



# NATURE HELD ME CLOSE

A ZINE ABOUT GENDER  
DYSPHORIA AND THE  
GREAT OUTDOORS

VOLUME 3

# Editor's Note

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

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

*"Caw, caw!"*

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

- Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*

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*When I launched the first edition of Nature Held Me Close in early 2020, I had no idea how strange the rest of the year was going to become -- or how much we'd need narratives celebrating queer existence in outdoor spaces. Over this long pandemic year, and into 2021, spending time outdoors was often the only safe way to connect with others in person, and bringing the outside indoors was a necessary alternative for many as well. In a time when many of us found ourselves isolated and afraid for the future, I have been profoundly moved by the outpouring of creativity and connection that the first two volumes of this zine represented -- and this 2021 edition holds even more.*

*This third 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, discussion of heavy subject matter is involved. This collection contains writing that touches on the following topics: gender dysphoria, transphobia and homophobia, the COVID-19 pandemic, drug use, disordered eating, body horror, and images of artistic nudity. Reader discretion is advised.*

*My lasting gratitude goes out to everyone who contributed to this zine: your enthusiasm, skill, and willingness to share your stories have made this project remarkable. I'm honored to be part of it.*

**El Green (Tumblr: @starfoozle)**  
Halloween 2021  
[natureheldmeclosezine.tumblr.com](http://natureheldmeclosezine.tumblr.com)

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MY DAD AND I GO OUT TO THE HEATH



TO CHECK FOR FIRES  
IT'S BORDERED BY A ROAD, SEEN THROUGH THE TREES



BUT IT'S QUIET HERE.



SOUND IS DIFFERENT.

I LOCK EYES WITH A DEER THROUGH THE GORSE



AND THINK FOR A MOMENT WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER

MY BODY IS DIFFERENT HERE, TOO



THE BORDERS OF IT CHANGE

LESS "MY SHIRT HANGS LIKE THIS", "MY TROUSERS  
CLING HERE",



AND MORE "THE MUD STICKS BENEATH MY FEET  
HERE", "GRASS BRUSHES MY ARM THERE", "I GET  
DIRT UNDER MY NAILS LIKE THIS"

I BREATHE OUT.



**Nature Fills the Gaps of Me**

*Andy (@jamcranberries)*

## Finding Gender in the Weeds

*Raven (@garden\_hermit)*



As a child I didn't think much about what words described myself. I only thought about my identity in relation to the people around me- how it affected dynamics within relationships. It was fine until it wasn't. It was fine until I sat alone and actually thought about who I was and who I wasn't.

As a teenager, the words I used were based on the things I felt I had to push against. I thought I was finally free, finally myself, no longer bound by what others thought of me. Looking back on those years the reality was that I was just as confined in my identity. I still wasn't happy.

Now twenty-one, after a year of being mostly alone to grapple with my own company, things are different. The words and feelings I associate with myself are finally based on the truth. My identity now comes from the way I feel when alone- the way I feel when I'm truly at peace with myself. My identity comes from the euphoria I feel when sprawled out in the patchy moss behind my family's northern cabin in the wilderness of Minnesota. I only feel myself moving through nature on my own, exploring this little world and taking note of the even tinier things others



tend not to notice. It's a small, older building with an even smaller, older building hiding off in the woods for the mice and bats and spiders the size of your open hand. It's surrounded by grander, much fancier houses. You'd miss it entirely driving down that road if you didn't know where to look for the dirt trail that would lead you home. That cabin feels much like the hidden sprouts of moss I lay next to for hours, taking photos while buried amongst the dirt and the ferns that hopefully don't hide any poison ivy.

The photos I take often come from the perspectives of beings that are small but whole. Photos of leaves from underneath, making them reach up toward the sky, towering tall as skyscrapers. The viewer can use these photos to imagine being a bug wandering through an endless and beautiful forest. Those who see my photos have enjoyed that perspective, but when the images are removed they are transported back into their own view of the world. They will never in their day-to-day lives view the world the same way I do. They will push through the woods to their destination, crushing my favorite subjects to photograph- the same subjects they had just praised- without ever realizing they were there in the first place. It's not their fault. We just view things differently.



When I think about those flowers hidden in the grass, and the cabin held gently by the trees that shelter it from the outside world, I am reminded of myself. I am

reminded of the unconditional acceptance nature has when it reaches up to embrace me. It's not that nature holds no danger. It's that I feel best acknowledged in a world where it is quiet, I am alone, and even if something wishes to harm me or eat me whole, it is done without malice. I think that that is a certain acceptance that nothing else can give me.

Out in front of the hidden cove of the lake, I fit perfectly into the size nature has allowed me to take up. The bumblebees here come fatter than any I've seen in the suburbs. The chipmunks hide in every nook and cranny on the yard, thankful for one plot of land that doesn't house a large dog. I am thankful for a plot of land that doesn't house any prying eyes. The land provides firewood to cook my food by and morels that hide beyond even my careful gaze. I almost like it better that way. The mushrooms and I understand each others' need for privacy.

On cold evenings when I huddle inside near a dying wood stove I can very rarely be seen by the deer. I peer through the window and the largest buck on the other side of the deck lifts his head. He doesn't see what humans see. He assesses me as he should; *is the human a threat? Will it harm the herd?*

Perhaps he remembers me as the one who watches because he lets his guard down, poking around in the grass once more. One doe clambers her way up the steps and just stands there, looking through the glass the same way I look out. There's no food up here- just me. I wonder if she is there for the same reason I am, or if it is enough just to exist in a new space. We are both animals, just taking in what's before us. It's a chance meeting, but one that allows me to sink further into the mud the next morning, counting the hoofprints left behind.



Nature doesn't judge me by human standards. If the bees are displeased with my appearance it is only a slight annoyance when my brightly flowered shirt provides no pollen for them when they land. If the dragonflies judge me, it is only a measure of the relief they feel when I rescue them from the water during mating season and allow them to dry off on my kayak. If the leaves take any notice of me, it's only by the change in sunlight as my shadow passes over them. Nature appraises me only by the things I wish to be understood by. The shape of my body matters only when the grass considers how much of itself will be pressed flat when I lay down, or when the lake decides how much it will rise to envelop me when I slip in.

I am still a human -- the wild is not my home -- but the trees allow me to find a sense of home in the branches when I visit. The source of the Mississippi allows me to wade in it and feel my breath catch in my throat at the wonder of it all. The gentleness of the water before it becomes a powerful, roaring river is almost more than a person can understand. Even so, standing there at the beginning of the water's journey, I feel human. I feel alive. I connect to my humanity through the things that make me feel human. I define my gender by my humanity.



I don't feel like a man when I am surrounded by friends. I don't feel like a man when I read alone in my room. I don't feel like a man in a crowd, one of so many that no one bothers to notice me. I feel like a man when I smell the wormy lake air during a freezing drizzle. I am a man when I carefully pick vegetables from my garden that I've poured my care into raising. I am a man when I watch the ravens that share my name perching in the trees at dawn. I am a man not when observed, but when observing. I am a man when I do not have to worry about whether people agree with my existence. I am a man when I am simply existing, present, and whole. Nature doesn't see me as man, but as Man. Another creature that gives and takes from the world in its lifetime.

I can learn to love myself through the tiny clovers that pop up from the grass. I can appreciate my smile when it comes out watching the sunset turn the water into a beautiful painting. The more I accept the inherent beauty in just being alive the more I become in tune with my own place in the world. If I can understand myself the way the earth does, I can understand myself as I truly am. If I can allow the lake's surface to reflect my own image the same way it reflects the rest of the world, I can see a photograph of myself clearly for the first time.





**Settled Into Nature**  
*Maxine (@sublime\_arts\_co)*

## Float On

*M. Lilian*

I.

My birthname means girl from the sea  
in a language very, very old.  
I'm not a girl, though.  
That I know for sure  
as I stand by the sea's shore, sunlight on my skin  
breathing it all in.

II.

I like biking to the beach.  
There's a certain rhythm to biking,  
the way you have to keep on moving and never stop.  
I like the wind against my face, messing up my hair  
I like feeling breathless,  
I like my heart beating on my chest like it wants out,  
out, out,  
like arriving there  
struggling for air —

and then I like the waves,  
the blue stretching on forever.  
I take some breaths,  
in, out, in, out  
like the waves, the tide, following their rhythm.  
I feel the seasalt in the air,  
and the horizon that seems to go on  
and on and on.

There's familiarity here, in going to the beach.  
I live very near it  
(or at least, a quick bike ride away).  
I walk to the bright green stand  
that sells fresh coconut water  
and leave my bag with a kind lady there.  
She knows me, and I don't need to explain.  
Quickly, I strip down to my bathing suit,  
and leave her my clothes, my worries, my backpack and my cellphone.  
I don't need them here.

I feel so much lighter at the beach.

III.

There was a time I hated it.  
I thought my problem was with beaches as a whole  
but no,  
it was just my body.  
Too many curves I didn't like and didn't know why,  
a confusing bother,  
too short, too dirty —  
I convinced myself it was dirty,  
something to be ashamed of.

When the sun beat down my skin,  
I didn't feel warmth in its touch as I do now.  
Just its unforgiving light.  
But it's always been me,  
the unforgiving one.

Two years ago, I could have never stripped the clothes  
from my sweaty body  
in front of a stranger at the beach like that.  
I always wondered why, too,  
why I didn't like it, or at least why I couldn't stop  
thinking about it,  
never quiet, never enough.

IV.

So much has changed since then.  
Now, I run towards the sea,  
partly because of the scalding hot sand beneath my feet,  
partly because I just feel like running —  
(I'm always running.  
Took some time to figure out what I am running from.  
I haven't looked back for a while.)  
and I feel the breeze on my hair; it's shorter now, as well,  
and getting shorter by the year;  
And I jump into the sea  
and start swimming.

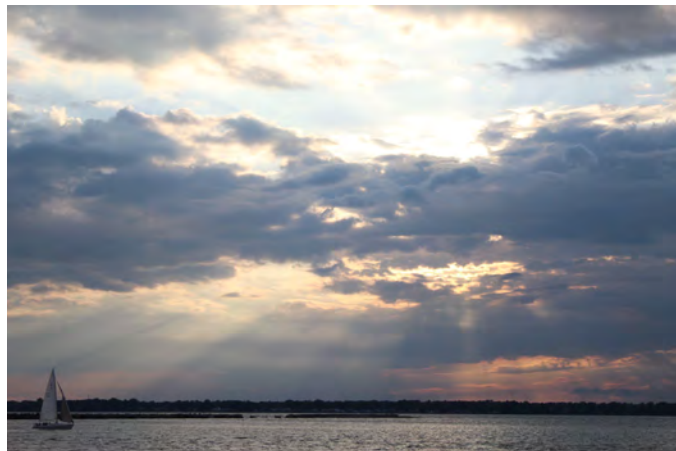
I swim away from the coast 'till I'm breathless again



and then  
I stop, and let go  
& I float.  
It's just me, here  
and it feels something like coming home.

My skin both salty & sweaty  
the cool saltwater embracing me whole,  
the sunlight kissing my face  
the people at the beach barely little colourful speckles  
as my heart beats away in my chest,  
it's easy to overlook the etymology of the  
Latin name I was burdened with.

Because you see  
I might not be a girl  
but I'm definitely from the sea.  
(All life came from the warm depths of the ocean,  
I hear.)  
There is some kind of language, here,  
older than Latin,  
and if I stay very quiet, if I swim far enough,  
I can listen to it.  
The sea cradles me and  
it says  
Keep on moving and never stop to look back,  
it says  
Life can be so much lighter if you forgive yourself,  
and it says  
Float on. You're back  
home.



