LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

_Wetlands Magazine_ exists to serve as a forum for conversations about diversity, inclusivity, social justice, identity, intersectionality, politics, and so many other things. A recurring question we were faced with as editors of this publication is how to articulate this project in new and relevant ways to effect change across campus. As Wetlands continues to mature as a publication, the magazine is guided in its evolution by the submissions we receive from peers and the conversations we have with each other as staffers, students, with faculty, and with other community members.

The submissions we received for this issue have been some of our best. As editors, we are honored with the opportunity to read the work of our peers on this campus writing about their experiences, narratives, and visions for change. The pieces reflected in this magazine, written by students and alumni from different social locations and encompassing a number of topics, share a confidence in the power of writing and art to capture the attention of university administrators, faculty and students. What the pieces assembled here reflect is the reality of dialogue on our campus and the necessity of recognizing that things at this university cannot go on as they have forever.

While students have always advocated for their own voices and interests and have always organized with one another for the purpose of making this advocacy known, many students, especially from marginalized communities, feel that we can do better as a community. And as a community, each of us is implicated whenever a student announces that this university is an inaccessible, exclusive, privileged space. We should constantly be asking ourselves how we can make this university better, how we can change our personal practices and open up to the differences of others, how we can think of our engagement with the world differently, even on a scale as simultaneously large and small as the university campus.

It is my hope that this issue of _Wetlands Magazine_ will serve as a platform for future dialogues and conversations on campus. Because these dialogues are initiated by students, they should be treated with immediacy and respect. Our peers, colleagues, and friends have presented us with powerful calls to action. How we respond will demonstrate what sort of campus we want to become.

C.J. Queirolo
Editor-in-Chief
Wetlands Magazine
I did not find a home here at Puget Sound, I found a home in the Gender Studies program.

I came to this University fresh off the most difficult summer of my life. I started coming out as gay to friends and family without really understanding myself or my sexuality in a healthy way. I had internalized a lot of the hate that I received during that process. I was also dealing with a sexual assault I experienced at 16 in a new and challenging way.

My second semester freshman year I took a class with Greta Austin called The Iconic Feminine, which introduced me to the world of gender studies: passionate, confrontational, accessible, urgent, and always close to home. I soon immersed myself in this world, and I do not plan on ever surfacing.

Greta and my other gender studies Professors like Alison Tracy Hale, Suzanne Holland, and Priti Joshi offered me education that directly empowered me, taught me how to love, how to think and see critically, and how to heal. Quite literally, gender studies saved my life.

I came to this University a disillusioned gay kid who really hated himself. I am leaving this University an empowered and hyper-critical queer man who loves himself without apology. And for that, I love UPS.

This has nothing to do with the department of my major or my core curriculum experience. This has nothing to do with Logger athletics, Greek life, student government, my residential experience on campus, the acres of startlingly green lawns, or any other component of campus life that the administration funds to excess. It has everything to do with Gender Studies.

I support the people who support these campus activities, who are constantly striving to build community, strengthen critical sensibilities, and foster safe and empowering spaces for marginalized students. However, you cannot compare these activities with a program like Gender Studies, which lacks meaningful institutional support. I can no longer tolerate the blatant disinterest and disrespect communicated to the Gender Studies program and everyone involved in it through the lack of funding, staffing, and commitment on the part the administration.

I am writing this piece because I am tired of seeing the exhaustion that my Gender Studies professors try so admirably to hide. I am tired of witnessing them tug-of-warred between their departmental commitments and their passion for the program that they simply cannot afford to commit to. I am tired of knowing that student complaints over lack of interest in Gender Studies, lack of programming around related topics, and lack of community around issues related to gender, sexuality, and identity could be remedied with an expanded department that is funded and staffed.

I am tired of having to recite my darkest personal experiences to make people understand that Gender Studies is important. I don’t see students studying biology or business leadership having to defend the legitimacy of their scholarly pursuits on the weekly, even daily basis that I do. I am tired of being told to silence my criticisms of the administration, and my frustration at what I see as a lack of institutional support for Gender Studies, by people who tell me instead to celebrate what we do have here. Here is my problem: what we do have here is incredible, but it is getting terrible support.

