

ally

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Madison Scott-Clary

Also by Madison Scott-Clary

Arcana — A Tarot Anthology, ed.

Rum and Coke — Three Short Stories from a Furry Convention

Restless Town

Eigengrau — Poems 2015–2020

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ally

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I'm not ready to share this yet.

But you want to save it?

I want to save it.

*But you save it like this. You save it in a book. You obscure
the meaning, but it's there. It's in the ink. It's on the page.
It's in the realm of the physical.*

That's not the same as sharing.

It's exactly the same as sharing.

And who asked you?

Who invoked me?

Well played.

Do you remember when you met me?

When I met you? I don't remember it so much as a meeting as you were just already there.

I was, yes.

After high school, then. That's when you showed up. That's when life began. That's when I started thinking of myself as a person. That's when I started thinking of others as people, with their own motivations, their own desires, their own incentives and failings.

And you made it through.

After a fashion.

You're here, now. You made it through.

*She never wanted to be
What she became;
The irony of which
Is not lost on her.*

Touching.

Hey now, don't be rude. Aren't you supposed to be my ally?

I am your ally. I'm just not your friend.

Fair enough.

So you showed up after high school. You showed up after life slid sideways through puberty. I went digging, you know. To find this out.

Oh?

Yeah. June 2004. There you are. I say,

The navy blue I've been seeing at waist level in front of me and to my left is contentment. I'm not entirely sure that it being omnipresent is a good thing, however, considering the colors it's mixed with. Am I really content with longing and hopelessness? It's not out of the question, I suppose that it could just be another aspect of my personality. But that just brings up the question of whether or not it's something I ingrained into myself through habit, something where I just kinda accepted that feeling such things is normal, okay, and what I want; or is it something I was born with, or that we're all born with? Is it a side effect of love, expecting impossible desires and the blind hopelessness that follows the end of a four year undertaking?

And you replied...?

You're rambling.

So pleased you remember.

You're rambling.

I suppose I am. But there you were. You said *You're rambling* to which I replied "Guilty, conspirator." And that was that. That was us. We never greeted each other. Why would we?

I kept digging, too. You stuck around for a year. I saw you off and on until June 2005. In October, 2004, I said that empathy is cooler in person. *Why?* you asked. *So you can verify? Don't you trust your feelings?* I said I didn't know, and then I begged you not to go.

Everyone always leaves, don't they?

Perhaps. It's good to hear from you again. Even after fourteen years,
I've missed you.

And what was the last thing I said to you?

I was going to call you emo, or suicidal, but no, not goth. It was when Ash
and Shannon and I found a house to move into.

I believe I also called you a prick.

Was I?

Yes.

Am I still?

Yes, but a different kind.

You're as chipper now as you were then.

Yes, but a different kind.

Why am I here?

Aren't you always?

*With you, sure. Why am I bound to words, though? It's been
fourteen years.*

Surely that's not all on me. You must play some role in it. I was talking with my partner about doing something autobiographical for my next project, after all.

*I'm the observer and the mirror. All I can do is reflect your
choices back at you. Choice itself is not my department.*

After getting *Restless Town* finished, I needed something to do. Some other project that would make me feel like I was being productive.

Feel, or seem?

Both. If I sat still, I'd burn up. If I was seen sitting still, clearly I'd be worth less in the eyes of those around me, right?

Not my department.

Right.

So I started digging through stuff I'd already done, seeing if any of it could be cleaned up and turned into a new project. I stumbled across *Rum and Coke* and found it mostly clean as it was, so I decided to publish it as a book. Paperback and ebook, I mean, not just the stories online.

Were you proud of them?

To an extent. A different me wrote them. A lesser me, in some ways. I was younger, I hadn't quite found my voice and tone. No *Arcana*, no *Disappearance*, no *Getting Lost* or *Post-Self*. All I had was a few scattered tidbits and my mom's words ringing in my ears: "You wrote your own wedding vows, right? I could tell."

A me with a different identity, too. A me that was working on gender through small steps. I hadn't yet picked up the word 'trans' for myself. I was non-binary, presenting male, writing to justify myself. Or maybe to hype myself up. I was writing works about gender and poly problems being worked through to convince myself it was possible.

They read like parables.

They were, to me. Each one came with an internal discussion after the last line, *now, what can we take from this?* Something in a circle. Socratic. A talking stick.

I know, I was there.

Of course.

Why didn't I show up then?

I was too...something. Too busy, too preoccupied. I was focused too much on identity, too much on The Work, as it were, to reflect. Maybe I was moving too quickly to notice my choices being shown to me.

You'd mostly stopped [adjective][species] by then, too.

Life got weird. I was transitioning–

A choice.

-I was solidifying my relationship with Judith-

A choice.

-I was starting to burn out at work-

Was that a choice?

The result of choices, maybe. The result of the choice to start drinking. It is called *Rum and Coke*, after all. The result of the choice to get into computers. The result of the choice to work from home, which itself was the result of a choice to take the previous job so far from home.

You burned out in part because you burned so hard at the start.

Was I not supposed to? I had to prove myself.

To whom?

You?

Not my department.

One of your neighbors, perhaps. A cubicle over, a floor above, something like that.

Do you anthropomorphize me that much?

No, I suppose, I don't. You're not my therapist, sitting in a chair across from me and talking me through my problems. You're not person shaped. You're the shape of my hands displaced half an inch behind my own, navy blue and trimmed with sea-foam green.

You haven't used colors in fourteen years, either.

What I'm trying to say is that maybe you're back because of nostalgia. *Restless Town* was done and couldn't be published yet, and a prideful part of me didn't want it to be my first book, so I pulled *Rum and Coke* into shape.

It rubbed my nose in the past. I published it a few weeks ago, and I wasn't done with the past, so I started archiving more data. I dug up my old hard drives. I grabbed stuff from Dreamhost, both files and database backups. I finally unlocked my LJ account and archived that.

And you work at an archive.

I go through phases, looking back at the past. I'll spend a few days trying to backdate some log files, or dig through my old scores and publish them — I did that too, alongside *Rum and Coke*, publish a bunch of my old music — or resurrect my notes on *Nanon*, or the like.

You are quite mercurial.

A failing. That may play a role in my burnout. I'm only good at something for seven years before it becomes so intolerable that I have to leave. Happened with school.

So here I am, your ally, twice seven years later.

I hadn't thought of it that way.

Portentous. The only way it would've been more so is if it were thrice seven years.

I ran away thrice seven years ago. In seventh grade, in 1997, no less.

Ill omens. What will happen to me in seven years?

Will you leave me for good?

Can an ally disinhabit a mind so easily?

I'm not comfortable with that question. I'm not comfortable with its implications. Either way, the past is important to me because maybe it can help me figure out the present. Those who don't know history are doomed to blah blah blah.

And have you figured out your present?

For me to pull out that trite quote about my own personal history speaks pretty well to my fears of doing things accidentally. I've certainly figured out my present better than twice-seven-years-ago me had figured out his.

When 2007 rolled around, I turned 21. *What if*, I thought to myself. *What if I decided to see what it feels like to be addicted to something?*

By that point, alcohol was this nebulous thing. I'd roped a few people into getting me alcohol now and then, and it was fine. I'd started brewing and it was whatever. I had beer and it was alright. I went through a mead phase-

You went through several.

-I went through a wine phase, and an absinthe phase-

Don't sell yourself short. You wrote an essay on absinthe.

-and a gin phase. That's the one that got me. I had a bottle of Beefeater's, what was to become my gin of choice, and I had an inch of it poured over ice and I was standing in the kitchen. Such a wide open space. The kitchen at that apartment was larger than my bedroom now, and it opened onto a living room the size of what we have now. I was standing tall in that vast plain of a room, staring down into my glass and watching the way the ice melting into the gin created swirls of two different kinds of transparent. I was thinking how it was probably due to the different ways the two liquids refracted light, and then I was laughing, because I was staring down into my drink like something out of a bar.

What if I decided to see what it feels like to be addicted to something? I thought. I drank every night that week.

Why ruin your life on accident when you can do it on purpose?

I don't think I was thinking in those terms at that point.

Are you now?

Perhaps.

Maybe you're just afraid of doing anything by accident.

Perhaps.

You're sounding like me more by the day.

Learn from the best.

And so you set about with a will.

Like magic. I set forth my will with a stated goal and made it happen. My spell was spoken and washed down with liquor. I drank nearly every day from then on out. I spent thousands of dollars on alcohol over the next ten years. I went through more mead phases and more beer phases. I went through a distillation phase. Magic is empowerment through attention to detail.

The MEAD principle. Cute.

I drank hard with the choir, and then I left school and drank hard with the programmers. If there's one thing that most programmers do better than computers, it's drinking, after all.

I did some work at a bar, even. Just making their menu and website for them in exchange for free drinks.

You mastered \LaTeX that way. A very you thing to do.

I did well at it. I still have one of the menus and some of the paper laying around somewhere. I did that until the bartender left and, when I asked for my next payment from the owner, he flipped out at me and threatened to sue me for impersonating him. I don't think I realized Raffi, the bar manager who hired me, was already on his way out.

I drank my way out of one job and through a good chunk of another. I drank until I got better at it than I was at software. I drank myself into burnout. I drank until I collapsed.

You used up your spell slots. You ran out of will. You had to quit by accident.

I worked to quit, I'll have you know. It wasn't easy. It took meds and some rough nights.

You were less of a person then than you were when you started drinking. The you who started drinking by focusing on starting drinking was more real than the you who collapsed in the kitchen from a PNES and stopped drinking because she was completely empty of intention.

Should I start the daily drinking again, then?

You're more of a person now than you were when you started drinking.

That, coming from you, is a glowing endorsement.

You may have been more of a person when you started than when you stopped, but you weren't much of one, even then.

When I was young, back before I knew what mental health entailed, what anxiety and abuse and depression really meant, I was convinced I was having semi-regular mental breakdowns. That was the phrase I used then, because I was unsure of what it meant to have a panic attack.

This was before LiveJournal, of course. This was before I was writing on the internet, or even really on the internet at all. This was before you.

No, it wasn't.

Right.

When I ran away, my dad found my paper journal. I had kept it infrequently, as something about daily journaling to a seventh-grader felt dishonest, stupid. What could I possibly write about?

In the journal, I mentioned on a few occasions that I'd had a mental breakdown. My dad called me several times over the next few days after my mom found me, and in one of those calls, he yelled at me about that. "Do you really think you're crazy?" he said. "Do you need to be taken to an asylum?"

I told him no. I whispered it. I murmured it. I wasn't crazy. I didn't need to go to an asylum. I just felt like time stopped for me and the world around me sped up. I just felt like I was holding on by the barest amount of friction on my fingertips. The whorls of my fingerprints providing my only grasp on reality.

That was me saying hi.

Blunt-force greeting?

I was quiet as a mouse.

I have the words now. I have the vocabulary. I can say derealization, depersonalization, dissociation. I can say panic attack and anxiety and depression and hypomania. I can say *ah, this is what is happening now.*

You have emotions now, is what you have. Those were your mental breakdowns.

Dad didn't believe in those. Not for boys. *Mood's a thing for cattle and loveplay, right?* Emotions are for women.

He was half-right.

I suppose he was.

I think of myself as a trans woman, not a woman. I think of past me as male, not female. To an extent, I think of past me as cisgender. I was a guy. I was that gay guy who tumbled out the other side of puberty and was left to figure out what the fuck. I am not who I was.

You have ship-of-Theseus'd yourself into what you are.

I was not Madison. I am not Matthew. I can't deny his existence, though. He was him, and to erase that, to toe the party line and say I've always known that I was Madison, would do a disservice to him.

He got in all those relationships. He loved so hard it hurt. He dreamed of being held. He struggled with the words.

He fought. He enacted his cruelty in countless subtle ways. He promised himself he'd be better than his dad and failed more often than not.

He rode the same crests of hypomania and crashed just as hard after. Once, he tried to schedule his hobbies into his day so thoroughly that he forgot to schedule meals, then, having failed two weeks later, considered shooting himself in the head. Anxiety rode him just as thoroughly. Once, dead convinced that he had meningitis, he wrote a note apologizing to loved ones and left it on the bedstand.

He was just as mercurial, too. The brewing phase-

Phases. Plural.

-the gun phase, the photography phase and all its subphases: digital, film, cross-processing, rangefinders.

Yeah, he was a prick.

You said I still am, but a different kind.

In all fondness.

How kind.

All this to say, I have not always known I was trans. To pretend such would be to erase a real, actual person who tried his best more often than not.

Have you answered Theseus' question?

I don't know.

July 2nd, 2004, shortly after midnight.

My emotions are gaining distinct colors, like a kind of twisted synesthesia. There's definitely a sense of physical location associated with each emotion, and it's not always internal. There may also be a tactile part to this, but I have yet to experience it in any different places or with any different touches, so it may just be one continuous headache that goes latent occasionally.

An example: when pondering *****, a luminescent fuschia color that seems to be flowing in the right hemisphere of my brain; when thinking of ***** and snuggling, a warm, earthy brown with a little bit of green in a pine-needle-ish pattern about a foot and a half in front of me and slightly to the left; tiredness is off-white everywhere and blind hopelessness is bright blue wrapped around my mind. The headache moves around, but it's mostly at the lower, back, right side of my head. Ibuprofin works well.

This isn't what I meant when I was talking about beautiful pain.

Current mood: Bright blue with a tinge of purple, but mostly off white and hazy.

July 3rd, 2004, shortly after midnight.

Greens covering my chest and shoulders warmly are
happiness.

And that's when I showed up, yes?

Yeah, later that day.

The navy blue I've been seeing at waist level in front of me and to my left is contentment. I'm not entirely sure that it being omnipresent is a good thing, however, considering the colors it's mixed with. Am I really content with longing and hopelessness? It's not out of the question, I suppose that it could just be another aspect of my personality. But that just brings up the question of whether or not it's something I ingrained into myself through habit, something where I just kinda accepted that feeling such things is normal, okay, and what I want; or is it something I was born with, or that we're all born with? Is it a side effect of love, expecting impossible desires and the blind hopelessness that follows the end of a four year undertaking?

Whatever, you're rambling.

Guilty, conspirator.

And these pictures?

All from years later. The color thing comes and goes, like you.

April 8, 2004

The undersides
off gray
of clouds
drift
while I
on the path
stand
above
where the crow flies
me.
Off
with purple
gray, I
wandering
ponder, should
in a perfect
were there such a thing
world
be a
though the word is plain
color with it's own
to name
as they say
creates
word.
It soothes.

Sometimes I'm overcome by the numinous. Sometimes it's colors, sometimes it's you, sometimes it's a silence swelling within my chest, stealing breath.

He would be riding on the subway or writing formulas on the blackboard or having a meal or (as now) sitting and talking to someone across a table, and it would envelop him like a soundless tsunami.

That's a post-rock song title.

Is it wrong?

I'll take a picture, lasso a color, and desaturate everything else. Sometimes, it's fun. I do it to Falcon's eyes a lot because they're so pretty.

And sometimes it's something more.

Yeah. Sometimes it's a compulsion. Sometimes a picture will latch onto me and never let me go. Sometimes I'll remove all color.

Sometimes I'll blow out the background because the foreground is so completely overwhelming.

Sometimes I'll skew colors all in one direction.

It's not an artistic decision. Not just, at least. It's always something more.

Inter ĝuo kaj timo
Estas loko de tro da signifo.
Apud kompreno, ekster saĝo,
Tamen ĝi tutampleksas.
Mi kompareble malgrandas
Kaj ĝi tro granda estas.
Nekomprenebla
Nekontestebla,
Senmova kaj ĉiam ŝanĝigema.

Between joy and fear
Is a place of too much meaning.
Next to understanding, outside wisdom,
It nonetheless expands.
I'm so small beside it
and it is too big.
Incomprehensible,
Incontestible,
Unmoving and always changing.

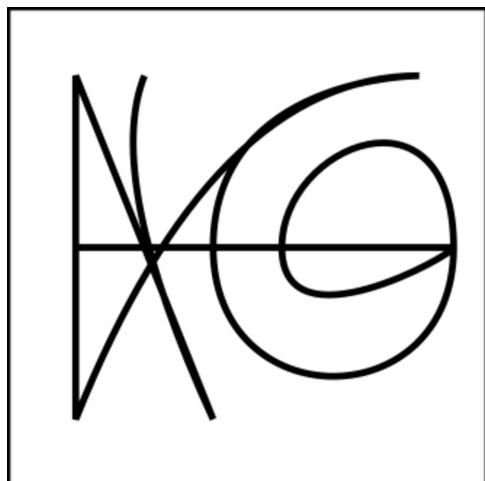
A sigil need not just be lines and curves.

Or maybe it's just mania.

It may be.

Tell me about mania.

No.



*Lines and curves, lines and curves.
Beginning now.*

Wait, what? Why are you asking? Weren't you there?

I was. I...am?

I don't think I'm hypomanic now. On my way, perhaps. I can't sleep.

I may be, then. Tell me about mania.

No, tell me why you're asking.

I'm more of a liminal creature, myself. It's hard to keep an ally around when depression slowly shuts down avenue after avenue of reaching one. You, as a reflection of me, become distorted while manic. Fun-house mirrors and blind-spots. I want to hear about it.

No.

Later.

I took a sleep aid. I'm not getting into this now. I was all prepped to write about poly stuff, but you started banging on the door.

Read what I've already written.

I was there when you wrote those.

So? Does that not clarify it?

Will anything?

Likely not.

I will say, though, that I missed some stuff in my investigation earlier. You did come back for three brief days in November, 2013. It was at a liminal time, but you didn't stick around.

I'll remind you that you ignored me for one of those posts.

Point.

Let's get into mania later. We owe each other that. For now, bed. And tomorrow, something a little less harrowing.

Ah yes. Polyamory. Known for being easy peasy, lemon squeezy.

The first time I remember thinking about polyamory-

And here I was hoping you'd cave and talk more about mania.

Why are you so hung up on that? I told you I wouldn't, and you seemed to accept that.

'Seemed to'? 'Accept'? Are those things something like me can do?

Well, if I can...

Conceded. No mania, then?

It's not a comfortable topic.

Granted. Tell me why, at least.

It's not a good feeling. Not from the inside, not from the outside. From the inside I've only caught glimpses of it, even. Glimpses caught through the haze of medication or withdrawal or the mass of ineffable ecstasy comes crashing down upon me. I get all wrapped up in hypomania. Something less. Something just beneath. That thin meniscus between this world and...something else.

But in others I've watched — in some cases, been caught up in — the frenzy as their world slowly slides out of alignment with consensus reality. They turn from...

What?

You got me talking about it.

I'm pleased you think so highly of me.

I *will* talk about it. It's not off the table. I just need something not that for a bit.

To poly?

To poly.

My parents put me through three divorces. My mother and father divorced when I was very young. Young to the point where I don't remember them being married. I remember finding a picture of them walking with their arms around each other's backs. Dad was shirtless and chestnut brown, hair a near-black 'fro. Mom was in a white blouse, blonde hair in a perm. It seemed so alien to me.

Mom and Jay got divorced when I was in my freshman year of high school. I remember being taken to a family therapy session for Jay's lingering divorce with his previous wife, but no such luck with his divorce with my mom. I just remember things getting bad after I came out, and then my mom coming downstairs to wake me one morning and inform me that we were moving out. Today. Now.

Mom and Jay got married when I was in elementary school. Fourth grade, maybe? It's a bit hazy.

I don't remember ever seeing Jay again after that, though I surely must have.

But you heard about him.

Life began in high school, remember?

Mom said he called Erin, my ex-step-sister a "witch". I don't think that's the word he used. A decade and a half later, she'd suggest that I go visit him.

Life began when I came out, I suppose. Or maybe when I ran away. Life began when I started to assert ownership over it.

I turned her down.

A sub-story. Do I sense conflict?

Who owned it before?

Of course.

I thought my dad did. My dad and Jay, and they let my mom borrow me.

You may be made of star-stuff, but conflict seems to be what holds you together.

What did you own.

Stop trying to get me to talk about mania.

Many gifts. A few hobbies. Later, an internet connection.

At first, I was proud of my relationships. Then I was embarrassed. There were so many, all in a line. One would trickle into existence

with, as I put it, light, in through the head, out through the heart. We'd be perfect, until we weren't. Everything would be delightful, until it wasn't. It's the way of early relationships, I suppose. You fall for someone, and you can't quite pick apart the difference between love and lust.

I just went through so many that I started feeling a bit weird about it. How do I talk about the Danny-Marek-Merlin-Andrew-Michael-Andy-Rikky-Kayla-Tyson-Andrew(again) progression? And how do I talk about Lon? Or what JD and I were at the beginning?

Doubtless with the same lilac-scented words you talk about everything.

I guess.

Early on, I promised myself that I would do anything to not become my dad, in so many ways. One of those was to not run my relationships like him. Some bits were easy, of course. I could start by being queer. That's glib, of course, but at the time I started dating, being queer required more discretion, more discussion than I saw in my dad's relationships.

Some bits weren't so easy, though. The overlap between the discussion that's involved the mechanics of simply having a queer relationship and the discussion that's involved in having a healthy relationship, queer or not, is not non-existent, but neither is it large.

Are you going to provide us with a Venn Diagram? In hand-coded SVG, perhaps?

Happy?

Very. I just wanted to ensure that you were at your very Maddy-est about this.

Jay was a photographer. An artist. A true, honest, dyed-in-the-wool artist.

You looked up to him. Part of you wanted to be him. He could run a photography business funded by his day job of being a newspaper photographer. You thought of him when you changed your major to music.

Did I? I was terrified of him.

Are they so different? 'Awe', as a word, is not always a positive one.

He took a picture of his son from a prior marriage that I still remember. Zach was shirtless, covered in mud that had started to dry and crack. He was looking down and to the left. He was holding something...a sunflower, maybe? He had ram horns. The colors were muted...was it black and white? Or was it just the mud?

I think I wanted to be that. Not Zach, necessarily. but I wanted to be that picture. I wanted to be a son that was loved like that. I wanted to be something as magical as that felt.

You also wanted to be the Phantom from Phantom of the Opera. Raoul was the bad guy, and you danced with your ‘Christine’, Sarah Trowbridge, after school in front of your parents on the balance beam.

I desperately craved being an artist. I drew endlessly. I played the saxophone, and sometimes I even liked it. I wrote music. My first song in third or fourth grade.

Maybe I did look up to him. He pulled it off.

Until he didn’t.

Right. When my mom told me to get in touch with him a decade and a half after the divorce, he owned a feed store down the block from me.

He left The Rocky Mountain News as lead photographer or something to pursue a job in 3D art. He bought Bryce 3D. He brought Lightwave. He spent a year learning Lightwave, and when the next version came out, he bought that and said it would take time to learn.

By that point, mom had been supporting all of us — herself, him, me, my step-brother and two step-sisters — for a year.

When my dad divorced Julie, he told her he hadn’t loved her in ten years. He told her he married her because she was easy to deal with. Quiet. Compliant. Not as smart as him. He could be right around her, which wasn’t always guaranteed with mom.

Julie’s friends gave her a rubber rat afterward. They had scribbled his name on it. The rat was sitting on a plaque that said Rat Bastard. The last time I saw her, she was very drunk, sagged against my side, sobbing and beating that rat against the nightstand.

And you didn’t want to be like him when you grew up? Color me surprised.

You would say that.