## **Stardust**

*Randy Anthony (@ranchdiip)*

*“you were born of stardust and infinite possibilities. there are universes in every one of your neurons, worlds and planets in your mind, constellations at your fingertips. by some incredible and incomprehensible happenstance you were made from nothing, put into the wreckage of galaxies with the power of their rubble in your soul. there is no such thing as a mistake in this process; just remember that hardly anything is ever on purpose.”*

## **The Sea Beckons, And I Answer**

*Jay Starling (@give-soup-please)*

It is the height of summer. The sun bakes those unfortunate enough to stay within reach of its heat. I stand on the crystal blue edge of the ocean, my toes barely touching the surf as it laps against the sand. The sun beats overhead, and I don't want to go further in, but there will be no relief if I stay where I am. I stand, fists clenched in fear. My baggy clothes hide the parts of myself that no one should see. Underneath, a tight swimsuit pushes my body into the wrong shape. My breath is ragged. Sweat pours down my back, and in a split second I decide to dive in fully clothed. The spray of water goes up my nose a little, the burn of salt stings and I feel so alive. The water is biting cold, and I start to hyperventilate. My warmth is nothing compared to the depth of the ocean, and slowly my body heat is leached away. I settle, bobbing gently, not making an effort to jump over waves. A transformation begins as I exist in this sacred space. I know where all the hidden beaches are, and no one is around to see my curves or watch me swim, and it brings relief. The coldness turns to calm and sinks into my bones, making me feel heavy. I strip off my hoodie and jeans, so I don't struggle with the extra weight, and throw them in the direction of the sandbank. I am there. The ocean is here. I feel her gently pull me, and there is a tug from the waves and from within to go deeper. The barrier between me and the rest of the universe begins to shrink. As the chill sinks in, I feel closer to the ocean than ever. My breasts no longer feel heavy, the muscles in my back begin to unfurl. I become formless, the sea cradles me as I explore and watch the sun make the water glitter. The water on my skin makes me shine too, and for a few minutes, my dysphoria doesn't exist. It is just me and the ocean. Soon there is no difference between the two of us. All that is wrong is obscured from view and thought. I know that I will have to leave the ocean eventually; no land based lifeform can stay forever. For the time I am here my pain is eased. And that will have to be enough.

## Pacific

Elliot

I haven't been to the Pacific ocean in years,  
But I still remember how deep and cold and crashing it was. It made  
the world seem big,  
And made me feel small.

Some days I want to be like the Pacific,  
Loud and wild and demanding of respect

Other days I wish I could slip below the surface,  
Beneath the crashing of the breakers,  
Beyond the cries of gulls and the eyes of others,  
Surrounded only by the silence of the kelp forests and rhythms of the tides.



*Author's note: This is a little bit about gender, and a little bit about being autistic. A special thanks to my mom for the photo, which was taken on one of our trips to the ocean.*



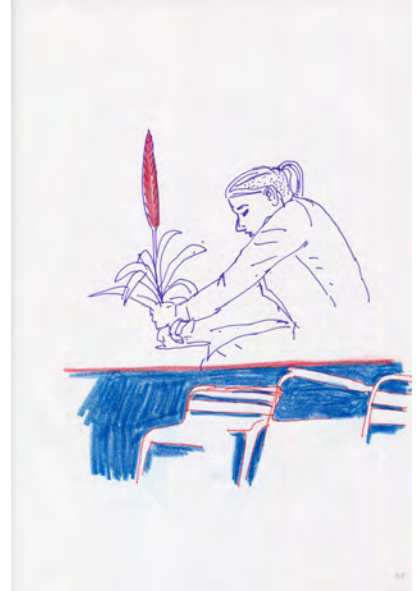
### **Sense of Self**

*Raven Bolander (@raven-shmaven)*

*Artist's note: I've always been drawn to the ocean, it seems to be a reflection of myself, showing who I am beyond physical form and beyond gender. It's hard to pull myself away from it.*

## Planet

Froy



just for a short while  
a dawn that quickly filters  
into sunset

then night  
*(for a long time)*

\*\*\*

inside the house is a field  
in which i lie down

you must wait for my soul to return  
before you strike

\*\*\*

swallow the moon & fall  
backwards  
into the day

all the rhododendrons at the park are blooming  
at once &

water smooths the stone  
of the fountain

i drown my name

\*\*\*

when the sun loves me  
the wind - the water  
in its impersonal way  
making me belong

\*\*\*

i could be a bird - make love to the dawn  
i could be a fish - make love to the current

\*\*\*

*(each day)*  
i wake up &

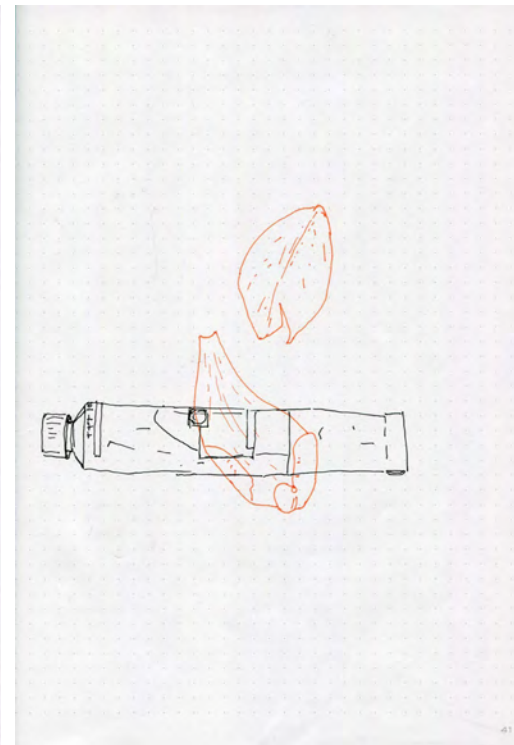
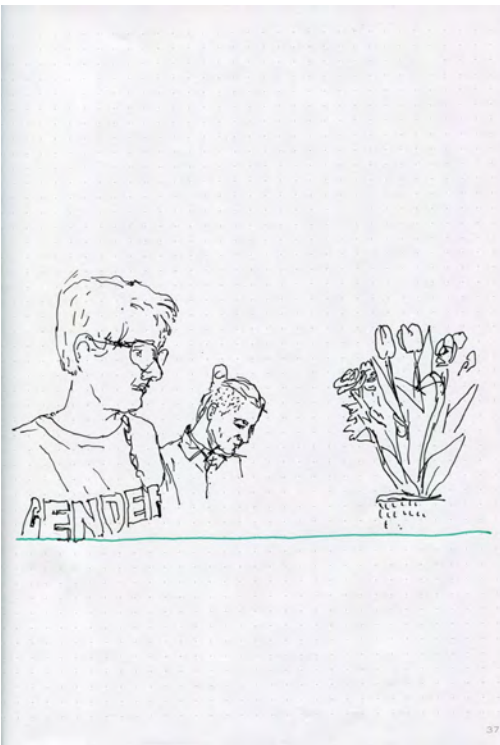
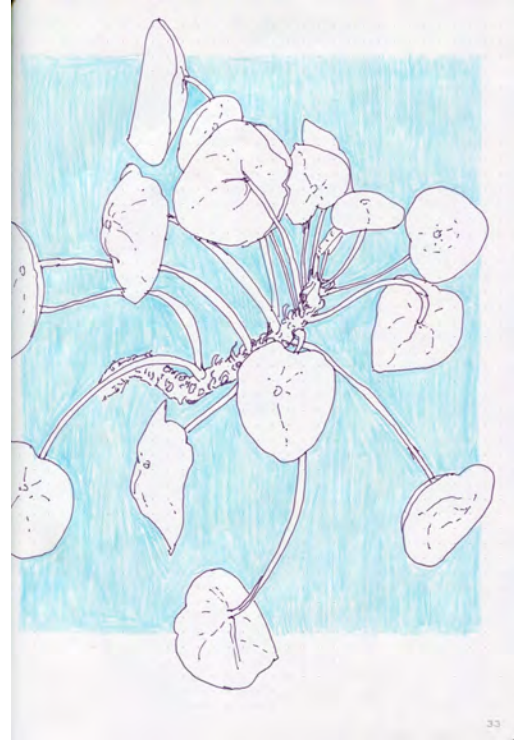
sorrow dips its ladle in the sky &  
wets the ground

\*\*\*

in the future i am alive  
on the coast though  
it is not the coast  
that you know

instead it is one that  
the ocean has brought to my door &  
spread languidly  
outside my windows

there are gulls                      & lots  
of wind



*Froy is an artist and poet. They live and work in Aarhus, Denmark, where they spend most of their time looking at the world and trying to figure out what it means to be human.*





### **Ferns**

Ayla Walter ([aylawalter.com](http://aylawalter.com))

*"For every work of art there are three true things: the subject being depicted the way that it actually is, the subject in the eyes of the artist deciding what is beautiful and what it means and how to show that, and finally what ends up on the page to be seen as a new subject by new viewers. In this way gender is like art; a private truth, partially constructed, and sometimes forcefully ascribed. Your identity may be a sketch or a detailed masterpiece being worked and reworked your whole life. The ferns will grow regardless, soft and indomitable."*

## **Weeds Are Just Unexpected Wild Things**

*Anonymous*

1

weeds are just unexpected wild things.  
i tell myself this although i don't believe it.  
'separating the wheat from the tares,' it's been called.  
measured movements. machinery.  
i am not sure if i am the wheat or the tares.

2

i went cycling down by the river and  
i listened to the birds circle above me  
across the spot where adina and i stole a sugar beet from a farmer's field.  
my parents knew i was lying to them, then and now.  
i called the birds celestial. i called the river a ribbon of holiness.  
at best, they are outcomes divinely appointed by a careful hand.  
at worst--

3

i water the weeds in secret.

4

something begins to take root within the deepest parts of me.  
i do not need to be celestial, angelic, heavenly.  
i simply need to live.



## **Foliage**

*Pycho (@cloudcryptid)*

*Artist's note: Finding yourself is hard. But getting bits and pieces here and there helps. Shoutout to my plants for being stellar models.*

## **Personal Gardens**

*Pycho (@cloudcryptid)*

I originally came from the woods; surrounded by trees and plants and life. The only issue with that becomes prominent once you move out. Everything looks the same and devoid of light. Cold, empty, uncaring, wrong. So to make up for it, to make it feel even the slightest bit comfier, you start gardening. And the more you look into it, the more types of plants you find and learn about. So many to explore, to pick and choose from.

- Succulents: low effort, easy to maintain, hard to kill
- A venus fly trap: ready to take from the world what it needs to survive
- A vine: ever growing, ever branching
- A flaming katy: loses its petals, but they always come back

These make up my garden. It's not always easy to maintain them. Some days are easier than others. But, my garden is something I've cultivated to my liking. My happiness and comfort against the harsh and cold. It keeps me happy and safe until I can finally return to the security of the woods again.



**reflections in the grass**

*Gray (@perhaps-a-dragon)*

## **What is Gender to a Tree?**

*Penelope Epple (@poetpenelopee)*

I do not have to prove who I am to the trees.  
The bugs do not hear my voice  
and judge me too feminine.  
The dirt does not see my stubble  
and judge me too masculine.  
The woods do not judge me at all.  
Masculine. Feminine. Androgynous. Neutral.  
It all means less than nothing to them.  
I do not have to dress right, act right, sound right,  
be shaped right  
for them,  
because they never thought  
there was a wrong way to be.  
It's humans who make me prove myself.

