Gender and myself are not so simple as removing trash from a hiking path. I am not transitioning so that I can be in pictures. I claimed a name like roots claim abandoned foundations so that I can grow and I did it for me alone. We accept that grass grows short over train tracks because that is how it lives. Likewise it should be simple to accept that the version of myself that I strive to be is what is best for my survival.

I was not made to do anything but to do that which I've proven best at: to live, and to continue. No committed needs to accept my aesthetic worth in order for my existence to be justified. When an old cabin crumbles away after years of re-becoming the landscape it was born out of, we accept that as part of nature's way. Down the path from the bridge there is a formation of collapsed water pipes sunken into the ground. A colony of pinewoods tree frogs (*Hyla femoralis*) use them as their home, and it's enough.



o set aside, dark heart

Fen (@noonmarkart)

o set aside, dark heart
your lungs so curiously lit
afame
with burning sensation and hesitation
at committing such a heinous secret to memory

o set aside, dark heart
forget your wants, your wars, your wishes,
there's a quiet fire raging,
but you needn't feed the flames

o set aside, dark heart
there's a solemn pride in the forest
covet your quiet life there

o set aside, dark heart
there's freedom there,
on the blue blue tree line

so push on through my darling.
push on through.

Prairie Gender

Sar

Something that always drove me nuts about growing up in the prairies was how some insisted that gender was a constant... despite an environment and climate that created space for variation on any and all possible themes of masculine and feminine. That tension and discomfort has been, and continues to be, a good teacher – although sometimes it's nice to get outside and stop analyzing for a while.

I wanted to write about what I'm calling *prairie gender* in this piece, but I have to qualify that I only speak about it as informed by my perspective as a Canadian, who grew up in the prairies as a white person, and the daughter of two farm kids who raised theirs in a city.

I think I need to locate this story a little more.



My mom grew up as the middle of three daughters. She hated cooking, and her younger sister was allergic to *everything*, so she and her older sister helped their dad with the outdoor chores while the younger stayed inside to help mom. They tended farm equipment, grain silos, and cattle variably; my mom hasn't met a tool she couldn't use, and she's equally as comfortable in a garden as on a combine. Her family had the benefit of rich southern Albertan soil and a dedicated series of irrigation canals to draw water from, so things were great, and she wasn't ever uncomfortable. I have four cousins on this side, plus my siblings, and my brother is the only boy.

My dad grew up on the younger end of seven sisters and two brothers on a farm in east Saskatchewan. He grew up very poor. With a family that size, my dad and his siblings were largely conscripted after school to help around the farm. They had to, to keep things running. In Saskatchewan, the crops are generally dependent on weather for adequate water; the health and success of a given year depends on the whims of snowmelt and moderate-to-severe storms that sweep across the land. Too little or too much, and things will fail – the rest comes down to family and community, and how much you rally around each other.

You can imagine that this kind of upbringing on both sides of the family made the women headstrong and practical, real no-nonsense get-shit-done kinda women. Get them lined up

for a family photo and you'll see a pack of women of all kinds, some of whom look like they could and would kick your ass.

--

When we drove to my mom's family farm, you could bet we'd go play in the little playhouse my Pa had built for us grandkids; or, I'd run through the garden all bare-kneed with my long ponytail lashing behind me. I'd play tag with my siblings, hiding behind huge conifers that left sticky, tacky resin on my hands. When my cousins came out to see us too, sometimes they'd play outside with us; but mostly, frustratingly, they wanted to do makeup or read J-14 magazines or Elle or talk about *boys*. I thought this was terribly boring. After a brief flirtation with blue eyeshadow in 8th grade, I gave it up entirely.

I was always jealous that my cousins were better at sports than me, though. It irked me that they were so good at driving the quads or a pickup truck *and* obsessed with shopping for things like pre-distressed jeans or shirts with rhinestones on them. Once I got squished between my two eldest cousins and their boyfriends while they sobbed through *The Notebook*, and felt dreadful for reasons I couldn't name. When I complained about how all I wanted to do was go outside, they popped bubblegum and rolled their eyes. The wheat fields were commonplace. Pa's shop and all the fascinating tools hung up inside it smelling of grease-oil-iron were boring. They didn't *want* to run around the farm; they could do that *whenever*, cause they lived so much closer by.

You're more of a city kid than we are, one of them pointed out once. *We get to hang out here all the time. Pa takes us on the combine or the tractor more than you. We're real country.*

Once outside her range I started fuming. First of all, she lived in the city just the same as I did. And what the hell did she mean, *real* country? Was I meant to take a cue from the country songs twanging through our FM radio? When Shania Twain's *Man! I Feel Like A Woman* came on, we all heard the lyrics: *go totally crazy, forget I'm a lady, men's shirts, short skirts...* I was this many years old when I learned that Shania had taken her inspiration from genderbending and drag culture when creating the song^[1]. Back then as a pre-teen all I could think about was how little I related to it and all the other country songs out there: was I supposed to spend my time wooing over men in Wranglers and wait for them to cheat on me, or... think their tractors were sexy, or something?

It seemed to me like there was a disconnect happening here. For me, 'real' country was out there *doing* stuff. It was in the unpredictable storms that'd sweep out of the mountains; in the fascinating annual rituals of *harvest season*, a time that took on mythic quality; it was in ripened wheat fields and clover in the ditches and grown-over windbreaks of trees. But for my cousins, 'real' country also apparently had to do with attracting and retaining a boyfriend, hair dyed blonde to look right out of *Heartland*, and changing out of practical work clothes into hyper-dolled-up fashion pieces fit for getting wasted at a house party.

Femininity felt like something they clung to ferociously, in stark contrast to their otherwise tomboyish or androgynous tendencies. I couldn't understand it, or what they wanted from me, or why they insisted their version of country was more authentic than mine when it seemed so performative. At least when we were all outside together, that kind of discomfort fell away. Wind coming in through a rolled-down window felt the same to all of us. If it was winter and we were in our 90's neon-coloured snowsuits you could hardly tell any of us apart.

We could be united by important things, like summer camp, a day trip to the mountains, or a hike that wove in and out of the coulees.

--

My dad's side felt different. So much family – 10 kids, and over 24 of us grandkids – meant that if you didn't have a job prepping cabbage rolls or perogies or setting up tables to eat at, you were in the way and could get yourself out of it until it was time to say the prayer for dinner.

There was a lot to explore, and since it took 9 hours to drive to my paternal grandparent's farmhouse, we were dying to stretch our legs on arrival. My siblings and I explored the grounds, locating a single-room peat house circa sometime in the early 1900's (still miraculously standing, if a little saggy). Down by the river, we picked brown paper bags full of fresh Saskatoon berries and got our fingers stained indigo from the juice. That same trip we got lost in the windbreaks planted down near a creek, and had to do a tick check once we got back from thrashing through the young birch and aspen saplings. My brother got into the fallow garden patch one spring, ended up stuck in the mud, and had to be hauled up out of it by the armpits. His boots got left behind half-buried in muck. One winter, the tractor shoveled snow into a huge pile the boy cousins and I dug into to make a snow fort. I had to leave before the snow fort was finished. The guys finished it without me.

I remember my aunts crowding the kitchen, sending me down to the basement and the root-cellar closet for some jars of jams or pickles. The men with their feet kicked up, watching hockey. All of us grandkids pulled in shifts to come help wash dishes. The water always felt so soft it left our hands feeling slightly greased, bubbles sliding off like silk. Sometimes while I was helping out I reflected: we grandkids were allowed to entertain ourselves outdoors however we pleased, as long as no one got hurt. All cousins were considered equal as long as you didn't fuss about dirt under the nails or burrs stuck in your hair or bug bites. We all got up to the same shit, no teasing about who could or couldn't do something – at least not because of gender.

Yet, oddly, there was a clear delineation of labour when it came to *indoor* activities, both before and after my grandparents sold the farm and moved into town. Adult women were always the ones cooking, or cleaning, or washing up while the men got to sit around talking or playing cards or watching sports on the boxy tv in the living room. We kids and teens had to contribute equally, but we always knew that would change as we grew up and got married and had kids of our own to instill good manners in... because that was inevitable. Right?

--

The thing about prairie weather is that it doesn't much care what you wear or look like. Shorts and t-shirts were suitable for high summer when the grasshoppers were whining and it was 30 degrees out; as many layers as needed, thermal underwear a *must*, for the harsh, dry, cold winters. -40 degrees will freeze the nose off your face if unprepared, and it doesn't matter whether your scarf is cute or not.

The other thing about prairie weather is you can't really tell what it's going to get up to next. The mountains create odd pockets of atmosphere, pressure, precipitation. Changes are sudden. Layers of clothing that you can shed or put on are compulsory; otherwise you might be caught shivering in a freak May snowstorm or baking in your long johns waiting for the

bus to cart you home from school. It can be a harsh environment, and people take a certain pride in adapting to it.

I think there's a sensibility formed by growing up in that kind of environment that means certain actions or behaviours are neutral. Expected. Like how it just makes sense for everyone to know how to use jumper cables in case your car won't start in the winter.

Paradoxically, there's also very rigid enforcement of other gender roles and expressions. Certain fields of work are 'natural' for given genders to be drawn to, and participation in others will raise eyebrows or voices or worse. Conservatism renders out in slightly different ways depending on where you are in the world.

In the prairies I felt like my weird, practical gender existed without challenge and was reflected by the women I grew up around... up to a certain extent. Beyond an invisible threshold, though, I felt panicked and constrained, wrong in the body, wordlessly terrified of the things I was supposed to want, alienated by the performative femininity that others around me extolled as virtuous and desirable. These feelings of estrangement meant I didn't notice or acknowledge when other gender non-conforming women in my family modelled or shared how they'd come to terms with the parts of compulsory femininity that didn't work for them. The result was me spending a lot of time trying to avoid how I was feeling, or trying to grapple with that alone.

I'd escape by running around in one of the largest urban parks in all of Canada. My house was in a neighbourhood less than ten minutes away by foot. Much of Nose Hill Park is rough fescue prairieland, touted as native prairie. Hard to say whether that's an accurate assessment, given cattle grazed right up through the 1960s on a lot of it. One of my second grade teachers told us she'd picketed in the 70s to protect the park from land development. It worked.