The recently passed KNOW requirement (the proposal to institute a diversity overlay onto the core curriculum, encouraging students to actively interrogate issues of power, privilege, and identity in the classroom) continues to be met with intense resistance from some faculty. Pushback on this proposal from some faculty communicates one thing: that the students who most rely on this type of education, who are the most marginalized and trivialized students on this campus, simply do not matter.

This is unacceptable.

Gender Studies fosters precisely the kind of progressive community, dynamic curriculum, engaged attitudes, and intersectional education that the institution claims to be seeking.

The administration of this University must no longer use Gender Studies students, research, faculty, initiatives, courses, and other related programs for promotional purposes if they are not willing to support us comprehensively. We as students want funding for an expanded and enriched Gender Studies. We want a permanent faculty position. We want a department and a major, not just a program. We want intentional recruiting for more faculty who have specific education in the fields of gender studies, feminist studies, queer theory and queer studies, trans* theory and studies, bisexuality, asexualities, and so much more under the umbrella of gender studies.

We want you to show us that we matter.

I have included testimonials to the necessity of strengthening Gender Studies on this campus from current students as well as alumni of the University. I have done this so that I cannot be pigeon-holed, misinterpreted, or dismissed. These testimonials represent a broad swath of critiques, suggestions, and celebrations, providing a space for movers and shakers at this institution to begin thinking in the critical space that students occupy.

We are constantly told that students have the most important and powerful voices on this campus. Let’s see if that’s not just another institutional lie.
TESTIMONIALS

Faith Matthews, ’14

“Gender studies is definitely something that I believe should be supported on this campus because it opens students up to a whole new way of understanding something that impacts their daily lives, self-perceptions, and perceptions of others. And gender studies typically does a lot to improve talks about equality and open up discussions on a whole lot of things.”

Sierra Maloch, ’12

“The one class I took within the Gender Studies program was probably one of the most important classes I have ever taken, and the interactions I had with fellow students there were some of the most valuable in all my time at UPS. Gender Studies provides a safe space to discuss incredibly important issues, and if the program is not upheld, protected, and revered, where can these discussions take place??”

Grace Penzell, ’15

“The University of Washington has a Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies major that includes requirements for transnational perspectives courses and a fieldwork course. We don’t even have those courses as options. How can you tell me that we deserve to be on the list of 40 colleges that change lives if we aren’t even given the chance to change lives by studying issues that are essential to future global progress?!”

Lindsey Conrad, ’15

“Allowing Gender Studies to remain an unfunded program highlights UPS’s lack of concern for progress — it showcases the administration’s complicity in systems that exist to oppress people, in a historical and cultural context. There is no possibility of progress without scholarship, that is generally accepted in all other fields — so why is Gender Studies different?”

Tosia Klincewicz, ’14

“There are many folks on this campus and part of this community who are working tirelessly to deconstruct and end oppression. But it’s not enough. When the university provides limited options for gender-neutral bathrooms; this is unacceptable. When the students who do seek to expand their knowledge and academic inquiry of power, identity, and privilege are provided limited resources; this is unacceptable. When students continue to feel marginalized on our campus, this is unacceptable.”
I ached to belong:

Performing in the Vagina monologues as a Queer Woman

by Clara Sciortino

I was too nervous to even attend the Vagina Monologues my first year at Puget Sound. As a young girl, terrified by the queer-ness within me that I was just beginning to understand, plagued constantly by insecurities about my body and the way I expressed gender, I didn't want to go anywhere near anything that even remotely discussed sex, let alone an event with vaginas literally in the title.

By sophomore year, I had begun coming out as a lesbian. When the monologues rolled around, I eagerly volunteered to work with them as a Kilworth Chapel Assistant, so I could see them without having to ask anyone to go with me. I watched them twice that year; they were incredible. It wasn’t so much the content of the monologues that really struck me, but the confidence of the women on stage performing. I ached to be a part of that community of strong and empowered women.