But in the woods,  
I can just be.



## **Growth Rings**

*Kayd K (@goldswords)*

## Communities Thrive from Diversity

Kayd K (@goldswords)

Children are taught the names of things at a young age. Everything has a name, which gives it identity. Everything fits into a neat little box with others like it. Coyotes are coyotes. Robins are robins. Buffalo are buffalo. This, however, is a massive simplification. There are many names for the coyote. Scientists use the binomial naming system: *Canis latrans*. The Niisitapi, whose land I reside on, name them aapí'si. My immigrant great grandparents may have called them prærieulv. Coyotes don't care what you name them. Their language is an intricate web of smell, body language and vocalizations, disconnected from human thought.

Human brains are adapted to seek out patterns, and to categorize things. But what happens when something doesn't fit neatly into one box? At best, it's an oddity, a curious outlier to gawk and study. At worst, it must be eradicated because it is not understood. A coyote would not understand any such notion. Several instances of breeding between coyotes and wolves, despite being of different species, have been recorded. *Canis latrans*, the Eastern coyote, is one such example, holding coyote and wolf parentage in its DNA. Did the ancestral coyote and wolf recognize that they were different? Or were they just seeking another warm body to keep them company?

Our knowledge of the natural world is always changing. What may work as a definition for one species may not work for another within the same family. Phylogenetic trees get rearranged as new evidence emerges. The sun rises and falls, the cool stream runs over my bare feet. The soul is transient, we never stay the same person for long, we grow and change. Our identity is tied to the elements we connect to our consciousness, our name, our clothing, our gender. But gender has always felt like a too-tight sweater to me. Fundamentally, there is very little difference between man and woman: look closer, and the lines begin to blur further. The most successful ecosystems thrive off diversity, and the same is true for people. Gender is a construct invented and upheld by a white patriarchy, sorting us into neat little boxes.

I've found there are very few boxes in nature.



## Dialogue With A Bobcat I Met When I Was Fourteen

Truth Venson (@truthvenson)

When I was younger, I met a bobcat in the woods.

When you meet an animal in the woods who does not want to meet you, there is this kind of stepless dance. You both freeze. There is a mutual sizing-up. I feel like a lot of people try and act like it's just the animal sizing them up while they logic their way through it and remember everything they've read about bobcats, but no, it's the same considerations on both ends. Are you a threat? Or can I walk on by?

It is deeply freeing, to be nothing more than a potential threat. Nothing in the woods is going to ask you the kind of questions, like *what are your pronouns*, that make you freeze up, threat-assess, and lie.

There is this sense in the woods of no one watching. Things are watching, of course, but they aren't people. You aren't really people. Is a person a person when there's no one around to perceive them? It's a kind of peaceful depersonalization.

*Are you going to attack me?* asks the bobcat. *You're bigger than me. Are you a predator?*

*No. Yes, I answer. Do you want to know what my gender is?*

The bobcat is already walking away. Bobcats live deliberately. They don't have time for anything else. They don't care what you are outside of the small moment when you meet eyes across a fallen log and freeze up, threat assess.

*Let's not bother each other today,* says the bobcat. *Let's be nothing to each other.* I agree. I'm young and newly top-heavy and I don't want to fight a bobcat. We walk on by.

I'm young and I want to not be watched. I am plagued by the feeling of being watched. Achingly self-conscious and as unwilling to be seen as anything less than perfect as I am unable to be perfect, which just translates into being unwilling to be seen.

I'm still like that. Mostly. I wish so desperately, deeply to be perceived as nothing. As a series of actions unconnected by anything but a theme. As a mysterious thing in the woods, impossible to pin a little she/her, they/them sticker on.

*What are your pronouns?* asks the bobcat.

*How can I answer that?* I say. *I can barely even stand having a name.*

We both walk on by.

The bobcat is out of sight when I realize my heart is racing. I sit down on a moss-covered stone and let it calm. It does quickly, because there is no one here to tell me I should be more scared, that I'd forgotten that you're supposed to back away from a bobcat, not walk on by.

*Do you identify as a threat?* I ask the bobcat.

*Not right now,* says the bobcat. *What do you identify as?*

I identify as someone walking in the woods.

## My Name

Belette (@godzillascoffeebreak)





**Are You a Plant or an Animal?**

*Jules (@jules-tries-arts)*

## Advice from the Grass

*Sig (@cigarette-eater)*

This is a drug story, and also a nature story.

The grass had more colors than I thought possible. I asked the mushrooms I'd consumed an hour earlier, "What am I supposed to do with all of this?" They answered, in my best friend's voice, "What do you mean, *do* with it?" I asked them what I was supposed to do about my body. Again, they echoed me: "*Do* about it?" This time they used my sibling's voice.

It is a strange thing, to be so overwhelmed, walking through spacetime and listening to the wind scream in the trees, and to experience perfect personal clarity for the first and perhaps only time ever. That trip was the only time I both understood and *felt* that my body was my own. For six precious hours, my body was mine, and thus it was reflective of who I am. There was no one around to tell me otherwise: it was me and the massive tree my body allowed me to climb, me and the grass grabbing at my ankles, me and the entirety of the beautiful, callous universe. Me and a drug that both terrified me and set me free.

I wandered through the pasture behind my house, and I observed and thus enjoyed the frogs in the pond, and the million shades of kikuyu grass, and the friendly horses, and the ironwood trees along the gulch. Some of these wonders observed me back with reserve but without ill will. Perhaps the most precious part of being unobserved (at least by other people) is that it allows you to observe: without fear of judgment, you have the chance to stare, to catalogue, to take in existence beyond your own and find your place in that existence. I found mine in a banyan tree.

## Contradiction

Ollie O. ([ollieo.art](http://ollieo.art))

I live in the light and dark both;  
I bridge the liminality between.

I soak in the sun,  
photons sinking through my skin,  
breathing with and seeing other beings,  
recognizing our resonance and harmonies.

I burrow in the ground,  
giving and taking of nutrient with the earth,  
embraced with mycelium to share  
what we have with others we feel,  
near and far.

I embody both soft and sharp,  
I act both tender and firm;  
I am stably steady with flexible flow,  
all these innate to my being.  
change and difference do not inherently  
mean contradiction.

plurality of being and experience is an option;  
for me, the only one worth choosing,  
since existing this way is integral to me.

I will never be encompassed by set boxes;  
archetypes can be found for approximation,  
but I will always have my own approach,  
lenses and filters and angles -  
my own perspectives, narratives, themes;  
and not even I know  
Everything  
I can be.

I am a part of All that Is,  
and I deserve to live in my complexity.

*Author's note: ollie o. is a queer genderfluid non-binary artist, theorist, and creator of many hats, masks, and experiences. More of their works can be found at [ollieo.art](http://ollieo.art) (that's it, that's the website!). They strive for a world where safety and kindness is the norm and all beings live in mutual symbiosis, and call their theory and style of that Umbrella Punk.*

## **Musings from the Hiking Trail**

*Cecil W. (@coffeefromthevoid)*

Here's something you should know about me: I don't like getting dirty. It's why I don't bake nearly as often as I should.

Here's another thing: I don't mind getting dirty when it's natural. When it's dirt or algae. Snow or dust. Blood from the bark that scrapes my skin, or blood from the insects that I kill. Not that the latter happens often. I'm much more likely to flip over a lost beetle than I am to kill a mosquito that bit me. Still, it warrants a mention.

The way I feel about my body runs parallel to the way I feel about it getting dirty. It's fine in nature. I despise it in civilization. It makes sense too; its function changes according to where I find myself. In civilization, it's what we in my sociology class call an "outward indicator of gender" -- a way for others to perceive my identity, no matter how wrong their conclusions may be. Nature aligns more with another phrase my sociology professor said, one that'll stay with me for the rest of my life: "gender is a verb". It acts. It moves. It shifts. In nature, my body is a verb. It takes me to where I need to be. It allows me to look at birds, flowers, trees. To hear coursing rivers and mice running beneath leaves. It forces me to taste the bitterness when an insect mistakes my mouth for an eligible path forward - I never said it was all fun.

My body has been my savior and my condemner. It condemns me to a life filled either with shame and low thrumming pain, or one with needles and hidden medical files. The decision to be that way was made before my birth. I didn't have control over it until now. And even then, I have to share control with people in expensive suits wearing expensive glasses and typing on expensive computers. It's like having to share a pair of hiking boots with someone two feet taller than you. But I also said my body was my savior. Despite everything I've said so far, I wasn't kidding about that. I've never broken a bone, for example. I've climbed in tall trees, jumped over slippery rocks, tripped over bundling roots -- and yet, I've never broken anything. Haven't even come close. I've also never gotten sick from anything I've eaten in the forest, be it berries dangerously in range of dogs' piss or leaves from plants labeled "edible" by memories half-remembered from ages long past. My body's decided nature is the one thing that cannot hurt me. Like Achilles bathed by his heel, my body protects me from 99% of the planet's surface. Such a shame that 1% is much more prominent to me.

I wish I didn't have to date this story, but for it to make sense, I do. 2020, despite all odds, was a great year for me. School was cancelled, including my finals, and I had an unprecedented break of six months before I had to return to academia. Stores and

restaurants were closed. As were zoos, museums, and any other public building you could possibly think of. The cities were empty. No reason to go there. All the more reason to go to nature. I must've hiked every single day and yet my boots were more worn out than I was. The freedom was incredible. Being outside in nature all day was incredible. There were no expectations, nothing asked or expected of me or the way I presented. Better yet, nature, through the paradoxical means of society's gender expectations, made peoples' perception of me line up with my own identity far better than anything else did. My body and clothes were covered in mud. I saw no reason to change my pants when they became dirty -- I'd just muddy them again the following day. I reeked of sweat and cheap deodorant. My breath stank of cheese sandwiches and homebrewed coffee, in the rare cases I remembered to bring those along. This all to say, I was a mess. I was like a werewolf who hadn't seen society in months, which coincidentally happens to be my ideal form. I stank and I was filthy and I loved myself. What more could I possibly ask?

During that same time, I was reading a book about fungi. Is it strange to say that reading it, understanding it, learning it allowed me to read, understand and learn myself? No. It isn't. People sometimes ask what flower you are. I'm not a flower. I don't say this because of some hypermasculine rejection of femininity; I say it because it's true. Flowers don't describe me. Fungi do. I'm a rare truffle making myself known to those who can catch my scent. Like a truffle, I am uncultivable. You cannot grow me willingly. You have to submit to me, submit to the fact I've outsmarted you for years. I only make myself known when I want to, when I believe I am ready to be seen and to be plucked from my earthly cradle. What's more, I stretch further than anything you could possibly imagine. I am more than just the bulb you see. I am deeper, more complex. I am a network of thoughts and feelings grown exponentially over the years. When you see me, you see only what I want you to see. In fact, even if I wanted to, I couldn't possibly show you more. My network is too vast for you to comprehend. Too vast for me to put into words. You'll just have to believe me when I say I am more than you see, because the truth will only confuse you more.