I grew up looking at purple fuzzy crocuses in spring, rubbing sage leaves between my fingers in high summer, noticing the minute shifts in the colour and texture of grasses and scrub in the fall, crunching through a thin shell of windswept snow in the winter. If you hike your way up, panting, to the top of the hill, you can see for miles. Depending on your angle on a clear day, you can look west to the mountains, their forms washed over with sky-haze but still majestic against the horizon.



When you turn inward, away from the neighbourhood sprawling out in miniature before you, it's possible to see nothing but the landscape; to forget you're in a city entirely. Sometimes in the winter, you'll see a chinook arch carving out a patch of sky, a curved bite of blue taken out of steely or smoke-grey clouds. And other times, I would climb up to watch a prairie summer storm roll by, scraping along like the glaciers that formed the hills I stood on.

Nose Hill was where I went for a lot of things. It gave me an escape when I'd had another fight with my dad about my so-called attitude. It was where I could imagine that I was a character in *Lord of the Rings* or a video game, or to pretend that I lived hundreds of years in the past. I sometimes took a sketchbook or camera out with me. I'd walk our family dog there.

I loved to go there to decompress from the demands of school, work, or family. When I was walking through the grass or observing the golden-peachy tones of a grain-dust hazed sunset, I was free. Out there everything I felt was so blatantly, obviously *natural*. Like my attraction to women, or the questions I had about God, or the way the thought of pregnancy made me flinch away as though burned. It was a gorgeous natural area and being there felt like a metaphor for headspace. As I grew older, and my hair was progressively chopped ever shorter until I had a shaggy androgynous bob, I came to rely more and more on the park as a space for creativity and respite.

I missed it terribly when I moved away for undergrad, but I found new places to be outside – along the Meewasin Trail, for instance. I'd bike joyfully across any of the bridges in my new city into downtown, loving how strong my legs got. I shaved off my hair in the dead of winter to support cancer research and haven't ever let it come back. Did drag shows, letting my persona help me grow in confidence and a sense of personal style that finally felt like mine. After years of approaching the concept tentatively, I started identifying myself specifically as a butch lesbian -- it felt like home settling in my bones. Long, invigorating conversations with friends affirmed my identity and theirs, helped us find commonality in the ways we'd experienced gender as something enclosing, freeing, or transformative.

I took deep gulps of prairie air, and if I missed seeing the mountains on the horizon... well, I had long road trips to get home to look forward to, elbow hanging out the driver's side

window while vivid canola fields scrolled on by. And Nose Hill was always there to greet me when I got home: a constant, shifting with the seasons but ever-present, visible from the highway as I drove in from the north or rising into view on approach from the east.

--

My friends admitted they could tell things had gotten bad for me as a young teacher in rural Saskatchewan when I confessed I never went for walks around town anymore.

I was too scared of running into one of my crueler students or an older teen who'd yell at me. Bad enough to put up with baiting statements or slurs disguised in other conversation at work; I didn't want to risk having them hurled at me when I was just trying to go for a walk. I was tired of being told, *kids will be kids and they'll grow out of it*. By this time, I'd quietly packed up most of the woolen blazers I'd felt so happy wearing and shoved them to the back of my closet, started wearing other kinds of clothing I desperately hoped would be read as inoffensive. That was when I really internalized that a lot of how I felt about my gender had to do with who I was surrounded by and what they had to say about it. I wasn't even out as a lesbian at work.

Isolated and working in a small town far away from anyone and everyone who knew me best, I'd taken the job because it was a continuing contract – not a term covering a leave, a rarity in my province – and it let me teach in my primary subject area. With a year of experience under my belt, I'd figured I'd be okay even visibly butch – after all, I had been in every other location so far! Either I could try this out or spend money I didn't have to get licensed in Alberta... and then have to job hunt all over again.

Increasingly, I regretted the decision. Daytime was traumatic. I couldn't take joy in going outside when it wasn't safe to do so, and when I was still new enough to the area that no one could really do anything to protect me, even if they sympathized. The nearby provincial park was beautiful, but I had no friends to go with and wasn't comfortable heading there to explore on my own; bears had been sighted before. Instead of at peace, I felt exposed; increasingly, it felt like going outside was something denied to me, or worse, that I had to deny myself for safety's sake.

So I refused to let that happen. Instead, I'd drive 20 minutes on the highway at night and park near a heritage one-room schoolhouse. I'd lie on top of my car, with a camera timed for long exposures. Hit the shutter: *click*, and wait. I'd hold my breath so I wouldn't jostle things.



Without light pollution, I could see *everything*. Stars, planets, the Milky Way spilled out, pastel greens and pinks of aurora shifting and whirling like ghosts through the night. Out there, I felt infinite and infinitesimal. Fields whispered. Coyotes howled. I'd inhale, exhale slowly, my breath pluming out in front of me. I'd forget where I was, and get put back into my body at the same time. For a long time, doing so saved me.

--

The people in that town who were kindest to me knew my family. The prairies can be like that, netted over with invisible relational ties that can harm or help in equal measure. By my second year there I had some people I could turn to for affirmation and company. One woman took me foraging, helped me re-locate joy in cooking meals together. Another let me help her garden at her farm. Dirt feels good in your hands. It feels good to work to put food on the table.

--

Nose Hill didn't need to be worked for. It exists for its own sake with occasional gentle maintenance. Gender feels like that, to me, when mine is quiet and at rest.

--

I'm starting to wear blazers at work again; the career change helped, getting away from a workplace environment where it *very much matters* that you remain respectable to the community you work in and the parents you work for. Their kids were learning cruelty and intolerance from somewhere. I just hope the ones who needed to see someone like me did.

It all blurs together for me.

Saskatchewan is the land of the living skies; Alberta is called wild rose country. Both are subject to mercurial weather, a dry winter, a variable summer, unpredictable storms. I don't live near either, anymore. There's a lot to love where I've landed, but I ache after the prairies sometimes. I miss the mountains. I carry in me the mushrooming dark bruise of summer thunderstorms you can see coming for hours before they arrive. I hold the smell of grassland, the vibrant contrast of fields against clear blue. Open skylines thrill me. Farmland soothes me, even if wheat ripens at the wrong time of year out here.

Put me in a lineup of good ol' prairie farm women, and I blend right in, even though I've cut my hair off. That wasn't, and isn't, the most comfortable space to hold. I don't want to be perceived. I want to be seen. I want it to matter. I want it to be inconsequential.

When I tell my story and my experience, frame the way I feel about myself and my body and the roles that people want to ascribe to me depending on where in the world I am and who I'm surrounded by... well, there's a lot of similarities to friends of mine who've come to different conclusions about what that means for them and their identity. I read that similarity as kinship, something deep and abiding and powerful and wonderful. It feels like my big, practical, sprawling, contradictory family.

I cannot separate my gender identity and expression from the women I grew up around, nor from the fact that being 'a woman' in some ways was defined much more broadly and generously among the women of my family than for other people I've known. Some of that is luck and localized circumstance.

Landscape and climate inform my gender expression and identity; and travelling from place to place throughout the prairies, I found that what was celebrated or innocuous in some places was punished as non-conformity in others. Some elements of this relationship to gender I share with my family members - immediate and extended, straight or queer - and others feel more shaped by societal factors, or location, or class, or upbringing. *Prairie gender* is what I can call it, but I don't mean that my experiences are universal, I don't mean there aren't other words or language that we could use. I think I just mean that places and people can be more than one thing simultaneously.

12 kilometers of land in a city environment can be a sanctuary of prairie grassland, even though it's surrounded by suburbs and a million urban people.

You can feel what it means to develop a rural ethic of community, of mutual aid and pulling together, whether you've grown up on a farm or not.

Here is my gender, the open sky and wide rolling grassland vista, the deep breath in and out – it is, and it isn't.

I want it just to be.



--

This story has no telling without acknowledging the traditional territories of the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta, which includes the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations), as well as the Tsuut'ina First Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda (including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations). The City of Calgary is also home to Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3.

Other lands mentioned include the traditional territories of Treaty 4 territory, the original lands of the Cree, Ojibwe, Saukteaux, Dakota, Nakota, Lakota, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation, as well as Treaty 6 territory, homeland of the Cree and Métis Nations, also recognized as the traditional homelands of the Lakota, Dakota, Nakota, Dene, and Saukteaux.

In writing this I acknowledge and reaffirm my relationship and responsibilities to the commitments made through the treaties.

[1] Chang, R. (2019, October 28). *Shania Twain: The Surprising Inspiration Behind "Man! I Feel Like A Woman"*. Biography. <https://www.biography.com/news/shania-twain-man-i-feel-like-a-woman-inspiration-drag>

Hermit Crab Drafting a Hermit Crab House

Ayla Walter (aylawalter.com)

doesn't use a ruler
writes in crayon
smudges the lines accidentally.
Tries so hard.
Squashes quasi-dimensional shapes down
into 3D realities
but inside dreams of shells curving indefinitely
of interiors melding seamlessly into exteriors
of infinite space
cradling raw brittle bodies
gently
and safe.



Now, what kind of creature
are you, little guy?



I guess neither of us really
wants to answer that, huh?

“Are you a frog? Or are you a toad?”