This year, my senior year, I decided to be a part of the Vagina Monologues. I wanted to stand up in front the school as part of the feminist community that I yearned to be a part of, but never quite felt I belonged to, despite all I had learned over the past few years about gender, feminism, and social justice. I wanted to be one of those strong, empowered women that I looked up to two years earlier. I wanted to show my scared, first year self how much I had grown.

But while there were wonderful experiences involved in taking part in the monologues, I ultimately didn’t leave feeling like I was part of that strong and empowered feminist community that I had imagined two years earlier. In some ways, I left feeling more disconnected from it.

I initially began naming and interrogating this disconnect when I saw the sweatshirts. Though I had been looking forward wearing them since auditioning for the Monologues, this year, they were adorned with an upside-down pink triangle. This was the symbol that gay men were forced to wear during the Holocaust, and was later reclaimed by the gay rights movement in the 1970s. I tried to ignore how uncomfortable this made me feel; after all, everyone else had just happily taken the sweatshirt without a word about this appropriation. I went home and googled “pink triangle,” convinced that there must be some alternative meaning that I wasn’t aware of. It wasn’t until another queer friend mentioned it that I realized it wasn’t just me.

I sent an email to the directors of the Vagina Monologues. I felt guilty for doing so, even though it was some thing I felt I needed to address. I tried to make it sound like it wasn’t a big deal, that I liked the sweatshirt but just thought it was maybe kind of awkward. The directors forwarded my email to the entire cast, explaining that they didn’t think of this appropriation, and they apologized if they offended anyone. After that, no one mentioned it to me, and I didn’t bring it up. I tried to let it go. I wore the sweatshirt, convincing myself that I shouldn’t let my sensitivity impede the success of the monologues.

Looking back, I wish I had handled this differently. I wish I had raised my concerns to the directors in person. And I wish I’d had the courage to say, to them and to myself, that the appropriation of the pink triangle hurt me. It revealed to me that I was one of the few women in the monologues for whom the pink triangle held any meaning. It trivialized my identity, and revealed the failure of the feminist community to truly include and advocate for queer people. It tainted my experience of the Vagina Monologues.

I’ve been thinking a lot about why I felt the need to hold back. Why did I feel the need to address this in a way that diminished the hurt it caused me?

In part, I didn’t want to feel like I was derailing the Vagina Monologues. For better or for worse, the monologues are probably the most successful feminist event on this campus. And I do think they bring about good. For many women, performing or attending the monologues is their first chance to
engage in a conversation about their bodies, their sexualities, and the violence perpetrated against them. And they do raise awareness of violence against women and raise money for the YWCA of Tacoma. I felt that it would be selfish of me to place my personal feelings of hurt in the way of that greater good. And I didn’t want to demean the experiences of women who had found their voice through performing in the monologues because of an appropriation that, while hurtful, was also accidental.

But deeper than that, I really wanted the Vagina Monologues to be the experience of strength and empowerment that I had imagined it to be. I tried to dismiss my feelings of marginalization in an attempt to experience that.

It wasn’t just the sweatshirt. I was in the monologue “They Beat the Girl Out of My Boy (Or So They Tried).” It was added later in include the voices of trans*women in the monologues. Especially because the Vagina Monologues, even in name, are built on the conflation between anatomy and womanhood, this is an incredibly important monologue and I was proud to be a part of it. And yet, when I considered what I would wear, I initially felt as if I should not wear a tie. A part of me thought that to be true to the part, I needed to “femme it up.” I reminded myself that this was ridiculous—trans*women do not present their genders in a monolithic, ultra feminine way. Some trans*women wear ties. In the end, I did wear a tie. I loved it and got many compliments from other women in the cast. But my internal debate demonstrated to me the way the monologues embody a performance of femininity that I don’t identify with and doesn’t match my definition of what it means to be a woman.