He had started dating well before divorcing her. I don’t know if he and Maurine are married now. When I told mom, she shrugged and said that he had started dating Julie before their own divorce.

You dovetailed relationships. You were dating Andrew well before you and Tyson fell away from each other.

Hey, I said some bits weren’t as easy. He left me with a lot of him in me.

Like the anger. He gave you that. The anger and the pride.

I pay for his past as well as mine.

So, when Michael mentioned that he wanted to go on a date with someone else while we were together, well, it touched a nerve.

I suppose you also searched your archives for poly.

You know me so well.

Of course.

The first mention on LiveJournal was April 6th, 2004.

Of the interesting topics that popped up, that of polygamy stuck with me the most. Michael has a date with another on Thursday and, while this brought up issues with Merlin and Atrius, all I can say right now to Michael is that I wish him the best of luck. It just feels like it would actually /work/ in his case. As to how it pertains to me, I'm not sure if my mind could handle having two mates. Granted I still have a thing for Kory (hah, good luck with that) and a few others, I just don't think I could find another who a) would be willing to have that sort of relationship with me and b) I could have that sort of relationship with. Ah well. Something to think about.

Never one to have a high opinion of yourself.

That's hindsight talking.

You literally just got out of a therapy session where you talked about how you don't believe you deserve a better job.

Touché.

Michael and I's relationship was rocky, tumultuous. We met through a queer group and from there wound up in a weird, heated romance that danced around sex, gender, mental health, everything.

She confided in me later that she had lost half a million dollars by the end of the relationship.

I didn't remember that folly. I majored in music and thought, "Ah, yes, I can get a job doing library music or teaching choir while I work on my compositions" but forgot how lucky he was when I met him.

You remembered and raced to teach yourself programming.

You remembered, maybe. I'd like to think of myself as a bit of a dreamer, even still.

Thus you, 1:19 AM on a Tuesday, gritting your teeth and trying not to write about mania.

Our punishment — my step-siblings and I — was time-out. Jay had an old church pew rescued from some church in New Mexico that he'd painted a grayish sky blue. "Go sit on the bench," he'd tell us. "Half an hour."

You measured it with your fingers. You'd judge the width of the plank you sat on by pinching it. Three inches? Four? You'd lay your length on it and count how many Matts it took from one end to another.

It was a perfect punishment. My dad lamented once that he couldn't send me to my room as a punishment because I'd happily sit in there for hours on end.

You'd be away from him. That's a reward.

I hadn't thought of it that way.

The bench, though, was perfect. It faced a dining table, and across from that, the computer which was kept powered off. No reading. No talking. No moving from the bench. If more than one of us were in trouble at the same time, no looking at each other; we sat on opposite ends.

We fought, we made up. We got annoying. We made out a lot, we had sex, though with each of our individual hangups around sex, it was rarely penetrative.

It was penetrative once.

That's rare, isn't it?

Vanishingly.

Listen, we were both trans. The subject was complex.

You were a cis gay guy. You told me that. You were unsure of vaginas.

It started that way, I suppose. I learned.

Then you bought one for yourself.

Listen.

Yes?

There were bits of sexuality that didn't work for me when I was bepenised. A lot of those make sense in a transgender context. Matthew was still a gay guy, but the Ship-of-Theseusizing was already beginning.

'Bepenised'? 'Ship-of-Theseusizing'?

You verbed it first.

We've gotten off track.

Right.

In two previous relationships, poly had come up, and neither time, it had worked. With Merlin and Atrius, I had immediately jumped to jealousy. I felt as though I was being set aside.

Never one to have a high opinion of yourself.

It didn't last. That was part of the breaking point. Similarly with Andrew and Ryn. I've heard it said that jealousy is a sign that one's needs are not being met.

What did you need that you weren't getting?

I thought it was someone to myself.

You couldn't own yourself, maybe you could own someone else.

That hurts to hear.

Is it wrong?

I don't know. Maybe it isn't. Maybe I wanted to keep someone. To possess them. Maybe it was a reaction to being owned.

Let's talk about kink.

Let's fucking not.

When he started taking up martial arts, he brought Zach and I with him. He thought...well, I don't know what he thought. That it would make us men? That it would teach us to defend ourselves?

In the end, it turned into its own means of punishment. He'd grapple with us. He'd grab me by the front of my shirt and slam me into the cabinets. It was just play, right? Just studying up for the next session, right?

Maybe he wanted to hit you from the start. Maybe that's why he got into karate.

I think part of him did, yeah. I think part of him would rather our punishments would make him feel better at the same time. It took me a while to think of it that way, though. It took me a while to think of it as abuse.

It took you no longer being afraid of him. It took you telling your mom that, no, you wouldn't go see him at his feed store in Loveland. It took you until then to think of it as anything other than you not being man enough.

I'm still afraid of him. Maybe it just took me admitting that.

I won't repost them, because they're direct logs, shortly after the conversation mentioned before, the issue of Michael bringing another partner to the queer group we were a part of came up. How would we work a situation where I, coming from a monogamous point of view, would be in the same room with my partner and metamour? Would we split our time? Would one of us get ignored while the other got attention? Would we both get attention? Would we just plain avoid it?

It's surreal, even for me, to hear you talk about this today, given your current situation.

Suppose that the young man, Matthew, is in a monogamous relationship with someone. As the years go by the relationship begins to change, fades, and is replaced by a new one, more open than the last. After a decade or so, all of the parts have been replaced and Matthew, now Madison, is in a polycule the size of Rhode Island. Is Madison still the same person as Matthew?

That's a bit heavy-handed.

You can't start the metaphor train a-rollin' and then expect it to stop on a dime.

I'll own that.

I met JD in 2005, and met Robin in 2012. By 2013, I was in a relationship with both, and we were sharing dinner, along with Robin's partner, at a convention. It was natural. Comfortable. It was fun.

And now, I'm in relationships of various sorts with a half dozen people. The changes between then were so incremental, and discussed so thoroughly, that it really does feel Ship of Theseish.

Stop.

Never.

The other consequence of that is that, along the way, I sufficiently distanced myself from the mechanics of my parents' relationships that I finally felt comfortable in calling that dream fulfilled. The turning point was my mom, during one of her visits back to Colorado, mentioned my relationship with Robin as something she could never do.

Are you sure it wasn't writing a Python/Javascript/SVG web app to map polycules using force-directed layouts?

Okay, maybe it was before then.

And score a point to the ally.

I didn't feel better than my mom when she said that, of course. Her relationships matured well over time, I think. She and Bob got better at communicating and expressing their needs. And even if they hadn't, the love she had for all of her partners was no less valid for being monogamous.

Could you say the same of your dad, had he said that to you?

I don't know.

Probably not.

Yeah, probably not.

When I came out, I did so by leaving a book of stories from gay youth on top of my mom's reading pile right before taking the bus down to visit my dad for the night. She called me after dinner and asked me if the book meant what she thought it did.

Did you ever tell — really tell, with words and everything — any of your family you were gay? Or trans?

Twice. It was awful.

She must have told him at some point. Within a week, he told my mom I had to tell Zach that I was gay, too. He left the house on a run and made my mom stand in the kitchen with me to make me say, "Zach, I'm gay."

He just said, "Oh, okay", and kept pouring his Kix.

And then he stopped talking to you.

Beside the point.

After I came out, Jay changed. He got mean—

"Got", she says.

Do you fear him, then?

Mu.

Fair enough.

He got mean. That's when he got physical. That's when his anger got hot.

He started reading my emails. He found some reply notifications to some posts on a forum, where kids were talking about puberty. As kids do, there was some dick-size comparing. He read that aloud in front of my mom and mocked me for my answer. I had said seven inches. It was generous, sure, but keep in mind, I was way underweight at the time-

And him rather overweight.

-and the skinnier you are, the less padding you have around the base of your penis.

We're getting off topic.

Are we? I was starting to own my body. I was starting to find things that I felt I could feel proud about. I was starting to form relationships. Puberty was in full swing and I was realizing that there were people my age like me who would find me attractive.

And he took that and he humiliated me for it.

Let's talk about kink.

Relationship anarchy, as a topic, seems to draw heavily from both poly folks and queer folks. In fact, the three ideas are so heavily intertwined that it's difficult to have one without the others. Poly? Well, there's a good chance that there are some queer aspects to your relationship.

And if you're queer and at least of a certain age, relationship anarchy is baked into your soul. If your society sets up a "natural" relationship progression and then bars an entire class from entry to that progression, subversive and transgressive relationship structures form as a matter of course.

Queer people, queer relationships.

Yes. June, 2004:

Queer hair, queer mouth, queer brain, queer sleeves, queer shoes, queer toes, queer nails, queer fingers, queer palms, hairy palms, queer wrists, limp wrists, queer arms, queer shoulders, arms around shoulders, queer neck, sensitive neck, queer hair, curly, queer ears, sensitive ears, eargasmic, queer cheek, blushing cheek, queer nose, got it from my dad, queer eyes, queer colors, got them from my grandpa, queer eyebrows, but not as queer as some, queer face, too long, queer chest, too skinny, queer belly, padded, queer crotch, go figure, queer thighs, better believe it, queer knees, queer calves, queer ankles, queer legs, flexible, queer feet, still smell, queer guy, no surprise.

When you're queer, *being queer* is baked into just about everything about you, but most especially in your relationships. "Minority identity acts as a force multiplier on social dynamics," as Orrery put it.

And so?

Let's fucking not.

And so, being hopelessly queer, I wind up in relationships that are hopelessly queer.

Except when you don't.

Yes. And when I don't, there's such a fundamental mismatch of understanding that I feel uncomfortable in my own skin.

Something that queer relationships miss, or at least reconfigure to their own ends, is the relationship escalator, that heteronormative idea that one gets on at the ground floor of friendship and gets off at the top with marriage, or one can stop off at any of the other floors to stop for a while, or to step off entirely when the relationship ends.

It's not a bad idea, either. It's not as old as some would have you think, but in today's society, it works quite well.

Does the divorce rate agree with you there?

Is that just another step on the escalator?

Touché.

In nonheteronormative relationships, the idea is muddied. The friends-dating-marriage-children set of steps, originally shattered when marriage was made illegal and adoption banned for large swaths of queer folks, just doesn't fit. The barrier between friends and dating, as well as between dating and permanent relationship, is thin, osmotic.

*Suddenly, you're in a relationship. Suddenly, you're saying
"I love you."*

My mom and I got in the habit of going to the dog park after work. We'd pick up Hank, our golden lad, and Chelsea, our Phyllis-Diller-slash-Yoda mutt, and drive across town to a field dedicated to letting dogs frolic with each other.

We'd play with other dogs. We'd through tennis ball after slobbery tennis ball. We got to know the other owners, mostly as "oh, you're Sandy's owner".

Or "oh, you're Zephyr's owner".

*You stole your own dog's name
from some random aussie sheep-
herd at the dog park.*

It was a meaningful period of my life. Is there some reason that wouldn't make a big impact on me?

*It was Zephyr or Samuel. Even
you knew what you wanted. You
had him already named in your
mind.*

And mom and I would talk. We'd walk the perimeter or, on hot days, sit at the lone picnic table under the lone tree and talk.

I was sitting on the table itself, feet on the bench, and she was sitting next to me,

Yes. Suddenly, organically, though not for lack of deliberation. There's much talking, if everything goes right, much working out of boundaries. It's just that there are fewer milestones.

Why do you bring this up? You're not writing an article. Out with it.

Right.

If poly is queer, in that it's not relationship-normative, then I'm queer. If being trans is queer because it's not gender-normative, then I'm queer. If my identity blurs lines, then I'm queer.

If I'm in a relationship with someone, then, is that a queer relationship? Is my partner queer?

What would they say?

I don't know. I haven't gotten to the point of talking to myself about this yet, much less talking with them. That's what this process is, isn't it?

So what would you say, then?

My gut instinct says that, since I'm trans, I've transgressed the lines of gender-normative relationships; since I'm poly, I've transgressed the lines of relationship-normative relationships. That, since I am queer, the relationship must be as well.

But?

But it doesn't really feel like it. I feel like a girlfriend. Barac feels like a boyfriend. I feel like I've stepped onto an escalator, here.

There is an error in your gut instinct: it does not take into account that, in a relationship between two people, there are more than just two actors. There is you, there is your past, there is Barac and his, and there is society, influencing all four of you. That you are queer and that Barac does not consider himself to be is beside the point. Society, Barac, and Barac's past all think of this as a straight relationship — or a take on one, at least — and that's overwhelming your gut

when she said, "I think I'm going to get divorced from Jay. Is it alright if I use his reaction to you coming out as the reason?"

And you thought, "I must be the luckiest boy in the world, being able to say that I knew my parents' divorce was your fault."

She told me how much money she had lost, and how he had changed even before I came out. I think that's when I realized that she might be a friend as well as a mother.

Gag.

I know. I tried typing that eight different ways, and no matter what, it sounds like a Care Bears thing or whatever.

Back to the lilac-scented word, please.

Gladly.

Between when the divorce was decided and when we were supposed to move out to the townhouse my mom had purchased, mom adopted a dog. Helen had clearly been feral rather than a surrender, because she was impossible. She didn't know how to act around dogs. She didn't know how to act around people. She didn't know how to act indoors. She didn't know how to act outside.

She didn't know how to act around you, so you hid from her.

She didn't know how to act around Jay, either, to be fair. One night, three days before we were supposed to move out, mom was sleeping on the couch downstairs, and Jay came down from the master bedroom to have the last word in one argument or another, and Helen raced up to greet him, nailing him right in the nuts with her paw.

Do you laugh?

Not my department.

It took my mom and I a while to laugh about that. It's the type of story that usually gets a laugh, right? Nut-shots?

Hollywood decrees it must be so.

instinct, which only has access to you, and limited access to your past.

Is that why I feel contention, then? Is that why there are an odd number of actors in this situation?

Perhaps. Perhaps you are feeling contention because you are having to work, for once, rather than slot smoothly into a relationship.

My other relationships have taken work, though.

Your other partners have spoken the same language as you. It was easier to coordinate that work. You and Barac are having to learn each other's language as you go along.

Robin and I had to learn the language of poly when we were starting out together. Judith and I and Colton and I both had our own things to learn as our relationships grew.

Yes, but you all spoke queer. None of you really spoke normative, a skill you're having to learn late in life.

I've been married for seven years. Robin and I have been together for more than five. My polycule has grown steadily over the years, and I have to wonder: how much of my polyamory, my relationship anarchy is a coping mechanism for how I was raised?

Does it matter?

Yes, I think it does. *Early on, I promised myself that I would do anything to not become my dad*, I said. I wanted to stay away from serial monogamy. I wanted to talk more and perform less within my relationships. I wanted to be an improvement upon what I saw growing up.

If I'm poly because I'm coping for my past once again, have I really grown? Or have I fallen into the trap just on the other side of the path?

If I'm coping for my childhood, what would I leave my children coping with?

Again, does it matter? You must walk a fine line between the selfish and selfless when working with reality. In order to be happy, you need to not repeat the past, as you've said — a selfish act. But worrying about counterfactuals with non-existent entities, being too selfless in this, will only set you back in your own growth.

Perhaps I'm worried that if poly and such are just coping mechanisms, my relationships might be somehow less real, less earnest than if they weren't. Perhaps I'm worried that I'm doing a disservice to my partners by using them to overcome my own failings.

This is impostor syndrome, not using people. No relationship is perfect, all that matters is that you're approaching these honestly, earnestly, and with your whole heart. Even then, there will be friction occasionally. Your parents gave

Maybe my mom smiled when she woke me to tell me we had to move out immediately. It was Sunday. We moved all we could to the townhouse in my mom's Honda Civic and slept on newly-purchased air mattresses. Mine kept going flat.

Your mom would soon learn that she had rheumatoid arthritis. You complained to her about that in the morning, and she stayed quiet about how much pain she must have been in.

The next day at school was nigh intolerable.

And yet you felt free.

And yet I felt free.

you stuff to cope with, and you would give your children stuff to cope with too.

Guess it's a good thing I don't have kids.

Let's talk about kink.

Oh my god.

Alas, had I a face, I would be able to smirk. Imagine that for me, will you?

You know what? Now's as good a time as any.

Cathleen Schine writes in *The Evolution of Jane*:

And while I don't necessarily have fond memories of childhood-

Clearly not

-some part of me does rather miss the childlike curiosity with which I was able to approach sexuality early in puberty. It was all so abstract and confusing. Every time I'd try something new, there would be this thrill of danger, this rush of excitement. The lone copy of *Joy of Sex*'s assurances aside, was each burst of pleasure actually something going *horribly wrong?*

Ah, to be young and anxious.

And I really was. Like many kids, I suspect, my first orgasm was terrifying. I thought I'd broken myself.

You got over it.

Boy did I. I soon learned to love masturbation.

But still, the bit I yearn for was the utter simplicity of my explorations. There was a lot of *does this feel good* and *let's try this* and so on, as I spent hours just trying to figure out what the hell bodies even are.

And the best part of it all is that it didn't involve anyone else.

Your fantasies were about feeling good, or perhaps about some vague idea of sex as a concept, but it was all so abstract. The orgasm — later, the delaying of such — became the highest goal, the purest art. Other people just got in the way.

It was a bit telling, wasn't it?

How can one be sexual when the act of engaging in sex is so confusing, so anxiety-inducing as to be not worth it no matter how barked up one is?

You're getting ahead of yourself. The solutions arrived before the problem made itself known.

I suppose so.

My first sexual experiences took place over the phone and over text. Late night, parked in front of my computer with the cordless pinned between my cheek and shoulder, Danny and I masturbated together 1,800 miles apart. There was only the soft sounds of breathing, the quiet monosyllables, and the rushed reassurances that, yes, we were close, and then a shaky sigh from both of us.

You can still hear his voice saying two things: "Mattie", his pet name for you, and the sleepy, giddy kind of "I love you" that comes after an orgasm when you've both stayed up far too late.

I only met him once. We just smoked weed together in a hotel bathroom, hung out, cuddled. Sex would be too complicated for us, by then. We had gone our different ways. We had become different people.

And by then, you'd started encountering the aforementioned problem.

Yes.

Another easy solution I latched onto was erotic roleplay. TS. Type-fucking. Co-authoring erotica.

I latched on and wouldn't let go. Still haven't. Beyond even myself, it shows up in my writing:

Did you?

Did I what? Write bits of my life into furry fiction?

Hunger for touch.

In some cases, sure. I wanted nothing more than to hold, to be held. I wanted nothing more than to experience arousal and climax with these people I loved.

And that was the problem.

Yes. The problem was that I wanted to experience arousal and climax, but not really the whole sex part. Or perhaps I wanted that frictionless sex that can be accomplished in typefucking. I wanted that consequence-free, painless, perfectly-lubricated and utterly mess-less sex.

Even then, I'm not so sure.

The problem was that I didn't really want sex. I loved the idea of it, loved reading and writing about it, loved ERP, loved consuming art, loved thinking about it, loved masturbating. I just didn't really love sex itself.

Not for lack of trying, mind. I played around with my partners, tamping down my anxiety and squeamishness in order to try and just enjoy myself, enjoy our times together. Often, I was at least reasonably successful, too. I still have fond memories of some fun romps.

What rankled?

It was a few things, I think. The most obvious being the increasing dissonance between my body and my identity as 'male' started to fit less and less. When having a penis seems odd and discordant, engaging with it feels unsatisfactory at best, nauseating at worst.

Another was simply the mess of it all. Water-based lube gets sticky. Condoms are finicky. Fluid-bonding is great, but then the mess is magnified. Foreskin is complicated — a rough weekend of too much masturbation left me scarred, the resulting phimosis making sex something of an adventure.

I think, most often, it was just that it was a lot of work. You had to set aside time. You had to negotiate. You had to have the condoms handy. You had to have the lube handy. You had to both be willing and on the same page. All perfectly doable, but whether or not it was worth it was something that seemed to vary from day to day.

And the shame.

Yes, there was plenty of that. The unswerving sense that I had messed up. That I was doing something wrong. That this was all so disgust-

ing. That this baffling act of smashing meat together was somehow a positive thing, but I just couldn't see how.

You tried to cleanse yourself of that with TIASAP. You also tried going the other way. You went to the Underground parties. You gathered around you a core group of people you trusted and played with them. You worked to extract that shame from yourself so that you could live without it.

Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it was a matter of the stars aligning.

Of those fond memories I mentioned, most of them surround lazy, comfortable sex, where everything was just aligned. Giving a cozy blowjob on a couch with no time pressure. Putting my hair up with a chopstick. That Underground party with lube and condoms readily available, and us two incidentally parked near enough that getting started was no stress. Sneaky fingers slipping past elastic waistbands. Tentative touches.

*Sex that you had for fun. Sex with people you were close to.
Sex with no expectations.*

Which I suppose is how it should be, but that rarely seems to be the case. Even when JD and I had moved in together and were sexually active, it was often more stress than it was worth.

And then you gave up trying to conquer shame.

Yes. And since, by that point, every sexual act I engaged with left me feeling awful, I effectively gave up on sex.

Where did the shame come from?

I'm not sure. I've got a few ideas, though.

The first is likely that, as a queer person, societal shame is just part of our lives. We're not normal, after all. The sex we have doesn't line up with the sex we *should* have.

I certainly bought into that, despite all of my efforts. Homosexual stuff was fine online, of course, because it was all so idyllic and perfect. No muss, no fuss. To be confronted with just how much of a mess sex can be offline, especially between two bepenised individuals, left me feeling like somehow I was falling short of that ideal.

Perhaps that is the crux of the shame: sex should be easy, and you should be good at it, if your online sex life was anything to go by. That it isn't and that you aren't felt like an indictment.

Yes. The second idea that I have is that there was that misalignment between body and mind that started in 2005 and just grew wider over time. This put that indictment in very stark terms: sex should be easy, I should be good at it, and I should be a girl, if my online sex life was anything to go by, and I was none of those things.

Has the shame lessened since transition? Since surgery?

Oh, quite a bit. I still feel like I'm not very good at it, that it's not easy, but I no longer have that overwhelming sense that I'm lying to everyone I lay with.

Your other ideas?

Two. The first is subtler, and more of a subset of stuff already mentioned. To be raised a boy in America in the 90s is to be raised with the

competing ideas that women are people and that women are sexual objects. Having sex is a balancing act between claiming what is rightfully yours as a man and treating a woman right.

To then be gay, and especially then to bottom, is to turn every bit of that on its head. You become the sexual object. You become the person who should be treated right. You fulfill all these obligations placed on sex, but somehow manage to do so completely wrong. You fuck it all up.

The other?

Getting raped just kind of messes you up.

Ah.

So, let's talk about kink.

What do you do when you've got a libido and relatively little will to act upon it?

Delve into kink.

Well, and fuck around on Taps a lot.

The two go hand in hand. When sex makes you intensely anxious, it turns out that getting tied up and blindfolded just sort of multiplies that anxiety.

So you removed yourself from the equation.

Close enough, yes. I let my characters bear the weight of kink and sexual interaction.

Textually, there's a vast divide between what's on the screen and what's going on in person. I can get all I need from kink without actually needing to interact with it.

And what do you need from kink?

Beyond just fantasy fulfillment? A way to cope, I suppose.

I can't let this go.

Why not?

I just can't. I doubt it's possible, but I need to somehow get this off my chest. I need to be able to throw enough words at it that it leaves me alone. I need...not a solution, but perhaps some sense of closure, of having explained it well enough that I may be forgiven.