Geri Ambrose (@mathysphere)

Tide

c.m.d

it's 2006 and i am in fifth grade, on a field trip to an aquarium near lake superior to learn about the ecology and history of the great lakes. i squish myself into a bus seat for three hours with my best friend, her legs too long and my hips too wide already to be comfortable, but we manage. we are friends in the way that only a boy and a girl with something to hide can be, though we won't realize what exactly it is we're hiding for many years. someday she'll tell me her new name and i'll tell her mine and suddenly things will make a lot more sense, but for now we make do with a pair of shared headphones, an mp3 player full of evanescence, and silent preteen angst. when we reach the aquarium we dip our hands in the water of the ray tank together and ignore the tour guide talking about the ocean. i look out the aquarium windows twice as tall as i am at the shore of lake superior, so close i can feel its pull like gravity, and i interrupt the guide to ask how big the lake is. big enough to have tides? no, she tells me, though it is the largest of the great lakes, it isn't large enough to have tides. i don't believe her.

it's 2014 and i am graduating high school soon and my physics class is building boats out of cardboard to prove we understand buoyancy. i end up partnered with my crush, and together we build a boat with a head like a viking ship. we spray paint it in yellow and green and orange and think we're the coolest people on earth. i invite them to join my d&d group, and lament to them about having to wear a swimsuit in front of our classmates when we test the boat in the school pool. we could have just taken it to the lake and tested it alone, i joke. i don't think that i'm flirting, but we end up dating nonetheless. when i come out a year later they seem confused and surprised, and all i can think about is being in that cardboard boat, sinking in the school pool, and wishing i could sink into lake superior like a wrecked ship and never be found. we break up a few months later.

it's 2016 and i move back to my hometown. i tell myself i hate it here, i hate being recognized, i hate being seen by people who knew me when i was a girl. but despite it all i settle into routine, walking around town late at night, alone, looking out at the streetlights reflecting on the little lakes that surround the town. my sibling comes to visit and we drive up to superior; i collect driftwood and pebbles and think about throwing myself into the water. i decide i'd rather not drive home in a wet binder, but the thought remains.

it's 2019 and i take my partner and my siblings up to the lake for an afternoon. i wander the shore looking at rocks, dipping them into the water and holding them up to the sun for a hint of translucence, trying to identify agates. i end up with the pockets of my cargo shorts full of them, though very few are agate. they're beautiful anyway; metallic greys and reds full of iron, yellowy orange cherts, dappled dark basalts and lighter speckled granites. i take off my shirt, finally, and wade out into the water, hoping none of the other beachgoers or rock pickers notice my scars. my partner keeps his shirt on, toes tapping against the edge of the water, waiting impatiently for the month to pass and acquire the same scars. when he goes in for surgery i spend the three hour wait driving around town with a gps, looking for

geocaches. i find one in a park, tucked away in the woods near a little creek. inside is a charm shaped like a fairy; i take it and clip it to my keychain next to my rainbow flag, and in its place i leave an agate. i wonder who will find it next, what they will leave in its place. i wonder if they'll feel its pull the same way i do.

it's 2020 and i haven't been outside in weeks. my sibling suggests we drive up to superior for a few hours, hoping the beach will be empty with everything locked down. instead we find it crowded, and we put down a blanket as far from the shore as we can while still being able to see the water. we eat muffins from a gas station near the border and watch people swim, too aware of the inadequate distance between most of them. an old man walks along the shore with a mask and a bucket, picking up rocks and splashing them in the water before holding them up to the sun, deciding whether they will go in his bucket or back into the lake. we talk about nothing important. i wonder aloud how expensive it would be to live in a house on the shore; my partner and my sibling play along, pretending this is a reasonable goal and not a silly dream. we all want to be away from the world, and this is the furthest we can get. but for now no one stares, too preoccupied with keeping their distance even on a crowded beach. the wind off the lake is cool and the water splashes up in little waves despite the absence of boats. my sibling asks me if lake superior has tides. i tell them no, i don't think it does, but it still feels to me like a lie. i can feel it tugging at me even as we leave, its hugeness like a gravity well in my mind and my chest. i roll the window down as we drive away, casting one last glance out at the water. i breathe deep, the smell of the lake filling my lungs, and they feel so much bigger than i remember.



Water

Tears of Mania (@tearsofmania)

"Anytime when I'm in the water or surrounded by aquatic life is where I feel at my best and most true self. Especially when I go swimming in any safe body of water. The currents lift the weight off my body and embrace me with the gentle ripples."

Weird + Alive

Jess

For my fourth birthday, I asked my mom to take me to the beach. She took me even though it was cold and raining in the middle of June. She and my aunt stood freezing on the beach while I ran around in the water. There's a picture of me from that day, crouching in the sand in a cute little floral bathing suit. I'm looking very intensely at the ground and reaching for something out of frame. It's one of the few pictures of myself I can stand to look at because I recognize myself in it. It's comforting to know I've always been this way.

I had so many books as a kid about the ocean and all its wonders. One of my favorites was a glow in the dark book about deep sea bioluminescence. Not nearly enough things glow in the dark in my adult life, and it's an endless disappointment. Something all these books really drove home was that we don't actually know all that much about the deep ocean or its inhabitants. The discovery of volcanic vents on the ocean floor in the late 1970s completely altered the popular concept of what it means to be Alive.

Here, in these volcanic vents at the bottom of the ocean, were complex creatures, living in centuries-old communities. Thriving, despite having never seen the sun. If that were possible, what else could be down there? I dreamed of exploring a place people didn't understand. I could see myself there so easily, for reasons I didn't understand.

As I grew older, I found that other people didn't share my love of the ocean and everything in it; they were scared of what was down there. I'd see viral videos of some 'vile thing' coming up from the twilight zone: "You Won't Believe this Monster from the Deep! 10 Deep Sea Creatures that will Creep You Out!" "Terrifying Monsters to Give you Nightmares!". The comments would always be the same: "Put it back! Kill it with fire!" "Great, never sleeping again!". It hurt to read these things. Here was something people had never seen before, something new and fascinating they could learn from...and they hated it. The kicker, of course, was always that these creatures were either dead or dying; these poor things were way out of their depth, not used to the light or the absence of crushing pressure. I saw myself in the distended neck of a frilled shark, the flat eyes of a washed-up oarfish. Would I meet the same fate, receive the same vitriolic reaction as I struggled to survive once brought into the light, if I told people I was something they'd never seen before?

The logical conclusion came to me: you're weird like the things in the bottom of the ocean. Other people will never love you for it. They don't love things they don't know. And they'll never really know you because you don't know you. It's terribly fun to

spend so long being Weird, to hold some nebulous thing deep inside of you. I would throw all kinds of words at it to have something to say to people. To have words to explain this Other self. To maybe have them not hate this Other. To accept this Other as my Self.

I never became a deep sea explorer, but I always return to the beach. I went to college almost 400 miles inland and found I couldn't do it; I couldn't leave the sea. I'm softer there; cold waves and coarse sand can wear down my guard like the edges of so much shattered glass. I can lose my trappings there and simply be Alive. To stand in the water and experience something vast and feared and referred to as a 'She' for no good reason. I too am vast and referred to as *she* for no good reason.

I've found there are other people in the deep with me. It's hard to see them in the dark, but like the volcanic vents, you can find them, outside of the prevailing theory of what it means to be Alive. I can walk on the shore in the moonlight with them. With only the noise of crashing waves to remind us that the sea is still there in the dark. I can stand in the water with them and let the tide come in up to our hips as we talk. I can throw a waterlogged skirt into the trunk of my car and drive everyone home in my boxers with sand between my toes. The feeling of being monstrous and strange doesn't go away. But there is cool water to stand in, driftwood to collect, and the ocean and all its inhabitants never asking why I don't shave my legs.

My gender is the sea, and the sea is me

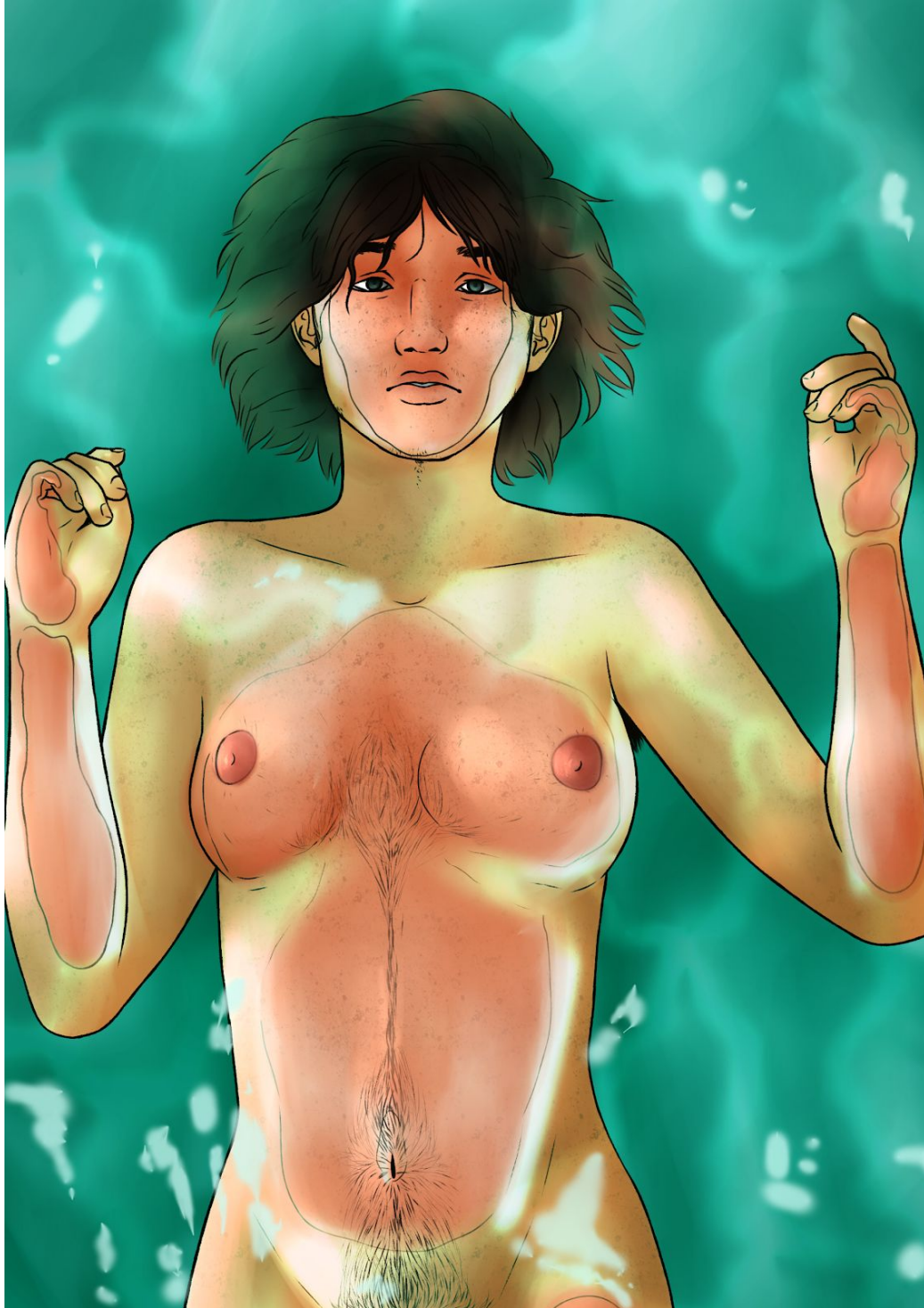
Sho'cye

It pushes and pulls with
A neat ebb and flow
Whose tides I can't guess
No matter how long I watch.
So goes my gender,
A mess that won't stay put
However much I complain
Or however much others
Say that it must be still.
But as I look out to
The sea stretching beyond,
Light waves rushing over
Bare feet as I look out
To the sea stretching beyond
With its tides so regular
Though ever a surprise,
I see myself there
In those same pushes and pulls
That drag men down
To depths we can't reach,
And push children along
On boards upon boards.
And in that moment
The tides of gender,
One flowing to the next
Then right back again,
With a rhythm I can't see
Seem to fall into place,
Just right, just perfect,
With a rhythm I can feel,
And however much they say
It must remain still,
The tides continue to turn
For none can look at the sea
And demand that it break
For them and them alone
At their pace and leisure,
And in that moment
I am those pushes and pulls.