I can't pick a point where it started. Neither my gender dysphoria, nor my love of nature -- both seem to have been ingrained in me since as long as I can remember. I know the milestones though. Going on holiday in Switzerland, spending my days hiking, burning my skin and running away from cows with massive bells. I'm European, so it's really not as crazy as you think. Even then I think I knew I wasn't cis. Not consciously. Not really. I just always felt the best the less dressed up I was. A Christmas party at my primary school. I knew then. Consciously. My teachers said I looked radiant in a dress. I just responded they'd never see me in one again. I wasn't wrong about that; I haven't worn a dress since, and even back then, it wasn't voluntary. I was just too afraid of what others would say if I showed up in a suit and



tie. I never felt at home there, in that small concrete building. I always felt better in the forest two streets down. You see, even my fondest memory of primary school is about nature - a trip to a botanical garden filled with local plant life. I'll never forget that day. The feeling of wood chips under my shoes, the sun burning on my head, and a lesson that's come in useful plenty of times: dandelion sap helps with stinging nettle burns. I felt at home there, learning about nature instead of math and spelling. Besides, I got to wear comfy clothes. Clothes that accentuated my calves -- hard from years of hiking -- instead of my uncomfortable chest.

Growing up in an area rich in woodlands, I suppose it is only natural I formed such a connection with it. Some might say it formed a connection with me, but I disagree. After all, when you fall, the ground may seem to come toward you, but the reality is it needn't move an inch. You're tumbling into its arms, and it merely catches you. When I was lost, it guided me. I guess it makes sense that the best place to think about your gender is a place where your gender doesn't matter. Just your muscles and willpower. I must've spent every hike thinking about it in those early days. Sometimes I still do. Now, however, the words have changed. I don't need to think about myself in human terms anymore, in the language of online discourse and psychology books, of Stonewall and Gay Pride. Now, I can think about myself in nature's terms. On nature's terms.

I am a patch of moss. When you look at me, I appear still and silent. What you fail to see is the infinitesimally slow party I am constantly throwing for myself. Your eyes do not work on my wavelength. But I know myself. I know what I'm partying for, and it's a party that will continue until my death, never changing, not even for a minute.

I am lichen. I am two things, yet I am one. One part of me provides my roots, the structure that's bound me since my birth. Another part allows me to grow, to take in light from the outside and to develop into my truest form. One cannot exist without the other.

I am a rock, turned smooth from centuries of rainfall, and dark from that of one night. Later, I will be a boulder -- the one near the picnic place I often sit on -- but not yet. Unlike stone, I only increase in size. One day I will be a boulder, with nooks and crannies for rain to puddle in, but not today. Only when I'm finished.

That's one thing the fungi and I have in common: we'll both like my body more when it's done.

## Fluid Seasons

Rocky Iwakabe

Dawn stretches out its fingers and coaxes morning glories into dancing  
Honeysuckle waves to hummingbirds  
Purple and orange and yellow, the fields beckon, busy with skittering tiny frogs  
A hawk screams, *Here!*

*I am here!*

He will do this all day  
I stand beneath the green-bursting oaks with my hands in my hair  
New-shorn and light  
The hawk skirls over my head  
And I am he

Turtles bake in the afternoon on dry, tufted islands  
In the reeds and the long grass, blackbirds and goats debate the weather  
Squirrels gossip about the cat on the riverbank  
Hawks wheel overhead with their fledglings  
One skims low over the river towards a duckling but the mother duck is faster  
I wait in the shadow of the oaks for the sweat to dry  
Green is burning into brown  
The hawks find perches in different trees and scud away again  
And I am they

Bullfrogs mourn in the widening banks  
A beaver cracks into a curl of bark  
Across the river, his home has collapsed, and mud and brambles spill out  
There is a hawk enshrouded in the canopy of tangled branches  
I pass beneath the oaks, beneath her judgement or her notice  
Hurrying away into dusk  
The hawk does not move and so I must  
And I am not enough

Raindrops hiss into hollow fields  
Festering drifts of leaves claw at tree-trunks  
Above and below, where there are no birds  
The creatures that remain are hidden and silent  
Like the oaks that huddle in their own embrace  
The skies lie barren, hushed  
And I am far away

There is a year no one goes outside  
Smoke bullies the oaks  
Eddies of ash snap at shoes and paws and slithering not-feet  
Haze crowds the earth into a flinching, skulking red  
If there are hawks, I do not hear them scream  
And I forget the flow of seasons

In the cool damp of dawn, morning glories stir and begin their dance  
Poppies and vetch, gardenias and daylilies  
Burst through soft green grass where they will  
I greet the oaks, bright and fresh with new growth  
Their bark strong within my hands  
Through the gilt-edged clouds brushed upon pink and purple  
A hawk pierces the hush of night with the sunrise  
I hear him scream  
*Here! Here!*  
I fling back my head and yawp to him  
My arms encompass the morning  
And I am he  
I am here!

# Bird in Eden

Samera Xu (@sameraxu)



BIRD IN EDEN  
BY SVX

DRESSED TO IMPRESS



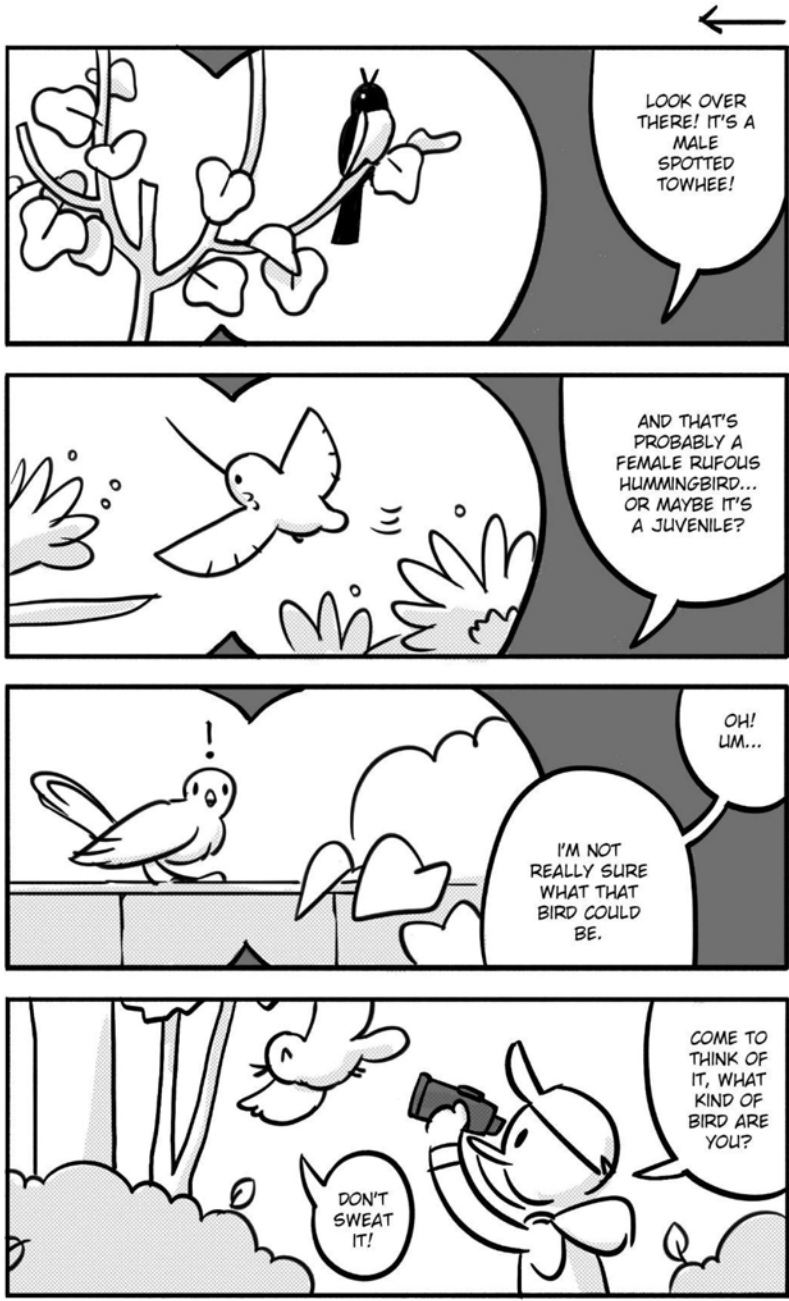
BIRD IN EDEN  
BY SVX

# SKYWRITING



BIRD IN EDEN  
BY SVX

A BIRD BY ANY OTHER NAME



## **Birds of a Feather, or the Medical Miracle of Transsexual Love**

*Ruy Luis Uzal*

I am watching the night-birds in the yard,  
And thinking on you fondly-  
How we built our own bodies,  
Our own homes.  
They sing louder while the sun sinks like platelets,  
And with every falling day I am more grateful for  
this, our resting place in the brambles-  
Laying mortar with spit,  
with vitriol.  
Throwing back errant stones  
(they are, in fact, errant)  
Or else sleeping on them  
sun-warm, skins loosening to shed.  
Spitting venom,  
picking up our feet in the long grass.  
This, our hatching into something new-  
I have watched you for a long time with careful eyes  
I have seen the way you cradle the plastic like it can be warmed,  
like life can grow inside of it,  
plump and vascular.  
This, our petri dish-  
Our nest in the madrone tree.

## Cicadas

Helen (@alatar-and-pallando)

When I try to write poetry, all that emerges is cicadas:

*After 17 long years I leave  
Smothering, clinging home behind  
Slip skin, expose my vulnerable body  
Free my wings, stretch my legs.*

The poems lodge in their skins, distorted and trapped. It's been five years, or perhaps six, since I've been able to complete a poem or piece of fiction. Anxiety and adult responsibilities drained my ability to put whimsy into words by the end of college — and even then, most of my writing was for classes.

Instead, I've spent the past five years pouring all my creative energy into my job as a journalist covering local news. Of the tens — hundreds? — of thousands of words I've strung together, not one of them has risked revealing anything more personal than my name.

Every so often, I get the urge to create again: To use my own words instead of quoting others, to invent worlds instead of regurgitating facts.

Every time I try, out comes a cicada.

*The traveler awakes to darkness—and hunger.  
Change. It comes swiftly. Movement, a downward rushing- down is meaningless to her, but disquieting nonetheless. Impact, and her capsule breaks open.  
LIGHT!  
It roars into her eyes, and she is blinded, frightened, intrigued; but driven away from this world in which she does not yet belong, she burrows with the front limbs she hadn't been aware of before, until the familiar darkness surrounds her once again.*

Those two fragments were written seven years apart — the first this year, the second in 2014. I'm sure more examples are buried in the depths of old hard drives.

Most who know me wouldn't be surprised that I write about bugs. As a child, I wanted to grow up to be an entomologist. My first experiences of science communication involved explaining to peers and adults what an entomologist is, and why bugs are cool and not gross.



Missouri, my home state, hosts both annual and periodical cicadas. In the summer, I'd track down annual cicadas by their droning calls or spot them beset by ants on sidewalks. Their wings would vibrate my fingers until I'd toss them back toward the singing trees. I collected jars of their discarded amber shells.

I met my first periodic cicadas during the magical summer of 2011. They had black bodies and ruby eyes, unlike the camo-patterned annual cicadas I was familiar with. Everywhere I looked, I spotted cicada nymphs hauling themselves up trunks and breaking through, pale and quivering, into their final stage of life.

The life cycle of cicadas is a peculiar one. Female cicadas lay eggs in the tips of twigs, and upon maturation, the tiny nymphs plummet to the ground. It's the last time they glimpse sunlight for up to 17 years. Upon landing, they burrow into the soil and get to sucking fluid from roots and growing.

When fully matured, cicada nymphs dig their way to the surface, crawl up the nearest tree or wall, and molt one last time. Adult cicadas live only a few weeks. Males gather in noisy choirs in trees, vibrating a special structure in their abdomens, to lure females in for mating. And the cycle begins anew.

How long this life cycle takes depends on the species. Annual cicadas (of which there are many species) take two to five years to emerge — they're called "annual" only because many individuals emerge every year in areas where they're present.