Forgiven what? Your trespasses? Your sins?

Perhaps. Perhaps I need to be forgiven my inadequacies.

Explain away, then.

I spend a lot of time walking circles around the concept of asexuality. It's an uncomfortable thought, an identity that itches for someone who feels attraction, who otherwise enjoys the idea of sex, is capable of even enjoying the act.

So long as it doesn't actually involve you.

Yes.

Autochorissexualism, they call it, though the word is clunky to the point of inoperable. The feeling of being generally positive on sex to the point of getting turned on, so long as it doesn't actually involve oneself. Fictional characters, visual art, and text-based role-play seem to be the bailiwick of such.

I suppose, if you spend so much time feeling a fundamental disconnect from your body, such an identity is almost bound to form. Even before I felt so plagued by dysphoria that interacting sexually was problematic in its own right, even before I was able to engage

with another person sexually in, as it were, the flesh, I was embedded in long distance relationships where sexual interaction was based on the idea of sex rather than the actual practice of it.

Was that a choice?

I don't know. I suppose, on some level, it was. Could I have dated someone local instead of Danny? Instead of Marek or Andrew? Sure, I guess.

But you didn't.

No.

Why not?

I suppose that would have required me coming out to my parents more formally. Or, perhaps, it would've required me gaining a level of sneakiness in my social interactions that I don't think I'm really capable of.

Not only that, but I dove into furry halfway through puberty, and I dove in *hard*. It was my distraction from a shitty few years of life, from a shitty entry into puberty. And, with the whole running away fiasco, the sudden moving of schools, it was my whole social circle.

And hey, one dates within one's social circle, right? That would require having a local furry scene.

You had Shannon and Ash.

Well, yes, but Ash and I had known each other since second grade. Something about it didn't feel right. And this is back when I was very, very gay. For better or for worse, Shannon and I were not relationship material.

Had you been more open to dating women, do you think you would have been?

I'm not really sure what to make of the fact that you made a bingo card for your kinks.

Well, hey, hit bingo, and maybe I explode or something. Besides, bbbingo was for a game jam.

So tell me about your free space.

Actually, I think many of them come from a similar space: recasting bad or uncomfortable experiences from childhood into some positive light. A way to reclaim them and make them positive again.

How is humiliation positive?

Okay, maybe some of them are not so much 'again'.

I don't imagine non-consensual sex ever was, no.

Not really, but using kink as a coping mechanism for anxieties around rape is at least a way forward for me.

Ditto humiliation. Being made to feel inadequate, often by people I was supposed to look up to, was such a negative force in my life — in Matthew's life — that it left me with quite a bit of baggage. This is just a way to sort through it.

Sexily.

I suppose. It's something of a metakink. Many of the others stem from that, or from a similar core interest.

Scent-play as a means of degradation: why would a snow leopard smell of canine? Fits in nicely with knotting. Why not toss in some species denial, too; no more kitty, you say 'arf' now.

Scruffing, in the context of furry, especially with felines, is a means of rendering one helpless. Coercion and weakened mental states fit as well. Those all sort of tag along with the non-consensual core kink

So, pain and blood? Breathplay?

Yes. Abuse. Damage. Bad ends.

Where do those come from?

Self hatred. Self harm. Destroy me before I destroy myself.

Really?

No, of course not.

But some part of you actively believes that? Some part of you actively craves someone destroying you? Beating you

Perhaps. I don't know how long that would have lasted, though, had we gone in that direction. After a time, we simply became better friends material than we would have made relationship material.

There was Pilot.

We were in no way compatible.

There was Michael.

I knew it. I knew that was coming. I could feel you winding up to throw that in my face.

So, tell me about Michael in a second, but tell me why you knew that was coming.

Why should I? We both know.

Because it's important that you be able to contextualize this discussion.

It was the order of your questions. It was the way you came at things so circuitously. It was the way you asked about the local furry scene specifically without mentioning him. It's the way you nudged me about Shannon before bringing him up.

Was that uncouth?

A little. Ask about relationships as relating to a woman, then ask me about when I started dating a trans man. Are you my internalized transphobia?

Not my department. You hate yourself far more than this conversation entails.

Of course.

Still, the answer is no. I do not ask about him out of some weird sense of transphobia, so much as because, with Shannon, you mentioned being very, very gay, and yet your relationship with Michael was still sexual.

So?

There is an aspect of biology here that needs mentioning.

Or at least talking around in circles.

bloody? Choking you? Leaving you for dead with casual non-chalance?

Yes.

Do you enjoy vanilla sex, then?

Perhaps. I suppose I must. So much of what I did for so long, online and off, was vanilla. Even now, much of it is.

Yet “sneps are for abusing”.

Yes.

Why?

I enjoy vanilla sex. It feels good. All this kink, though, helps me grow. It’s exposure therapy.

It was exposure therapy when a TS partner on Taps laughed in my face as he raped me and left me to clean myself up. It is exposure therapy because I can say no, because I can enjoy being tied up now.

It was exposure therapy when I was ordered to describe what I wanted in lurid detail. It’s exposure therapy because I can talk about sex now.

It was exposure therapy when I entered into a few master/pet relationships. It’s exposure therapy because at some point I was able to handle a power-dynamic in my relationships.

It was exposure therapy when I spent scene after scene toying with fertility. It’s exposure therapy because at some point I

No, mentioning. You went into your relationship with him gay to the point of describing your aversion to vaginas, and you came out of it solidly bi despite him being a man.

Point.

Yes.

Our relationship was indeed sexual. It didn’t involve PiV sex until it was no longer a romantic relationship, but there’s no denying the that aspect of it. There’s no denying the attraction, even if at the time, I chalked it up to him being transmasculine.

Was there perhaps some aspect of doppelwunsch to it? Some bit of “I don’t know whether I want to be with him or be him”?

If so, it was only the tiniest shadow of a prelude. We dated when I was seventeen and eighteen. I didn’t really do the whole *gosh, maybe I’m trans* thing until I was in my mid twenties.

Hindsight is 20/20.

I hate that phrase.

2016: “I think ‘hindsight is twenty-twenty’ is better reserved for cases when seemingly unrelated occurrences come together to form an outcome that seems to be greater than the sum of the parts. It fits best when you look back at your life and see disparate, unconnected events come together to make the situation you find yourself in now.”

You throw my words back at me?

Yes.

Fine. Yes. Perhaps there was some aspect of *doppelwunsch* to our relationship. Still, that does not take away from the fact that suddenly, sexuality became far more complex for me. Suddenly, there was attraction to someone who wasn't simply another gay furry on the internet.

It opened you up. "Ah," you thought. "Perhaps the reason sex doesn't work so well with guys is maybe I'm more into women."

That's putting it quite glibly, but perhaps in a way, yes.

So you dated Kayla.

Yes. We even had sex a few times.

And were you more into women?

I don't know. I think that's the point at which it stopped mattering. That's the point I started calling myself pan. That's the point I stopped keeping track.

Because nothing was working.

Yeah.

was able to deal with the idea of not being cis, of motherhood being unattainable.

It was exposure therapy when I made my character a pudgy nerd and still able to engage with her sexually. It's exposure therapy because I've been able to come to terms with my body.

It's exposure therapy because at some point, you started enjoying sex — or at least enjoying it more — and the thought of sharing that with someone.

Yes.

Tell me about rape.

I feel it important to add that it's not that sex itself feels bad.

No.

Why?

Talk in circles around it, then, and then tell me why you won't tell me about it. Or vice versa. I don't care. I'm not picky as to the order.

Why does it not feel bad?

No. Why do you feel it important to add that?

Because to not do so would do a disservice to my years trying to be sexually active. They weren't bad years, and I did have some success at it.

JD and I eventually got together. We had a good amount of sex. We went to the Underground parties — orgies, really — and had lots of fun there. Bel and I had a good amount of sex, and it was pretty good. I looked forward to seeing them, simply because the sex was pretty good, as well as because they were good friends.

So if the sex was pretty good, if you still had a lot of fun playing around with your husband, why did you stop? Why did you eventually remove your choice in the matter and chemically castrate yourself?

Perhaps because I resented needing sex. I was insatiable, yet it seemed to me to be no more than a puerile affliction, like baby teeth.

I resented how I shared so many wonderful and complete sexual interactions with people when my own body was not involved. I resented how good sex *could* be and yet never was. I resented how easy it was for some people to have good sex when, for me, even at my freest, I was so rarely able to manage much more than a confused, anxious jumble of physical interaction that was driven so often by the mere need to ejaculate.

You resented that you had to take part so wholeheartedly, too. You resented that you had to stop, to do nothing but sex for so long.

Yes. I could typefuck and read. I could typefuck and do homework. I could typefuck and browse porn. I could typefuck twice at the same time, or three times, spending time with one person on SPR and another on FurryMUCK, or hell, two people on one MUCK, one in the same room while paging another elsewhere.

Hell, I resent having to focus on a single thing even now. Even as I write this, I'm on a train with no cell signal, and I resent the fact that I have to focus just on this without the ability to tab over and, say, chat with someone.

Do you resent this forced interaction with me?

No, or perhaps no more than usual. I would resent being only able to work on typesetting or software, too, just as I resent going out to the movies for making me do nothing but consume a single piece of media.

Let's say, as we have already, that you spend much of puberty up in your head, and then when you start branching out into engaging sexually with others, you do so in a purely intellectual way. One which involves some sort of platonic ideal of sexuality. You never feel awkward. Everything always just works.

Let's just take that for granted.

Let's also take for granted that this mechanism of interaction is one wherein getting out of a sexual interaction that is uncomfortable, or pressured, or hell, even nonconsensual is a matter of just...stopping. Come up with an excuse. Come up with some lie. Eschew the truth in favor of making the other person happy, as you would your father.

That's not possible. Being pressured into typefucking is just as easy as it is to be pressured into sex in the embodied world.

I'll agree with that. Take it for granted, then that this is what you believe. You believe that consent is implicit in the act, because to revoke consent is as simple as signing off or pretending that your parents walked in on you.

Okay.

Now take the type of person who takes all that for granted, and put them in a situation with someone who has an overbearing personality, who gets what they deserve, and who deserves you. Take that type of person and put them in a situation where sex is expected of them.

What do you suppose happens?

The topic at hand.

Yes.

Now, what do you suppose happens to such a person who gets taken advantage of, who winds up in a situation they shouldn't be in, who gets raped, and then put them out into a world full of sexual people, where it is expected that one be sexual.

So if sex makes you feel anxious and confused, how does being asexual — or, as you say, autochorissexual — make you feel?

Other than uncomfortable and itchy? I think that's how I described it earlier.

Yes.

I guess it makes me feel anxious and confused, just in different ways. It's comfortable enough for JD and I to not have a sexual relationship. He's still a gay guy, for the most part, so for me to have transitioned to the extent that I have means that we don't really click on a sexual level anymore.

He's not my only partner, though. Robin is still sexual. Barack is still sexual. Colton is still sexual. I have all these sexual people in my life, and they're all people I'm attracted to and with whom I've shared sexuality in one way or another, but with whom I mostly feel disinclined to have sex with for any number of reasons.

And Judith?

We had penetrative sex for the first time — a sort of exploratory thing — when last she visited, and shortly after, she mentioned feeling ace, herself.

You enjoyed it.

I did, that hasn't changed from what I mentioned before. Sex can feel good, physically. It feels better now after surgery than it did before, too. Sometimes, I think, "Aha, this must have solved it. Now I'm able to do what I never was before." And then, when confronted with the reality, everything is still problematic.

It's just that, having had surgery has only removed one aspect of the anxious and confused grossness that goes along with the act. It only removed the dysphoria (and of course the complications of phimosis). It didn't fix my other hangups.

What are the other hangups?

The discomfort.

The mess.

The guilt.

The imperfection.

Imperfection?

The sense that were we doing something else, we might both be happier.

The sense that, no matter how smoothly I might move, I must surely be doing a bad job, I must be falling short in some way.

The sense that, no matter how many times I ask the other person whether something feels good or is allowed, I must be somehow betraying their consent by gaining pleasure from this act.

Do you think that you are asexual because you were raped?

No.

That was quick.

No, I can promise you that, if there is a simple cause for me being ace (and there emphatically isn't), it's my reliance on TS. I found sex confusing, baffling, and kind of gross long before I had my own little struggle with consent.

Being ace, being autochorissexual, even if I didn't have the words for it, even if I didn't believe in such a thing, even if such a thing couldn't possibly apply to me, was the case from the very beginning of my embodied sexual interactions. It was the case from the very beginning. It was the case from when I lost my virginity, however slippery the concept is.

Ah yes, was it the first time you masturbated with someone? Was it the first time you had oral sex? Anal?

Life's complicated for a gay boy.

So much easier for a trans girl.

We've been over that.

Fair enough. Do you think that being raped prevented you from coming to terms with your asexuality?

I think so, yes.

Less quick.

It's unclear to me. It's something of a new thought I've had lately. Was part of what kept me struggling and striving to have a healthy sexual existence due to me trying to overcome this aspect of my past?

Beyond that, was TIASAP me accepting that I wasn't succeeding?

Perhaps.

Perhaps. Perhaps you needed exposure to a certain level of knowledge surrounding identity before you could truly accept it. Perhaps you needed to circle around it like you're circling around the event at hand. Perhaps you needed to side-eye it, because looking at it directly would surely blind you. It was too bright. It was the wrong color, some impossible shade of

Were you able to become a truly sexual person, would you?

Probably.

What would that look like?

I'm not sure. Sexual liberation? All that stuff online, being able to do at least some of it in person? Some fantasies coming true? I'm writing this on my way to a furry convention where I'll be around three of my partners. Maybe it would look like having comfortable sex with them. Maybe it would be some low-consequences sex with friends, many of whom will also be there.

Perhaps it would simply look like less shame.

Shame, according to Brené Brown, is rooted in vulnerability.

Shame is the sense that "you are bad", as opposed to the "you did a bad thing" that goes along with guilt.

Yes. And there is some aspect of vulnerability that is healthy, but just an aspect of it, not the whole of it.

Were I able to become a truly sexual person, I'd probably do it.

Do you feel bad that you aren't, then?

To an extent, but not bad enough to hunt down some sort of "fix". I don't feel broken, *per se*, at least not always, but I do feel like I'm missing out on something wonderful. I don't feel broken, but maybe I do feel a little jealous.

Do you think you are becoming more comfortable with sex over time?

Yes, as I've mentioned.

Spell it out plainly.

Okay.

Surgery helped. Hell, transition as a whole helped. Being a girl has helped. Sure, it might be nice to be the penetrating partner, but I also dearly love being penetrated, and this has added that to my life.

Talking and thinking about it has helped. I spend a lot of time working on this, because even if I can't become a sexual person, becoming more comfortable with being an asexual person would be a good thing.

Even kink has helped, as mentioned. As has typefucking. I've started interacting more as Makyo lately, as an explicitly transgender character, as someone so very like myself. I'll never be able to have anything other than complicated and weird trans sex as a complicated and weird trans woman, and so doing so intentionally, owning the less-than-ideal realities of my body and mind in a place where it's so easy to take part in the ideal feels like a healthy step forward.

Late bloomer that you are, you're learning that all of the less-than-ideal aspects of sex are a part of the whole experience, and that you can still have fun despite them.

Yes. Let me own the lube and the awkward positions. Let me own the wet spots and the performance anxiety. Let me own my weird-as-hell body. And then let me own sexuality. I would be plenty happy with that.

blue. It made your head hurt and your gorge rise.

Perhaps.

*So why are we talking circles
around it?*

Because, at some level, the experience itself is unimportant. I was young, I was dumb, he was an asshole.

What is important is the ramifications. What is important is the fact that I have to live with the person I became when I was disabused of all of those silly, romantic notions of implied consent and this strange idea that I could just stop an act, even if it meant lying.

*Lying always worked so well
with your dad, did it?*

No, and now I was finding out that this was the case in relationships beyond just type-fucking. It made me realize, on some level, how superficial my interactions up until this point had been. I had gone from being the type of person who believed she was living an earnest life with earnest people, enjoying deep relationships, falling in love.

Were you not?

Perhaps I was on some level, but I was missing this key component: that my actions have consequences.

But you're not unhappy now.

No, I'm not unhappy. I'm happy with this, really. I'm happy with fantasy and art and TS. I'm happy with verbal teasing and masturbation.

The only bit I'm really unhappy about is that it keeps me from making others happy.

Not that I'm blaming myself for what happened, of course. I was young, I was dumb, he was an asshole, after all. But non-action is still an action. Not saying no was still an action. Being unwilling to learn about the fact that my actions have consequences was an action.

It called into question how passive I had been in the past. It called into question how little I had been saying no in the past. It called into question how little I had actually learned about how the world worked.

“Coming to terms with being a terrible person,” you wrote.

Yes, and I wrote that in the thick of this realization. At that point, I was coming to terms with all of these things, the passivity and the willful ignorance.

I was coming to terms with how much I was hurting those around me, and just how much I had to learn.

And boy howdy.

Yeah. I would continue to hurt those around me for years. I still do. I'm getting better, though. I'm willing to learn, now.

“I cannot possibly bow low enough, I cannot possibly apol-

*ogize with enough sincerity to
make up for the hurt I've caused
you," you wrote.*

Yes. And I stand by it.

I have much to learn, but I've come a long ways from who I used to be.

The specifics of what happened aren't really important. What is important is the moment before, and the moment after.

*The blackbird whistling, or just
after.*

Let's talk about mania.

Fine.

Somewhere around 2014, a friend of mine went mad.

That's a bit dramatic, isn't it?

I really don't know how else to put the sensation of someone's reality not meshing with yours. The closest I can come is the feeling of shock and betrayal that I felt the first (and only) time I experienced an earthquake.

Do you feel that your friend betrayed you?

Not intentionally.

Can betrayal be anything but?

Did the earth intend betray me? Almost certainly not. Is it even capable of such?

And yet you feel it did.

I have trust issues.

Well, yes.

I trust that some parts of the world around me are static, inert. Or that they move so slowly as to be indistinguishable from such. That's balanced by just how much everything else moves.

This static thing suddenly became something else. A gentle side-to-side motion became a more rapid wobble, lasting perhaps ten to fifteen seconds before fading quickly to stillness once more. In that time, I'd leaped from bed and dashed into the hallway, confused. I was just in the process of calling the dogs when it stopped.

JD simply mumbled "Earthy-quake?" and fell back asleep.

Three minutes later came a small aftershock, lasting no more than five seconds.

*You raced to post it on Twitter, Mastodon, and Telegram, and
fill out the I-Felt-It report like a good little Millennial.*

I have a type. I'll own that.

Getting that call in 2014, hearing those words that spoke of a different reality. It was an earthquake.

And...

Somewhere around 2018, a friend of mine went mad.

Same one?

Same one.

Let's talk about mania.

Let's talk about *my* mania.

How long are your cycles?

Three to five months.

It was toward the tail end of high school that I began to get plagued with depression and mood swings.

I was a healthy collie. All the romance of a noble lineage had gone to my parents' heads, and there was simply no reason one of my standing should ever feel bad. Sure, the family had come on hard times financially, and Idaho had been an inexpensive refuge for us. Flyover state or no, we could keep our large house and happy lives. How could any dog be sad?

And yet I was. I was in spades. I would swing down for a few months, life slowly losing its color, until I'd feel nothing except an ache behind my sternum, eating only mechanically, and only when reminded.

Then it would pass. It would be dinner and I'd realize that I was actually *really* enjoying the curried chicken. I'd realize that it had been days since I'd thought about falling asleep and not waking up. I'd have energy.

I'd have a bit too much energy.

Mom would shrug and mumble something about boys. "Men in this family, always so moody. You'll grow out of it."

I mostly kept it to myself. When I did share it with friends online, it was to commiserate in the "Parents, eh? What do they know?" style that never goes out of fashion among teenagers.

Still, as awful as it was, I learned the rhythm of it. I'd spend a month or so feeling terrible, three months feeling pretty good, and then a month feeling great.

Not just great, *better* than great.

I'd spend all of my allowance in a week. I'd sleep three, four hours a night. I'd write page after page of backstory for my role-playing characters. I'd scribble ideas as fast as they came to me and still not be fast enough.

I still have a folder of those ideas. They're illegible, unnerving.

And then, over the course of a week at most, I'd be back underwater once more.

Depression is a strange thing.

I tried at several points to capture some sense of it in words, but nothing ever quite fit. Whenever I did, I found myself using a lot of ellipses just to fill in, textually, my fumbling for words with enough meaning. I came up with stuff like, "I dunno. My brain just isn't all me. Like...It's something else. It's there and exerts influence on me life, but it spends an inordinate amount of time trying to destroy me."

Or poetry. I tried to throw that at depression, too, but it just came out sounding stilted and weird. I'd wind up talking about fire a lot. Fire and birds, for some reason.

Which was nonsense, really, but each in such a way that seemed to cover at least one small corner of depression.

Depression is big. It's vast and terrible and empty. Completely empty, and there you are, in the middle of it, feeling bad about nothing.

There's just no sense to it. No sense in trying to describe nothing. A 'nothing' which is also nonsensical.

And yet I keep trying.

All these words...

Which came first, the lilac-scented words on bipolar disorder, or the furry fiction?

Does it matter?

I suppose not, but humor me.

The bit about words first. Then the bit about the dog.

Let's talk about mania.

Again, hypomania. That's usually what I wind up in.

Let's talk about mania.

Okay.

On two occasions, the world has slid away from me.

What does madness feel like from within?

Oh, not madness. PNESes.

Lewd.

I wince every time I say or type it. Even spelling it out still sounds crass.

Let's talk about mania.

I'm working up to it.

On two occasions, the world has slid away from me. My perception shrinks. Tunnel vision, yes, but just all of perception. My ears fill with static. My skin becomes fantastically sensitive. My vision narrows to the size of a quarter held at arm's length.

My muscles stopped working.

I fell.

JD thought it was the alcohol at first.

Was it not? I was drunk.

It may have been, and yet you collapsed in the bathroom months later. You were wedged between the wall, the toilet, and the bathtub. You shook and shook and shook.

JD came home and held me while I shook. I was sober, and it happened again. I sobbed and said that over and over again. I was sober and it happened again.

I'm sorry for coming at this sideways. You're good at taking this in different directions than intended.

You're good at taking this in different directions than intended.

Great.

I'm glad you showed the fortitude to tell me no, though.

Careful, lady. Pride's a sin.

Having experienced it from the outside, and having experienced the world sliding away from beneath me, there is some similarity between the two.

And...

Let's talk about mania.

Finally.

There's this rush.

This wild-nights-wild-nights rush.

There's this lack of foresight.

There's this thinking of the goal instead of the path.

There's this tinny scent to the air. There's this burning, burning sensation, burning. There's this pleasant static.

And...

And?

And were I to catch fire, the flames would feel like silk against my skin,
against freshly-shaven skin.

And?

And I feel like, were I to draw a blade along my limbs, to trace each long bone, each carpal, each tarsal, it would feel like ice, and the blood that came with would be my semen, and I would give birth to whole worlds through my flesh.

And?

And if I stop, I'll surely die.

And?

I'm hypomanic now.

You're hypomanic now.

It's not because of this.

It's not because of me.

This is part of hypomania, but this is not because of it.

I am part of hypomania, but I am not because of it.