Untitled

Kai (@gyfen-mann)



Float Above

Vincent (@4ratx)

"Dysphoria can make you feel horrible, like you're drowning, but if you breathe and work through it you can float above it."

For Silver Élan

Pale M. L. Ranisson (@kingofthewilds)

Here is the story of the broken. Here is the story of the mended. And so here, we begin. Reach down, down to the space behind your sternum and pull out your beating, bleeding heart. Replace it with something more true to the world that wants you dead: a pomegranate, a rose, a battery, the corpse of a cardinal bird. Take your beating, bleeding heart from your hand and crush it between your teeth, take bites raw and rich and red until you can barely feel the beating. Finally, pull a memory from your temple. The temple of your head, mind you, not the desecration you've made of your still-breathing corpse. Take your memory and make it the right one, don't turn back, don't second-guess, don't hesitate, don't choose wrong. We both know what will happen if you do.

So take your memory and the strained beating from your heart and whatever sacrifice you made to breathe without bleeding. Mix them together in your favourite pestle and mortar. Or use a saucepan, if you'd like, or an iron cauldron. It's versatile, if you want it to be. As versatile and unforgiving as you. Crush them up until you can't tell one from the other, and paint the mixture over your eyes, your hands, the rolling hills of your thighs. And breathe.

And breathe. Breathe in and feel your teeth turn sharp, feel the way they'd cut if you closed your mouth. Don't look yet, don't turn back. Breathe until the ashy, dying scent of your mixture turns heather-sweet, until sorrow turns into something less painful. You'll taste the clean breeze on the air, even though you're inside, even though wind can't find you here. Don't open your eyes, but get up and walk straight west, wherever your west happens to be, and count your steps. Don't look back. Don't open your eyes. Don't second-guess.

Seven steps forward and seven steps more. When the wind is behind you, open your eyes, and tell yourself what you expect the flowers to be. Honeysuckles or forget-me-nots, love-lies-bleeding or bleeding-heart-orchids, alba-fica or asphodel, or even the roses. Look around at the doorway you stepped through, notice that your heart still beats in your chest, your sacrifice buried on the road you took to find your way back. Notice that your ashy mixture is gone, and it took your image with it. There are no mirrors here.

So run. Run and fly and maybe take three steps and begin to swim. I never asked you what you see here. Keep going, until the air in your lungs is sweet and clean and green. Whatever you are, whatever you see: it's not for my eyes to know. But here are the rules. Don't second-guess. Don't hesitate. And never, never look back. Your younger self is still running to this point. Doesn't need you to hold the door open, only the chance to find a sacrifice to replace a beating heart with.

Let that heart beat against your sternum like wings against a cage. Let it guide you onward, like a compass on the sea. What isn't asked is never answered. What's answered is never asked. Decide for yourself what that means.

Keep running. Run and scream and turn a cartwheel if you're so inclined. Put miles behind you, more progress than you know. Know you can be at peace here, in the green, in whatever colours you saw fit to splatter against the viridescence. Whatever you stuffed in the cavity of your heart, see it within the trees, see how it beats life into the world, breathes and

steadies what you see. See how your heart made of you what you need to be, what you're meant to be. See how if you are sure, if your heart is allowed its reign, every broken fragment of you can fall into place.

Listen to the birds of your memory, coloured by the sacrifice you made. What did you give up? Expectations? Conditional love? A chance or seven, a leap of faith not taken? Does it matter? Probably. But you made it this far.

So collapse upon the shore of the distant pool, glass against the green, clear as day, clear as an image you dreamed up but never painted. Look into its depths. Recall, if you so please, that if you look into an abyss, it too looks back at you.

It loves you. Know it or don't, hear the words or fail to listen. But the abyss sees you, sees the yearning in what you made of yourself, the beating of your heart and the memory you draped yourself in, the sacrifice for a doorway into the green. The abyss of the great glass pool sees you, knows you, and it loves you. If you draped yourself in sin, it sees, it forgives, it loves. If you draped yourself in sorrow, in joy, in pride – it understands. It sees no fault in any choice you have had to make.

Stare into the pool, into what it knows, and ask it for the knowledge you hold but don't yet cradle in your hands. Reach for the first stone you see at the bank, feel it smooth and worn beneath your fingertips, skip it into the pool. Watch the ripple as the abyss accepts your offering. It isn't a sacrifice. You don't need to bleed to see what you already know.

When it stops rippling, look again into the abyss. Breathe, and look. What do you see, in the reflection of the great glass pool?

Yourself, of course, but not in so much mundane like a mirror. You shed the breathing corpse you inhabited when you stepped through the door. In lieu of that, what did your heart have to work with, when it conjured you up a new one? It took your memory and your sacrifice, and what you see is only what you've always been, what you are meant to be. If you have clothes on, they fit perfectly, the body you have draped around yourself allows them to shine in the exact way you thought they might, at the height of the stars when the moon is full. Look and see, at the image your heart conjured up for you.

The abyss loves you. Remember that, and lift your feet from the mud of the bank, step an entire rotation around the pool counter-clockwise, and walk eastward, take your time to turn back and go home.

When you awaken in your own bed, doorway closed and sacrifice vanished from the physical world, you won't remember what exactly you saw in the depths of the pool. But you will remember the green, and the memory you thought up is draped in peace.

Rest. Peace has claimed you, and the world has remembered the knowledge it held but forgot to cradle in its arms: it loves you, too.

I found a body in the woods

Braigwen

i found a body in the woods.

i rolled it over

and i looked in its brown-hazel eyes

and traced over its thick arms

and chubby legs

and shoulders filled with pitted scars

and decided that it was me.

if it was me

i must decide what it looked like

but the truth is i do not know.

the hair is brown, it's always brown,

but sometimes it is long,

so long,

tumbling down my back and to my butt

and winding itself ankles,

and sometimes it is short,

no more than a couple inches, brushing

the tips of my ears

and whispering 'look,

you could be a fairy if you tried'.

sometimes it has thick, heavy breasts,

broad and stretch-marked and pit-scarred,

and sometimes the chest is flat and clear

unbound and unblemished

with the leaves of shrubs and groundcovers edging lazily against the nipples,

free and masculine in the breeze.

the body in the woods cannot decide what

shape it is, or how it is decorated.

it is never a woman,
but sometimes it is a girl.
sometimes its eyes are greener,
sometimes it's thinner or fatter or
more scarred,
and sometimes it's not even human.
one thing always remains the same.
i found a body in the woods and it is mine
and it is me.
the woods are the important bit,
the trees and the
mosses and the winds and the
rich, compact, brown soil
and the promise of thunder.
often, my chest has aches.
sometimes the aches are
from the tightness of a bra,
sometimes the aches are from
looking in the mirror and wondering why
they are there,
but most of the time the aches are from
a distant, ever-present, always-close
longing for the forests
i have always felt need to dwell in.
i remain by the body.
it grows dusk, and there is woodsmoke in the air.
the body changes shape again.
loneliness frees me.

Time in the Backyard

Lora

I like mowing my backyard. Not with a lawnmower -- that broke before I even moved into my new home. No, I grab the step stool my dad bought, a little slightly broken blue one, climb onto it, and grab the weed whacker hanging off the ceiling of the garage before I start to prep it.

The strings in it are broken.

They're always broken nowadays. But I always have more string to fill into it.

Clipping off the cap, I remove the red string from my pocket and fill it into the two compartments. I spin it around and around the center, but leave the ends unspun. Those will be threaded through the holes on the sides. Just like thread through the eye of a needle. I can do that. Next, I have to click in the cap.

The sides are stuck again, *just like you're stuck in your ugly little* --

I hit the top of the cap with more force than necessary.

It finally clicks in though.

Grabbing a battery off of dad's old workbench, I head out of the garage. It's been a very rainy winter. The grass and weeds have grown high enough to tickle my legs. *My ugly, chubby* --

The weed whacker roars to life, slicing the grass in half.

I like the sound of the weed whacker. It's loud -- louder than most sounds I can tolerate. But it keeps the terrible thoughts at bay. Or maybe they just don't scream loud enough to be heard against the growls of the beast within my palms. Either way my brain is quiet.

For now.

They'll be loud enough soon, but I won't have to focus on them. It takes a lot of focus to get the lawn even when the ground is so uneven. I have to watch where the strings are spinning and how low they're spinning. I have to keep an eye on the places I've already mowed -- are they even? Did I get everything? Even near the old broken lattice ma used to use?

The weed whacker throws something, a stick, which hits my leg. I can feel the cut under my jeans. *This wouldn't have happened if your legs were* --

I turn it back on and continue.

I'll get a bandage later. It doesn't matter what the voices say - the stick would have hit me anyway, even if my body was the way I wished it was.

Around the trees and the young guava I cut, careful not to hit them. They're delicate right now, after the storms. The little apple tree is leaning again. I'll have to get a stick and thread later to try to help it stand straight again. This isn't the first time it's tried to fall, but I hope it'll be the last.

The strings suddenly stop spinning.

The battery has run out.

I run to the garage to find another one, hoping to outrun the voices. But they're faster than me -- they always are.