Then there are 13- and 17-year cicadas, which take 13 and 17 years to develop, respectively. (As with annual cicadas, there are multiple species of each, all within the aptly-named genus *Magicicada*.)

These cicadas are divided into developmentally synchronized, geographically distinct "broods," which emerge all at once in glorious choruses when the time is right. Brood XIX, the brood I was lucky enough to meet, includes four species of 13-year cicadas and spans several states in the United States' south.

Recently, I admitted to myself that my fascination with cicadas is deeper, more personal, than mere scientific curiosity.

Even now, finally examining my long affinity, I'm tempted to dismiss it, to laugh myself off as trite and predictable. But I think that all this time, as I've written about cicadas (in the dark, rushing inexorably toward a change they scarcely understand but that ultimately seems right), I've been writing about myself. So now I'm peeling off my strangling skin of metaphor, instead of writing yet another cicada poem.

Not long after I wrote the 2014 piece, I finally admitted to myself, and then to my future husband, that my gender wasn't as simple as "cis female." I'd never felt feminine, and I was increasingly sure that I didn't feel female, either.

Salting and sogging my fries with tears — we'd just gone through a Wendy's drive-through — I told my then-boyfriend about how I used to wear a shapeless hoodie and gaze at myself as a mirror, trying to decide if I looked like a boy. How my heart had pounded when we'd walked into a glasses shop together, wearing heavy winter coats, and were immediately pointed to the men's section. How I'd seen the outdated term "penis envy" in a dictionary in fourth grade and been unable to stop thinking about it. How, frankly, I did wish I'd been born with a penis, how I wished my shoulders were broad and my hips narrow, how I'd always thought I'd look good with a beard.

I think my early obsession with nature and insects shielded me from this reality, in more ways than one. People around me were quick to label me a "tomboy," a label I was all too eager to accept (hello, internalized misogyny; hello, early dysphoria). And to their credit, my parents were perfectly fine with having a tomboy daughter. They encouraged me to pursue my interests and let me wear clothes appropriate for crawling around in the dirt. Any divergence from femininity was chalked down to tomboyishness.

My gender was a given, and I — cut off from conversations about gender, attending a Christian school with no openly queer peers — had no framework for questioning it.

It took me until early adulthood, and exposure to trans and queer narratives, to begin putting the pieces together. I wasn't just a tomboy. I didn't just resent the strictures society places on girls. I was uninterested in being a girl at all.

Once I spoke that aloud, I could feel the scream that had been building up inside me for my whole life.

What followed was years of dysphoria. I cut my hair shorter and shorter, did push-ups in the office while my ramen warmed in the microwave. As a reporter — and later the editor — at a small-town newspaper in conservative Missouri, I felt the need to tread carefully with my gender presentation. In my mind, I waffled over my exact identity: A trans man? Transmasculine nonbinary? Genderfluid?

Escapes to the woods to hunt mushrooms and peer under rocks continued to provide a welcome escape from the buzzing in my head. Outdoors I find it easier to not think about gender at all, or to think about it in a gentler way. The slime molds I

race against to collect oyster mushrooms have hundreds of potential sexes. They don't care if I can't settle on one gender.

I'm still not entirely sure what my identity is, but a recent move to a more liberal state far away from my conservative family — plus health insurance that covers gender-affirming care — has given me the opportunity to find out. Late last year, I bought a binder. In May, I made an appointment at Planned Parenthood to seek a testosterone prescription.

I've begun telling close friends and more-liberal relatives that I'm... Trans-something? Gender-something? Seeking a more-authentic, visibly queer self, at least. Like the cicadas, like the slime molds, I'm simply vibing.

It's taken me 26 years, far longer than any cicada, but I'm finally out. Unlike cicadas, this may not be my final form. Perhaps I have more skins to shed. Certainly I plan to do more with this renewed self than scream, fuck and die. I must be gentle with my soft, freshly shed self.

In typing this, I'm releasing one last cicada.

*This page is my exuvium, and I'm out there in the sun, singing.*



## **Buggy**

*Mike*

*Artist's note: There are all these bugs out there, all these intricate little creatures, and they're making the world alive. They're keeping me company, and I try to do the same. They're gorgeous by design and just trying to live in a place that doesn't always want them. I hope they don't mind me borrowing their imagery when visualizing my gender. It's a show of love.*

## Cicada

Nikos (@lolcode)

i always thought i would die in the dark.

seventeen years under the shadow of twisted religion, beneath the dirt of shame and fear

when you're surrounded on all sides by the soil, it's all you ever know.

i clung to the roots, the familiar darkness, hiding

blend in with the earth, so they will not notice your repulsive body, so you will not see yourself either

time keeps dragging on, pain fades to dullness. ugly queers, bathroom predators, sinners in need of saving. it's all old news.

don't listen.

don't listen.

one day the nymph's shell will begin to crack, learn the art of not giving a fuck. learn to care about what matters.

call the number of the clinic and shave your head, get a new outfit and a new name. emerge from the soil, feel the sun on your thin wings.

i flew to the top of the trees and screamed in joy, frustration, anger, happiness. i would not be silent any longer. and they joined me, with their voices, the thousands of others.

thoughts transformed along with bodies, we have not become beautiful but rather discovered that we are. so many others, similar stories, screaming and rejoicing and celebrating from the branches and the leaves.

*"we are here. we are queer. we are beautiful and we will never return to the darkness again."*

## **Butterfly**

*Sam (@metalmarks)*

When I think of my gender dysphoria, I think of the Meadow Brown butterfly.  
A summer spent in a meadow  
Skin kissed by the sun, caressed by the breeze  
In the company only of insects  
My one escape from the agony of dysphoria,  
The growing pains of the early days of my transition.

Some may find it ironic that, in my transition to male,  
I found solace in the world of butterflies.  
But I think it is quite fitting.

In undergoing a painful metamorphosis,  
Who better to turn to  
Than the master?

All insects undergo some form of metamorphosis, it is true,  
But the process is most famous in the butterfly.  
From the soft, vulnerable form of the caterpillar; to the paper thin fragility of the pupa; to the final masterpiece that is the butterfly.

Perhaps not that fitting,  
For my metamorphosis was more akin to that of the grasshopper, or dragonfly  
A gradual acquisition of new characteristics,  
Different yet much the same.  
I will not have the dramatic, striking metamorphosis of a lepidopteran.

The wings of a meadow brown butterfly are brown, but under bright sunlight, its scales reflect a beautiful iridescent green.  
Yet I perceive more in this reflection than just a trick of the light  
It is in their wings I see myself, my hopes, my dreams.  
The impermanence of my current form,  
The promise of a happier person, a truly authentic sense of self  
Waiting to eclose from within me.  
I hope that it is this spiritual transition that awaits me,  
That will grant me a dramatic, striking metamorphosis, like that of the butterfly.



AFTER I CAME OUT AS NONBINARY, I WAS NERVOUS ABOUT GOING OUTSIDE, AND I WENT A LITTLE OVERBOARD WITH GROWING HOUSEPLANTS.

A LOT OF THINGS CHANGED IN 2020. I STILL SPENT MOST OF THE DAY INSIDE, BUT IN THE DESERTED HOURS OF THE EARLY MORNING,



I WAS FREE TO ROAM THROUGH THE NEWLY OVERGROWN CITY AS I PLEASED, AND THE EMPTY SIDEWALKS BECAME MY GREAT OUTDOORS.

@KATHRYNTHEHUMAN

## My Great Outdoors

Kathryn Hemmann (@kathrynthehuman)

## Man on a Swing

*Jai Mohan*

i sit upon stone in the sun's embrace  
on the boulders high before the playground  
and i let the wind ride roughshod through my hair.

and it is late, and the park is closed, but i brought a water bottle in my backpack  
and i fed my cat a treat before i told him i'd be back soon  
and i bade him farewell, and i left my apartment and walked and jumped the fence.

a spider weaves a web a few feet away  
and a squirrel buries hidden gold by the trees  
and far in the distance a couple holds hands

and the night air smells like grass  
and late-mass incense  
and someone nearby is smoking and the city sounds are a drifting latent buzz  
through the plastic covering my ears. here, the noise is soft  
controllable  
no meltdowns will come for me.

effervescent, i can see  
neon bright in windows from where i sit  
there is an ache deep in my soul,  
untouched by muscle strain  
unknown to bone and blood

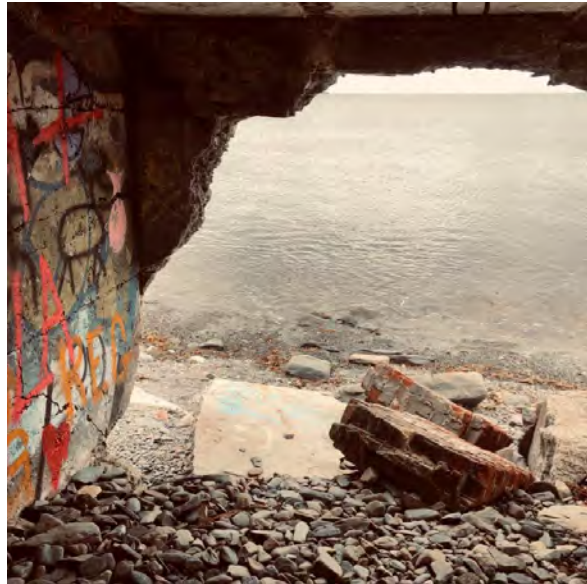
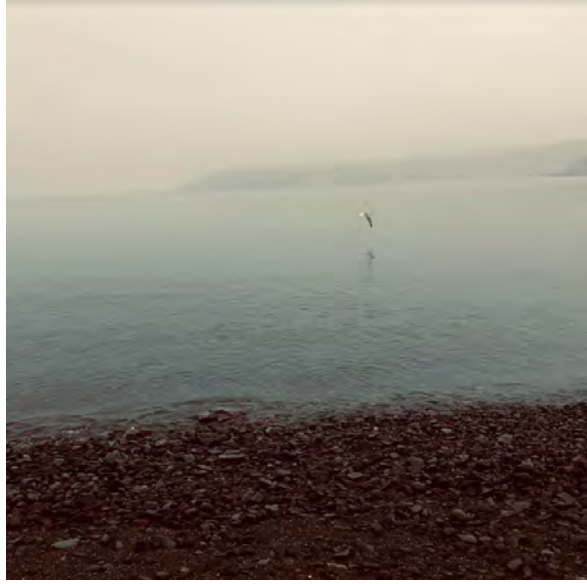
and i get up and walk towards the swings and settle into place.  
no one is here to hear me.

in the air, i imagine  
that i am a bird  
feathered and unfettered by the world's expectations  
free in flight  
and i raise my arms with elbows locked around the chains  
and i sing for hours  
until my grief and fear and rage have left me  
and the moon is high

and i know myself to be a man  
on a swing in a park in a city







## **Encounter**

Cameron Rankin

Artist's note: *I am non-binary and schizophrenic. I like to hike, collect toys, and I take comfort in monsters and horror media, which I guess all combined, makes me inclined to make art.*

*The doll you see was once my childhood baby doll that I reinvented using many materials to create this alien. A lost alien that has been wandering the woods of Atlantic Canada for a couple of centuries, observing the cyclical youth of nature on Earth combined with dissolving human structures. They are hoping that they might one day encounter another creature who is just as lonely as they are.*

## **Nature Never Held Me (And That's Okay)**

*Erin (@agendermetalbender)*

Nature, in the sense of Being Outdoors And Experiencing Plants Et Al., and I have never been on great terms. But Nature in the sense of Physical Reality has been a longtime friend of mine, viewed through the lens of physics, mechanics, chemistry, and materials.