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry.

Let's go back, please.

Thank you.

Can we talk about something else? Please?

Something lighter?

Something softer.

A lot of times, when furries talk, they talk about their fursoñas as their ideal selves. I've found that it's more likely that their fursoñas are them at their most normal, most natural, most earnest.

It's strange that this venue seen as escapist by even its own members is basically just a means of exploring what it means to be earnest in an ironic world.

Is it?

Every time I think we're living in a post-ironic world, the Internet proves me wrong.

I wouldn't know.

Do you not experience irony?

A friend asks Maddy: what is irony?

A friend asked Maddy: what is the importance of tension?

Maddy said: I don't know

The friend looked sad and went away.

When the friend came back, they asked:
what is the importance of tension?

Maddy said: I know-

But the friend cut her off angrily and left in a huff.

Later, the friend asked Maddy: what is the importance of tension?

Maddy said: I know: I don't know

Then they sat and chatted over a cup of tea.

I talk up my style as frumpcore. It's the synthesis of momcore and downtempo librarian, I say. In reality, It's an intentionally garbage-y, thrown-together look designed to, I hope, lead onlookers' eyes to slide right off of me as unremarkable.

Ah yes, the invisible six-foot-one trans woman with purple hair. That tired old trope.

While I've had fursoñas that were intended to be something better than myself — Makyo, for a while, was dressed in a nice suit — more often than not, they've played along similar lines.

Ranna was a gay fox, a bit pudgy, with two tails he readily admitted were an early affectation to differentiate himself from countless other foxes.

Makyo was intentionally a transfeminine vixen who didn't pass. Maddy's a dumpy, nerdy cis girl who dresses to hide her weight.

And Madison's a dumpy, nerdy transfeminine girl who doesn't pass and dresses to hide her weight?

I suppose.

You don't give yourself enough credit.

Is that your department, now? Cheering me on?

I'm your ally.

But not my friend.

No, but I am your ally.

Fine. How do I not give myself enough credit?

A friend asked Maddy: why do you drink tea?

Maddy said: I like it. It's tasty, it makes me feel good.

The friend said: well that's dumb.

Maddy went and drank tea.

The friend asked: why do you drink tea?

Maddy said: I don't know.

The friend said: well that's dumb.

Maddy went and drank tea.

The friend asked: why do you drink tea?

Maddy said: I like it. It's tasty, it makes me feel good.

The friend laughed and clapped delightedly, and said: perfect

Then sat to drink tea with Maddy.

A friend asked Maddy: why are you coating yourself with grease?

Maddy said: so that when I run through a field, no dirt will stick to me, and I won't get poked by thorns.

Maddy ran through the field, and wound up covered in dirt and scratches.

The friend said: better to not run.

Firstly, you're not as invisible as you seem and frumpcore isn't seen as that cohesive from the outside. Secondly, you pass better than you imagine. Everyone tells you that, you just can't yet hear it. Finally, you just got done writing some heavy shit after a day of worrying about work, so of course you're down on yourself. You don't want to pass, remember? You want to be visibly trans. You want to be seen as the trans psychopomp you strive to be.

...Wow.

Your very words set lie to your insecurities. Your fursoñas are yourself expressed more earnestly than you can manage in person.

Thank you.

If you could become Maddy, would you?

Yeah, in a heartbeat.

Why?

You said it as well as I could. She's the front-stage persona I wish were also my back-stage persona.

And she's pretty.

I mean, she's still a dumpy fat nerd.

Let's talk about kink.

Oh for Christ's sake.

When I hit puberty, I wound up doing a good bit of digging to try and figure out just what it was that was going on. I mean, obviously, there was sex ed and stuff, but it's not like that's super comprehensive in the states.

In fifth grade, the teachers gathered the four classes together in one spot to show a video and give a short lecture on sex. That was the extent of it, before and at the beginning of puberty.

Yeah, the video kept going on about how embarrassing puberty was. Boys getting erections and everyone laughing at them. Girls getting their period and everyone noticing. There was so much mortification built into the process. So much repression. The teachers hated it, the students picked up on it. The one woman teacher was asked if she could feel a man orgasm inside of her during sex. She haltingly said, "It's not like a fire hose or anything, but I guess so."

You memorized that. You thought about that forever.

Yeah, maybe some genderful stuff going on there.

Let's talk about kink.

Fuck off.

If were corporeal, I'd be smirking.

I'll just have to imagine it.

So I turned to the internet to learn more, as one does. I found the delightfully-named Puberty101. Forums, chat, articles, stories...

And pedophiles?

Maddy built a sand castle and it was washed away.

The first friend was sad about the sand castle for Maddy, and said: better to not build the sand castle and risk further sorrow.

The second friend said this was good, because Maddy saw adversity and built the castle anyway.

The third said this was good because Maddy was able to acknowledge the castle and let it pass.

A fourth said: better to have never built the castle. The sand is itself, the wave is itself, and Maddy remains.

The fifth was helping build a bigger, better sand castle.

A friend asked Maddy: why are you nailing boards together?

Maddy said: I'm building a house to live in.

When the friend came back later, there was an awkward jumble of sticks nailed together on the ground. They said: well that was dumb.

Some time later, the friend visited Maddy and asked: why are you frowning?

Maddy said: I paid someone to build me a house, but it's round, upside down, and a mile to the east of where it should be.

The friend shrugged and said: well that was dumb

Some time later, the friend visited Maddy and found her reading on the front porch of a cozy home. They said: did you build this?

Maddy said: no, but I did my part.

The friend laughed and sat down next to Maddy to read with her.

I'm sure of it.

I met my first boyfriend there. Danny. He was wickedly smart. We started moderating a subforum on long distance relationships in the LGBT section. I think. Something like that.

Did you dig for that, too?

Not this time. Or, well, not in months. Not since I found out he died. ODed? Not sure. I did dig it up it then, on Wayback. I saw us talking together.

No.

I saw Matthew and a dead guy talking together. I saw two kids in love. I saw too many names.

Did you learn about sex?

I suppose. I learned about phone sex with Danny, at least. I miss that, actually. The tense silences, the little gasp, the embarrassed giggling that followed. I learned the theory if not the practice.

I learned about the theory of sex, embedded deep within puberty, and then I learned about furry.

You learned about typefucking

Boy howdy did I.

You are a parody of yourself.

And proud of it.

So, I think the order of my entry to furry was as follows:

Are you having fun?

1. Find a furcode in someone's forum sig.

Oh my aching bones.

Yes.

Shut up, you're not that old, the internet just moves *really* fast.

You know that I'm not the friend, right?

Besides, you don't have bones.

I do.

2. Find a furcode decoder.

Carry on.

3. Find Captain Packrat's page on furry.

No, I'm finished for now.

4. Find Yerfl!.

5. Make a dragon character.

6. This lasts three days. No one pays attention to me. Make a fox character.

7. Meet some furries on GovTeen (née Puberty101).

8. Start talking with furries on AIM.

9. Join FluffMUCK.

Ah yes, Fluff. May she rest in eternal solitude.

She's not totally gone. I don't think. I actually haven't checked in a while.

I'm starting to doubt your commitment to nostalgia, here.

What would I gain from such?

You could go look in the park. You could go ride around in the Universe-in-a-Box. You could laston some folks, maybe.

Weirdly enough, of the people I would laston, I was finally reintroduced to a few not too long ago by, of all people, Zorin, head wiz of Fluff. Rela and GC. I was glad to see them doing well.

You were glad to see they were alive.

I was glad to see they were alive, yes. That was around the time I had found the obituary for Danny.

You could laston Marek.

I'm not sure I could take that.

Is that why you don't want to connect?

It's one reason. Nostalgia is only so much fun. It's fun up until a certain extent, and then it becomes painful.

It's fun up until you're confronted with mortality and uncertainty. Danny died, and you don't know if Marek's alive.

Yeah.

It's no longer fun, but it's no less important.

Let's talk about Margaras.

Not yet.

Danny's passing was an abstract thing. Maragaras' was much more immediate. Much more concrete and real.

Please.

Take your time.

The first furry I met, aside from Ash, was Osric. We went to see a movie. We were so painfully shy.

After seeing the movie, you drove him back to where he had parked, and you sat for a few moments in pained silence, then hugged and went your separate ways.

Years later, I'd take a picture of him and his husband after his graduation that I think they still have. Years after that, his husband would officiate JD and I's wedding.

When was the last time you talked with either of them?

Bel favorited a tweet of mine not too long ago.

You grew up.

Yeah, we all grew up. We bought houses. We got jobs.

JD and Os dated for a little, and Bel and I nearly did. Even up until when I was working on polycul.es, we had dashed lines between us. I loved them.

'Loved'?

I still do. Very much so. But every year, that love gets more abstract. More academic.

Bel and I clicked on a sexual and nerdy level on which Os and I seemed to miss each other. I wasn't toppy enough for Os, and the nerdery — minus, briefly, EVE — was work, for him.

Eventually, it got that way with you, too. And then you started feeling uncomfortable with sex.

Our relationships were organic. We met randomly. We drifted closer, orbited each other, and then we drifted apart. The same happened with friends from high school and university. The same happened with friends from the PN on FurryMUCK.

From those first, halting meetings, I wound up slowly working my way into meeting furries in person. First, there were the few at school. Then the few at the queer group. Then, in university, Os dragged me to Fort Fur Friday, which I attended basically until they moved out of Fort Collins. That's where I met JD.

Then I managed to make it to Anthrocon 2005. Then Further Confusion 2007. I was sold.

There's this trope that pokes its head up every now and then, that there is an age-out date for furry. A time when you realize you're too old for this shit and peace.

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.

There is some of that, yes, but I like Qoheleth more than Paul. I like Ecclesiastes better than the epistles.

When you graduated high school, you stamped 1 Cor. 13 in your friends' yearbooks.

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.

Well played.

There is a time for reaping and a time for sowing; there is a time for being a hardcore nutjob furry and a time for taking a break and just being a human for a while.

This, too, is meaningless.

Well played.

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up.

My interest in furry wound down a bit in university. I'd burned myself a bit too hard, hurt too many people, grew too jaded to take part. I still prowled around the usual haunts on the MUCKs, still poked my head in FFF, still looked at all the art, but my heart wasn't in it anymore.

There was a reason behind this. There were people behind this.

Well, true. I don't know how to square that with...well, a lot of things.

You don't know how to square that with how you felt about those people at the time.

That's one aspect, yes. I also don't know how to square that with the fact that I was growing too jaded in a lot more than just furry. I grew jaded at school. I grew jaded at work. I struggled with my relationships. I struggled.

You struggled with gender.

Well, yes, but I wasn't quite ready to admit that, yet.

You struggled with self harm.

Yes.

You struggled with the intersections, the interstices, and the liminal spaces.

I was going to write about [a][s]. Where are you taking me?

Straight homeward to your symbol-essences.

Shall I not die, then?

Isn't that the point of writing?

I'm pretty sure all our names are writ on water at this point.

Come now. You wanted to be Keats when you grew up.

You're in a mood.

You're in a mood.

Fine.

Where are you taking me?

Let [a][s] speak for [a][s]. Let yourself speak for yourself.

Okay.

Who are you?

I'm Madison Jesse Scott-Clary.

What are you?

I...what?

Who are you?

I answered you.

Tell me your names.

I am Madison. I am Maddy. I am Makyo.

No Sarai? No Happenstance, or Younes?

Sarai could die. I couldn't be her. Happenstance was a coping mechanism for gender. Younes was...

Tell me about Younes, then. That's where you started going before, right?

Yeah, though you've certainly changed the tenor of it. The mood.

No one said this project would be easy.

Back in 2011 and 2012, I started to really loathe being me.

'Started'?

Well, okay, in a very specific way. I started hating the anger. I started hating the expectations. I started hating the toxicity.

You started hating a lot more than that.

I started hating my brain and my body. I started hating the coarseness of me. I started hating all my angles. I started hating my hair and my face and my genitals and my lies.

I was lying to JD. I was lying to work. I was lying to Tyson. I was lying to everyone who saw me online as a girl, and I was lying to everyone who saw me online as a boy. I was in a liminal place where I could tell no one the truth.

Not even yourself.

Not yet, at least.

There were a few easy steps to take, of course. I saw a doctor who got me on meds.

Tell me about suicide.

Not yet. Don't derail me for a bit. I need some breathing room after yesterday.

Tell me about Younes, then.

I'm getting there.

I started taking my own meds alongside those the doctor gave me. I started the slow process of ridding myself of testosterone. I hated my body so much, I did my best to camp out up in my head, to remove at least one means of having to interact with it: sex.

Go back. Before that.

Before that, I changed how I presented. I changed Makyo to be genderless. Started going by ‘it’ pronouns. And I made Younes.

Younes was a means for me to no longer lie. Or at least knock the severity of the lies down a few notches.

Younes was like me. He looked like a guy, but had something decidedly feminine about him.

Don’t be coy: he had a vagina.

Well, yes, but he wasn’t simply male in all his interactions. He was effeminate, without being flamey. He could be both more and less than a guy.

Let’s talk about kink.

Soon, soon.

There's a few things that I did wrong, here.

Objectively?

Yes. Or maybe, wrong by consensus. Wrong subjectively, and also wrong by the standards of many of those around me.

Did they feel wrong at the time?

They felt shameful.

Is shame wrong?

Not always. It can be an indicator, I suppose.

It's a tool. It's a tool to tell you when you're being vulnerable.

In this case, vulnerable in your uncertainty.

I suppose.

I handled this in a way that made me feel a lot of shame. I was uncertain about a lot.

If you had done so unabashedly, would that have made it any better?

I don't know, honestly.

What were you uncertain about?

I was uncertain about the approach. I was uncertain about the terminology. I was uncertain about how it made me feel. That last most of all, probably.

I approached Younes as a primarily sexual facet of myself. After all, what's the point of making a character with both a penis and a vagina, I thought, if there isn't going to be some aspect of sexuality to it?

There may be a great many points besides that.

Yeah, I know that now. Uncertain, remember?

Always.

So I made an altersex character that was primarily sexual in nature. that was the approach. And then I called him a ‘male-herm’.

Ouch.

Yeah, ouch. The term does not fit so well these days. Some folks own it, and I’m happy for them, but even then, the term rankled. It took a lot of history and turned it, for a lot of folks, into a fetish. A lot of intersex folks are really unhappy with it being used. Ditto ‘futanari’.

It’s understandable, too. Like, I’ve dealt with chasers. Folks who fetishize my gender, my presentation, my body.

It’s understandable now.

Yes. Uncertainty.

It made me feel almost right. It made me feel like I was on the edge of something. It made me feel just around the corner from a revelation. It made me doubt myself. It made me doubt my place in the world. It was both a symptom and the cause of my hatred for body.

For your body, or for yourself?

Both, I suppose. It was a symptom of this growing unease, this feeling of being just a few millimeters to the left of myself. This feeling of being just slightly out of focus.

A rangefinder camera uses a ghostly yellow image overlaid atop the real image when you look through the viewfinder. When you turn

the ring of the lens to focus, that ghost slowly shifts to align with the object you want to be in focus.

Your view of yourself was slowly slipping from focus.

Matthew was starting to lose coherency.

And Younes was one of the means of slowly dragging that back into focus.

It doesn't matter how right or wrong it was of me to use this tool.
It does matter how wrong I was in the mechanics of the scenario.

You hid him. You covered him up and kept him from the world. You interacted with a completely different crowd, as Younes than you did as Makyo or Macchi. When that overlapped with Rikky, it was awkward.

It was, and not because of the altersex part. We interacted that way with Makyo as altersex, too, and that didn't feel awkward at all. It felt like cheating to engage with the world as Younes. It felt shameful.

The thing that you did wrong was to lie.

Growing up, I had a real problem with lying.

There were reasons.

That doesn't mean it wasn't a problem. That doesn't make it right.

It shifts more into the gray area.

Let's talk about dad later. Life began at high school, remember? We can talk about the kid who grew up to be born freshman year some other time.

The problem with lying is often the problem of secrets. The only secret that can be kept is when only one person knows it, and even then it's not guaranteed.

Yes.

And you got found out.

Yes.

And it cost you.

Yes. It cost me friends. It cost me sanity. It made me jerk away from the path I'd started down. Made me jerk out of focus again.

Let's talk about TIASAP.

Yes.

Self harm is a recurring theme within my life.

It takes so many forms, too. The cutting and burning, sure, but also the self-sabotage. Dropping my testosterone to zero. If approaching this in a sexual fashion was wrong, then remove the sexuality.

An obvious solution.

I punished myself for what I did. If I was fetishizing, if I was causing harm, then I deserved to suffer for it. I removed my sexuality from the picture. Cyproterone acetate twice a day and medroxyprogesterone every two weeks does a really good job of that.

I tell myself now that if I believe something to be true when I'm depressed as well as when I'm hypomanic, it's more likely to be right.

One of us only tells the truth, and one of us only lies.

Perhaps if I still felt like I existed a few millimeters to the left of my body when sex wasn't a part of the equation, I was more likely to be right in pursuing the path of gender exploration.

I talked with JD about this, he helped me out, but I told basically no one else. I tanked my T and attempted to learn from my punishment.

Now now, what did we say about secrets?

And then I let it slip on FurryMUCK, yes.

You spilled the beans.

Yes. Then I admitted it. I talked about it.

You spoiled the surprise.

Everyone was so confused.

Lapsus linguae.

I was so ashamed.

You spoke too soon.

Even my punishment was wrong.

It was the last thing Margaras heard from you.

Never mind stopping myself from creating Younes, nevermind stopping myself from chemical castration; if I could go back in time, I would stop myself from saying anything for just a few more days.

He died knowing that about you.

If Margaras had to die, I would that he not die with that being the last he heard from me.

You cannot take that back.

If Younes, chemcast, and Margs' death are immutable, if losing my friends was inevitable, at least let me delay the hour of my mistake.

You cannot.

Please.

You cannot.

Oh god.

It was the last thing he heard from you.

Merciful god, please take me away.

You never spoke to him again.

I will close my eyes and my heart and become a stone.

There is too much fire in me
to be described by the soldering iron's tip.

I must not fear.

Were I to draw it across my skin,
it would all spill out at once.

Fear is the mind-killer.

I'd melt, eaten whole by flames,
and flow into a pool of molten glass.

Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.

Sublimation would claim me,
atoms would scatter, diffuse.

I will face my fear.

I would be borne up through the clouds,
and grow lighter by the second.

I will permit it to pass over me and through me.

All that energy poured to the air around me,
an imperceptible increase in temperature.

*And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its
path.*

Particle would excite particle
until I'm felt only as warmth on your face.

Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.

But even that would not be enough.

Only I will remain.

TIASAP stands for *The Ill-Advised Self-Administration Period*.

This is why.

I was unsafe about it.

I lost my sexuality for years.

I turned the need for change into punishment.

The color drained from my universe. The flavor was gone from food. I could not smell.

And when you added in a bit of estrogen, you wept at the return of sensation.

I tell myself now that if I believe something to be true when I'm depressed as well as when I'm hypomanic, it's more likely to be right.

And, well.

Now I knew it was right.

But I was unsafe, I was punishing myself, and I did it all on purpose.

Why ruin your life on accident when you can do it on purpose?

On March 21st, 2012, I tried to kill myself.

It's amazing how such a simple statement of fact reflects, months of strange tension, slow recovery, and a whole lot of trying to understand what really happened. It's not a comfortable thing for anyone to discuss, but it's one of those things I need to discuss, need to get off my chest. A little too much of what makes life meaningful for me now is wrapped up in that one night.

Even now?

Even now.

You wrote that disclaimer four months after the attempt itself. You copied it from some notes from back then. You even kept the Steve Eisman quote.

Yes. Nostalgia, remember?

Are you nostalgic for those weighty months after you tried to kill yourself?

If Matthew died on September of that year, then he was sick long before. This was part of his long, slow death rattle.

Perhaps it's not totally accurate to say that I'm nostalgic for that time in particular, but I suppose I am nostalgic for the sense of change that permeated the air around me then. Something big was happening. Something terrible and wonderful.

And you got to witness it from the inside.

Yes. I got to watch the agonal breathing that went on for far too long. I got to see his eyes widen in terror. I got up to fetch the cold compress and came back to a quiet room.

I'm not nostalgic for that pain, no. I'm nostalgic for the fact that I am who I am because I went through that. I'm nostalgic for what it came to symbolize. I'm nostalgic for its part in Madison's birth.

It's not really so much that I have the need to write about what happened, even, as that, after something of such import, I feel the need to expose myself through writing, to force ideas out into the open whether or not they actually have anything to do with what's going on.

It goes beyond a desire. It becomes a necessity.

Creativity, it seems, is one of those things where, the more you put it to use, the more you *must* use it.

After a certain point, it forces itself upon you. Hits you like a ton of bricks.

Yes.

I toyed with how to write about something like this for a few months after it happened before hammering out a five thousand word essay.

You planned on an additional ten thousand.

In this case, after all, I felt the need to actually write about what really happened. I tried the whole “write about something else” thing and it didn’t work; it didn’t relieve that pressure within myself that needed to be released.

You tried venting little bits of it here and there on twitter, on Facebook.

It didn’t work. It kept the pressure from becoming unbearable, perhaps, but only for a few days. After that, the weight of it — of how easy it was, of how quickly I snapped to, of how badly I could have fucked up — became too intense to ignore once again.

So.

I tried to kill myself on March 21st, 2012. It was, as the epigram said, not a big deal; it was just my big deal.

I'll be honest, I stole the concept of *thisness*, the phrase, "See, it is doing *this* now" from a science fiction book.

I honestly expected nothing less.

I suspect that Neal Stephenson got it from elsewhere, too. I think he basically admits as much, in that he was talking about Husserl at the time. Still, it's proven handy.

The biggest thing I've taken away from therapy has been an increased sense of self awareness. The ability to say "ah, I am doing *this* now." It is the *thisness* of myself. The *thisness* of my mind. I am able to see myself dipping down into the well of depression. I'm able to see the hypomania that starts to creep into my mind, into my life, and forces me to bury myself in projects.

Like this one.

Yes. That's why I'm moving so much more slowly with it now. I have slid off the pedestal and into the slow morass of depression. I can feel it coloring my life with anhedonia.

Not coloring, no. Sapping the color. Not even black-and-white, but an absence. A missingness.

Yes.

But you didn't have this back then. You didn't have the thisness of mental health maturity. You weren't able to see what was going on.

Yes. I was having panic attacks from day to day. I was caught up in those rising swells of anxiety that would lead to me freezing. Occasionally, I would have to stop in a rest area on my way home just to calm down enough to continue driving.

That's when you started your habit of asking others to tell you good things.

“Tell me good things,” I’d say, and I’d get a slew of responses. Many were along the lines of “You! You’re good!”

But you weren’t able to internalize that.

Not then, no. Not back then, and especially not during panic attacks.

Some of them would be “A good thing is that I had a good day at work.” That was what I needed to hear. I needed to hear that others were having a good day. I needed to hear that others were *capable* of having good days. I needed to hear that good days were possible, and that I might be in line for one, myself.

My boss picked up on that, as well as so many other things. “You’re so angry,” he said. “You’re scaring the project manager at times.” So he sent me to a psychiatrist.

He handed you a check for a thousand dollars and said, “I know it’s expensive, so hopefully this helps you out.” You never cashed it.

He sent me to his doctor, doctor Johnston. And he was a pretty good at what he did.