I remember squirming guiltily during certain monologues, seeing themes in them that I didn’t pick up on when I watched them two years earlier. The demonizing depiction of female genital mutilation that once seemed to me to be an inclusion of the needs of women transnationally now strikes me as the imposition of Western feminism on all women, and ultimately, an extension of colonialism. While the monologue “Because He Liked to Look at It,” about a man who insists on looking at his partner’s vagina during their first sexual encounter didn’t concern me when I watched it two years ago, I now worried what message it was sending to the men in the audience. It now seemed to claim that in the end, it was okay to coerce someone into doing unwanted sexual acts. Such coercion is not okay; it is rape.

I was disappointed that the Vagina Monologues did not provide the experience I wanted them to, but I learned a lot from participating in them. It made me question what I want feminism to look like. I realize that while the monologues had once opened doors to who I could be, I now find them limiting. They served an important purpose in my life, but I outgrew them.

I think our school has outgrown the monologues as well, and it’s time that we move on to a more inclusive performance of feminism. I don’t say this lightly. I know that, as flawed as they are, the Vagina Monologues are an important entry point into feminism for many people. I know that they are a significant demonstration of activism and justice on our campus with a momentum that won’t be easily replaced. Yet, what message do we send when we say that heteronormative, white western feminism is the place where we must start? When intersectionality is an optional addendum for further studies instead of the heart of the curriculum? Because performances of the monologues must adhere to the V-Day script, they are static and unable to adapt. I want to be part of a feminist community that’s dynamic, challenging, and inclusive. I want the way we see feminism to continue to grow.
My mother asks if her hips look wide
In that skirt,
   In this dress,
   In those pants,
   In this bathing suit,

_No, Ma. You’re beautiful_ I tell her.

But still,
I cannot decide if I believe the words I hear floating off my tongue.

Because I look down everyday and I see those same hips on my own body and I feel
disgust,
Like I’m taking up too much space
   In this city,
   On this earth.
And yet,
_Those_ are the very hips that birthed me,
that widened for my entrance,
that were weighed down with
   my life.
I should kneel down and thank those hips from the core of my womanly being.
   For they bore me,
   And they will bear my children,
   And they can move
   and shake
   and dance
   and thrust
   and curve,
   and bear.

Two decades ago
My mama would scoop me up and lean her hips to the right
To make a
_Perfect Perch._
My mother asks if her hips look wide
In that skirt,
In this dress,
In those pants,
In this bathing suit,
No, Ma. You’re beautiful I tell her.

But still,
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For they bore me,
And they will bear my children,
And they can move
and shake
and dance
and thrust
and curve,
and bear.

Two decades ago
My mama would scoop me up and lean her hips to the right
To make a
Perfect Perch.

Just for me.
How can I hate those hips when they represent
my womanhood,
my childhood,
my motherhood?

How can I call myself a
Feminist
When I sometimes imagine
The sleek lines of my body without these
Protruding,
Uninvited
Baby-bearers?
How can I feel animosity toward
my female body
When I praise every other woman’s shell for its
beauty
individuality
great strength and
goddess-like grace;
And preach that everybody’s every body is its own
And in that there is
Power,
Identity,
Inexplicable splendor?

But then again,
My mother asks if her hips look wide
In that skirt,
In this dress,
In those pants,
In this bathing suit,

And I am my mother’s daughter.
Why Feminism Should Be Reformed: Written From My Perspective as an African American Woman

by Danae Smith

As a black woman of color, I receive two dominant messages from society. The first is that I’m unattractive. My hair is too curly, my skin too brown. On TV and in magazines black women wear weaves and perms that subtly spread the message that straight hair is better. Articles cover stories about how black and brown women have their skin photoshopped lighter and whiter for their big magazine cover.

The second message I get is that, as a black woman, I am “un-dateable.” I exist solely for the pleasure of men and my job is to fulfill their sexual desires. The dominant portrayal of black women is hypersexualized and objectified, even in feminist media such as Lilly Allen’s “Hard Out Here” music video. In this video, Allen surrounds herself with scantily clad black women twerking in the camera. This past semester, I realized just how problematic these depictions are. They don’t just stay on the screen; they follow me back home.