The universe is not good or kind or evil or cruel, it simply Is. Knowing the underlying processes behind what I experience is deeply gratifying, and I draw a great deal of peace knowing that it doesn't care because it cannot care. I will never face rejection or dismissal from a furnace filled with roiling molten steel or from nitrogen molecules in air—they have no thoughts and simply act as they will.

Natural things are often seen as Good while synthetic things can be vilified; this doesn't mean that Nature is Good, since there are a great many artificial substances that have tremendous benefit to humanity, and just as many natural ones that are harmful. This also doesn't mean Nature is Bad; Nature simply exists. The substances and objects that are part of it do what they do because it's what they do.

When a coal furnace belches forth smoke, there is no malign act—the atoms are simply finding a lower-energy state. When corrosive acid burns flesh, there is no cruelty behind it; the molecules are just reacting as they do. Magma and sulfur are as natural as trees and sunlight.

I held nature close and found no fault with it.

## **In Golden Esprit**

*Pale M. L. Greenwood (@kingofthewilds)*

Tap the rim of your glass to mine and lean into my shoulder, pull the shawl she gave you around your collar and take a sip of whatever you thought to stuff into your bags as refreshments for the journey. Sit beside me up on this cliff, this ridge, legs hanging down to the great wilderness below as we watch it burn. Watch as the trees fall and the animals gallop fast as a heart can break and lean back to watch the spectacle of the sky as the plumes of the pyroclastic clouds rise higher and higher. We never meant to be in the ring of fire, oh, we never meant to be anywhere that wasn't here. We wanted to be alive when the world fell apart, and here we are. My arm around your hips and your shoulder leaning into mine, and two glasses of whatever we chose to be the last drink of the world as we toast to it burning everything down around us.

I think you know as well as I do that it isn't going to touch us. For once, we're in the right place, wearing the right flesh, all the way down to the bones. Or maybe it's that we're not wearing flesh at all, for once. Watch the volcano heave and roll as it spews out another line of lyric in its song of destruction. There's ash now, in your hair, sparkling red and gold and silver, smoulders and sparkles like falling stars, like the stars frozen on your skin. Even in autumn, when the leaves change and the world is on fire, and the world might forever be on fire in this moment, the rainbows aren't as beautiful as they are right now, in your hair, dusting the cinders across your face.

You never asked to be beautiful. I know. I never asked for it, either. The ash falls from your tears to your shawl and burns it away, and now, there's no need to hide. It's already burnt your skin from your bones and left us all but hollow. We were always hollow, in the here and now, in the distant past when the world remembered something other than fire. You and I, in the endless moment stretching on just this side of forever that we call the present, are nothing now but bones. We are but only bones, remembering the world, etching its eulogy in the softness of the marrow.

The world burns down around us, and we are always, forever, touched by it. When the world turns, so do we. So when the world falls apart around us, shockwaves rolling and laments howling, what does that mean for us? The smoking remains of the volcano no longer stand tall and proud, a hole carved from its head down to the shoulders of its neck, leaving the molten breath of its throat exposed to the world. One more breath between each stanza, each verse of its song of destruction. Don't you remember feeling like that, once? Head chopped off and rational thought cast to the wind, holding so tight to the only words that mattered? The only words that ever meant anything at all?

Leave your open, brittle vocal chords to the sky for the wind to whistle by. A song of destruction, something so bright and red that in the fires all we can see is blood. Blood you and I don't have, anymore. Blood the marrow of our bones remembers how to make. Take two phalanges to your lips and whistle in answer, whistle in reply of the great sky above. The sky is big and you and I are small. Bones are a cage, for they hold you inside. Even the sky is a cage, if you want it to be, for it ends. Bones have always been more than just a cage, if you let them be.

The ash settles, and the volcano heaves its last lyric in its song, and for a moment, all is silent. It rains through the night, dampens our bones as tears begin to fall. Tears are nothing more than the rains that douse the fire and replenish the land. Sing the stars to sleep, lay your weary head down in the remains of the inferno that consumed the world. What is there to cry for, really? Nothing but the world burning down around us. Nothing but the flesh so sweetly stripped away, as once we asked the world to do. Nothing but the smouldering cinders in the hair you wore like a crown of falling stars. Nothing is stopping you from claiming another word, another name, talking to the wind as it shows the rain where to weep. The wind whistles and the rain falls, washing away the ash and the dirt, eroding away all but the memory that it buries under the loam. It whittles at the rock, and carves out something new.

Carve your bones into webs and bend them as only humanity can. The marrow will remember how to make flesh and blood. It will mould them around the bone, unknowing what's changed. It will follow you down to the ground and the loam and the sky. You already shaped it in fire, didn't you? Cut your chest open at the sternum and use the ash of a volcano's final tears to forge it, to mend it, to cool it in the weeping of the sky for all that it lost. We stand on this grave and we allow the sky to weep for us. Stand tall on the cliff that survived and whistle to the sky that for once, for forever, for a single endless, ephemeral moment, everything is finally all right.

For your heart, when your marrow rebuilds it from the ashes, take the first sapling from the ground and plant it in your chest. Ash is, after all, a rich food to begin the growing season once more. Things wouldn't burn if they never left a memory. Fire exists because we believed it would. The sapling will wrap itself around your ribs and serenade your liver and your shoulders into something new. It will sing a song of creation, remembering what came before. It will choose to blossom and reach for the sky, if only to comfort it when the rain comes crashing down.

The world came to a standstill, once, and it burned. Ash fell to smoulder in your hair like falling stars, and we watched each other burst into flames. The rain came down and we told the wind to sing a new song, just for us. The volcano ripped itself apart and it will build up something better. I wonder what flowers will nest under your heart, holding in their blossoms until it is time to burst themselves forth from your skin to reach the sun.

To be a person is to be a sanctum. To be a human is to be an ecosystem. To be you is to be everything glorious in this world, and what better way to be glorious, than to be you? Your bones are only the bedrock of your foundation, and even the volcano refused the peak of them when it was time to change and to become something new.

You are not beholden to the form you have held for aeons before, and neither am I. We sing the song of where we came from, and when that song has ended, we will sing to the wind and the sky of where we will go from here.

## **I Am The Desert**

*Kay (@starlight.knight)*

My soul is uncomfortable for many.  
To the outsider I am barren and empty.  
Because you don't know me  
You don't know where to look

I am scorching everything I touch  
But I am flourishing in the night and after it rains. There is so much  
hidden life  
So much beautiful life here  
You couldn't begin to imagine

My gender is tough like the heat.  
My gender is incredibly difficult like caliche.  
My gender is loud like a thunderstorm in the desert. My gender is beautiful like a  
desert in full bloom after it rains. My gender is vibrant like the desert at night.

I am the desert.

## The Palisade Glacier Is Dying

Jenae M.

and there's nothing I can do about it,  
except listen  
to the sheaves of ice culled  
by time and the scythe of the golden summer sun.  
They slip, sighing into the lake beneath,  
a milky turquoise maw,  
melt without protest  
down the waterfall throat that leads to more lakes,  
to feed the deer and mountain chickadees  
and the dappled yellow herd of willowy bushes  
that congregate to drink and share the secret  
of how to endure, fed by light alone.  
All bodies, an infinite play on the pattern.  
Red algae stains the snow,  
remember your blood  
once water once ice once air once water  
all still.  
*C. nivalis* is cryophilic,  
chooses the frozen, the unloved  
to make their multi-life inside.  
I'm chewing on pine needles  
for the bitter bite back in my mouth.  
In my skin without edges, I am all that moves  
under the shadow of jagged granite peaks.

## Second Sleep

*Six Rudolph*

I hiked the Appalachian Trail in the winter. (This is when you ask why the hell I'd do that.) Yeah, it's cold and snowy, but the AT is overrun with retirees and vloggers any time between March and October, and in the off season you can go four days straight without seeing another human, so I'll take it. I'm about two weeks in - my blisters are hardening into calluses, and Clif bars are starting to taste good - when I start waking up in the middle of the night.

The first night, I think it's an anomaly. I take a piss, write a brief journal entry, listen to the forest, and fall back asleep after an inexplicable hour of wakefulness. The second night, I think it's an odd coincidence. The old timber of the three-sided wooden shelter creaks around me in the dark as the wind swirls up and dies down, and then I'm out again. By the third night, it's routine, and I start saving my journaling for the wee hours, knowing I'll be awake. Just another weird thing about thru hiking, along with the roaring appetite and an interesting new assortment of smells.

It's much later that I hear about second sleep.

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I got top surgery less than a year before I started on the trail. (This is when you say oh, hey, congratulations!) Thanks, it was the best day of my life. In the tiny mountain towns that service thru hikers, I explain to the people I meet that there's breast cancer in my family and I had to have a double mastectomy at a young age. I call myself a 'woman warrior.' "Nature doesn't care about your gender or orientation," the average granola heterosexual will blithely tell you; the people you meet out there might, though. I talk all about my boyfriend, Jacob, for good measure. He's still in school for computer science, a year younger than me. MIT. I'm very proud of him. We're trying to make distance work. I am good at the closet, in a way I haven't had to be since high school. It helps that most hikers look pretty butch anyway. My bathroom-sink undercut, gruff tone, body hair, and men's clothes go unquestioned.

At any rate, I don't worry about it outside of the frontcountry. Even when I do see other humans, hikers tend to be hippie types, open-minded and eager to prove it. And most of the time, of course, I am content in my own company.



The urgency of gender dysphoria's old roar has been softened by my newly flat chest. It's not gone, but it's subtler and more intermittent: discomfort at the pitch of my voice here, the sight of my soft features there. Off the grid, I don't have to confront either too frequently. The rare mirror I see in a hostel doesn't set off the disgust it used to. Looking down at myself is a quiet thrill of delight.

With a newfound ease of mind, I reacquaint myself with the body I live in. There is strength in it - the flex and burn of the quadriceps as I clamber up a steep stretch, the steady thump-thump of the heartbeat in my ears. I like its smell of dirt and sweat. Once, curious, I try on a skirt from a hostel's spare clothing box while my laundry is running. *Still not for me*, I decide, and change into jeans. But it's brief and painless.

I begin to think - for the first time since the blithe genderless joy of childhood - that I might be able to get along with this flesh.

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*Second sleep* is the name Professor Roger Ekirch gave to humans' historical tendency to sleep in two parts: four hours, an hour or two awake, and then another four hours. The period in between was used for praying, talking to your partner, having sex, reflecting on still-vivid dreams. Scholars and poets, in particular, favored the time for writing. Meanwhile, "*I'm up for my nightly I am desperate need to pee and then staying awake for an hour,*" reads my journal entry from the highest shelter on the trail. Roan Mountain, 6285'. I had chugged uphill through a foot and a half of fresh snow all day to get there and then fallen asleep immediately after dinner. (This is when you say something about the grammar in that quote.) Give me a break, I *just* said I wrote it in the middle of the night. Most of my AT journal has that same dreamy, wandering cadence.

The biphasic sleep pattern began to change around the time of the Industrial Revolution, when the new prevalence of artificial lighting meant that people could stay up later. I read this under an incandescent bulb in a gritty hostel bunkroom, the first time in a week that I've seen light besides the sun and the stars and the moon on fresh snow. The Industrial Revolution also meant clocks became more common; sleep became something one measured and limited. I have a phone with me, but reception is rare, and I wake before dawn without any alarm. I check the time maybe once or twice a week.