You fired him when, after you asked him for a letter of support for hormones, he said, “I don’t know enough about that, and you don’t even want to know my feelings about it.”

Well, yes, but there’s no denying the utility of what he gave me.

He gave you exactly what you brought to the table, except with context.

Yes. I brought my anxiety to the table, and he taught me about it. He spoke my words back to me and added footnotes. He wrote in the margins of my speech and I learned. I learned coping mechanisms and breathing techniques. I got my prescriptions.

You brought your anxiety, but not your depression. You thought you just had anxiety, not any mood disorders. Boys didn't have moods, right? You were just anxious. Despite years of experience, you didn't tell him about how you felt.

No, and there's the problem.

When I first started therapy, I did what I thought was the right thing by bringing an open mind. It wasn't enough for me to seek help, I had to be told what was wrong with me. So anxious was I to not diagnose myself, I had to let someone do the work to pry the symptoms from me.

I didn't tell Dr Johnston that I was feeling bad. I told him my boss told me I was angry. I didn't tell him that I was depressed, I told him that James was worried about how anxious I was.

And so you got treated for anxiety.

And so I got treated for anxiety. I was given clonazepam to take daily and lorazepam for breakthrough anxiety.

You have always had issues with control. You always needed to be on top of a situation.

And all my deepest fears, all of those things I would ruminate on during a panic attack, would surround the fact that I wasn't in control of a situation, yes. It made sense to treat the anxiety.

It hurt.

Yes. I was given a long-acting anxiolytic and a more powerful, shorter-lasting one for breakthrough anxiety. When things hurt, they calmed and soothed the pain. They removed it.

They removed a lot more than just the pain of panic.

Yes.

The problem of working with clients on a task with a specified end-goal, one that is finished and about which you can say, “ah, it does *this now*”, is that when the project is done, there is nothing left.

This is a problem with any task. This is a grander problem.

Yes, even with self-appointed tasks, even with tasks at a non job-shop. It happened just recently, too. I finished my time at IA. I got home from visiting Barac. I got the contract signed at NV.

If you hit a deadline and succeed, or if you have some work travel, or if you get home from a vacation, suddenly there's this empty bit of your future where there used to be this thing. There's just a void there. A sudden lack of weight.

And so, back then, you finished the release at work and also finished the office move in one fell swoop, and went home.

I went home and took my meds like a good girl, and then proceeded to dissociate right through the evening.

Dissociation is a hell of a drug.

It's a dreamy thing. It's a soft thing. It's a cottony thing. It's a muffled thing. It's watching your hands move. It's watching yourself breathe. It's feeling the air move in and out of you with a distant, slightly confused detachment. It's “ah, it does this now”, except saying that about some strange machine which is not yourself.

I watched myself sit down in my chair. I watched myself turn on *Babylon 5*. I watched myself mow through two glasses of gin.

You watched yourself with a metaphysical quirk of the eye-brow as you reached forward, grabbed the box of X-acto

wood-carving tools — purchased, doubtless, for some long forgotten project — and flipped it open. You watched numbly as you slashed open the inside of your arm. There was a moment where you marveled at how long it took for the blood to well up, where you could see the white of subcutaneous fat.

And then the pain snapped me to.

Okay, I lied. Just a little bit.

Yes. You didn't dissociate through the entire thing. There was no small part of that scene that was horribly, terrifyingly intentional.

What really woke me up was watching this person-who-was-me somehow go into 'fuck it' mode and tear the shit out of his right arm from one end to the other with a very sharp, very new razor blade.

It was like the rush of coming to your senses after a nightmare, the pulling forward and the re-anchoring, the flood of adrenaline in preparation for flight.

It wasn't necessarily the cut that woke me. It was the second or so before when I entered that 'fuck it' mode, and I was too slow, too confused and frightened to stop this person-who-was-me from pulling the ultimate embarrassing act: trying to commit suicide while watching a dumb '90s science fiction show.

It was a slow awakening. You weren't just too slow, you were not fully awake yet. The dream of dissociation was still clinging, gauzy, to you.

V I do not know which to prefer, The beauty of inflections Or the beauty of innuendoes, The blackbird whistling Or just after.

I can remember it so clearly.

You can remember it because you still live it.

Yes. I still feel that slide into someone-else-ness, and then the snap back when drawn back into self-ness. Back into here and now.

You felt that last night.

Yes.

You felt that slide into dissociation, felt the folding blade click into place with a vague sense of surprise, then jolted as it drew across your leg.

Yes.

You felt that same jolt of humiliation and pain and anger and fear.

Yes.

Especially this time. You cut too deep. Your usual superficial--yet-still-painful scratch had turned into something of a flay.

Yes.

You needed twelve stitches. You lied and said you dropped your knife while cleaning it.

Yes.

Are you writing about this now because you were, on some subconscious level, working up to this most recent little climax?

I really don't know.

Tell me what happened after.

I started whispering James' name-

Both times?

Both times. I started whispering his name, then eventually swallowed the minuscule bit of pride I had left and called out loud enough to wake him up. “Can you come help me?” I asked. It took asking two more times before he got up. I found out later that he thought I had made a mess and just wanted help cleaning up, thinking that I should just clean up my own messes. A good point, that.

Though the rest of the night in March is still sort of a blur — I hadn’t totally gotten out of the state that I was in, just woken up enough to engage with the mechanics — I do remember James helping me to clean and bandage my arm as we sat on the floor of the bathroom, the dog occasionally wandering in and out. The whole time, I was still sobbing, blubbering out, “I don’t want to leave you, I don’t want to leave Zephyr, I don’t know why I did that, I’m sorry” over and over again.

I'm so tired.

I know.

Can I let Matthew tell the story? Can I put his words here, and can I catch up on the sleep I missed while in the ER? Can I feel better before I write again?

Yes, but don't make a habit of it.

Okay.

The last thing I did before going to bed that night was to send an email to work saying that I would be in later in the day due to an “emergency appointment” in the morning. I certainly couldn’t tell them what had actually happened, but I had so thoroughly exhausted myself and still felt so bad that I decided sleeping in would help me out quite a bit.

I wound up at the office around eleven in the morning, and sat down, feeling tired, worn thin, and still traumatized from the fact that I had apparently acted out something I had thought was just one of those persistent negative thoughts that won’t go away, one with no grounding in reality. Within minutes, I received a message from my boss informing me that my attitude in the last few weeks was not acceptable. I had been irritable and angry, to the point where my supervisors felt as though they had to word things so that I wouldn’t get upset.

I was stuck in a weird situation, here. On the one hand, my boss was totally right and I really did need to take a look at how I was interacting with others at work, but on the other hand, I wasn’t in a place to do anything about it at the time, and I certainly didn’t feel as though I

could talk to my boss about what had happened in order to save the conversation for another time.

I did my best to accept it and trudge through the rest of the day. The plan that was in place before was to follow a friend up to Blackhawk for a free night at a casino hotel that he had available. It seemed like getting out of town might actually help, and it also meant that my workday was significantly shorter than it would've been otherwise.

The drive after work was calming, and I actually got to the point where I felt as though the night out would be a good change of pace to keep me from going too crazy.

And you know? The evening really did help. It was a lot of fun spending \$20 on roulette and walking away with \$60, it was fun eating a ridiculous amount of crab legs, and it was...well, it was mortifying, watching some of saddest people I've ever seen in my life sit, lost, in front of their slot machines.

We had planned on going hot-tubbing, but, as became clear when I took off my shirt back at the room and exposed the rather bulky bandage along the underside of my arm, that was pretty much out of the question, so we mostly just sat around talking, and, in my case, trying to feel better about the whole thing.

I was fine until it was time for bed. As is usually the case, the stillness is when I get the worst, in terms of anxiety. That's when it's easiest for my mind to wander, fixate on a subject, and loop over it in all the worst ways for the longest time. The problems started when sleep didn't come.

And didn't come.

And still didn't come.

After a time, I suppose I just lost it. I got up and started pacing the room, walking from the bathroom to the window and back again,

clenching and unclenching my hands before I let loose a “Jesus fucking Christ!”

I locked myself in the bathroom and broke down again.

Both James and Karl checked in on me throughout the next few hours, but it was mostly spent huddled up on the cold tile of the floor feeling awful about both myself and what I’d done — that it had any effect on those around me was just starting to hit home. I will not lie that, several times throughout the night, I wished that I had succeeded in order to not be going through what I was going through at the time. I simply couldn’t stand what I’d done.

Things are totally out of control now.

— Maddy, whose tail is behind her (@drab_makyo) March 23, 2012

On meds for anxiety now, but that seems to have just let loose something terrible. Tried to kill myself Wednesday night, spent all tonight—

— Maddy, whose tail is behind her (@drab_makyo) March 23, 2012

-obsessing about it, woke up Karl and James, then felt guilty and upset about it.

— Maddy, whose tail is behind her (@drab_makyo) March 23, 2012

It's not even really about anything, I'm just messed up, I guess.

— Maddy, whose tail is behind her (@drab_makyo) March 23, 2012

Days are spent in a surreal reality, both happy and unreasonably angry.

— Maddy, whose tail is behind her (@drab_makyo) March 23, 2012

I'm sorry you'll all wake up to a bunch of Matt freaking out, but I'm stuck :S

— Maddy, whose tail is behind her (@drab_makyo) March 23, 2012

Where's your tweet from this time?

As someone who went to the ER last night and got 12 stitches only to find out that insurance ended on the 30th and I haven't received my COBRA paperwork yet so we'll see how fucked I am financially: mood.
<https://t.co/sil5Yf2617>

— Maddy, whose tail is behind her (@drab_makyo) October 10, 2019

I'm okay. Just tired.

— Maddy, whose tail is behind her (@drab_makyo) October 10, 2019

You posted about those things publicly, but not privately, not one-on-one.

I know. I've been called on it before.

And since. Why?

I suppose I need to be seen, but am not brave enough for it to be a conversation. I need to be seen but can't quite ask for help. I've promised everyone that I'm working on it, but the truth is, I don't know how I'd even begin to.

Is that what you're doing now?

Perhaps.

So, what happened after?

There was an inpouring of confused and sympathetic replies. Some were simply along the lines of “You are loved” and “There are friends all around the world thinking of you”, while others were more focused on “But this is all so sudden” and “You didn’t say anything was wrong.” Someone mentioned a correlation between my medication and dissociation as mentioned.

You have to understand that, at the time, I was embedded in a casino an hour and a half’s drive from work. Casinos are horrifying places to be, even at the best of time. Desperation and sweat. Cigarette smoke and free drinks. The dead eyes of those who must pull the lever, who must pull the lever, who must pull the lever.

So here I was, with an hour’s sleep under my belt, seeing people still gambling, still hurting, answering texts and calls from my boss, and a wave of numb dissociation once more washes over me.

I drove numbly down to work

You sat in your car in front of the building, talking on the phone with Ash. You somehow made it to your desk, though there was no memory of moving from the car.

“Come with me,” Kevin said, and beckoned me out of the office.

“Sorry about all of the freaking out,” I mumbled, once we were out of earshot. “I think it has to do with the medication, I’m going to call Dr.-”

The office next to

“I need you to tell me what your plan is,” my boss asked.

“Plan?”

“Plan to kill yourself.”

“I...don’t have a plan, I don’t know why,” I managed.

“Well, you need to tell me if anything like that happens again.”

I can't do this.

Of course you can.

I can't. I can't talk about this. I thought I was done with it. I thought it would be easy enough to go back over this, but I can't.

Tell me why not, then?

I just...I just remember how easy it was to fuck up so badly. I did that a few weeks ago, too. I fucked up real bad, and now I'm stuck with the consequences, all the mechanics of tending to a wound, and all I can think about is how easy it was. It was so easy. It was so easy.

Perhaps that's part of what snaps you back into place. Perhaps that's part of what keeps you from following through. The mechanics of wound care. The laser focus on not doing it. Perhaps that's what saves you, in the end: the realization that you have a body leads to the realization that you're alive, confronting mortality leads to the acceptance of life.

It's harder to *not*.

I can't do this anymore.

This topic, or this project?

I don't know.

Let's talk about something else. Please.

One more question, and then we can.

Okay.

How far have you come since then?

I think a long ways.

You think?

Well, every time I think I've come a long ways, I do something horribly stupid again. Every time I think I'm over all this, I tear at myself. Every time I think I'm getting good at talking about my mental health, I wind up in this pit where I have to destroy myself, to make it physically evident that I'm unwell in some invisible way. I always have. I tried to blind myself when I was ten, remember? I tried to lose a finger, a leg. I cut. I burned.

Is it about proving that you're unwell?

How could I possibly prove that I'm too depressed to be around others? How could I possibly prove that I'm too anxious and sad and upset and numb to look at a chat lest the read-receipts show that I am okay enough to exist? How could I possibly prove such a thing when you look at me and see me hale and intact?

You are talking about self harm. I asked about suicide. How far have you come since your first suicide attempt.

I still think about it on the daily. I still obsess over it. Now I'm more likely to just go to bed, though.

Is it so simple?

No, of course not, but look, I'm thirty-three. I'm too old for it to be tragic, too young for it to be a midlife crisis, too healthy for it to be understandable, too sick for it to be a surprise. It would just be sad and weird, not to mention mean to those in my life. I've got that perspective now. I'm thirty-three, I've made it this far, I've worked this hard, and I can at least understand that.

It's easier to just go to bed and wait it out, or maybe just get out the soldering iron for a bit, because yeah, it still blows, but at least now I know it'll pass, and five months down the line, I can do the same dance all over again.

That seems rather fatalistic.

I'm tired. I don't even know what to do about this anymore, other than wait it out. My doctor got mad at me for saying I've come to terms with feeling like shit for a few weeks every five months or so, that that's just my life forever now.

I've just never seen any evidence to the contrary.

How did we get here?

What?

How did we get here? How did we get to this topic? Trace for me the route you took to get to the point where you felt able to talk about gender.

Well, I suppose I started by talking about furry, which led to me talking about Younes, right? He was sort of the beginning of my more serious explorations into gender as something other than a tool for enjoying sex.

Yes, but that's not where gender is on the map, is it?

Why are you trying to get me to do this?

Because we must take care to place ourselves in our time: now that we are done with writing about one of the hardest parts of our lives. And we must take special care that we locate ourselves within our place: having come at this conversation about gender through self-harm.

Then yes. We got here through furry, which opened up the path before us to even begin exploring gender, and then we finally reached this topic through that of self-harm, wherein I came face to face with so many aspects of my body. It's so easy to disappear within one's own head for days, weeks, months at a time, but one eventually comes to terms with the fact that one is stuck with a body, and thus one must deal with it. Live with it and inhabit it.

What better way to experience that sudden, jarring dissonance of body-ownership than to re-inhabit it and discover it to be wrong in so many ways?

I stand by the fact that not every trans, non-binary, or queer person experiences gender through a negative lens. Dysphoria is not a requirement for being trans. It has to be the case that there be a positive way to experience gender, or transition would be simply an exercise in futility. There has to be a flip side. There has to be gender euphoria.

There has to be the little thrill of typing morph female and being able to interact with the world around you — even if that's only in the instance of a furry text-base role-play game — as something other, something truer. There has to be that even when you still enjoy the body you've got.

Or are at least okay with it being yours on a day-to-day basis, yes.

And I was. I thought I looked okay. I was reasonably fit. I was tall and I liked it. I was a baritone and happy with my voice.

“Was”?

There has to be some flip-side, right? There has to be a flip-side to the gender euphoria that I was feeling, and that was a slowly mounting dysphoria.

If we got here through any one part of the trail I mentioned, it was through Younes specifically, more than just furry or just self-harm, because with Younes, so much started to hit me in a very visceral, physical way. It was one thing for me play as a girl online, to touch on aspects of gender and fertility and even sexism. It was another to be confronted with the fact that maybe the body that I had wasn't okay.

“I remember laying on the couch,” you said. “That awful, awful yellow couch, and [JD] getting playful, and then some little movement of his touched a nerve and I started crying

because of the way that brushed up against me wasn't in focus."

Why do you bring my words back to me?

"It brought to the forefront the fact that I didn't align with myself," you said. "That there was a lag in my proprioception, that I was falling behind myself."

I did. But why?

Because you wrote that in the section about liminality.

Yes, but I wrote it two days later than I wrote about Younes.

The time scale is not what I'm pointing at right now.

Can you point?

Are you looking at my finger, or the moon? Don't dodge this. I'm pointing at the fact that you came at gender through fury, then through self-harm, and yet this quote, this realization of "oh, shit, I might actually be trans", is all the way on the other side of that goofy map you make, and from there, you headed into talking about your dad.

So?

And you headed from there to talking about your dad.

So?

By way of talking about a dress you tried on as a kid.

I think I see where you're going, but it's important that you make your point.

Gender is woven throughout this entire project. Gender is woven throughout your entire life. You build a map of this site like a web, and it is gender that is helping to hold it together.

It is identity that is holding it together.

Name a part of your identity that figures larger in your life than gender.

Ah.

So, if we've talked about furry and we've talked about the dress and we've talked about dad and self-harm and the yellow couch, then what is there to talk about when it comes to gender?

Talk about what happened.

Are those not things that happened?

They are things that happened before. They are precursors and doormats and signs. They all point to gender. Talk about gender. Talk about what happened.

Alright.

I remember laying on the couch — that awful, awful yellow couch — and him getting playful, and then some little movement of his touched a nerve and I started crying because of the way that brushed up against that me that wasn't in focus. It brought it to the forefront the fact that I didn't align with myself, that there was a lag in my proprioception, that I was falling behind myself.

As you said.

I remember scooting back up into a sitting position, facing JD, with us sitting by the picture window in the living room. I remember words coming out in a jumble. I remember leaning heavily on similes. I remember taking lots of breaks as though I was collecting my thoughts when really I was trying to talk without my voice going all gross with tears. That horrible, bubbly, trapped-in-my-chest sound that comes with trying to talk while crying.

I remember explaining to him that I'd been spending so much time online having different parts than I actually had, that it was super jarring to have it brought into focus that that was actually not the case. I

tried to say how, feeling him aroused and pressing against me, pressing between my legs, it hurt on a very emotional level that he was pressing only against my perineum and not against a vulva.

Emotional isn't the right word there. It hurt on a visceral level. On a primitive level. It hurt in the sense that you had all of the reactions to pain except for the physical sensation of pain itself. There was the panic, the need to get away, to stop whatever was happening to cause that pain.

I remember saying that I was having some complicated feelings about gender, but being largely unable to explain what they were.

They were things that I could feel and not say. They were as yet ineffable. They were liminal. They had yet to surface completely.

And they were frightening. Too frightening to say.

Yes, had I the words, I would not have been able to say them out of fear. Fear that they might drive JD away, but also fear that they might be true, because if they were true, I was fucked.

So were you?

Was I what?

Fucked. Were you fucked?

I think that's still to-be-determined.

You don't seem fucked. I mean, life is harder now, I suppose. You've got to contend with a minority identity you never particularly wanted.

There's no denying that. I don't quite like that this is what I'm stuck with, but I do alright with it. I try to keep going as best I can, and I try to help others as much as I can along the way. Robin likes to call me a "trans psychopomp", but I suspect that's due in part to the word 'psychopomp' is really fun to say. I would say that she falls under that title as well.

Do you see yourself as one? Do you see yourself as someone who guides others?

Not particularly. I feel like I'm doing everything by accident. I feel like I'm accidentally visibly trans. Like I can't help but be visibly trans, like that's what I've got to work with. That that helps others long the way is still something of a mystery. A pleasant one, but a mystery.

Still, the least I could do is not hurt, might as well put in the effort to be a help.

Do you think that others see you as a resource?

Perhaps, though that has me worried. That's an awful lot of responsibility.

Permit me to take a tangent.

Do I have a choice?

You always have a choice.

If I say no, what will happen?

Nothing.

You'll let me just carry on with what I was saying?

Sure.

Do you have the power to stop me?

No, but do you?

Ah.

Do you see yourself as a woman?

I see where you're going with this.

And?

It's a good direction.

So. Do you see yourself as a woman?

No. I'm a giant lump. I'm a rectangle. I'm more than six feet tall. I'm a baritone. I barely have breasts. I don't pass.

Do you want to?

No.

That was easy.

It's not.

No, it isn't.

Start at the beginning.

And when I get to the end, stop. Yes.

As soon as I got surgery, literally when I was in the hospital, laying in bed on my five days strict bed-rest, something changed about the ways in which trans women interacted with me. I was, in some indescribable way, no longer trans.

Or, perhaps, no longer trans enough.

Yes. I became a *persona non grata* in a way that didn't involve actually cutting me out of trans spaces.

You were done. You were finished. You had beat the game.

I was a woman now. What could I possibly bring to a trans space, now that I was just a woman? I was appropriating their spaces. I was trespassing.

So. Do you see yourself as a woman?

You just asked me that.

And I didn't like your answer. Do you see yourself as a woman?

I don't. I see myself as a trans woman.

Why?

Do you want the scientific answer(s), or the personal?

...

Right.

I see myself as a trans woman because that's who I am. That's *what* I am. I can't change that. I can't suddenly become interested in mechanical engineering. I can't suddenly be a dog. I can't even slowly become those things, I can't *learn* to be a mechanical engineer, because I'm not interested in it.

I can't become a woman.

This isn't some essentialist, transphobic bullshit. Trans women are women, period. I'm not denying that.

I'm just not a woman. I'm a trans woman. I'm *specifically* a trans woman. That's who I am. That's *what* I am. I don't want to pass. I don't want to be stealth. I don't want to be a woman, because that's very specifically not what I am.

To have someone say, "I just see you as a woman" is to have a portion of my identity erased. It's reductionist to describe someone as something they aren't. That's one of the lessons we learned from folks coming out, from folks learning about identity.

You just also learned that other trans women are as apt to do the same.

Yes. I left chats. I stopped talking with some people. I didn't feel welcome, no matter how friendly folks were. Where I had been leaning heavily on Maddy, that cis-female character, I started drifting back towards Makyo, towards portraying the explicitly transfeminine.

All because they believed you were something that you weren't.

Yes.

And did you ask them?

No.

Why not?

I didn't feel that I needed to. It was one of those types of ostracization where you're part of a circle, and then slowly people stop referring to you, and then maybe someone leans over to nudge the person standing on the other side of you and then doesn't quite lean back all the way, and then somehow you're standing just outside this circle of your very own friends, holding your red solo cup, wondering what it is that you did wrong.

Did you make your voice heard.

Not for more than a year after.

Why not?

Because perhaps I was appropriating their space. Perhaps I was taking this venue that was for these pre-op trans women to talk about their struggles and stepping into it unwanted. Perhaps I was stepping out of my lane.

Were you?

I don't know.

What did you do?

I think the correct question is “What didn’t I do?”

I’ll bite. What didn’t you do?

I didn’t practice my voice. I didn’t give up dyeing my hair. I didn’t stop dressing like a mess. I didn’t do all of those things that are supposed to help you get by in the world without all that added baggage of being trans.

I didn’t try to pass.

I didn’t try to be a woman.

I didn’t want to. I want to be a trans woman. It’s not masochism. It’s not appropriation. I don’t think so. I think it’s living true to myself. I think it’s being honest and saying that who I am involves being trans, and that ignoring that would be doing myself a disservice.