In the fall, I ended up living in a house with three men from the military and one friend I had known from before. What started as friendly soon became hostile. The military men started talking about dating. They all agreed that they wouldn’t date black women. “I only date white girls.” On another day, one of the men in the military and my friend were teasing me about wearing my hair naturally. “If you ever want to get a boyfriend or be able to fight off any of those men by myself. That’s when I realized things wouldn’t change and I had to leave.

For me, the worst instance happened when one of their friends had come over to our house. It was brought to my attention that he tried to get into my room that night when he knew I was up there getting ready for bed. I’m not weak, but I didn’t have a lock on my door and I knew I wouldn’t be able to fight off any of those men by myself. That’s when I realized things wouldn’t change and I had to leave.

After a great deal of effort, and the help of some true friends, I was finally able to get out of the house. As I was packing up my things and moving, one of the men who harassed me confronted me. “Why do you whine and bitch about everything? You’re too ugly to be harassed anyways,” he said.

On two separate occasions, I sought solace with allies. Both of them were white, male, self-proclaimed feminists. I told my friend in the house what was happening to me and he responded by telling me it was just “petty girl stuff” and we should focus on real house issues, like how they were using our laundry detergent. It wasn’t at least a week later, when a white girl told him that one of the men had touched her inappropriately at the party too, that he started to care about their behavior.

We went to talk with the landlord about what happened and the landlord told us to write down official statements and send them to him. I wrote mine and my friend asked me to email it to him, so that he could make sure we were on the same page. I sent it to him and the landlord as well. After some time, I asked my friend if he had sent his statement to the landlord. “No, I decided not to because you sent yours in and [the other girl] doesn’t think it’s that big of a deal because it just happened that one time.” Maybe it was just one time for her, but for me it was a reality I had to go home to everyday. I was fighting alone again.

People at school that I hardly knew started coming up to me, asking me to confirm the gossip they had been hearing about things I had told my friend and written in my statement. It felt awful. Almost like a double violation. I felt like I lost autonomy over my body and it had become a source of entertainment for students on campus.

I also told the guy I was dating at the time. I told him I wasn’t comfortable with him meeting my roommates because of everything that had happened and I told him why I was leaving. “That just sounds like guys being guys. I don’t know why you would choose to live in a house full of dudes anyways,” was his response. I was furious. I thought if anyone would be caring or understanding, especially about “no means no,” it would be
the guy that I was dating. It bothered me that he felt it was ok for the other men to treat me in the ways that they had. A couple weeks later, he posted a Youtube video of Laci Green on his facebook where she was talking about the harassment she faced because people post comments about her boobs on her Youtube videos. He was appalled by that treatment and I can’t help but think that if I were a petite, blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman like Laci, maybe he would have cared about what was happening to me.

At this point, I want to say that I had many female friends who were supportive of me. But, having faced that last semester, I have come to the realization that I am not a feminist. As it functions now, feminism is a movement for upper middle class, white, straight, cisgender women. And, as a woman of color, I am left out. Unfortunately, almost every woman faces harassment and knows how it feels but can only imagine what it’s like to not feel safe in your own home. But male feminists, such as the friend I was living with and the guy I was dating, do not know how harassment feels and how unsafe it can make someone feel. I think that until the face of the feminist movement is changed, male feminists will never be supportive of women of color or any other woman who falls outside of the current norm of the feminist movement.
Gender Phallacies In, And What We Can Learn From From, Max Valerio’s The Testosterone Files
by Tosia Klincewicz

The following piece is an excerpt from a zine I made in the spring of 2013 in which I examine and critique the memoir The Testosterone Files: My Hormonal and Social Transformation from Female to Male, by Max Valerio. In this two-part piece I seek to challenge what I find to be Valerio’s problematic perpetuation of the gender binary and to also illuminate what we, as readers, can learn from texts like The Testosterone Files.

Part I. Gender Phallacies

Men are homogenous: “By becoming a man, I became all men” (4). There is no such thing as the “everyman.” Each person has a unique positional identity based on sex, gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and other factors which contribute to individual identity.

Having a penis makes you a man: “The penis is an important part of the package—it’s the prize. Without it, how can I attain manhood?” (56). Being a man means identifying as such.