It's not that I don't keep track of time. Just that it's not in numbers. There's the greyness before dawn, accompanied by a Clif bar and instant coffee, and then there's the thin gold and rose of sunrise as I gain the ridge, and then the sun gathers its strength and burns off the mist and my body lets me know when it's time to find an appealing rock for lunch. Miles again, racing down ridgelines with the clouds at my feet. What passes for the heat of the day. Another Clif bar. The sun drops lower, hanging in the winter sky like a cold nickel. A battered wooden sign indicates a shelter off to one side of the trail. I eat a dinner that would undoubtedly taste terrible in any other situation. And then, sleep, in the plural.

All this to say that the body remembered. Some parts of personhood are written not in the flesh but in the bone: to eat when you're hungry, to sleep when you're tired. To scream when you're hurt and cry when you're sad and sing when you're happy and roam when you're restless.

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I have felt wrong in my body since it first began to grow breasts. This was not the form I would've chosen for myself. We have trudged through our unhappy obligate marriage, myself in fundamental pain at the union, unable to soften the force of my rejection. It has learned to expect no kindness from me.

Alone together in the ice and snow, I take my body's hand, offer it a cup of tea, invite it to sit at my kitchen table. I have long refused to look at it straight on, and now it avoids my gaze in return. When I manage to make eye contact, it's staring back with trembling, defiant fear, arms still crossed defensively over its chest.

A body is a home. Homes sometimes need renovations. In a hospital in Boston, a surgeon makes a few cuts, and for the first time since childhood, there is no misery in calling this body mine.

Now what?

I've been a serious hiker for long enough that I know how to patch up my blisters - always with clipped frustration, passive-aggressive annoyance at my body's failure, whatever burn medications and painkillers I needed to keep moving. This time around, I try on gentleness for size. I take a day off at a hostel, soak my feet in salt water and let them feel fresh air. When my knees ache, instead of gritting my teeth and cursing my own bones, I buy a pair of braces. I stop denying myself water on long scrambles. I eat and eat and eat.

All this to say that the body remembered. I shed the wrongness of the flesh, and found that the bones within still knew the name of contentment. Transition was never a path into the unknown for me - every step felt more and more familiar. Like a drive into the neighborhood where you grew up, or a good night's sleep.

On the rare warm day, I find a patch of grass for lunch. Afterwards, I nap for an hour or so with sunlight soaking into my cheeks. I often have issues getting to sleep in the frontcountry. It's only manageable with one specific position and temperature and blanket weight and set of pajamas. Here, I shove my pack under my head and call it just right. To a body that's worn out but free of pain, rest comes easy.

## Gender: Camp Kitchen

*Kodani (@pixiesnakes)*



Gender: Camp Kitchen  
by Kodandi  
kodandi.net  
2021



Gender: Spoon. This part of me is brought out into the yard. It is me touched and held, laid bare, hosed down, soaped up, rinsed and set to dry in the sun. Left for the donkeys to nose and prod, the squirrels and birds to check for scraps, the insects explore the new landscape.



Gender: Skillet. Society cannot project its assumptions on me here. I exist only in view of sky, the mountains, the fields, the myriad of fauna, and the river where I pump the water from.



Gender: Knife. The experience of experience. The purity of the self unmediated by other selves or societies. Living close to reality and exposed to the windswept world. The donkey chews up my good spatula and my wire mesh strainer while they sit out to dry.

## The Warm Eye of the Sun

Jude (he/him)

The year I was in eighth grade, I participated in a year-long program with the local nature preserve that was meant for teenagers who were interested in becoming park rangers. We met once a month for twelve months, hiking and fixing damaged trails and becoming certified in wilderness first aid. The program culminated in a 5-day camping trip to the Adirondacks. I went home 3 days in because I didn't have the stamina to finish climbing the mountains our chaperones chose, and the shame of holding the others back from summiting was choking me. This year, I was cleaning out a crate of my things from middle school, and found a photo taken on the first day of that abandoned camping trip. It depicts me and the other eleven participants standing on the side of a dirt road, all of us jumping in the air at once, with the Adirondacks rising behind us. My hair reached past my shoulders at the time. It hasn't been that long since. That fall I dyed half of it a lurid, bloody red. The summer after that, I shaved it down so it was only an inch long. In the photo, it is floating up in a curly brown cloud around my head, and there is naked, unbridled joy shining in every line of my body. I hung the photo on my wall, and I can see it from my desk every day. It's a reminder that despite how jumbled and uncomfortable being in my body was then, and despite how miserable and exhausted I would be just two days later, there were moments when I could stand outside and let all the discomfort go. The girl in the picture does not know who she is, but she is standing in a field, and there are mountains behind her, and she is flying.

For four years, I went to a summer camp run by the DEC. The first two years, my cabin mates and my workshop group and the counselors learned my name, and nobody else did. The third year, I had a buzzcut, and my mother told me that I would have to bring a hat or put sunscreen on my scalp. I chose the hat. I had one of those snapbacks with my name airbrushed on it that you can buy for fifteen dollars at the county fair. I became known as the girl with the hat. Everyone knew my name within a day. The fourth year, I had a different name and a different hat to go with it. *My name is Jude*, I told everyone. *It's not what's on the paperwork, but it's my name. I use they/them pronouns.* Most people didn't remember the pronouns. One night out of the six I spent there each year was called the overnight, and it was a camping trip. The fourth year, something crawled into my sleeping bag and bit my leg, leaving a numb patch from mid-thigh to the top of my knee. When we got back, my counselor walked me to the medical cabin. *They think it was a spider*, she told the nurse. *They're probably right*, the nurse replied. *Put this on it*, she told me, handing me an ice pack. *If the way it feels changes or if it's still numb tomorrow, come tell me.* The numbness made walking strange, but I didn't particularly care. The short exchange in the cabin cured me of my trouble.

When I was thirteen, my mother called me over to the computer. *My friend's son is doing this program, she told me. It's called live-action roleplay. You like fantasy stories, do you think you would enjoy it?* I thought I would, and I did. There were several inches of snow on the ground, and it was the first time I'd ever met a real life trans person. We played a version of capture the flag that involved swiping at each other with foam swords, and when I hit the ground after each imaginary death the snow rose up to cradle me. The fantasy we'd all gathered to play was called The Castle of Doctor Murdervich, and the sun was already down when we began, a cold wind rising up and whipping at the costume I'd pulled on over my clothes. In those three dark hours, my body stopped being an enemy and became the vessel for a not-me person, a strong upright force that protected me and my friends from real-imaginary danger. When we gathered at the end to cool down and collect back into ourselves, I felt supported on all sides. It was with those people that two years later I felt safe enough to call myself by my name in public for the first time.

A few weeks after my fourteenth birthday, I packed up three days worth of clothes and boarded a boat for a sleepaway trip advertised as a youth empowerment program. I assumed it would be mainly a program about the ecology of the river, with the fact that we were on a boat being a secondary interest. I was wrong. I was given a quick lesson on how to tend a dockline, and then I stood next to a massive wooden cleat with the thick rope in my hands as the boat maneuvered away from the dock. I was hooked immediately. The process of spooling the rope into a working coil so the more experienced sailors could stow it properly took several minutes, and by the time I was done we were out in the middle of the river. I adjusted very quickly to the slow roll of the deck under my feet, and ever since then solid ground has felt strange. We sang shanties several times during those three days, and on one memorable occasion we raised the enormous main sail to a mixed selection of Beyonce and Taylor Swift. My favorite was one that was sung while we were hauling in a trawl net to get a look at the sorts of fish that lived in the river. I was hoping for an eel. I'd recently learned a lot about the American eel and I was bursting to share. *You're not pulling hard enough, the woman at the front of our line said. Let's sing. This one's easy, and it's fun because we can put your names in it! It goes like this.* I was at the front of the line, so my name was added to the melody first. *N---- got eaten by a hogchoker, a hogchoker, a hogchoker,* she sang, and we all burst out laughing. *N---- got eaten by a hogchoker, and now she's gone forever.* I didn't know what a hogchoker was, although I would soon learn that it was a flatfish sort of like a flounder, called that because fishermen would leave them behind and wild hogs would choke on them if they ate them tail-first. *Forever, forever, forever, forever,* we sang. *And now she's gone forever.*

## **In the Woods**

*Katie*

I grew up in the woods and I was just a child  
No qualifiers attached, unmarked  
My mother once took pride in a moment  
When I picked up a frog, and the boys were surprised  
I don't remember this.  
It never occurred to me that it would matter.

I liked being unmarked. I liked the woods.  
But I don't live there anymore, and I am no longer a child.

I walk barefoot wherever I can to feel the earth beneath me.  
I lie in the grass and stare at the moon  
One night (or early morning), I can't sleep  
So I go out into the rain

The rules are different now  
(they aren't though, not really)  
I liked it better when I didn't know them  
I miss the woods.

The rain can't wash away the years of being trapped  
Trapped in a body, trapped in the world  
Trapped in rules that always seemed so arbitrary  
But the rain has built the river from a shallow stream to a steady rush of water

I don't go all the way under. I sit on the rocky bottom,  
And let it flow past me, around me, through me  
The moon is watching, and the rain has petered out  
But I can still hear it dripping through the trees

I don't know how long it lasts. Not long  
But something is different now.  
I go back inside. Peel off drenched clothes.  
Stare at the stars on the ceiling.

I remember having the whole world at my doorstep and now it's gone  
But sometimes, for just a moment,  
I can find it again

The woods never forced me to be anything.

## **The Moors of Self-Discovery**

*Luke (@anarchist-luke)*

As a trans guy from Northern England, I always felt a sense of queer connection to the land around me. The Moors of the Pennines always felt safe and comforting to me. A place in total isolation where I could be myself. The weight of dysphoria could get to me so much, when I was still cloested. In a home in the outskirts of Manchester -- sometimes it felt like nature's soothing presence was hard to come by. Then I discovered the Moors.

When I was still cloested, I volunteered at a stable on the side of the Moors. Sometimes we'd take the ponies out to a wild outcrop of rock way up in the hills. It was an old scar, put there by the Victorians quarrying for industrial era Manchester, yet it is a scar that is long since healed. Taking a pony up there was a transcending experience -- they would be just as taken in by the surroundings as you are -- both human and pony in awe of the wide scar carved out of the earth. The numerous ridges that now make a perfect cantering slope have been weathered by horse and human feet. Occasionally, sheep would break free from a nearby farm and waste no time in hopping up the steep craggy cliff face. Other times, dogs from walkers would shoot up the slopes, having as much fun as any other animal that graces this moorland.

Which is why it felt so special as a trans person, all alone up in that moorland -- yet surrounded by nature in such a surprising way. The horses, sheep, dogs and birds of prey that take to the sparse and wild moorlands do not care about such things as being cis or trans. Like me, they come to enjoy the moorland. I don't imagine animals feel dysphoria much, but I feel like they would understand, if the concept was possible to explain to them. Failing that, the land seemed to understand -- never moved from underneath my feet when I needed support for my dysphoria -- the feeling that put me at odds with the world was put to bed by that world's land.

Getting to the moorland wasn't always easy: I'd volunteer for a set time each week, usually on a Saturday. My parents aren't the understanding type, my queer self was afraid of them -- and so finding myself in the moorlands led to me becoming estranged. But back to reaching that place of isolation and self reflection -- I began to lie and say that my volunteering called for an extra half an hour of work off me -- so my parents would arrive half an hour later than they would usually pick me up. After I'd finished my volunteer work for the day, taking care of ponies and cherishing the connections I'd made with the animals -- I'd shoot up the hill into the Moors. I'd later employ this same strategy when making visits to Manchester, albeit for different reasons.