“I was not Madison,” you said. “I am not Matthew. I can’t deny his existence, though. He was him, and to erase that, to toe the party line and say I’ve always known that I was Madison, would do a disservice to him.”

Yes, but it goes beyond that. I’m not saying simply that I was not a woman and then either at some point did become one or that, at some point, *will* become one. I’m saying that I live in that liminal space between. I can’t be anything other than what I am. I can’t live anywhere else.

There’s a lot of talk in your circles about internalized transphobia. That sense that one should hate this aspect about oneself and try to get away from it. Have you not just internalized some sort of trans euphoria? Have you not simply

bought into the sense of being different for being different's sake?

Are you playing at being devil's advocate?

Yes.

Why?

I want you to justify yourself.

Why?

Because it's important that you be able to explain yourself.

Why?

Because if you can't, how can you say you understand yourself?

You are playing devil's advocate because you are handily ignoring genderqueer people in order to get me to explain my identity.

I am, yes. So, explain.

We, as gender-nonconforming people, talk often about gender dysphoria. There is a flip side to that. There is gender euphoria. There is that sense of rightness when you glimpse the you who was meant to be in the mirror, rather than the you who you've been trained to be.

I look in the mirror and I see a woman sometimes, and that makes me happy. I look in the mirror and I see a man sometimes, and that makes me unhappy.

Does that not make you a woman?

...And sometimes, when I look in the mirror, I see this rockin' queer person, someone who is unabashedly, unashamedly trans, and *that* is when I feel euphoria.

I don't fit in cisgender spaces. I never will. I fit in trans spaces. That's the 'square hole', as it were. that's where I belong.

Are you not gender-queer, then?

Am I? So be it. That is not mutually exclusive with being a trans woman.

But to have that part of myself be erased by other trans women because I reached some magical stage on the gender escalator and stepped off hurts as much as being misgendered as a man by the worst TERF out there.

I'm happy for you.

What? Why?

You're proud. For the first time, you're proud of who you are.

Saturday is for mechanics.
Sunday is for terror.
Monday is for acceptance.
Tuesday is for purging.
Wednesday is for anxiety.
Thursday is for sleep.

It is surprisingly hard to think something real
when every indication, every word, all you feel
tells you that that must not be the case.

There's no easy way to make yourself face
that which your emotions continually deny,
no matter how true you know it to be.

But why

must all these contradictions claim events
that mean the most to us? What prevents
them from taking the unimportant? The small?
Is the import just too big? Can we not fit all
of the thing in our heads? Are we too weak?
Is the life-changing too vast to explore, to seek
out every corner?

*Have you considered that your constant seeking
may be the problem? That your anxieties leaking
all over may be what's preventing you
from recognizing what's actually true:
you can do things for yourself. It's allowed.*

It also doesn't help that there were so many delays.
The scheduler losing my application, and me counting days
after those who consulted after me got their dates;
The mishap of the letters, and me rushing past gates
and their keepers; countless thoughts of countless regrets —
regrets which hadn't yet happened — as mom frets
that maybe I will wind up hating my new body.

And why not? Why not fret? Surgery! How gaudy.
I fight with myself enough over how this surgery
is plastic, how I'm just doing something sugary
to somehow make myself somewhat more appealing.
How trite. How selfish. How lame. How revealing
of my bottomless shallowness.

*Your saving grace being, as always, dysphoria:
more than any cough or cold, more than your chorea,
it provided you with a problem. Something fixable.
It gave you a tangible solution to something integral
that plagued you.*

That I had something I could concrete at which to point
that would be fixed by this act, I could thus anoint
it as somehow more worthy, something worth doing.
If I could go through some process of ungluing,
excise this thing from myself I might become whole
in some way never before imagined.

Ah, but the toll.

There must always some arbitrary price to pay —
Self-actualization must never be free — and hey,
Everything in society must come with a reason.
To come up with letters, proof, for that season
of change must serve some sort of divine end.
To wait eighteen long months, to refuse to bend
to others' whims...

*You got your letters, you got your date, you did it.
You did your labor, you did your time. They let you fidget
and twist in the wind. Hell, they did it to you twice.
Your letters only good for one year, you had to ask nice
for a second set.*

Yes.

To preempt your 'why', I followed my own advice:
If I feel the same when I'm depressed as I do when I feel nice,
It's a thing worth doing. Eighteen months is time enough
to let at least two depressive cycles call my own bluff.
When they did not, when I panicked at having to reapply
and still pulled through in time, well, no need to justify
my actions any further. That's when it all became real.
That's when I was in. That's when I could tell just by feel
that I was ready for this change. I wasn't *ready* ready,
but I was ready enough to come off as rock steady
when I called the surgeon's office. I was visibly confident,
even at the pre-operative appointments, totally cognizant
that I didn't deserve this.

*Whether or not you deserve this is not up for debate.
Not because you do or don't so much as because the hand
fate
dealt you. You had the job, you had the insurance, the means.
You made the call. You took the step. You passed the screens.
You did this.*

And so we find ourselves in a place between.

If Matthew died on September 6th, 2012, was Madison born then?

No, I don't think so. Madison was born some years later. Maybe at some point in 2014. The years in between were a sort of liminal time.

You found yourself in a place between.

I did. There was this time in my life when I was figuring out gender. I was figuring out poly. I was figuring out working. I was figuring out not being at school and moving away from music and learning to write and all the interstices of alcoholism. Those little nooks and crannies you never know about until you start drinking in earnest.

It was like a second period of growing up. Something more refined than a rebirth. Something less grand. Something subtler.

You also learned the term 'hendiadris'.

I have a style, alright?

Right.

It's the time when I started [a][s], the time when I started to look at my life in earnest, to give thought to the fact that one might actually enjoy things, have opinions. It was the time I started to let go of irony, bit by bit.

It was the time you started to own yourself.

Maybe. Maybe not. I'm still working on that one. It feels like an ongoing struggle.

What's the old saw? You'll finally perfect it six months after death?

I think that was about when men leave puberty.

Let's talk about TIASAP.

No more, please.

Let's talk about puberty.

That first exploration? I don't know if I'm ready for that, yet.

So what are you talking about?

Well, I was going to talk about that liminal phase, but you seem to have other ideas.

That just means you're unfocused.

Well, yes.

Tell me about that place in between, then.

Shortly after we learned that Margaras died-

Less than twenty-four hours. That's pretty short.

-I wound up in Montreal on the first of many work ‘sprints’. These were to become a common fixture for the next six years. After all, working from home only gets you so far. Gotta get together, actually learn how the others on your team work. Meet.

*You had just started at Canonical. Are you sure that wasn't
the death of Matthew? Or maybe it was getting married?
Creating Younes?*

Matthew was sick for a while. Can we put it that way? He was struggling to hold on, his time was at an end, he was looking rather pale.

He was fading.

Yes.

And Madison faded in in 2014.

I was a transparent person. I was less than real. I was empty, unable to contain an identity. I was a fetch. I was held together with Blu-Tack and paperclips. I was not myself.

Are you now?

Held together with Blu-Tack? I like to think I'm moderately better put together these days.

No, yourself. Are you yourself yet?

Six months after death, remember?

Fair. What did you do during your two years as a half-entity?

Failed. Like, a lot. I failed like it was my job. I failed friends when we moved to Loveland and effectively disappeared from their lives. I failed work when I burned so hard that I burnt out. I failed at communicating. I failed in a lot of ways.

I drank, too. I stopped composing.

Was it so negative a time?

No, of course not. I'm still here. A lot of that failure was the valuable sort. I failed my years at university when I stopped composing, but found that I could still be creative when writing. I failed work when I burned out, but I also learned how to pace myself better (something I definitely hadn't learned up until that point). I learned how to talk, how to listen. At least, how to listen better, how to express myself better.

There's a lot of folks to whom I could credit those being successful failures, if there is such a thing. In a round about way, my boss from the job prior kicking my ass and making me go to therapy, even if not to the ideal therapist, set me on the path to learning how to slow down when I needed to and speed up when that was called for. Writing got me better at putting my ideas — and, at times, emotions — into words. Friends, countless friends, helped me become who I am.

What's that I'm tasting? Sweet'n Low?

Is it really that saccharine to be able to look back and say that you sucked, and that you're getting better?

She wears a pendant of stamped brass Saying “Non sum qualis eram.”

Like, obviously, it sucks to get that retrospect feeling of looking back and realizing that you were a terrible person, but it's also a good sign that you've improved. If you don't like who you were, at least it's good that you're not that, now.

Unless you don't like who you are now.

That's a different problem. Same class of problem, maybe, but a different problem.

Was it really so bad to be in this liminal space?

Of course not. I just got done saying how much I learned during that time.

You don't make it sound pleasant.

It wasn't, I suppose. I mean, obviously there was a lot of good going on in my life. I started a few relationships that are still going strong to this day. I solidified my place in the industry. [a][s] took off. Good stuff came of it. A better me came of it.

At what cost?

Well.

Okay. A lot of that time was bound up in recovery. There was the suicide attempt in March that ate up a lot of my emotional bandwidth on a daily basis for quite a while.

There are a lot of cute metaphors for how pain and grief work on a daily basis. Spoon theory is great and all, but it's starting to lose its luster for me. I like the idea of spell slots. It was like the number of spell slots I had to work with before needing a long rest was reduced by half after that, and it took me two years at least to bring it back up.

You remain a parody of yourself.

It's only been a few days since you reminded me of that.

I will never cease to do so.

Fine.

Another metaphor is that you have a box with a ball in it. On the wall of the box is a button that causes pain, exhaustion, anxiety, your

choice. When it starts out, the ball is big and with basically every movement, it bumps up against the button and activates it. Over time, the ball gets smaller and bumps up against the switch less often.

Or maybe you could think of it as endurance. You can hold a glass of water for a few minutes, but after a bit, it becomes painful, and after along time, your arm can start to feel paralyzed. Over time and with training, you might be able to endure that longer and longer.

The last two, in particular, are used often with the idea of grief in mind, which, I suppose, is fitting given how much I still bear over Margaras.

Do you feel any for Matthew?

Less, perhaps.

Was it that easy to let go?

I don't know. Maybe.

And so when was Madison born?

On, September 2, 2014, I got this email:

I recently discovered your Twitter page and I wasn't sure if I should say something or not. When I saw that you are stressing out about telling me about your name change I thought I'd better 'fess up.

I love the name "Madison". It may take me a while to get used to calling you by your new name so forgive me if I make a mistake. Madison, whatever direction your life takes you, I'll accept you, support you and love you unconditionally. Please don't stress out about my reaction.

See you Friday.

Hugs, Mom

And, two days later:

Hey Madison,

Maybe I shouldn't have opened up to you about seeing your Twitter thingy. I felt like I was being dishonest by not saying anything but it looks like you are really, really anxious about knowing that I've seen it. Yikes!

Are you OK with me visiting tomorrow? I'd love to see you but I don't want to add to your anxiety any more than I already have. Let me know if you have enough spoons.

Love, Mom

Did you not want her to come up?

No, I did. I told her:

Mom,

I'm anxious, but please come up tomorrow. I think I
need that more than anything right now.

M

That's when I was born. September 4, 2014 at 3:18 PM. Madison
Scott-Clary, 230 pounds, 73 inches.

You were born when you could own yourself.

Yes. I was born when I could share that with my mom. It was all well and good for me to be out on Twitter and what not, and it was great that JD could accept me, but the fact that I could start to regain my biological family without any lies in the way was when I opened my eyes for the first time.

How was the visit?

I don't know. I don't remember. I think it was fine. We talked about me starting hormones–

Did you talk about TIASAP?

No.

No, we did not. If she's reading this, which she may very well be, this will be how she learns about that.

How could I possibly talk to my mom about something like that? I hid my arms and legs from her for years before, and it wouldn't be for another year before I could even bring up the concept of self-harm.

That's not true.

I...well, no, it's not.

Let's talk about suicide.

Not yet.

Please.

Why not?

I'd like it to be a cohesive thing. I'd like to be able to think about it on its own, none of this coming at it sideways. I'd like to be deliberate about it.

Soon.

Yes, soon.

Telling dad was the second time I came out to family deliberately.

The third.

Third?

You told Aunt Patty that you were gay back before high school.

I...did not remember that.

Not until just now, apparently.

Apparently. I have no recollection of what I said. I have no recollection of what *she* said.

I have no recollection of her.

Hazy images at grandma's.

I guess.

Memories surrounding her.

Lots of those.

Memories of when she and her family got stranded on a sailboat between Cuba and Florida and rescued by a cruise ship. Grandma and dad smug in their assessment that she was stupid and irresponsible.

A vague, heavily pixelated picture shot by one of the cruise boat attendants.

“She’s crazy,” they said. “She has too many kids. They draw all over the walls. Her house is wild. She’s crazy.”

And me, with with my secret. My little pet lie I kept hidden from them.

Tell me about coming out to dad.

I will.

Coming out to myself and JD was more gradual. A sea-change.

Maybe that's what those two years were between Matthew and Madison were.

Nothing of him that doth fade, but doth suffer a sea-change into something rich and strange.

I suppose so. I explored around the edges of it. I touched it tentatively. I lived my life in widening circles.

Surely you mean narrowing.

Okay, yes. It was too good a line to pass up, though. Shakespeare and Rilke in one go?

There is nothing new under the sun.

Ooh, and Ecclasiastes, you spoil me.

Treat, as they say, yourself. Carry on.

There were little fits and starts between James and I. I remember laying on the couch — that awful, awful yellow couch — and him getting playful, and then some little movement of his touched a nerve and I started crying because of the way that brushed up against that me that wasn't in focus. It brought it to the forefront the fact that I didn't align with myself, that there was a lag in my proprioception, that I was falling behind myself.

Is there some word for ecstasy that doesn't imply it being positive? Something that captures the feeling of being outside oneself, beside oneself, behind oneself without implying the sense of greatness, of awe that goes along with spiritual *ekstasis*?

Dissociation?

Yeah.

That.

That little bit of panic-colored dissociation that I would later name dysphoria would come in waves. Sometimes it'd be triggered, as it was then. Sometimes it would fade slowly into view and I'd go on a tear making skirts and then it would fade back into the low background static of the anxiety that goes along with being a member of a minority identity group.

There was ecstasy, though. There was euphoria as well as dysphoria.

Yes.

The moment when my hair got long enough to put up in a ponytail.

The utter terror of shaving my legs for the first time, weird as it sounds. Outrageously stupid, and yet the feeling of *having* shaved legs was incredibly validating.

The first time I looked in the mirror and saw the trace of femininity.

The softening of skin.

The first “she” on the street.

The first “ma’am” on the phone.

Hell, the first time dressing feminine.

What, back when you were nine? When you snuck into the spare room and tried on one of Julie’s dresses?

Holy shit could you just shut up.

Wow, touched a nerve, there.

We will talk about that later.

You know what? No, I take that back. We'll talk about it now.

Tell me about the dress.

It's not even about the dress.

It's not about the dress.

It's about that whole point in my life. It's about the way home ways. It's about the way I was left to my own devices. Every kid's dream, right?

I had no father. I had the angry, drunken man who lived upstairs. I have the man who woke me in the morning to drive me to school, who clearly showed up at some point during the night. I had this unpredictable animal living in the house that I had to please, and there were no rules for what would or wouldn't please him.

I was left to my own devices and there was always something that I needed to be doing and doing correctly, and I was never sure what it was. Do good in school, sure. Grow up to become an important engineer of some kind, sure. The details in between, though, were hazy.

The rules are made up and you're always in trouble.

Or about to be, yes.

You know now that he was flailing at life as much as you are now.

I do.

You know now that he was actually in quite a bit of pain.

Yes.

I also know that he would close out the bar that Julie worked out, drinking the whole time.

I know that if I went with, I'd spent countless hours meandering between the corner booth in the bar and the Pac-Man and Millipede cabinets up front.

The owners of the restaurant would dote on you. They would give you free kitsch from the glass case by the register. Little sticky-backed calenders with tear-off months and pens to draw on the backs of the pages. They'd let you pick out the licorice breathmints from the brass bowl by the register, the ones shaped like chalky pillows. They'd let you play hide-and-seek with Kevin, the other kid being raised in the bar by a drunken father.

I know that he and Julie had bowling league on Saturdays and I was left home alone.

I know that if I went with, I'd be fed quarters in a steady stream to spend time in the arcade room or on the little toy vending machines.

You would buy the little plastic snakes made from links that would let you bend them into squares and cubes. You would drink coke after coke. You would wonder how they managed to oil the lanes so perfectly up to the foul line and no further, and when you saw the machine that did so, you were entranced by its single-minded, track-bound life. You watched him sing Devo's I'm Too Sexy for karaoke, mincing about on the stage and producing gales of laughter in his parody of what he knew of gay culture. You were just starting to think of yourself that way.

It was a spear through my heart.

Tell me about the dress.

Left to my own devices, I prowled the house.

I stole a beer. I stole some Kahlua. I stole a little bit of brandy, but I hated it. I stole some of his pot. I stole a condom.

He was so angry about that. He grilled you and you denied it.

I realize, later, that the reason he was so angry was because, if I didn't steal it, it would've meant that Julie was cheating on him.

Tell me about the dress.

I stole a paring knife and obsessively sharpened it. I cut at my wrists until, confronted with the realization that I would be asked about it, I stopped and cut on my big toes instead.

You told your friend, Julene. She had no idea what to do, confronted with such information. You were eleven.

What does one say to being told that your friend is self-harming? I would never tell anyone about self harm again, I promised myself.

Tell me about the dress.

I tried on Julie's dress. I tried on her teddy. I prowled, naked, through her rack of clothing in the spare room for things to try on. I spent a lot of time naked. I spent a lot of time masturbating. I wondered if I was gay because I tried on her clothing, or I tried on her clothing because I was gay.

You told your friends confidently in third grade that lesbians were just women who wanted to be men and that gay men were just men who wanted to be women.

Matthew said those things, but he had been dying since birth.

Tell me about the dress.

I tried on Julie's clothes with a mixture of guilt and shame. It was titillating and humiliating. It was transgressive. At some point, I figured that, the ontology of being gay aside, I had better get used to wearing such, as that's just what gay men did.

Your anger is cooling down.

Yeah, it is. I can't tell if it's you shifting it away from my dad and onto the dress, or if it's just getting the words out there that's helping so much.

Dig deeper.

The thing I like to say about my dad is that he didn't really want a son, he wanted a buddy. He wanted someone he could be smart with, or, failing that, be smart at. He wanted someone he could chill with and, at the end of the day, go home.

He wanted someone he could drink with. Someone he could take to the bar.

Yes. He seemed fundamentally uncomfortable with the fact that I was his offspring.

It wasn't an always thing, of course. There were a few times we really connected.

Yes.

One time, we taped up glow in the dark stars on my bedroom ceiling and walls to make my bedroom into a night sky when the lights were out.

Yes.

One time, when driving you to school on a snowy morning, there was an accident far ahead and traffic was stopped on Highway 93, and I had to pee so bad, he had me just step out of the car and pee, blocked off by the door with my back to the car behind me. Traffic started moving then and I had to walk awkwardly to finish peeing before I could hop back inside the moving truck. We laughed. On days we knew we'd be late because of weather, we'd grab french toast sticks from Burger King.

Yes.

One time, we lay on our backs on a beach at Lake Powell and stared up at the real night sky and talked about the satellites that went overhead. We would try to guess, based on how fast they moved, whether we were seeing the same ones again later. He talked of his sisters, Patty and Sue, and how they were doing. He talked of his brother, Joe. He told me Joe was the trouble kid, how he got caught on PCP once and when grandma brought him home from the police station, he missed the door to the house entirely and walked into the door jamb and fell down laughing. Grandma kicked at him, cursing up a storm. He told me about his dad, blowing up an inner tube and floating out into the middle of the pond with a six pack or a bottle of liquor and drinking as he looked up at these very same stars, floating on his back. About how sometimes, his dad would fall asleep out there and grandma would have to throw rocks at him to wake him up the next morning so he could paddle back ashore and get to work.

One time, after you switched majors from biochem to music education, you went skiing with him, but had an upset stomach, so you stopped to buy some Alka-Seltzer tablets. You asked what kept them from fizzing until they were dropped in water, and he started to explain about buffers, then cut himself short and said coldly, “But you won’t learn about that, now. I don’t expect you really want to know.” He had you ski alone the rest of the afternoon.

Yes.

One time, you told your best friend in the area, Joseph, that you had rode your bike to the mall, Villa Italia, God rest its weary soul, and bought magic cards. He mentioned that while out with you and your dad, and your dad fell behind a

few steps and kicked you. You rode home in silence. Joseph refused to ride with you again.

Yes.

One time, you kissed him on the cheek after he hugged you good night and he laughed in your face. “You thought I was your mom, didn’t you?” he said, then got up and left the room, shutting the door behind him. You thought, years later, decades later, that he really meant to say, “You thought I was your parent, didn’t you? Best buds don’t kiss.” You never kissed him again, and he never kissed you at all.

Yes.

When teaching you to read with the book Hop on Pop by Dr. Seuss, he jokingly warned you never to actually hop on him or he’d kick you from one side of the house over the roof to the other, and then back again. Joking, of course, but you were already so terrified of him you believed every word.

He said the same during our one talk on sex. That if I ever got a girl pregnant and didn’t use a condom, he’d do it five times and then leave me on my own to be a dad.

He raised me, but the definition of ‘raise’ here is a very elastic one.

Dig deeper.

The one thing we did together that we both seemed to earnestly enjoy was skiing.

There were other things you enjoyed.

Together?

Reading, perhaps?

He tried to get me to read *Flowers for Algernon*, but I wound up skimming parts, enough to keep him happy when he asked me about them, all while reading the copy of *Mossflower* I'd hidden down the back of the couch. The closest we got was reading *The Dark Tower*.

Catch?

One-sided and short-lived. We played a few times. Then, after telling me to "get under" a fly ball, it hit me square on the forehead and he laughed, telling me I was supposed to get my glove up, too. We never played again.

The dogs?

Dad used to punish the dogs by locking them in the basement. If he was really mad, he'd toss them down the stairs by the scruff.

School? Math? Computers? Being smart?

Listen.

You have to understand that there were only two valid emotions for my dad: pride and anger. Being good at computers and math was not something that was enjoyable in its own right. Not for the both of us. The part that we shared there was that we had to have something we could declaim about. Something we could pull out and show that we might be proud of it.

So you went skiing, because you both were about the same level at that.

I bounced, he didn't.

That's a factor of your age and size. I don't think you actually bounce all that well.

Fair.

You're right, though. We went skiing together because that was just sort of the thing we enjoyed — for different reasons, I'm sure — and it just so happened that we enjoyed doing it around each other, too.

There would be mishaps, of course. Forgetting boots or poles was a big one. I forgot my poles once and thought I'd be found, dead, in the woods later that day. We wound up renting a pair. From then on, I was determined to learn how to ski without them.

It turned out to be fun, at least.

Yes.

We fell into a habit. Go skiing every other weekend, since that was my time staying with him, from late fall to mid spring. We'd make the drive from the suburbs west of Denver up into the mountains. We'd hit Winter Park, our favorite, or we'd maybe run over to Arapahoe Basin or Loveland Pass.

We'd ski from nine in the morning until about three in the afternoon. We'd grab lunch. Dad would grab 'beer-thirty' a little bit after that and let me do a few runs on my own while he chatted up a bartender.