Historically, yes, being a man meant having a penis, but this mindset is a remnant of an essentialist worldview which denies self-determination to maintain patriarchal order.

The gender binary is a good thing/useful way of conceiving of the world: “It’s a good thing men and women have separate restrooms” (182). The “man/woman” binary is a constructed system of gender based on primary sex characteristics (penis/testes, vagina/ovaries). This system not only excludes the many individuals born with other anatomic and chromosomal configurations, but also denies the legitimacy of genders outside of the hegemonic binary.

By attempting to perform a gender other than your assigned gender (as a counterpart to your biological sex) you are “cheating:” “My gesture have ‘become more male.’ […] I’m not deliberately trying to alter my gestures. That would be cheating” (13). Taking hormones is not the only legitimate form of expressing gender. Almost all behaviors are socialized rather than inherent, and so consciously acting a certain way is not “cheating” but rather performativity, or part of a process of resocialization.

Males are naturally predatory; “real men” curb their “impulses”: “I remember how it feels to be watched, leered at. It is wrong to make women feel that way, appraised, objectified. […] So I curb my desire to stare, to watch. I’m beginning to understand that maturity as a male, becoming a man instead of an adolescent boy, means learning to control or sublimate these impulses. […] Even so, this impulse to watch women’s bodies and not notice or care about the rest of them overwhelms me. There’s a natural propensity of the male sex drive to objectify” (22-3). Just… no. It is not okay to extrapolate a personal experience to an entire population. Stating that it is a natural impulse of all men to “objectify” women not only denies male agency but also excuses this behavior as biological, rather than social, therefore making it seem somehow more “okay.” This mentality is one of the most insidious forms of perpetuation of rape culture, in which violence against women and other marginalized persons is accepted as inevitable.

Not having a “convincing” gender performance makes your performance illegitimate: “We [transsexuals] have to worry about whether or not to disclose our past, and to whom and under what circumstances. This is the life sentence, and the cost of passing as genetic males. Certainly, I am not complaining. The alternative, not being convincing as a man, is far worse” (327). Valerio brings up a valid concern of many individuals outside of the hegemonic gender and sexual binary, which is that these individuals have historically faced (and continue to face) discrimination and violence for their perceived deviance. But underlying Valerio’s comment is a theme that runs throughout his memoir and ultimately reinforces the gender binary: it would be better to remain a woman than become an “unconvincing” man. It is important to recognize that all forms of gender expression are legitimate and should not be judged by the patriarchal standards of the binary.

Part II: What we can learn

Self-expression is organic and limitless: “The identifier, ‘woman-identified-woman’ […] originally appeared in an essay, ‘The Woman-Identified-Woman,’ by the Radicalesbians in 1970. A woman could be any way that a woman wished to be and she would still be a woman; in fact, she would be more of the essence of what woman is since she would not be relying on patriarchal definitions of womanhood. She had no reason to constrain herself, to contain her actions or choices within a tightly defined arena called ‘feminine’ or even ‘female.’ Any piece of clothing a woman wore, even a man’s suit jacket and tie, was a piece of ‘woman’s’ clothing because she was wearing it. This helped all kinds of women try on traditionally masculine roles and not feel as though they were ‘trying to be men’” (50). Feminism and forms of identification are fluid and ever-evolving. If it was once “radical” for an American woman to wear pants, think about it the next time you see someone doing something perceived as inappropriate for their gender and question where that perception comes from.

Be critical of traditional gender roles: “I’m not treated like a typical little girl. In many respects, my courage, independence, and physical vigor are encouraged. Perhaps my parents perceived my masculine nature, my in-trepid, adventurous spirit” (41). Personality traits, especially in children, are unnecessarily gendered, so that from birth we are implicitly and explicitly told how to act (e.g. men should be strong/active/assertive, girls should be neat/polite/patient). Learn to recognize and challenge when these behaviors are being reinforced.

Listen: “He speaks about transsexuality in in matter-of-fact and accepting terms, making it clear he considers it a genuine and legible expression of human possibility” (117). When faced with a form of gender expression or identification that is new to you: listen. Try to understand where the other person is coming from and check in to see what they need to feel supported. Remember, the only gender that you have the right to control is your own.