The voices are mocking me, cruelly whispering about my body again. They point out every flaw within it -- the stretch marks that cover my arms and stomach, the breasts that grew larger as I grew older. They mock my legs and my arms - my acne - the scar on my face - my hair. Invisible fingers point out every flaw I hate as I slam a new battery into the grass stained weed whacker.

I hastily walk back to the section I was working on -- the area between the shed and the little trees -- and slam the buttons down.

The voices grow louder as the weed whacker loudly destroys everything in its path -- eating grass and weeds, killing vines that have snaked their way across the ground. I can feel my arms shaking as I walk around the area, carefully cutting the grass. As I continue the voices start to quiet down, and slowly I start to calm down again. Before I even notice it, I'm done.

I look across my small backyard, quietly viewing the result of my hard work from the past few hours. The grass is nice now, even and short, just like how I was taught to cut it. It makes me smile as I walk back to the garage, removing the battery as I walk.

Things are silent now.

The dogs run out of the house as I get to the door of the garage, the youngest shoving his head into my leg before running into the freshly cut grass to play. I laugh as I open the door, watching him roll in the grass before I walk in. Such a silly boy.

I balance myself on the stool and gently place it on its hook. The strings are broken again, just like when I first got it down.

I'll fix them the next time I see you, old friend.

I dust off the grass on my jeans and hop off the stool. My first job out here is complete, now for the second part. It's not as hard as the first, but it helps the last of the thoughts go away.

The rainy season might be here, but not all of our plants got to enjoy it. The large planter near dad's old chimenea is ok, but the soil in the small planters under the overhang feels a little dry. I grab the bottle next to them and fill it up. Half of the water spills gently into one before the rest goes into the second. Gently, I move some of their leaves off of the ground, and remove some of the dead ones from them. They keep falling back on the soil due to the wind. Hopefully they won't fall again... they probably will though.

The dogs bound over to me, done playing now that I'm near the planters - and their food bowls. They jump around, bouncing with so much enthusiasm one throws their bowl into the air and they flee for a moment when it comes clattering down. But not a second later they're back, shoving their heads against my legs and looking at me with bright puppy like eyes. I laugh and pet their heads.

At least when I'm out here, with them, the voices -- and my body -- don't seem so bad. I smile and walk towards their bowls, picking one up in each hand.

"Are you guys ready to eat?"



Wings

Heather

"This piece is an expression of my gender dysphoria in combination with my weight and the expressiveness I see in the wings of birds and insects."

I Move With the Trees in the Breeze

Violet Clare (@periareolar)

I was never particularly athletic. I was a very sick child—various ailments kept me from being a typically active child, and personally, I have a theory that even without my numerous surgeries, infections, and hospital stays, I *still* wouldn't have been all that inclined toward athleticism, purely because of my bookishness. But the fact of the matter is this: my tendency to read obsessively only made me more aware of my changing body as the years went on. Other kids in my grade were happy with their bodies, as far as I could tell, unworried about the ways their bodies might change in the coming years, and, perhaps most importantly, far more active than I could ever have hoped to be, while I was pockmarked with acne scars at the ripe old age of nine, and hating the changes I was starting to see in my body.

In spite of my lack of athleticism and all-encompassing clumsiness—spanning from my (lack of a) way with words, to my inability to ride a bike very well—I think fondly of the bike rides I took with my siblings when I was younger. The fact that I couldn't pedal very fast for very long did little to keep me from learning that getting outside was one of the easier ways to forget about the changes being wrought upon my body by an evil witch (or so it seemed to me). Although I knew how puberty worked, more or less, from a biological perspective, I didn't *want* to be another victim of that oh-so-mysterious evil, *Being Gendered*. I wanted to stay prepubescent with a chest like an ironing board and hips narrower than anything *forever*, and with no one really able to tell if I was a boy or a girl until they asked my parents, or, God forbid, asked *me*.

That last is more wishful thinking than anything, if I'm being perfectly honest. As a child, I embraced dresses, skirts, and other things deemed traditionally feminine, and by the time I realized I didn't really know that I *was* all girl, or if I was instead, more likely, something else entirely, the damage was done. I'm sure once I'm a few years into my transition, I'm going to be read as a particularly flamboyant, limp-wristed gay man, due to my feminine mannerisms (which I doubt I'll ever really be able to shake). I think I'll be okay with that, really, as long as I personally am more comfortable in my body by then. However, comfort in my body might come at the price of my relationship with my biological family, which will be difficult for a few years if, God forbid, my family reacts as horribly to my wanting to pursue medical transition post-pandemic as they did in April of 2019, when I first broached the subject of my gender, and my wish to transition. However, my mother has told me that assuming I get a job after coronavirus is over, the money I earn from that will be mine to

spend as I please, although of course (of course!) some of that money will have to go towards necessities, once I'm back on campus. I think ultimately, she wants me to be more responsible with money, and doesn't care if I change the body she gave me—although of course that's also mostly wishful thinking. I don't know what she wants for, or *from*, me.

Anyway—the bike rides. I remember one of these summer bike rides more clearly than almost anything else from my childhood, or, I suppose, more specifically, I remember the end of that bike ride better than anything—I was so focused on keeping my balance on the bike, the wind in my hair, and the summer weather, stiflingly hot though it was, that I forgot, for a moment, to be uncomfortable in (or with) my changing body. I also lost track of my surroundings for a bit, biking on autopilot as I was, and I remember being startled to see that I had made my way back to the entrance of the greenway without getting lost, and without really paying much attention to my surroundings at all beyond relishing the weather. Something else about these summer bike rides was that for all my talk of being unathletic, I could still bike pretty well once I got going, if I wasn't too nervous, so these bike rides forced me to appreciate my body for what it could do for me, rather than hating it for the changes being wrought upon it by my changing biochemistry.

As the years have passed, I've found that my dysphoria has grown more and more debilitating, which may be tied to the fact that my assorted ailments have made it harder for me to spend very much time outside when it's warm (April through August or September in North Carolina, generally). However, I've started seriously talking to my primary care physician about why I feel that I need to go on testosterone, and why I feel that it will improve my quality of life. All of this, by which I mean talking to her about my trouble with my body, is complicated by the fact that I had, at first, tried to keep talk of gender confined to my therapists when I first realized that my body didn't fit quite right (I was twelve or thirteen, and had been repressing these feelings for who *knows* how long beforehand) without breathing a word of my discomfort to my primary care physician. This lasted for years, with me starving myself in an effort to make my body feel more like something I could control *without* any hormonal intervention (due to the damage this would deal to my already-strained relationship with my family) rather than talk to my primary care physician about any of this.

However, as of early February of 2020, I've started seriously discussing and dissecting the fact that my eating disorder is rooted in gender dysphoria more than anything else—more than any familial tendencies towards disordered eating, and certainly more than what I saw as my need to compete with my twin sister and *her* eating disorder—with my primary care physician. If everything goes well, I hope to start testosterone by the end of the

COVID-19 pandemic, whenever that ends up being. As I write this, it's mid-April, and I'm staying with my mother's parents during the state of emergency in my state. I've been taking a walk with my grandmother almost every day since I came here, and while I haven't been tracking its impact on my mental health, I'd like to think that taking walks almost daily has helped my mental health and relationship to my body, even if only a little. I need to relearn the things my body does well before I start changing it—although it's become increasingly clear that I *will* have to go on testosterone if I want to be functional, rather than painfully anxious about how I'm perceived at all hours.

Despite the good those childhood bike rides did for my sense of what I was capable of at the time, I will admit that I'm honestly glad that I stopped being particularly active as I got older and threw myself into school. Who knows how much longer I would have been able to repress my feelings about my body if I were more active, and more aware of the things my body does well?

The Meaning of Conception

R. Tally (@tallyrunning)

What natural is there
Where moon meets sun
When supernatural
Wakes lightness in my belly
Oases at night
Oblige me to wonder
Of how stars can form
Over something deserted
Massive pressure arouses flood
Merely swimming wrong I'd drown
Mast up I sail toward the stars
My mother grieves unbroken water
But I really have
Borne life already
Brought strength and beauty
By starlight's ways

"I am an avid watcher of the sky - day and night. It never fails to remind me that although light can move and come from different places, light is light and all sources are natural. A little like gender and a little like the bodies we are born with. It is always our decision to embrace and admire light, in whatever way we choose, or to shade ourselves from it entirely."

Heat Lightning

Phoenix Sandroock

Lightning does not come from the sky. Well, not only from the sky, my cousin Chris explains.

"There's a part that comes down from the clouds," he says, sitting on the swing next to mine. I'm standing on my swing, wobbling back and forth.

"There's another part that comes from the sky, though."

A shriek goes up from the climber, a ramshackle collection of metal and peeling paint baking in the summer sun. Kennedy is it for grounders, and he's circling the climber, every step a threat. A dozen or so of the trailer park kids are jostling for position, trying to find the best place to hide when he comes chasing. Someone's on top of a tunnel, others cling haphazardly to the outside of railings. A girl scrambles to the top of the monkey bars.

"When the two parts meet," Chris finishes, "That's when lightning happens. You can see it sometimes, when you put videos in slow motion. The two charges meet and... boom!"

Back at the climber, Kennedy darts up the stairs. He clearly has his eyes open, and a few people complain that he's cheating, but he doesn't hear. He goes straight for my friend Mackenzie, grabs at the back of her shirt. She twists away from his grip and her shirt hits her back with an audible snap. Kennedy grins a taunt.

"Come on," someone whines, "That's the fourth time you've gone for her."

"Yeah, it's not fun anymore," another child complains.

A mom appears at the edge of the playground and announces dinner. People break off in twos and threes, heading to their trailers. The sun is going down, upholstering the clouds in pastels; the smell of cooking charcoal fills the air. I run up to Mackenzie on the structure.

"You okay?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says, somewhat sullen. She adjusts the strap of her bra, which Kennedy snapped while tagging her.

"You wanna come over for dinner?" Chris asks, "We're having tacos."

"That's okay," Mackenzie says, "Thanks, though." She sets off to her own trailer, and Chris and I begin the trek to ours.

I watch Mackenzie walk away and think about how much she's changed since I last saw her. Every summer, my parents send me down to the trailer park, to live with my cousin Chris and Aunt Rose. When you only see people in the summer, they don't change slowly. It happens all at once. Last summer Mackenzie was only a bit taller than me. Now she's a full head taller. She started shopping at different stores, sometime over the course of the year. She's wearing tank tops and short shorts now, and flip-flops, though she abandons those to run when necessary.