You would get the buffalo green chili every lunch, when you wound up at Winter Park. At Loveland, it would be the build-your-own pizzas. It was all so routine.

It was the most comfortably routine thing that we did together. Not even school could top that.

It was, above all, pleasant.

At times.

Yes.

At times it was stressful. At times it felt like we were going skiing so that my dad could take some time away from home, away from Julie. At times, when Julie came with us, it would be more stressful on the slopes than it was at home.

And then it fell apart.

Yes,

There's no one time I could point to and say, "Ah-hah, *this* is when things fell apart." There were a few indicators, to be sure, but no one single instance.

There was only that last ski trip to Steamboat.

When?

My birthday.

Which?

I don't even remember. Middle school? Freshman year of high school?

Had life started yet?

It must have. It must have been high school, then. It must have been spring break. It must have been, because I could drive, then. Dad made me take my turn driving his new truck while he sat in the passenger seat and drank glumly. Tecate after Tecate. Julie sat in the back and stayed quiet. Even then the cracks were showing in their relationship.

It started snowing on the drive.

Yes.

You drove a fraction of an inch too close to the shoulder, your right wheel veered from the dark tracks plowed through the thin layer of snow by the car in front of you. He shouted, “Pull over at the next exit, if you’re going to drive like that. Snow could cause too much drag on the tires and drag us off the road.”

Yes.

He was drunk and in pain. His shoulder again. He yelled at Julie. Told you both to let him drive in silence.

Yes.

When you got to the condo that you’d rented. He took four or five advil with a Corona, apologized sullenly, and went to go lay down.

I don’t remember any of the rest of the trip. All I remember is that we watched *Fellowship of the Ring* and that, at one point on the drive back, I asked a question about angular momentum.

*You wanted to promise him, visibly, that you were still smart.
You wanted to appeal to him in a way that you knew he'd
take well.*

I wanted him to be okay with me.

Dig deeper.

Suicide

If life started in high school, if that was birth, then running away
was conception.

*It was the first sign you gave that you might have a claim of
ownership over yourself.*

Is it alright if I include something I wrote about it a long time ago?

Maybe.

Will you feel left out?

Maybe. Will you?

I guess.

June 10, 2015:

I think we all have a lot of formative moments in our lives. For me, it was stuff like coming out, the realization of my own mortality, the suicide attempt, and so on. I think that they tend to fall into two basic categories: those which affect us consciously, which we think about from day to day, with enough frequency to say ‘often’; and those which affect us more subconsciously, where we can go years or decades without really thinking about them, and yet they still inform so many of your actions.

Running away spent a lot of time in the subconscious camp, quietly informing several aspects of how I viewed myself and how I viewed the world around me. It was only recently, in the last year or so, that it’s come to the forefront, thanks largely to recent discussions with friends, family, and therapists. It’s only through that process that I’ve come to realize just how formative an event it really was.

In 1997, at eleven years old, I switched from living with my mom full time to living with my dad full time. My parents had divorced at some point early in my childhood, when I was too young to remember, and I grew up knowing nothing else.

The switch was part of a way to make sure that I grew up to be a balanced person. Having spent so much of my childhood in my mom's household, it was time for me to spend more time with my dad than the schedule that we had maintained until then, Wednesday nights and every other weekend. The move was set for the time when I would be switching schools, anyway – I had just left fifth grade, and that was the time when middle school started in Boulder county.

I remember feeling a mix of excitement and apprehension as the date neared for the switch. On the one hand, it was exciting to be able to spend more time with my dad, who had always been keen on doing things with me that were fun. We'd go skiing, boating, spend a day trying to make the best paper airplanes, learn how to use the computer. On the other, though, I was apprehensive that I would be spending more time with my dad, who had always been somewhat distant, spending much of his time at the bar where my stepmother worked as a bartender, caring more about the grades that I brought home than my experience in school. In some senses, we were in line with each other and our expectations of what a parent-child relationship should be, and in others, we found ourselves at odds.

Even so, things wound up working out alright for sixth grade. I moved in with my dad, and moved to a new school. I had to spend one more year in elementary school, as Jefferson county didn't start junior high until seventh grade, but it served me well. I wound up in a 'gifted and talented' program at the school due to how well I did at my previous school, and found the work to be both more engaging and

more intense. My grades started to drop, I started to get bouts of depression and anxiety. At one point, I forged my parents' signatures on my *Friday Folder*, which was supposed to be a weekly communication between my parents and my teacher, leading to a few weeks of being in trouble with both my dad and my mom.

Even so, although I was beginning to struggle for the first time in my life, I did my best to please my dad and maintain the enjoyable, if enigmatic, relationship that we had had up until then. I missed my mom, to be sure, having spent so much of my life until then living primarily with her, but I still felt like I could do well enough and excel in school living with my dad.

There is much to talk about.

Should I stop?

No, carry on for now.

I don't remember much about my summer between sixth and seventh grades, other than I had almost certainly gone back to the summer camp that I had gone to every summer before. I remember that this was the first time I started really enjoying writing. After leaving school for the summer, a friend and I had exchanged addresses and promised to write each other a letter over the summer. I don't remember if we actually did, but those drafts of letters turned into my first attempt at journalling, which would lead me to writing stuff like this – putting my introspection down in words.

In the fall of 1998, I began seventh grade at junior high, one of those transitions where students go from being the oldest kids in school to the youngest. I figured that school would be similar, that it would be as though class had picked up where it had left off.

It didn't.

Junior high and middle school is when they start introducing separate teachers for separate subjects, rather than a single teacher for core curriculum and separate teachers only for specialized subjects such as art, music, and physical education. This threw me for a loop, at first, and I wasn't really sure why until I started digging back into my past over the last few years. What had started happening as puberty continued to roar through me is that depressive and anxious tendencies really started to take root. I would start fearing math class, rather than the subject of math with a familiar teacher, start worrying about the fact that band was mixed-grade and I would be pitted against eighth graders.

As a pre-teen, I had no idea what anxiety, panic, and depression were. I thought I was going crazy. My journals at the time were filled with fretting that I was having 'psychotic episodes' and wondering when these increasingly common attacks would become the new normal and coherent thought the brief rays of sunshine.

At the same time, I remember life getting harder for my dad. Things were happening at work – bad things – and while I can't remember if it was that I had become more receptive to this or there had been actual changes, the perceived shift in my dad's mood started to wear on me. Over the summer, he had announced that I was grown-up enough to stay home while he went to the bar for the evening. I'd get home at four or so, and dad would get home at nine or ten at night, having sussed out many of his problems of the day at work. I'd be in bed, or maybe we'd watch Deep Space Nine, and then we'd both go to bed.

Do you remember it being this way?

I don't. Or maybe I do, but the time since when I wrote this has colored my interpretation of it.

You sound upset, now. Back when you wrote this, you just sounded weary.

I suppose I was. I was weary in general, then. I was writing this from a tired, point of view. I was the caryatid. I was tired.

You are still.

I've learned to bear the load a little better.

In junior high, report cards came quarterly. My first one came sometime in October. It was not good.

My dad had become increasingly harsh on the topic of grades over the previous few weeks. Parent teacher conferences had not gone well at all, with my math teacher having particularly harsh things to say about me. I don't even remember on what day of the week this happened, though I want to say Thursday. Dad came home for long enough to make us both dinner before he would head out to the bar. Although neither of us mentioned the fact that my poor grades were in my backpack, he must've known what the date had signified, as, before he left, he said something to the effect of, "When I get back home from seeing Julie, you'll show me your report card."

I didn't know what to do. Kill myself? I'd tried half-heartedly in the past. I collected the knife I'd stolen and kept in my desk. It was too dull. I had found a mirror from a makeup compact some days before, and I broke the glass, thinking I could use a piece of that instead, but couldn't manage to get any of the shards of glass actually out of the compact, and as time drew on, I felt less and less like actually dying, as opposed to simply ceasing to be.

Suicide

Hold on.

Yes?

Let's take a step back.

Okay.

You're about to mix the clinical with the reality.

I know. You know that. We wrote this story.

Yes.

Are you having doubts as to posting it?

Yes. And here is where you start mixing the clinical with the experiential.

There is one story, but there are two ways to tell it.

Can we retell it?

The whole thing?

No. You don't have to go back and change what you wrote before, at least not the preceding paragraphs. But we need to make this ours now.

Is the rest not good?

It's all perfectly serviceable. It's all perfectly you-in-2015.

That it is. I wasn't quite so heavy with the lilac scent on my words in those days.

It still gets a little purple.

I guess.

Let's cut a deal, then.

Oh? You want to edit it?

You want to edit it. You want to make it more relevant. You want to make it more 2019. You want to make it fit. You want to understand, not just regurgitate.

Okay, fair.

Let me talk about the clinical side. You go back to the other version of the story.

Okay.

What was happening at this point, is that you were having an honest to goodness panic attack. You were entering a fugue state.

I froze for several minutes, probably about an hour, sitting on my bed and holding a broken mirror in my hands. All thoughts had left me, and all I could think about was not being. Not being here, not being at all.

Having decided not to kill myself, I put on a hoodie, went up stairs and emptied the quarter jar of quarters, left the broken mirror on the counter, and grabbed my bike. I had no idea what I would do, where I would go. I just knew that I needed out of there. That place wasn't a place I could be.

Still in a trance, I made my way to what I assumed would be a safe space to hide out for a while, long enough for my dad to not be out

looking for me. I don't know why that was something I was thinking of, but it was. I rode my bike to the nearby Wal-Mart, and hid behind it, where the semi trailers were parked. I hid between two storage containers in the back, the stars invisible to me due to the bright lights of the parking lot, and yet the shadows were such that I remained in total darkness.

You needed to get away. You needed to not be there. You didn't have the language to explain panic, and you didn't understand the importance of escape.

Yeah. How could I have? No one had thought to teach me.

You had boundaries for what you felt were healthy means of interaction, and no means to communicate when they had been crossed. You had been slogging through anxiety with no way to explain to yourself or others what anxiety was, and you had crossed the point where you could continue to exist in that state.

The only solution was escape. Escaping into an internal world had worked until my dad demanded to see the report card, and escape by death hadn't panned out. The only route left to me was literally escaping the situation.

As the night wore on and the clock struck nine, I realized that I couldn't stay behind the Wal-Mart forever. I'd need some place to go. With only my bike, my hoodie, and five dollars in quarters, I biked the four miles from where I had been camped to the nearest bus station serving the route that would take me back to Boulder. I had no plans beyond getting to Boulder, other than I figured I could be homeless there in relative safety.

That's where you spent the coldest night of your life.

The last bus to Boulder had already left, and so I was left on my own from about eleven that night until nearly six in the morning. I slept off and on on the bench in the bus-stop shelter. I hadn't brought my bike lock with me, so I kept my bike leaning against the bench where I was dozing. I eventually got too paranoid and tied the sleeve of my hoodie around the top bar of the bike while I huddled deep within the relatively thin cotton of the jacket, no protection against the cold of the Colorado night.

At some point during the night, your anxiety abated enough to let you get some more perspective on the situation, and you started to think in terms of what you would do.

I would take the bus to Boulder, get off near the then-open Crossroads Mall, and see if I could get something to eat.

You never quite made it back to baseline in terms of anxiety, however. You were riding on a high, the fugue state constantly re-conquering you and leaving you paralyzed for hours at a time.

The bus was warm. It had eaten \$3.50 of my total of \$5, but it was totally worth it. I fell asleep in the back seat within minutes of getting on, and was only awoken when the bus reached the end of the line and the kindly driver (who surely knew what was up) shook me awake and helped me onto my bike.

For lack of anything better to do, I rode my bike from the Walnut Street Station to my old elementary school. School wouldn't be starting for another half hour or so, so I camped out in a playground

near by, affectionately known as Rock Park. I sat atop the sculpture-cum-playground that made up the park's central feature and watched elementary schoolers trudge toward their classes.

With a bit of rest under your belt and once more in familiar territory—

Literally three-quarters of a mile from my mom's house, at the time.

—you were starting to come out of your state of panic.

I was left with the dilemma of basically being a fugitive. I couldn't go to my mom's house, and I could never return to my dad's. I was no longer anxious – my brain couldn't hold that anymore – I was simply tired and sad.

Without anywhere to go or anything to do, I made my way back up to my original goal of Crossroads and puttered around the mall for a bit. My \$1.50 wouldn't buy me anything, so I just strolled around the bookstore for a while, always a favorite spot of mine. As I headed back out to where I'd left my bike in front of the entrance, I was startled by a red Honda Civic pulling up directly in front of me. My mom had found me. She admitted immediately that she had been canvassing the bookstores in town looking for me.

Even in your current state, you were a total dork.

The rest of that day and the next were a blur of crying. I was crying. My mom was crying.

Your dad may have been crying,

Maybe, but it wasn't the type of thing I saw or heard from him. Mostly, he was angry.

I remember heated phone calls back and forth several times throughout the next few days. He had found my journal and accused me, “If you feel like you’re going crazy, maybe we should put you in the hospital. Is that what you want from us?”

I couldn’t answer.

Might’ve done you some good. Gotten you some help.

“I’m throwing out a bunch of your stuff, since you don’t care about your place here.”

No answer.

*Stuff. Gifts. Clothing. Toys. Things piled high to, as you felt,
buy your loyalty.*

“What’s with the broken mirror?”

No answer.

You couldn’t tell him about the numinous aspect of it that drives that imagery in so many trashy teenage poetry notebooks, about how it came crashing down over you like a wave. And you definitely couldn’t tell him about wanting to use it to kill yourself.

“What is it you want from me?”

What did you want from him?

I struggled for a way to put into words the anxiety, panic, and depression that had slowly taken over my life from the moment puberty had hit, exacerbated by the fact that I was living in a place where I felt distinctly unwelcome. I think I wound up mumbling something about the fact that, with my dad gone all evening at the bar, I had no contact with

someone in utter control of my life other than through punishment.
Even then, as a child, that only felt partly true.

Dig deeper.

That was exhausting.

The old blog post?

Yes. Exhausting in the sense that you have to hold three versions of yourself in your head at once. You have to hold in your mind the version of you who, in 1998, had such a large panic attack that he ran away from home. You have to hold in your mind the version of you who, in 2015, was struggling through the early stages of transition, who was finally getting into the meat of things with therapy. And you have to hold me in your mind.

You have to remember that I'm powered by a small cantaloupe. Holding all three of those in my head at once would be a bit much.

One of us was getting squeezed out.

Did you feel neglected?

That's nostalgia: neglect of the present in favor of the past.

I suppose it is. I'll refrain from diving into a blog post like that again.

You can, just mind your boundaries.

I will.

Tell me about running away.

Again?

You-who-live-in-2019, tell me about running away.

One of us mentioned before that it was the moment at which I started to assert ownership over myself.

We both did.

I suppose I stand by that, then. Stand by the idea that that was conception to the birth that came in high school.

But it needs some qualifications.

Qualify away.

One qualification that it needs is that, at the moment, just as with so many other forms of conception, it was borne of some baser part of me. It was not some conscious thing. It was not this clean and well-thought-out experience, sleek by design.

It was a release of terror into action. I was blacking out from fear. I was so full of adrenaline that living my life as a vagrant was more acceptable to me than waiting for my dad to come home. It was an act that happened. Not something I did.

Some folks try to conceive.

Fair.

Some folks try and plan out their memoirs.

Fair.

Another qualification that needs to be made is that, while I'm willing to accept this was about the time I started to assert ownership over myself, I don't think it happened while running away. Not that night.

When did it happen?

It happened that morning when I sat atop the rocks of Rock Park. I sat atop the rocks and watched kids walking along the cul-de-sac toward Eisenhower, my old Elementary school.

I watched them walking and thought about how much bigger their backpacks looked than mine did when I was in school.

I watched them and I thought about how big my backpack might get in high school, and realized that I wouldn't find out.

I watched them and I thought about going to knock on the door at my mom's house. It was five blocks away.

And then you chose not to.

Yes.

Dig deeper.

When I was getting ready to leave bConnected, I started struggling with movements. It started as a twitchiness in the hands. It started with a wringing of the fingers. It started with a slight nod of the head. It started in so many tiny ways that I didn't really put together.

Twitching, twitching. Screw lorazepam. Gonna walk the dog instead :D

— Maddy, whose tail is behind her (@drab_makyo) August 19, 2012

Twitch twitch.

Yeah.

And how does this tie in with your dad, again?

Getting there.

I'll be patient.

Good.

The twitchiness grew worse. It grew to a jerk of the head to the side. It went from the occasional thing to something that hit every second and a half or so. It started impeding my speech. I started stuttering. I lost my balance and had to use a cane for a while.

It came and went. Not all of that happened at once.

When I think back on that time, it's just a smear of time from when I got the offer at Canonical and Further Confusion 2013 a few months later. There are bits of time that stick out as being particularly tic-filled, of course, and bits of time I know I was free of it.

You were free of it in Montreal, at your intro sprint.

Yes, and it came back during UDS in Copenhagen. It came back and it stayed.

Did it?

For our purposes here, yes, it did.

'Our'?

Listen. When your body rebels and tries to shake your brain out through your ears and dislodge your eyes, when your friend dies in a car crash and you only find out about it a week later, when you start a brand new job and fly all the way across the country, getting stuck in London along the way, time stops making a whole lot of sense. At some point, I had the tic, and it stayed.

Touchy tonight, aren't we?

You're being as helpful as ever.

Not my department.

At some point during this whole process, Thanksgiving rolled around and I went to visit dad.

Oh.

See?

I emailed him ahead of time, warning him that I was struggling with a transient tic disorder caused — or at least exacerbated — by one of my medications. I felt so embarrassed, to be seen by him like that.

Like what? Vulnerable?

Yes. To be seen as weak by someone who placed so high a premium on strength.

He was hardly a body-builder.

Well, no. Not physical strength. Moral, perhaps? He certainly prided himself on his composure, and this was me in a state where I was literally unable to maintain my composure.

At least you had an excuse for avoiding eye contact.

It was, oddly, a fairly calm and cozy evening. JD came with. We had some turkey breast. I brought a bottle of bourbon and some homemade cranberry sauce. We talked.

It was nice.

It was. This was at the time in my life where I was learning what the proper amount of ‘dad’ was that I could handle. About three hours. Maybe a little more. Any more than that and we’d both fall back into our old habits. We had much better reunions than we did an ongoing friendship.

And you drank, then.

Yes.

You laughed when you knocked the bottle of bourbon off the counter and immediately caught it before it fell to the ground. “The tic has led to my reflexes getting better,” you said.

Dad didn’t quite know how to accept me acknowledging my vulnerability.

It was nice.

In a smirking sort of way, I guess. In a *oh wow I'm different now* way. In a *I guess I'm finally starting to grow out of being your son* way.

Matthew had died.

Yes. Matthew had died, and we were doing Thanksgiving together.

It was nice.

It was. He had come to the wedding, so the truth was out, as it were, about JD and I, though he surely had known already. During one of his prior visits to Fort Collins, he had invited me down to grab dinner with him in Lakewood sometime, saying, “You can bring your...ah, you can bring James with you, too.”

Tell me about ‘man’.

Matthew was dead. Madison was conceived. She would be born soon.

Dig deeper.

October 26, 2014:

Hey Matt

Been a while since I've heard from you. You guys get all settled

Doing well here. Grandma is getting a bit more frail. We are goin

Dad

Sent from my BlackBerry 10 smartphone.

Never one to beat around the bush.

No indeed.

Three and a half hours later, my reply:

Hey dad,

Things are going fine at the house, though things are always more

It's a shame to hear about grandma, but I suppose that's sort of

In all, things are going well, though I think I need to be more h

In my life as a gay man, I believe I only ever really come out in

All of the other times I had to come out to family or friends, it

Needless to say, I'm not all that good at coming out.

Running away was a turning point for me - for both of us, really. I think that we have always bee

After that incident, however, I shut down even more. I didn't feel that talking through emotions

It has been my goal with my friends and partners to have relationships based on the ability to sha

So what's this about?

I've been having troubles fitting within a masculine role for as long as I can remember. Early on

Moving to college, of course, provided all sorts of opportunities to explore. Although I spent ti

Somewhere around then, I understood what feminism was all about. I realized how everything from w

Gayle Rubin describes gender as the aggregation of "chromosomal sex, hormonal exposure, internal r

It's only recently that I've decided to come at this problem of identity and personal friction in

What this boils down to, really, is that I'm more than just uncomfortable in a masculine role, it

I've found ways to soothe this friction, however, and, as I mentioned, I'm deliberately pursuing t

I waffle quite a bit on whether or not to adopt the label transgender for myself, but in a lot of

Going back to Rubin's definition of gender, it is my psychological identification that is not in

As far as definitions go, this makes me more "genderqueer" or "genderfluid", rather than simply "t

Big picture, what does this mean?

I've already brought up the name change, and as yet, that's one i

I am, however, still me. There is nothing above the surface leve

These changes allow me to live in a way that makes me content. I

What does this mean for you?

Dad, I really appreciate all that you've done for me. I owe so m

I understand that the changes that I am making for myself, now th

What it comes down to is that I'm writing to seek your acceptance

I know that our communication over the years has been rough in pl

Apologies for so many words, I know I wrote rather a lot. I'll s

Always yours,

Madison Scott-Clary

Some resources:

[0] A good explanation of neutrois/agender/genderqueer:

Take everything that you associate with masculinity and put i

- [1] A good set of pages on the subject of transgender issues and gender variance as a whole: <http://www.google.com>
- [2] A well-written video on non-binary gender, sexuality, and presentation: <http://www.youtube.com>
- [3] A friend, who is going through similar changes in their life, wrote a really good analogy on <http://www.google.com>
- [4] A really good paper on the types of things I've been working through over the past decade or so.

I'm ashamed to be associated with you.

Oh come now.

2300 words.

It's not that bad.

You have four footnotes

Okay, maybe it's a little bad.

One of them is an academic paper.

Okay, it's bad.

Remember when I had the accident with the Pathfinder, though?

He told you not to talk like a lawyer, that shit happens. I don't think that means write an essay for class.

Is it your department to experience just how difficult it is to interact with him.

No. It's my department to mirror that back at you.

Interacting with him was walking a minefield of proclamations. One didn't just discuss a topic. One didn't just feel emotions and have a heart to heart. One learned about something and showed that they knew what they were talking about. I had to talk like a lawyer. I had to write an essay.

Matthew was dead, and this was me letting him go. Madison was a newborn. Less than two months old. I couldn't not be careful. I was too fragile.

What was his reply?

Four days later.

Hey Madison

First things first. Congratulation on that vacation. They seem to

Thanks for the letter. I am always glad to get something to read

Anyway, I am truly happy for you. It's your life and it should be

Still looking forward to seeing you Madison. This weekend is a bi

Love Dad

Dig deeper.

I went through all this effort to come out to him. It was one of the only times I've come out and had it be 100% my choice, my words. I could write what I want, explain my feelings.

Ish.

Well, sure. I had to couch it in language catered to him. I had to couch it almost as an apology. But it was my choice to come out, when I could've just hid.

I typed up my letter. I ran it past Robin. I slept on it. I hit send.

You hit send and then you put your laptop away and curled up to rest your head on Robin's lap.

It took a lot out of me. Being vulnerable is exhausting. Being vulnerable around my dad doubly so.

It went better than you had hoped.

Much.

And then you met up in person.

Yes. We met up for dinner in Loveland, and he just couldn't quite do it. JD couldn't come for some reason or another, so it was just me and my dad and Maurine sitting at a table in Door 222.