Works Cited

This is the story of how I got my first period. It's never a glamorous story for anyone, right? It's utterly terrifying! You never know when or where it’s going to happen the first time, let alone what it is actually like!

It was my 11th birthday. I was so stoked. My parents were taking me to the ever-glamorous Las Vegas, Nevada! This was supposed to be the trip of my dreams, I fucking loved Las Vegas, but instead it was the trip of my nightmare…

It started off great, driving to Vegas from Phoenix, getting out of school early, the promise of hope in the air, basically a sixth graders dream! The point at which it went awry was entering the M&M Factory, only Las Vegas’ main attraction! It was right after going through the “History Of” walk through. I had to pee. I went to the bathroom, pulled down my pants sat on the toilet and noticed that spot. You all know what I’m talking about right? It was gross as fuck! It wasn’t quite red and a little brown, enough to terrify a girl of my age. I rushed out of the bathroom; I started balling when my mom told me what was happening. I freaked out! Why was my body betraying me? (The age long question!)

Something you have to understand is that up to this point in my life I had avoided all puberty talks, classes; the whole thing! I went as far as to throwing away my permission slips for sex education before my mom could even see them. When I did go to sex ed, I was the girl who got in trouble for causing a disturbance for cracking jokes the whole time! This was turning out to be the worst trip of my life! Period.

I hated being a girl. I hated that my period had ruined my special birthday trip. I hated it all. My own hatred for something so natural had me remembering a perfectly good trip as a complete nightmare. And the thing is, it has taken me up to this point in my life to be okay with that day, to actually talk about periods, be okay with them. Periods are never fun, they are messy and interruptive, but they are a special part of what makes a woman a woman. As shitty as they are, they should be embraced. After all, what happens in Vegas stays with you till menopause.
I miss the Androgyny the most.

Growing up, I refused to wear dresses. Even as a mere toddler, I would rebel against them; many a tear was shed and many a temper tantrum thrown in defiance. As a child, I think it was more of a practical reason than anything – you simply can’t run in a dress – but as I grew older I realized how different I was from other girls. From the ones who wore dresses and skirts, or pants with stitched butterfly wings sprawling across the butt. Everyday of my childhood existence, I donned straight-legged, faded blue “boy” jeans with grass stains and holes in the knee. They painted their fingernails and danced ballet while I played baseball with my dad and knew how to fly-fish by the age of ten. In the winter during recess, all the other girls glided along on white, laced figure skates that choked the ankles. I pounded the ice in thick black hockey skates. They played “house”; I challenged the boys to playground races. They wore ribbons in their hair. My hair was wild and tangled as a lion’s mane.

I love my parents for raising me this way, in a world completely void of subconscious heteronormativity, where every scrape and every mosquito bite was a celebration, where I could catch a baseball and wear a skirt at the same time. And at the time it didn’t matter – androgyny enveloped me in its arms and I was safe and alive and me. But as I grew and the notion of the “gender binary” slowly seeped into our collective consciousness, I remember feeling an unsettling sense of displacement: where the fuck did I belong in that mysterious world of gender and boy and girl and different bathrooms and what my teacher constantly reminded me was “appropriate female behavior”? I didn’t want to be like the girls I saw, but I knew I was different from the guys. I knew how I was supposed to act in the classroom, knew which games to play, knew which bathroom to use. What I didn’t understand was why I couldn’t yell across the room like the boys, or why I wasn’t allowed to wrestle like them, or WHY an image of a figure painted on a bathroom door. I much preferred my frayed jeans with holes in the knee, each tear a miniscule triumph in my mission to live, free and as myself: un-dressed.

I remember one time after a community race I began to remove my shirt in public. To this day, I firmly believe I am justified in my logic: all the guys were doing it, so why couldn’t I? But before I could lift the drenched cotton over my head, my mom was there, pulling it back down. When I asked her “why not?” she said “because” -- hardly a satisfying reason. At the time, I didn’t understand the biological differences between male and female; I hadn’t yet come to embody those characteristics that defined women, those mystical elements of feminine sexuality. I was neither boy nor girl, but something in-between, something slight and skinny and safe. Blobbed.