Next to her, I'm short, scrawny, and underdressed. The train lost my suitcase on the way up, so I'm wearing Chris' clothes while we wait for them to mail it. I wear hand-me-downs from my cousins all the time, but it somehow feels different, now that Mackenzie is wearing t-shirts with brand names plastered across the front.

We make it to my trailer just as Aunt Rose is laying out dinner. As we start to fill our plates, she mentions to me that she got a call from the train station.

"They have your suitcase," she explains, "I'll go pick it up tomorrow."

"Oh," I say. It's all I can think to say. The statement knocks the wind out of me, and I don't know why. Just that it does. When I come back to myself she and Chris are staring something awful.

"I guess I'll give this back, then!" I blurt, tugging on the collar of my shirt - as much to remove it as to quell the climbing blush.

"Nah, whatever," Chris says, "That one is too small for me anyway."

That sets Rose off on a tirade of really, another growth spurt, you need to tell me when you need new clothes. I let them squabble. I wonder for a moment where the feeling of relief came from, why I'm so attached to the shirt I'm wearing. I don't wonder too long, though. I feel as though I'm dipping my toes into dark water, and I'm not sure I'll like what I find.

The trailer park in summer is never boring. There's always something to do. Chris, Mackenzie, and I spend our days roaming the park and surrounding forest with a pack of other half-feral children. We swim in the river, play endless games of manhunt and grounders, hide and go seek. We retreat to the pool on the hot days, get yelled at by the lifeguards for doing trick dives and running on the deck. Sometimes we collect beer bottles and return them for spare change, then use the change to buy ice cream at the canteen.

It's during one of these ice cream runs that the haunted house comes up. I'm devouring a bubblegum cone, trying not to let it drip on my new shirt, when Laura announces, "Did you know there's a haunted house nearby?"

"No way," Mackenzie says.

"No, it's true!" she insists. She bites off the last bit of her popsicle and continues. "There was an old lady that lived all alone in her house. And then she fell down the stairs and died and nobody knew she lived there and then she rotted in there. Now she's a skeleton in the house and the house is haunted."

"That wouldn't happen," Chris says, "Someone would find her. What about her kids?"

"Maybe she didn't have any kids," Laura says.

"Someone else would find her," I say, "Maybe she stopped paying her water bill or something. Then somebody would come looking."

"No, I swear, she's dead in there," Laura insists, "I've seen her skeleton through the window. Kennedy showed me where the house is, he saw it too! Right, Kennedy?"

"Yeah, I've seen it," he says, "I think you're too scared to go see." He gestures emphatically with his ice cream bar, and the last bit of chocolate falls off into the dirt. He sighs.

"I'm not scared," Mackenzie says, "I wanna see it."

"Let's go, then!" Laura says.

“Right now?” I ask.

“Unless you’re chicken.”

“I’m not chicken,” I insist, “I just wanna finish my ice cream.”

The five of us manage to fit on three bikes. They’re camp bikes, with rusted brakes that squeal when pressed. I sit on Chris’ bike seat and he stands and works the pedals. Mackenzie does the same on Kennedy’s bike. Laura leads the charge. We follow her out to the parking lot, where she dismounts and leads us behind a dumpster.

True to her word, there’s a path there. It winds through the long grass before disappearing into the woods.

“After you,” I say, and she sets off.

I keep my eyes on the ground, most of the time. But as we walk through the forest, I can’t help but look up at the trees. They’re bursting with birds, chittering squirrels, sunlight filtering through and dappling the forest floor. It plays shadow-puppet patterns on my maroon shirt. I dart in and out of the light.

Soon, Laura calls us in close. We’re approaching the clearing with the house in it, she explains. We have to be sneaky, otherwise we’ll disturb the ghost.

“Sure,” I reply, rolling my eyes.

Within moments, the forest opens into a clearing. What I see there takes my breath away.

There’s a tiny cottage of a house, but most of the clearing is taken up by a garden. Flowers of every colour burst from the soil: pale blue forget-me-nots, white apple blossoms and daisies, fragrant wild roses with ants harvesting their nectar. The others are spreading out in the garden around me, each admiring a piece of its riches. Mackenzie picks a daisy and weaves it behind her ear and into her hair. Chris and Laura are tiptoeing up to the cottage, and Kennedy is snooping around a vegetable garden.

I walk up to Mackenzie.

“Whoever lives here, I don’t think they’re dead,” I say.

“Why?” she asks, now admiring some tigerlilies.

“Garden like this is a lot of work,” I explain. She frowns.

“Isn’t your mom always complaining about weeding?” I ask.

“I guess,” she replies.

Two things happen in quick succession. Kennedy yelps in pain and starts running back toward the path, and there’s a cracking sound, like a window slamming open.

“Run!” Laura shouts.

We all run for it, sprinting back to the head of the trail. Everyone else keeps going, but something compels me to stop. I turn around.

Laughter is ringing out through the clearing, bright and melodious. I shade my eyes to look at the cottage.

There's a person there, standing on the front porch. I can't tell whether they're a woman or a man. They're wearing plain shorts and a worn-out purple t-shirt. Their hair is tight-cropped. I run my hand through my own hair, a long, rough tangle from too much chlorine and not enough showers.

The person, still laughing, catches my eye. I recoil, thinking they'll be mad, but they smile so sweetly that I can't help but return it. I wave a little wave, and mouth sorry. They wave back. The moment passes like a love note between us.

I blink, and suddenly they're gone. I turn and return to my friends.

"You're sure it wasn't a ghost?" Laura asks, for the third time.

"I don't know what a ghost looks like. But they just looked like a normal person," I reply.

We make it back to the parking lot. Laura is quizzing me about the ghost. Mackenzie picks the petals off of her daisy, one by one, muttering under her breath, "He loves me. He loves me not." Chris helps Kennedy detangle the mouse trap from his shoelaces.

"She set traps for us!" Kennedy complains, "Even if she isn't a ghost, she's still setting traps for kids!"

"I think those traps were so that the mice didn't eat her tomatoes," I reply flatly, "Besides, it wasn't a lady."

"So it was a man?" Laura asks.

"I..." I start, "I don't know. They didn't look like a man, either."

Chris gets the mousetrap free, and Kennedy stands, triumphant.

"Maybe it's a he-she," he declares.

"A he-she who lives in the woods and sets traps for kids," Laura agrees.

I twist the hem of my shirt in my hand, tighter and tighter, until my fingers start to turn purple. Kennedy, Laura, and Chris walk off, speculating about the stranger with the garden. Mackenzie sighs, and pulls off the last petal.

"He loves me not," she says. She gets up and walks off to join the others.

I stare at the daisy petals, trampled into the dirt, for what feels like a long time.

In the later days of July, Chris announces that he's made a discovery.

"If you push your way through the bushes by the flower bed," he explains, "Near the main road? There's a creek there."

"How did you even figure that out?" I ask.

"After the last rainstorm it almost ran over," he replies, "It cut the road in two. I can show you. Come on!"

We set out - Laura, Chris, Kennedy, Mackenzie, and I. Chris shoves aside the bushes, hops a rusted barbed-wire fence, and reveals his discovery.

The forest beyond is close and cloistered. There are quiet sounds that imply life - birdsong, rustling leaves, and the tagalong burble of the creek. The creek is muddy-bottomed, with moss rocks lining the edge. The forest floor is mostly ferns, dappled with freckles of sunlight filtering through the canopy.

"We have to follow it," I say, and the others nod in agreement.

Chris leads the way, hopping back and forth from riverbank rock to forest floor. Kennedy trails close behind. He's picked up a stick and slashes away at the underbrush, leaves fluttering in his wake. Laura peers into the creek, between slapping mosquitoes on the back of her knees.

"Stop hitting the bushes, Kennedy," I say, "You're gonna scare away the animals."

"Piss off," he says.

"Yeah, quit it," Mackenzie says. Kennedy rolls his eyes, but tosses the stick aside.

"How come he listens to you but not to me?" I ask. Mackenzie shrugs.

"Hey," she says, "I've been thinking. I wanna go by Kenzi now. Mackenzie is just too... boyish. You know?"

"Oh," I say.

"You don't like it?"

"No, I do. It's, uh, cute."

"Good!" she chirps.

We walk a minute in silence.

What's wrong with boyish?

I'm pulled out of my reverie by a shriek. Mackenzie slips on a rock and slides into the creek. She pulls at her foot, but the mud has latched and will not let go.

"I'm stuck!" she yells.

I'm startled still. While the others tug at her arms and dig at her ankle, my eyes scan the creek. She comes free with a sucking sound straight out of a TV movie.

"Oh my god," she says, "I lost my shoe."

She's coated in clay from the ankle down, and her flip flop is nowhere in sight. Laura laughs. It's a bright peal that sends a nearby flock of birds flying.

"Guess we gotta turn back, huh," Laura says.

"Whatever," Chris replies, "There's too many bugs here, anyway. And I gotta pee."

"Just go on a tree or something," Kennedy answers.

"No!" Chris says. Then, in a scolding whisper, "There are girls here."

The others turn to follow the water home. They get a few dozen feet before realizing I'm not with them.

"Hey!" Mackenzie calls, "You coming?"

I spot something in the creek, just upstream of where Mackenzie went in. I hop soundlessly along the rocks, a tightrope dance along the riverbank. I crouch and plunge my hand in. The water is cool and clear, but it muddies as my fingers find their way around the object. I wiggle and dig until it comes free.

It's a skull. It's awkward in my hands, too large to fit comfortably. The lower jaw is missing, as are some teeth. The ones that remain are sharp even now. I press my fingertip against one. I can feel the blood rush to my fingerprint, asking to bead a pinprick on my hand. I rub at the clinging mud with the hem of my shirt, like I'm trying to wring a genie from a lamp.

"What is that?" I hear Laura ask. Soon the other four are beside me, their hands reaching to touch. I back away.

"Whoa," Chris says, "What animal is it?"

"You know how Joe's dog ran away and never came back?" Kennedy asks.

"Joe's dog was a beagle, stupid," Mackenzie adds, "That's too big. I think it's a wolf."