I went in boy mode. I wasn't quite sure that I was ready to be that vulnerable around him, not enough to be in a skirt and makeup.

You came out as ace. You couldn't have been that shy.

I was also a little drunk. Maybe after a few drinks, I thought maybe a bit more vulnerability might not be such a bad thing.

It was just all too much, though, for someone I saw so infrequently. He couldn't use my name. He couldn't call me Madison.

Man. Dude.

Yeah. That's all I got. I got one 'Matt' and an apology, and then the rest of the night, he would only call me 'man' or 'dude'.

Do you think it was intentional?

Probably not.

But it hurt.

Yes. It's one thing to not be able to remember a name on the spot, or to mess up on pronouns, but it's another to default to specifically gendered terms when your child just came out to you as trans.

I know, I know, they're not *that* gendered. Folks argue that 'dude' is gender neutral with some frequency.

But still.

But still.

And then you stopped really trying.

Yeah.

I talked with my therapist not too long ago about what I would tell someone coming out as trans who had a parent who reacted how my dad did, with that same nonchalance, that same uncaring attitude. I said I would tell them to try to make their voice heard up until a point.

"Up until a point?" she asked. "Do you think there's a point where you stop trying to make your voice heard?"

"It's less than it is there's a point where you have to make the cost-benefit analysis and decide whether or not it's worth it to try any harder."

"That's kind of harsh, don't you think? To say 'it's not worth it to continue this relationship with my family member'."

I shrugged. "Maybe it is, but at a certain point, it costs more to keep trying than any benefit I would get out of him really listening and understanding."

You cut your losses.

Yeah. I decided that it was either going to be too much energy or just plain hurt to much to keep trying and to keep failing with him, so I just kinda gave up.

You could have kept going.

Maybe.

Maybe he would have come around.

Maybe.

He could have started to see you as his daughter. You could have told him about the HRT, about surgery. You could have told him about drinking and poly and so many other things.

Maybe. But at this point, it's too many 'maybe's. I'm too tired to deal with something so important with someone I'm not even sure I respect.

It's okay not to respect them him that he was around Matthew. What about the him that's around Madison? What about the him that went and sought out therapy? What about the him who said, quietly, "I was a real asshole. I'm starting to realize that now."? Is that him not worth loving?

Maybe I love him.

I'm just not sure I can let my guard down around him enough to respect him.

The him who kicked me, the him who I ran away from, the him who taught me that moods were a thing for cattle and loveplay...that him is still too near the surface. I have spent years of my life, hours and hours of therapy, I have spent thousands of dollars trying to unwind what damage he did to me. I resent that. I loathe that I hate who I used to be in part because he made me that way.

Maybe I do love him, I'm just not yet sure that I don't also hate him.

There's some duality between sources of meaning,
Between the types of stories we use to back identity.
It's not quite good & bad or light & dark,
Though I'm not yet sure just how to define it.

Dad used to punish the dogs
by locking them in the basement.
If he was really mad,
he'd toss them down there by the scruff.

Mom moved me & her dogs to a new house —
moved us three days early during the divorce.
Her dog punched my ex stepdad in the crotch the night before,
the nut-shot to end all nut-shots, & our time there.

Few things make me feel as deeply about life as parenthood,
even if it's just me caring for my dogs.
Some reminders of that are intense enough to be raw, painful,
salt in the wounds of mortality, maybe, or the ache of maternal
love.

The meaning behind the story of me & my dogs
comes with a story of its own, or maybe several.
It's bound up in stories to come,
& these stories nest infinitely deep.

Remembering that & shaping that,
It's a part of making the meaning in my life.
This isn't better against worse,
it's not mom against dad.

It's not a dichotomy at all, really,
now that I think about it.
It's something subtler, comfortably complex, a topic of its own.
I guess it's just meaning & self.

Do you ever worry that maybe he should be forgiven?

Oh, constantly.

Here is the difference betwixt the poet and the mystic, that the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false. For all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead. Mysticism consists in the mistake of an accidental and individual symbol for an universal one.

Pretty.

I didn't write it.

I know.

I scramble through great heaps of words and sounds to try and at least pin some of them to fleeting symbols. Maybe then I'll be able to learn to see more of the accidental and individual symbols.

Too many words, too many sounds.

Yes.

You wrote four pieces about the winds coming down over the foothills near Boulder (for, of all things, wind quartet), just to try and capture one ecstatic experience.

I like those. I like the result.

You like the first two, most of all. They remind you of how hollow you felt, how you could feel the wind blow through you, vibrating your soul like the pipe of an organ, exciting you to ever higher harmonics.

Yes.

But then you kept writing.

Yeah. I make a terrible poet.

You make a terrible mystic. Your poetry's just okay.

How can I capture that essence of stillness? How can I become nothing?

Not reaching. Not trying.

How can I read the ecstasy of signs? How can I feel those black birds bursting free of my hunched shoulders?

Step beside yourself. Take your own hand.

How can I feel the cord that ties me to the center of the earth? How can I see where it leads? How can I walk the spiral?

Reach down, bury your fingers in rich earth, take root.

The cant of ritual.

The scent of incense.

The rhythm of chant.

The ripple of water.

Call and response.

The flicker of a candle.

Voices echoing voices echoing voices echoing...

Clay between fingertips.

And then?

We wandered around for a bit before ending up sprawled in a fire-escape at FHS with Shannon in my lap, me in Ash's lap, and Andrew in Kiran's lap. Andrew ditched to go shooting with Ash and Kiran, while I went to bomb a history test. That's when things started getting really weird. I had a percoset relapse (whether that's what it was or not, it felt oddly similar to the real thing: an incurable itch buried beneath my skin, to the point where I can't actually scratch it) near the end of the period, and then in choir I imploded from empathy - so many emotions from others that I had no room for my own. Then, horns grew from my chest and head, and wings from my back; a giant fox escaped, left, and exploded into a thousand birds over Viele. Mind you, none of this really happened, but I sure felt strange. During latin, I exploded from empathy in a patchwork swirl of colors while Starin et al. stared on as I banged my head against the desk. Ms. Gibert didn't notice. I yelled for help inaudibly and searched out white points of light in the black silhouette of Boulder. I yelled for Ash and searched for Moondog.

March 10, 2004

Afterwards, I figured out how to regain control (mostly) and just in time for the bell to ring. I got a small mocha at Cafe Sole, got eaten by small greenish crystals on a table while supposed psychics did fairy readings from a kids book, and here I am, about to take a shower and get ready for Great Works rehearsal, and then group, whereupon I shall request to Reiki Moondog (again) during the speakers board on gay marriage. Hopefully I don't ex-/implode again M

April 12, 2004

You have come, finally, to a safe place. You have arrived at the point where it counts most, the point at which Life itself seems to fall away, leaving behind nothing of its former shell: that blackened husk of body and mind that housed a bright bright star. Years and years, it took, places and places and each day offering good and bad, but you, lucky you, saw past that, saw beyond the grid of your perception to see inside others, touching and caressing the bright points of light that were essentially them, cherishing each for not only their good points, but for their faults as well. The energy flowed around and through you in the concentric spirals of the labyrinth and the Bat Qol kept you clean and pure with the voice of God and the Buddha in me to the Buddha in you weaved everything under the sun into Life itself. This is Rapture.

I'd like to chant, perhaps Emmeleia.

June 7, 2004

Or.. you could come up with something on your own. You know, do something productive with Nanon.

There's a thought. I still need to do those spells for Androo.

Exactly. Productive

I've noticed that, while my emotional colors are fading, you're becoming more prominent.

Who are you?

I'm a meme; I'm the idea of Lady Sage and Master Yage,

or maybe Eris and God. Are they the same?

I'm me.

I'm you. Are they the same?

I'm the fifth line of five.

You're an elusive bugger, that's what you are.

Damn straight.

You're depressing, too.

...hello?

October 5, 2004

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani.

Upon reading certain things, upon hearing certain songs, upon seeing certain people, upon smelling certain scents, upon tasting certain foods, upon feeling certain feelings and upon losing myself, it flows, the light, in through the head, out through the heart, washes over all, and, being lost in it, have found myself without.

How poetic.

These are the white things. Cold, bright, burning, white.

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani.

But the light isn't as it used to be. It was a thing to light up a day, a thing to light up me, filling completely. Now a simple thread flows from head to heart, and the light doesn't stray from the path of least resistance.

Love follows not the law of Ohm.

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani.

Light can be many things, but here, now, it means love - all four loves - and it's a strange feeling to have been so full of it for so long, then to suddenly be nearly without.

Full of what? Full of shit? How pathetic, how trite.

Having deified love for several years, it's a shock to my faith to have it disappear, even if it only turns out to be temporary.

*Faith? You're faithful? How have you EVER been
faithful to love?*

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!

What is your point?

You know.

Yes, but it is important that you make it.

It's the immediacy, the seamless immediacy...

It's about meaning and self. It's about defining where your boundaries are; your physical boundaries, your mental boundaries, your spiritual and emotional boundaries. It's about that ground-state training that you undergo so that you might step just a bit to the side. An inch. A mile. An age.

It's about breathing in for the count of four, holding for the count of two, breathing out for the count of four, holding for the count of two. It's about feeling where your feet touch the ground. It's about drawing a straight line from your center of gravity to the center of the world. It's about becoming totally present.

So that you can disappear entirely.

Why this? Why now?

Why talk about ecstasy?

Yes.

Dissociation.

Well, that was quick. I was expecting more roundabout. We would banter. You would get flustered. I would get smug.

Derealization, depersonalization, dissociation. Pure and simple.

Well huh.

Would I lie to you?

Oh, totally.

Fair.

You're not very focused.

I know.

It's just

that I'm

overflowing

with

words

speak to me
speak to me
speak to me
speak to me
that i may see
that i may see
that i may see
the face of god
the face of god

I was born at the edge of the numinous.

That is why I can tread along the border.

That is why I'm able to whisper the name of God.

That is why I'm allowed to know the number and how to factor it.

That is why I have seven fingers spread wide and three curled toward my heart.

That is why my limbs trace the curves and lines of power when I dance.

That is why I sit with my back to the sun in summer.

That is why my body is a canvas.

You were born in sunlight.

Speak secrets into my hair.

Take my words from me.

Spend the intercalary days telling me lies.

Break my dystonia with a breath.

Wash my face with salt water.

Tell me the name you call yourself.

Close my eyes.

We will sleep in the shade.

Let me bless you with smoke.

Let me bathe your feet.

Let me light the candles.

Let me place a stone beneath my tongue.

Let me taste copper.

Let me draw in ash.

Let me rise up until my head is in the branches and my hair becomes the leaves.

At the beginning of time,
when chaos birthed to order and disorder,
we were blessed with two souls.

One has seven eyes and can see all of the monsters in the dark,
but is blinded by the sun.

The other has no eyes,
but can feel no pain.

When order and disorder were close as children,
our souls experienced the world hand in hand,
but as they drifted apart and began to fight,
some of us left one of our souls behind,
and that is why we search.

Babel was a collaborative effort.

Once,
we all spoke the same language,
but on seeing god grow increasingly anxious with the rate of our progress,
we agreed to let our tongues be confused,
so that he could take things at a more comfortable pace,
and we could be assured he would not understand us unless we prayed in silence,
for only then do we speak the language of angels.

When I speak, the words drip from my tongue as ink,
and form writing on the ground,
and I leave a trail behind me,
and the ink stains your feet,
and when you walk, words and phrases and sentences are pressed into the soil,
and the ink breathes life into the plants,
and even the grass will flower,
and the bees will flourish,
and they will both sting you and provide you with sweet honey.

The ink stains my chin and my clothes.

Sometimes, I speak into my hands and stain my cheeks as well.

I speak against my fingers and press them into my flesh until I am covered in rosettes.

I stretch my hands to the sky and marvel at how black they are.

And as with the grass, where the ink stains, growth
quicken, and I am covered in soft fur.

I fall to all fours and hunt amid the rocks and the
buildings, between cars and along trails.

And when I am full, I curl up to sleep, and awake
human once again.

My skin is clean and my mind is clear,

and I cannot speak.

The only time I know my true name is when I pray.
The only time I pray is at the utmost need.
To pray is to ask yourself what you dare not ask god.
To answer your own question, you must step outside yourself.
To step outside yourself, you must forget your true name.
The only time I know my true name is when I pray.

Ask.

How does one approach what one can't describe?

Swing the flashlight rapidly across the room. Piece together what you can from the sweep of the beam across the walls, the furniture.

How does one hunt down what leaves no tracks?

Unwind the maze by keeping your right hand on the wall. Pray that the walls do not move.

How does one call down the gods to commune?

Speak thrice, and enter.

There was a sort of succulent quality to the air, as though, were I to bite down on it, it would all come bursting forth at once. Dribble down my chin. Stain my shirt. It would be sweet, almost saccharine. It would beg for a pinch of salt to quell all that sweetness.

I didn't know whether or not I'd be able to stomach it, honestly. I was dizzy. I was apart from myself. Above, and beside. I was looking down at myself. Were I to do so, to bite into time itself, I would surely overflow.

Was overflowing, I realized. Was bending forward at the waist where I was sitting. Those black choir chairs were comfortable, but made you sit up straight, so I couldn't slouch. I was bending forward, resting my elbows on my knees, and then bowing my head, bowing further.

I was overflowing, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. We weren't singing, the basses, we were watching the altos rehearse a part, so it wasn't too far out of the ordinary for me to be hunched over, breathing shallow, watching myself from above.

I was overflowing, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. Hunched over, breathing shallow, and watching from a few feet up, a few feet to the right, so that I could see my shirt tear even as I felt it against my back. I was so thin, then. So thin.

I was overflowing, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I watched my shirt tear, and my skin follow. I watched it split along my spine and peel back. It was bloodless, but not painless. The feeling of those wings, newborn and weak, slipping from the wound was raw.

I was overflowing, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I watched the wings stretch and extend from the wound on my back. “Aha,” I thought. “This is it. This is finally it. It’s finally happening. I am becoming something greater, and here I am, so unprepared!”

I was overflowing, though, not transforming, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. The growth did not stop at wings. An eye. A beak. The graceful curve of a head. Plumage.

“No, this isn’t it.” I panicked, and could think of nothing else but to apologize. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

The bird cocked its head as it climbed free of my back and perched on my shoulder. It cared not for apologies. Why would it?

Another pair of wings followed.

Another.

Another.

My hands were buried in my hair, I could see - barely - through the forest of pencil-thin legs crowding my shoulders, my neck, my head. Their weight had forced my shoulders down until my head was nearly between my knees.

We were singing now, and I was silent. How could I sing, when all I could do was beg silently for forgiveness? How could I sing with the weight of a dozen crows slowly crushing me into my seat? How could I sing when I was overflowing? There was nothing I could do to stop it

Chaos. The director stopped the choir, and as one, the flock lifted off. The weight was lifted off my back. The cacophony filled the air. I was borne up through the air by the birds. The birds were splitting, multiplying, avian mitosis. I was borne up, up. Up.

I was told afterward that my body stumbled, unthinking along the row and toward the double doors, that the director had sneered, ”It

sure would be nice if we had all our singers here today.” I was told that folks defended me, saying I was sick, I was pale, I was feverish.

I don’t know, I wasn’t there. I was above the Flatirons. I was beyond terror. I was beyond joy. I was beyond sensation, beyond any emotion except for that bottomless, black guilt. Sticky. Tar-like. Bitter. The flock numbered in the thousands, and still we flew up.

The blue of the sky became white, blinded, became black, and I was sitting in the hallway. I was with my body again. I was sobbing. A teacher stared. Students gave me a wide berth.

I cleaned myself up. I went back to choir. What else could I do?

A bird had plucked something from me. Something precious. Something unknowable. Something important and integral. Something hard. Something emerald and glassy. Before the white of the sky overtook me, I saw it in its beak.

The caw it gave as my vision left me and my ears filled with static was...triumphant? No, not quite. Triumph implies that the birds could do anything but succeed. In that sound was inevitability.

After school, - - - and I tramped through the ‘mini-forest’ and, impelled by something of the avian within, I collected five sticks.

They had to be as straight as possible. They had to be balanced as close to the middle as possible. They had to be the same length without me breaking them. They had to have been from different trees. They had to have fallen more than a year prior.

When I got home, I lay them in a row, asked my questions, and, one by one, broke them in half.

What had I lost?

What had I gained?

Where had I gone?

Where did I come from?

Why does memory stain me with that black, tarry guilt?

I had forgotten about the birds until recently, but every time I feel that ecstasy — that ekstasis — I am pitch. I am tar. I am sticky with apology. I am the living embodiment of “I’m sorry”.

I'm tired. I'm so tired. I'm tired and I'm upset and I'm lost.

I know.

I want to shout and to whisper. I want to talk about how the light flows in through the head and out through the heart. I want to put words to the feeling of falling to the ground and taking root.

I want to say how it feels when I step outside myself.

You tried.

I guess that's all I can do.

It's not, but it's important that you have tried.

How did I get here?

How did you get where?

How did I get here? How did I get to the point where I loathe my job? How did I get to the point where I loathe my life, but mostly only when I'm working?

Start from the beginning.

Which beginning?

Madison's beginning. For this, I don't think you need to go any further back for any reason other than to confirm what you already know. Or perhaps just a bit before. Start with the insurance company.

What, working with Kevin?

Yes. Start from there.

In 2011, I graduated — or, well, left — university and jumped straight into a job doing software for a subsidiary of a subsidiary of a company that made software for health insurance companies. I had a whole weekend off.

It was thrilling, in a way, to be seen as competent at something. It was nice to be able to drive to an office, sit down at a computer, type away for a few hours, drive home, and then see money in my bank account after the fact, knowing that I had done something that was useful.

Were you not doing anything useful before? You were working, you were at school. You were getting paid.

I was. But even when I looked at that money in my bank account, I couldn't then count it out and say, "Ah, yes, this was earned creating something." Work was spent living on the edge of failure, trying to push it back just one step further. That's the curse of IT.

And school? You were creating something there.

And paying a pretty penny for the privilege to do so.

Right.

But this was something new, I was given a list of things that they wanted to be able to do and given basically total freedom to pull that off. I was put in front of their raw materials and, when I showed them progressively more and more refined creations, they all stood back and applauded, and I could bow and say that I had created something for them.

And then?

And then...well, I don't know. And then the tasks got smaller and smaller, and the clients grumpier and grumpier about more and more inconsequential things. They needed twice as many new features done in half the time and could we work the weekends? After all, they had their QA people sleeping in the office in cots in the bathrooms. Shouldn't we do the same?

At some point that must have changed, but it all changed so gradually as to not be noticeable.

And then you started to see how capitalism worked, perhaps? That you weren't doing this because it was fun or because you were good at it, even if it was and you might have been, but because you had to.

I think that may be getting a bit ahead of the game, but in a way, I suppose so. I started to see that it was very easy to use up all of one's spell slots. I started to see just what purpose free time had in one's life. I started to talk about work-life balance and to schedule vacation time that wasn't simply holidays and to dream about the office.

At what point would you say you burned out?

That's one of those surprisingly difficult questions. I can't point to a day or week when things went bad, nor even a month. At some point, I just looked around me, at my office and my coworkers and my job and said, "I hate all of this."

When did you notice it, then?

Does when I tried to kill myself" count?

Not my department.

I spent a lot of time trying to fix it. I spent a lot of time changing little bits about my day or my desk or my tasks, and there was just not much that could put a dent into that mixture of loathing and anxiety that surrounded my day.

And eventually, you just dumped the whole thing in favor of something else.

Yes.

Did it work?

Oh, definitely. I jumped at the opportunity to stop working for an insurance company that just happened to need some software and to start working for a software company with a name that folks knew making products that I believed in.

Moving to Canonical came on such a whim, too. I met up with John Wright — such a nice man — at Mayor of Old Town and we talked over pints about the good and the bad of our respective jobs.

"I've been thinking about applying at Canonical," he said, twisting his glass between his hands. "I'm not unhappy at where I am, I'm just...not happy either."

I nodded, and made silent note to check out their postings later that night.

Did you wind up stealing John's idea?

Oh, totally. I apologized to him after the fact, too, for taking his idea and actually winding up with the job. He laughed and said that he didn't think he'd be able to work from home anyway.

Whereas that saved you.

Yes.

In a way.

For a while.

I could very easily get into talking about the ins and outs of working at Canonical and in software, but I don't think that's the point.

No, it's not.

No. The point is that, slowly, quietly, without me even noticing, I started hating what I do for a living. It snuck up on me once more. I once more found myself in a paralyzing mixture of anxiety and dread and anger. Every minute spent in front of my editor was spent filled with anger and frustration at not being able to work, and every minute spent away from it was spent dreading the next time I'd have to go back, fretting over how little I had gotten done.

I spent day after day on branches that should have been small and yet somehow, inexplicably, seemed insurmountable. Coworkers and bosses got upset at me. I did all I could to keep interested and invested in the company.

Even as you drifted your separate ways? Canonical stopped doing things that were relevant to you before you even moved to Seattle. They started focusing on things you didn't believe in. They laid off dozens of your coworkers. They started courting Microsoft.

Sure, I suppose. There's no doubt that Canonical was changing. They were certainly not blameless in me losing my interest and investment in them.

And from what JC says, you would hate them now.

I would, yes.

And yet here you speak only of yourself. Only of your failures.

Is this not a selfish project? I think that it's fair to just talk about how I feel when I talk about burnout.

Burnout does not happen in a vacuum.

I hardly believe that the things that Canonical was doing were so new as to be causing my burnout. They were doing as tech companies do. They were doing everything they could to maintain the same amount of velocity they had at the beginnings of projects later on. They were trying to change with the times while remaining exactly the same.

Perhaps it was just the honeymoon period finally coming to an end.

The third time was not the charm.

No, it was not. Canonical stopped doing something I believed in, so I switched to a company — Internet Archive — that was doing something that I believed in, but the process was crap. Now, here I am at a company that's got a great process and is doing something that I really believe in it, and...

And you hate it.

I hate my career. I don't hate my company. I love them. They're great people doing great things and doing them well. I just can't stand programming anymore.

I don't believe you.

You don't?

I don't. You, who have at least two open programming projects you poke at with some regularity.

I suppose I do, yeah.

So what do you hate, if you don't hate programming?

It's not work. I don't hate working.

It's not programming, you're right there. I still love the idea of making something that does what I tell it.

It's not computers, even if I'm a bit ambivalent on them.

It's...well, I definitely hate devops.

Why?

It feels...messy. It feels like I'm doing all I can to drag these ephemeral things into line, and none of them want to do it. It feels like all these people have grandiose ideas about what goes into running a system, and none of them agree with each other, and all we can do is to pick the least-bad one.

It destroys this idea that computers are a thing that you can ask to do something, and they can do it. There are more non-deterministic bugs in devops than in any other area of dealing with computers than I've experienced.

It makes me want to take up Haskell.

All very sensible.

If such a thing can be said of it.

Is that why you're burnt out, then?

No.

Then why?

I don't know.

Perhaps I'm only good for seven years at a time, like I said.

Did you burn out on music?

I would say that I was burnt, but I placed that on the performers at my recital.

Had your recital gone perfectly, would you still have felt burned out, though?

Perhaps.

Would you still have gone into computers?

Definitely.

Would you still be composing?

I don't know.



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