I like to think my time spent up there was worth it. At times it gave me space to break down and cry at my situation. When the dysphoria hit, I could take the edge off amidst beautiful natural scenery. Other times it gave me space to stand proudly



and look at the valleys all around me -- a lone trans man borne into nature's firm embrace -- in spite of all that I was going through. Sitting down on the cliff edge of the quarry, feeling a soft breeze pass by. The birds of prey high above, they see me up there, and I see them quietly going about their business. The sheep crowd together in the corral and the ponies -- now free to roam in their paddocks -- play together and roll in the early evening sun.

I am here in the Moors. I am queer. I am free.

Then, my fortunes changed -- I left for university eventually, swapping the rolling hills of Northern England for the incredible mountains of Mid Wales. The Moors give way to beautiful mounds of rusty-red hillside, as heather decays away. The pain of my upbringing decays away.

My dysphoria decays away. My love and cherishment for my fellow queer folks springs to life. My love for myself begins to grow. My love for my partner blossoms. I am home.

## **Peace from the Mountains**

Sunshinefirefox (@sunshinefirefox1)

Mountains loom in the distance  
The wind whispers as I continue to learn about myself  
Oh -- to be an elk grazing contentedly  
Or a mountain lion napping the day away

Trees stand firm -- no fear making them bow  
Leaves and branches dance in joy on the breeze  
Nature smiles all around in peaceful wonder  
I am relieved to be me

## **In Sunlight**

*E.J. Leigh*

Sometimes I want  
to slip sunlight through my teeth like  
a stream of seeds,  
small things that can take root  
in the uncomfortable dark  
and blossom against the cracks of me  
until my skin splits with sudden radiance.

I want to swallow sunlight like  
water and let it echo in the hollow spaces  
of me—let it carve and weather like eons  
passing in the span of one narrow ribcage.

I want to drench myself in sunlight  
saturate with sunlight  
sponge up with a sickening hunger the sunlight  
until other people's eyes cannot find  
the apocalypse of my body.

And then...

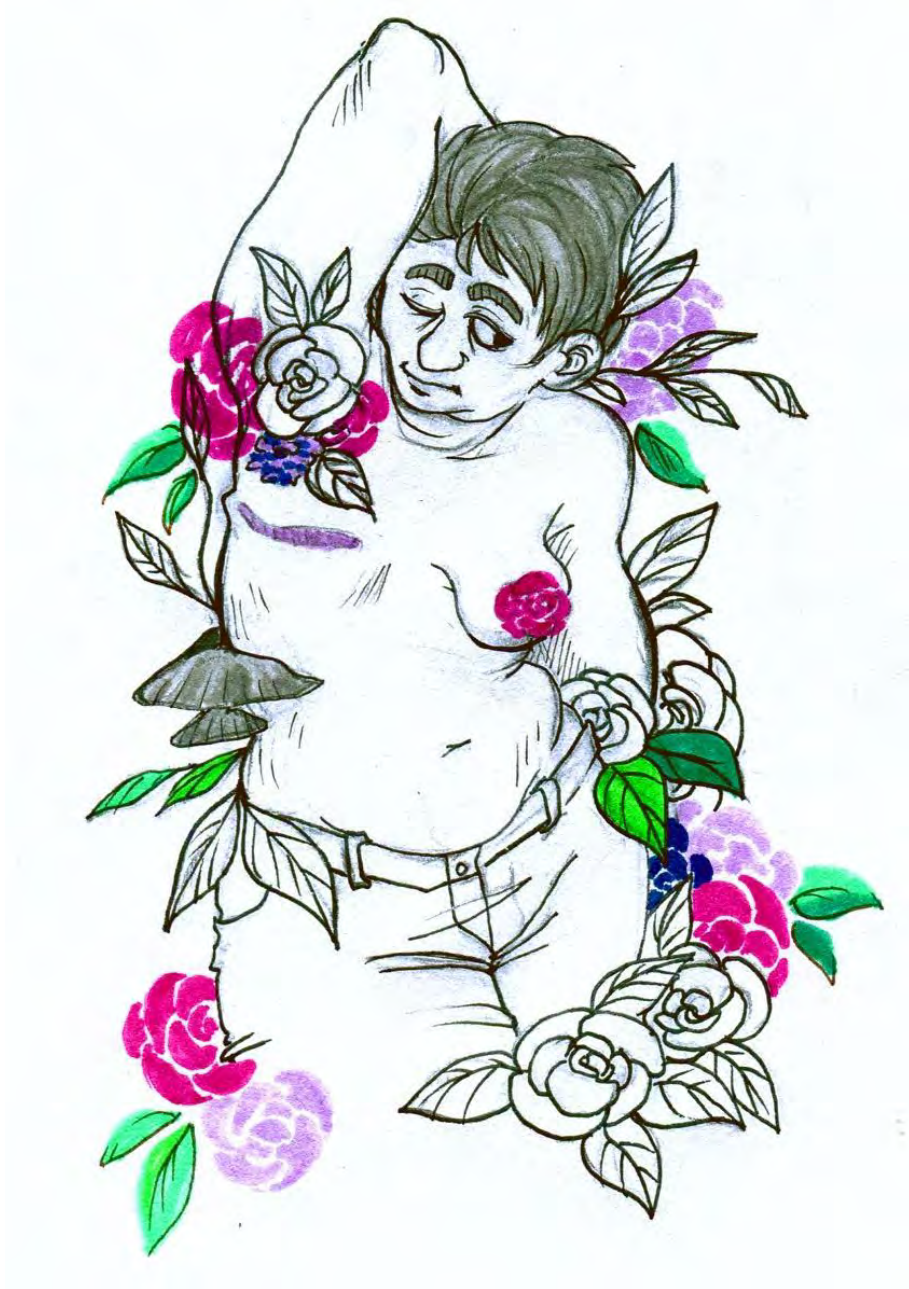
I will lie there,  
on a cool rock beneath shimmering trees  
whose leaves lap like water at the sky,  
and feel rough stone against my back  
and feel sunlight dancing on my skin.



**Thank You Miss Converse!**

*Jackson K. "Gouache Possum" (@gouache\_possum)*

**plant|body**  
*Ehm Eg (ehm.eg)*



2019

The first thing I do when I move to a new place is to locate the bits of nature amidst the urban landscape.

Narrow grassy paths behind rowhouses, planted trees between apartment blocks, dog walker parks, forested areas enclosed by highways.

It is both an act exploring, discovering something new, and a way to carve out a place for myself in a suffocating environment.

I want to burn all of my IDs that have gender markers on them.

I want to move to the countryside and start a queer commune.

I want my body to grow into the trees; put roots in the ground, breathe sunlight and air, sway in the wind.

For now, I am here. I am touching bark, I am smelling the grass. I see the sky and the flowers and leaves.



2017

Since my teen years, I've used nature as a coping mechanism. Long walks to quell hormone-induced rage, or restlessness, or just when I needed quiet introspection. Walks through forests, parks, and along coastlines have always been a constant in my life, although the reasons changed over the years. Transforming from the vague weltenschmerz of a teenager into more concrete troubles; dysphoria, mental illness, different flavors of existential dread and all the challenges of life.

As an adult, I started to bring the soothing nature home, filling my studio apartment with potted plants as well as flowers, rocks, shells, and sticks I collected on walks. Plants, trees and fungi also found their way through my hands into my drawings as I started to use art to properly process my gender dysphoria and body dysmorphia. Nature is a safe space, an outlet and an inspiration, and a cataclysm for healing all in one.

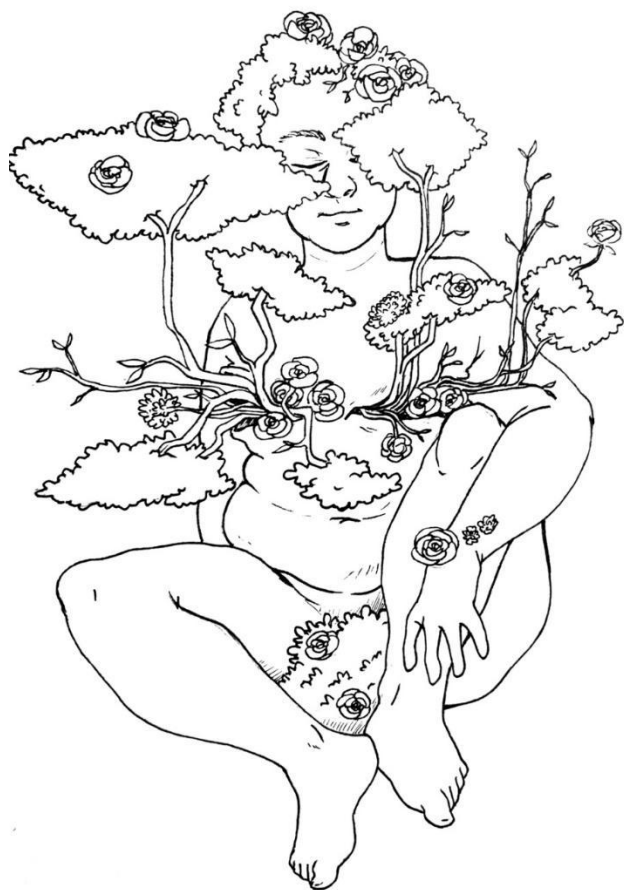


2019

I can see the healing unfold on paper. I can compare what I'm drawing now with similar works from years ago and see how my relationship to those themes and motives have changed. This happened most drastically, from one day to the other, when I had top surgery in March 2021. My surgery was scheduled on the anniversary of my country's first pandemic lockdown and in that way it became sort of a culmination of two very different anxieties: More than a year of pandemic fear, more than ten years of dysphoria.

I painted something the night before to calm my nerves and what appeared on the paper felt notably different from how my works normally seemed. More calm. In balance. Serene. It was still a variation of what I had drawn many times before: a

body and plants, integrated and entwined. But in this drawing, and in all the ones that came after in the months post-surgery, there was a different harmony in it.



*March 2021*



*June 2021*

For every step of transition I've decided to take, I've had to accept that I could not be completely sure of it before it was done. Seeing this change in my subconscious manifested in pencil strokes, was the first sign of the rightness of that decision.

I use nature to disappear. Just a little bit. It's not an uncomplicated relationship. The image of being consumed by nature is powerfully attractive but at the same time unsettlingly reminiscent of the years when I tried to starve myself out of my own body. It can be hard to distinguish the peace found in balance and the peace that comes from self-harm. Still, where the eating disorder crawled inwards, self-destruction through self-absorption, I feel that interacting with nature draws my gaze up and out as much as it fosters insight into myself. I find balance in myself and



my body by finding balance with nature and the world. Less destruction, more coalescence.



*April 2021*

I don't just disappear into nature, I grow with it. What does disappear, for a moment, is a world of enforced gender binaries, expectations and demands, global emergencies, fear of death. Left behind is just one breathing, growing whole.

It's the same with turning those feelings - body feelings, gender feelings, nature feelings - into drawings. Putting them on paper makes them real in a different way, existing things outside my own head, makes them legible to myself and, maybe, to others. They don't disappear, but they become part of something larger.

There's this vague, huge feeling of connectedness with nature and, by extension, the world that can be quite overwhelming, to the point of consuming, when it just exists as a sensation in my body. Translating it into strokes of pencil and ink processes it and transforms it into something manageable.

I am not the entire world. I am also not alone.

My body is not one thing; it is also not everything.

My body (and its dysmorphia, dysphoria, my gender, my anxieties, myself) is fluid, changeable; but not boundless, not beyond me.

We grow together and we will be okay.



2019

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

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