Kennedy scoffs. "There aren't any wolves here."

"Coyote," I say, outside of myself. The word feels natural on my tongue, as though the skull is speaking through me.

"You're probably right," Chris supplies.

"You gonna take it home?" Kennedy asks.

At that moment, a cloud passes over the sun. Everyone looks up. Without the splashes of sunlight on the ferns, the air is cold.

"Nah," I say, "It might have rabies."

This sets off a new round of debate among the others. They start to walk away. I set the skull on a rock and run to join them.

For the rest of the walk back, I lag a little behind the others, thinking about coyotes. Scrappy and cunning, they moved into the city; or, rather, the city moved into them. The skull, though, isn't cunning. There's a nudity to it, a brutal honesty stitched in its teeth. Without flesh to tell their lies the teeth no longer snarl threats. And so small.

I watch my companions hop the barbed-wire fence and wonder whether there's truth in our bones, too.

The drought sets in at the beginning of August. It can be hard to notice a drought, at first. Two or three days without rain, even a week, slip by in a blink. But after two weeks, or three, when the grass starts to yellow and the gardens start to die, people call it what it is.

The canteen sells out of bubblegum ice cream. The creek dries up. The metal on the climber is too hot to touch. The head lifeguard has closed the pool, worried about his guards getting heatstroke. At night, everyone sleeps in their underwear. We wear that and a sheen of sweat, coated in salt and fever dreams.

During the day, there's little to do but sit in the river, under the shade of the big oaks by the manager's cottage. Even the heat bugs are quiet. The soil cracks, a caricature of a desert. Ancient snapping turtles drift by in the tepid water, moss coating their shells.

The heat makes everyone short-tempered. I try to stay out of it, ducking insults and thrown bottles alike, vanishing into the river when it all becomes too much.

One morning I wake up to the heat. Again. I retrieve my bathing suit from the line and put it on beneath my clothes. It's dry. I swear it dries in seconds. Rose informs me that Chris is at the river already. I nod and say I'll meet him there.

I weave between trailers to get to Mackenzie's lot. She's sitting on the porch by herself. She looks pale, almost sickly. She's clutching her stomach.

"You ready to go to the river?" I ask her.

"Not going today," she whispers.

"Why?" I ask, "You sick?" She looks over her shoulder.

"Something like that," she replies.

"Maybe the heat's just getting to you," I answer, "A little cool water will do you good."

"Really. I don't want to go."

"Come on, Mack, I-"

"My period happened, okay?" she hisses. She looks over her shoulder again, making sure nobody heard. "And grandma doesn't have any stuff for me so I can't go swimming."

I churn in that for a moment, unsure how to respond. Mackenzie and I are the same age.

"I... could ask Rose if she has anything," I say.

"I don't feel like it," Mackenzie says, "Just go without me. Tell everyone I've got a stomach ache."

"Alright."

I set off toward the river, glancing again over my shoulder. Mackenzie looks miserable, but if she wants me to go by myself, I will.

The boys and some girls are already laying in the water, or swinging their legs off the edge of the dock. I give them Mackenzie's regrets while taking off my shirt and shorts, slinging them over a tree branch.

The maroon shirt is getting worn. I wear it a lot; it has the stains to prove it. Each one well-earned, though; paint from a mural, grass from wrestling matches, grease from helping Laura's dad repair his outboard motor. Some others are swimming. I sink sullenly into the water, a body tied to an anchor.

I don't know what it is that upsets me so much about Mackenzie. Part of me is nervous to be around the boys without her. They've been so combative since the heat set in. But a quieter, deeper anxiety lies below the surface.

Mackenzie has been absent for a while. She's been replaced by Kenzi. Kenzi isn't the girl I grew up with. She's still smart, still tough as nails, still beats the boys at arm wrestling and laughs about it after. But there's something that's evolved about her. She wears makeup. She paints her nails. She reads Teen Vogue. She has begun to abandon the girlhood we shared for womanhood.

A snapping branch catches my attention. I turn.

Kennedy is over by the shore. He's holding my shirt in one hand. Laura and a few other boys are looking on.

"Hey! What are you doing?" I stand.

"I was just gonna throw out your garbage for you," Kennedy says. The others snicker.

"That's not... My shirt isn't garbage!" I take a step toward him, but he doesn't budge.

"Why not?" he asks, "You wear this stupid shirt every day. It stinks."

"Give it back," I say.

"Why don't you dress like Kenzi?" he asks, "You dress like a boy. An ugly boy." More laughter.

My body moves without me. It grabs the shirt and tries to pull it away from Kennedy. He's laughing, teeth showing, thrilled to goad me into a fight. My arms do two things at once. One yanks on the shirt. The other pushes Kennedy.

There's a tear and a thump, then dead-nothing silence. Even the heat bugs don't scream. I pushed Kennedy into a rose bush. He's scratched all over. Everyone else is petrified with shock.

My body takes me away.

I end up hiding under the laundry rack. The laundry - Rose's long skirts mixed with Chris' underwear - is bone-dry. I'm crying, but silently; I don't want to give away my hiding place.

My shirt tore clean in two. I don't even want to look at the scrap I still have. The colour reminds me of blood. Kennedy's blood, seeping in droplets from rose-thorn scratches. But also Mackenzie's blood.

I understand, now, why it upsets me that Mackenzie is Kenzi. She's the same age as I am. We grew up together. But, with the inevitability of a sunrise ending the night, she's gone from girl to woman in one summer. And I'm destined for the same thing. For me it isn't a sunrise. It's a storm, a hurricane too large to outrun. The question comes to mind - whether I'll survive the storm.

The heat persists into the night. Rose tells me that Kennedy is fine, just embarrassed, and serves him right, anyway. Chris doesn't talk to me. He's now the crazy girl's cousin, damned

by association. I barely eat dinner, and I settle into bed early. I sleep in my underwear, like every night. It's too hot for anything else.

I awaken in the middle of the night feeling different. The air is still and clear. So is my head, relieved of the day's worries.

I walk into the bathroom. It's dark, but I don't turn the lights on. The mirror is a pool of dark water. I rummage around in the drawer under the sink until I find them - Aunt Rose's sharp scissors. I return to my bunk and pull out a pair of hand-me-down basketball shorts. I put them on.

It's bright outside; the moon is full. I set off toward the river. Along the way, I hear an owl hoot, followed by the yips and snarls of coyotes. They're far away, though. They will not cross the river.

The river itself is still. I can see my reflection in the water. The moonlight distorts it, enchants it. I smile at myself, and my reflection smiles back. I turn and see that Kennedy left my maroon shirt where it fell. I pay it little mind. Bare-chested, I don't need it anymore.

I reach behind my head and grab my unruly ponytail. I raise the scissors. It doesn't come off clean, like in the movies; it takes a minute's sawing, with hairs falling to my shoulders like spiderwebs. When my hair comes free I toss it back up the riverbank. Tomorrow a bird will pick it up and build a nest from it.

My head is lighter than it's been in years. I take a deep breath and plunge under the water.

It seems darker when I emerge. I look up. The moon is covered with dark clouds. Far away, I see heat lightning, but there's no sound with it. The wind picks up, and a sound begins to emerge. It's a hissing, almost silent. But it grows louder, hissing changing to tapping, tapping to clattering, until-

I awaken in my bed. For a moment I'm disoriented. My hair sticks to my neck with sweat. The noise is still here, though. The clattering, unmistakable: raindrops rapping impatient fingers on the canvas trailer roof. It's hard to tell which part was the dream. The air is cool. The rain breaks the hot silence of the drought.

A flash of lightning illuminates the trailer, a blinking second.

I get out of bed soundlessly. So does Chris. Rose meets us in the kitchen. We walk out the trailer door. All around us, our neighbours do the same. We're in our underwear, or naked. Grandparents wearing their wise skin, babies in diapers, Kennedy and his blood, Kenzi and hers.

The dark absolves us of our bodies. The rain washes them away. All that remains is our hands, outstretched and praying, our lightning fingertips daring the heavens to meet us where we are. Praying that when lightning strikes, it illuminates a place in our bodies; that it calls that bright place "home".

A Woven Gale

Marley T. (@hickorymoth)

there is something about the wind.
unlike me, it dances. it moves around
and shifts, in the middle of a sunny day
or in the middle of a rainstorm.

i went out in the beginning of a hurricane, once.
the leaves moved so fast i could imagine the cuts they left
on the people they touched. but they did not touch me.
no, what the hurricane gave me was an inability to breathe.

it is the same choking lack of breath i have when i see
someone else like me. not from fear or from sadness,
but from a bonecoddled sense of awe.
something caging my heart inside my ribs. but, no,

not caging. embracing. tying together as surely as
the twine of a bird's nest. it builds a home around me.
i have always been in tune with the wind.
there is no place the wind will not go, the breeze will not flutter.

it is like me; rather, i am like it. there are so many names you
could call the wind. there are so many things it can be.
there are so many things i wish others would call me.

Sunset

Grayson K. (@perhaps-a-dragon)

The sun is slipping
yielding the day to night
golden light
fractures between leaves
the dappled shadows
dancing against my skin
while wishes drift amongst blades of grass
dandelion seeds
in the evening air.
and with fragile breath, I wish
to be the thing
I was never told I could be.

I am a moon
that dreams of becoming
a sun.
I have heard the sharp tongued taunting
whispers barbed like thorns
that a moon who longs to be a sun
is of no worth
either way.
lucky, then, I say
that my existence
in this harsh and gentle world
is not a debt
to pay.

And the midnight thistle
tucked between spines
is set upon
by flame.
in the moment
asphalt warm and rough
beneath my palms
I think
it is
the most beautiful thing
that I have ever
seen.

Relief

Leigh Dawson

Nature's glorious paradox:
It wants nothing from me,
And that is the best absolution
The best forgiveness.
I listen
And it says
You do not have to know
You do not have to dissect yourself,
Point out each carefully labeled part to the
Onlookers
You do not have to hope,
Desperation staining your face
That someone will catch a glimpse of the almost-right you,
That for just a moment, you will fit
No,
You can simply move amongst the trees
Can simply taste the salt and sky
And feel freedom like a summer day.

Changing Course

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
No, do not compare me at all,
Do not observe, tally up
Analyze.
I am already shrinking as you look at me
And it is only the organic weight of my body that keeps me here:
The heft and flesh of it.
Do not compare me to that summer's day,
Set me alight within it,
Allow me the freedom of escape
As I reach that cloudless sky.

Formation

I am just as uncertain as a summer day in April
Asking myself
Is this right? Is this ok?
Can I be-
growing?
Changing?
Or is it too fast, too soon
Happening all out of order
The chaos of frantic growth
Of new blooms on too-spindly branches
Be careful
You don't want to break
Not in these heated, hurried
Tuneless days.

No one cares when it rains, but I do.

Datura Moth

Umbrellas obscure features.

Gray skies dim our world.

Gales make them want to shield their eyes.

Thunder impairs the hearing of voices.

Lightning poses a threat.

The smell of petrichor soothes emotions.

No one cares what gender I am when it's raining,
and that's exactly why I fell in love with the rain.

Taboo in Nature

Joey Dean (@toadstoolillustrates)

All my life,
I was warned against marking my body
I was told to fear any change in my skin
Anything to reclaim my body was deemed taboo

Every new hole I pierced through my own skin to make myself sparkle,
every strand of hair I lovingly dyed my favourite colour,
every sensual caress of another that made me feel human—

It was all deemed "risky behaviour".
Even every calorie I savoured was taboo;
enjoying skin and sustenance were unacceptable for such a good girl

Other boys it was natural, but not me;
I was a good girl

Everything that made up a girl was too unsightly on me, in my eyes only—
my stretch-marks,
my scars,
my body hair—

All marks of nature that
other boys didn't see with my eyes
They only saw me for flesh in the woods
They no longer saw the good girl I never was;

but as natural as a boy can be.

The World is Made of Eyes

Robyn Barter (@robynn_4cs)

The world is made of eyes. Hundreds of thousands, millions of eyes in every town, through every city. Every job, every coffee shop to restaurant to clothing store to street. Eyes, eyes, eyes, no matter where I go, always watching. Always judging. Knowing as instinctively as an animal to one who is phobic that I deeply, desperately wish to be invisible and watching me all the more for it. Knowing that judgement comes from every direction, I'm tense, always. Always ready to duck and hide. Always hiding in too-large clothing that gives a modicum of safety, of peace from the ever watching eyes of the world. I'm tense, always, as I prepare myself mentally to go out into the city, judging whether I have enough energy to put up with the stares again, again, the constant need to come up with scenarios in my mind to defend myself from, to better prepare myself for a reality that may or may not happen today, but may happen someday.

Most days of work, every day takes a minute, ten minutes more to force myself out of bed to face this reality. Most days of work I manage to scrape my mask back on. I did retail work for years. The smile-mask used to come easy then. I can still make it work, fill my ears and mind with music to help ease the anxiety that comes with the knowledge that the city is filled with eyes. I end my day exhausted, counting down the days until the weekend, where I can hole myself up in my room and forget for a brief moment that feeling of being watched.

The first time I realized the eyes were closed and I could relax I was on the trail. Where I live, just outside the city, is forests, miles of forests, mountains for days. The eyes became distant, almost forgotten beneath the trees. The sound of insects, the chatter of birds replaced my headphones. That first experience was not enough – I'd plan and plan trips out to the woods, filling my mind with thoughts of forest trails to block out the eyes. Out under the trees, on my trails by myself, is the one time I ever felt I could un-tense, could find a sense of peace. It took me far too many years to realize that.

A day here or there turned to a trip here or there, to a need for at least once a month, several days of me, a small camp and whatever trails in the woods I could find nearby. I'd never truly enjoyed camping growing up – three siblings crammed into a tent, forced to sit around camp and play cards for hours and long rides of carsickness. This new-found love, this peace, could be found in the changing colour of leaves, to snow on the mountains. Even in summer, when campground are full and dozens of people wander around, the eyes don't feel near as strong. Winter went from being the most hated season to most beloved as the rain, the snow, the cold mean little to me when I can have an entire campground to myself. No eyes at all then, just me, breathing in campfire smoke like the freshest of air, the trails muddy, the trees bare, but even without that protection, no eyes to be felt. I didn't care that I really shouldn't be spending the extra money, or taking time off of work to go out and do this. It was like finding my own personal utopia, in the rain and cold.

The more freedom I found, the harder and harder it became to come back to the city full of eyes, to feel the constant judgement. For the first time in years, I considered changing my future drastically once more. I could force myself to go on everyday, or I could change. I'd

made the decision without even realizing it. I could change a little, or I could change everything I wanted to, free from the eyes while in the city, free in a new job, a new city, a new life. I'm almost there – one more week of waiting and then the change will begin. From there, I can stop being trapped. I can make those steps closer and closer to the dream of a life outdoors. To a life where I leave the eyes behind and where I can be happy about me.

It's amazing, the changes that can be wrought just by stepping on a single trail.

Trees on High Places

Jay Oliver Dearly

All a body has to do is let you live in it

He reminds himself on the bus, bag set on his lap as an excuse to curl up and hide his chest. He does not jostle the other passengers so much as move with them; a jostle implies free space. There is none. He's not anxious so much as resigned to this, to this bus, to the faint warmth of other people pressed against his shoulders, to this feeling that weighs heavy down his spine, and in his lungs. This is normal, this is fine.

He counts the stops, watches the other passengers, waits, and waits, past endless smudges of green outside, and then off the bus. One station to the next, different bus, individual seats, something like 5 hours, maybe more. It depends on traffic, he thinks. A long time.

His bag's underneath in the cargo hold, so he takes off his jacket, drapes it over himself and tries to sleep. The chatter drives him insane, the gossip, not that he finds it inane, just the weight of others' expectations pushing down, even if they're not for him specifically. There's a fine tuning, eyes closed, to the deep rumble of the bus. It's better, the all-consuming drone that obliterates the meaning of the words and rattles the windows.

Off the bus, again, retrieve the bag. Heavy. Metaphorical weight displaced by physical. Now then, what next?

Cab, the walk, first night's campsite. Bugs, ugh, awful.

He turns in early.

Next day, cold breakfast, pack up, one foot in front of the other. The trees close in around the path, gnarled roots poking up through the dirt, leaving pockets of erosion. Already the straps of his backpack weigh heavy on his shoulders. There will be abrasions there later, not a problem for now. The water tastes like iodine, but it could be worse. The day heats up as the sun clears the treeline and he considers turning around for a brief moment, but his legs keep going.

His lungs are tight. Breathing phlegmy. He's out of shape. Shit. It's not the result of a medical condition, just too long sitting still. One foot, and then the other. He stops for lunch. It's awful, but the less water weight the better.

He keeps walking.

The ground has been inclined this whole time, and slowly as he gets higher, things start to fade away. The trees bending overhead shut out the sky, and with it, the rest of the world. Things live here, but the noise of his pack is too loud for most of them to stick around, just the occasional chipmunk. A flash of orange in the leaf litter.

He takes one breath and then another, it still hurts but it's something.

One tree looks much like another, and soon he enters something of a fugue state. He barely notices them as they drift by, he just lets the motion happen. For once he doesn't feel like an intruder, just a small part of something larger. The forest goes on around him, stretching out to the limits of his awareness. Beyond even. He's sweating, there's a bug bite under the strap

of his bag, but if he turns back now he won't get to his last campsite, and tonight's is still far off.

There's no choice but to keep going, past the trees, through the dirt.

Then, not all of a sudden, but suddenly nonetheless, the trees disappear and the sky opens up like a vault, nothing but blue and blue and blue forever. Up the roots of an old mountain, white stone and lichen underfoot until he reaches the spot where the world stretches out below him. Trees among trees, and lakes the colour of a child's painting, bright and vivid. He drops his pack next to a windblown and stunted trunk and gazes out. And for a moment, there is nothing weighing him down at all.

A deep breath, lungs clear.

All a body has to do is let you live in it



Happy Returns

Star (@knittingnoodle)

"This piece is made of magazine clippings to create an environment of things I enjoy: moths, my pronouns, or descriptive phrases. My goal was to encapsulate those things in a magical way that feels like me and the feelings I have with my nonbinary identity."

Things Vital to the Ecosystem of the Mind

Jay Horton (@icaruskids)

Jays chatter in the bushes behind me and I look over my shoulder as if someone called my name.

I spend my days growing my own hiding places.

As the garden grows, I revel in what my body can do outside of the context of how it looks or the words and labels that describe it. I ask the garden to teach me to stop bleeding. I am given yarrow. “Not that kind of bleeding.”

The earth, warm and soft as flesh and blood, holds my hands in ways I fear I won't otherwise experience, and Green doesn't call me 'she'. Birds chirp 'here, something is here' but don't peck at the details. (Something suits me well) The name animals call me with their eyes sounds like being called home.

And the ocean—the waves—they say nothing about me at all. The saltwater doesn't weigh me down with a name, doesn't hold me down.

Just gives me a way to be held. A way to hold myself.

Nature as something to lose myself in, or at least lose what hasn't already been lost. Or was never there to begin with— loss a long time coming.

And rain, a touch I don't flinch at.

Dickson to Bonfeld

Fen (@noonmarkart)

there's beauty
in a portage trail.
the silent stillness
of the forest,
and the sunlight that filters through the trees and
makes you sweat.
the terrifying resignation you feel as you begin,
because there is no other way forward,

and the glorious sense of accomplishment at the end,
because now you need not look back.

the strength that grips your limbs as you push and push,
and the overwhelming exhaustion that's strung through your bones.

but there's beauty, in using your body this way,
in relinquishing all control
and letting nature pull you through her deepest
woodlands.

it's just you here, in the dark
heart of the forest,
and there is beauty
in the feeling of isolation
that isn't quite lonely.

not all the time anyways.

Nature Holds Me In Her Arms

Sunny (@sunshinefirefox1)

I sit in quiet wonder picking at the grass
The wind gently caresses my face
Whispering softly in my ear
It rustles the trees and softens my thoughts

I sit in the heat of the sun
Sand coarse and loose under my feet
The ocean drowns out my thoughts
And promises me safety and change

Nature takes me into her arms
With her I can be me
With her I can be free
And I know with her I can find peace with myself.

Thank you again to everyone involved with this project.

All works are copyright to their respective creators.
Published under Creative Commons license
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International
(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