Imperceptibly at first, then increasingly more evident, the Play-Doh of my body began to take shape. I was being sculpted by some invisible force to which I was defenseless, victim to the pushing and pulling and poking and prodding of nature’s hand. I defied gravity and logic, entered the third dimension without knowing how I came to be there. My chest broke its cookie sheet mold, curving inexplicably outward. My legs grew larger and stronger, and my butt no longer resembled that of a boy’s. I couldn’t jump and bounce and leap freely; I was bound to the earth by gravity, and the weight of my morphing body. I had to relearn how to move, how to walk with hips, how to run in a sports bra. Suddenly I was a girl; I knew I was a girl, and it scared me. School and my mom had foretold this remarkable metamorphosis, warned me of the physical and emotional changes that I would inevitably undergo, but they had not prepared me. I firmly believe that “puberty” and “hormonal growth” are cruel, exotic words solely extant to instill fear in the mind of the preteen, a harsh condemnation and reminder that “this will happen to you and there’s nothing you can do about it.” Nonetheless, I tried to hide. But even sweatshirts and straight-legged jeans couldn’t conceal the drastic regeneration of my body. I was shedding off the safe skin of androgyny that had previously masked sexuality, gender, social expectation. My childhood peeled off in flakes; initially I tried to cling to it, desperately gluing the pieces together in an effort to preserve what innocence or ignorance I had left. Eventually, I found myself standing before the world, exposed to its scrutiny and judgment. Naked.

In the deep fathoms of middle school hell, I found myself suddenly straddling two identities that society had laid before my feet, and to one of which I had by some mystical powers been assigned. As a girl, I found my world shriveled like a piece of heated shrink wrap. Suddenly my life was completely dictated by the stick figure on the door of the girl’s bathroom — dressed and immobile and silent. I could no longer wrestle with the guys or slide across the grass in boy jeans because to do so was social damnation, it just wasn’t safe. I was caught between the Old Me — androgynous, stick-legged, secure — and the New Me — older, sensual, fragile. I was fractured between two realities, two identities: the girl and the boy, the new bewitching world of femininity and the old world I secretly longed for, but knew I couldn’t return to.

I was no longer stick-legged and flat-chested, no longer a sweaty kid finishing a race. I was something more, and for some reason had more to lose because of it. While taking a shower or getting dressed, I could scarcely look at myself in the mirror. There was always the uncomfortable feeling of intrusion, of violating something pure and fragile and natural that renders it irrevocably dirty and corrupt. It was the “biological purpose” of the feminine figure that society and my teachers shoved down our throats, even in the 21st century — that we were shaped the way we were to fit around, to conform, to be fulfilled — and the perverted acceptance with which other girls accepted this role scared me shitless. Then I was told that it was alright, to be shy was natural, good even.

But I wasn’t shy. I was angry. I was confused. I was me and they weren’t letting me be.

So I asked myself the same question I had asked my mom so many years earlier: why not?

Ironically, it wasn’t until I was standing naked before the world — literally — that I fully accepted Me. Wasn’t until I de-blobbed myself, removed unashamedly all those obstacles and disguises which concealed my feminine
figure and cast them aside that I was able to finally respect myself. No sweatshirt, no baggy pajama bottoms — no underwear, no bra. Nothing. Naked as the day I was born, but so very changed. Sprinting across a golf course at night with six other similarly skin-clad teenagers, screaming and leaping and flying, I was finally free and me. I had been so worried about covering myself up, evading the scrutiny of others, that I forgot what naked felt like. My body wasn’t a thing to be tainted or corrupted by others, wasn’t defined by some stick figure on a door or the kind of clothes I wore. I didn’t have to feel threatened or silent or crippled by the “gender binary” because I transcended it.

The next morning, if the golfers looked close enough, they would have seen the only traces of our midnight escapade: 12 tiny footprints, sprinting across their precious green.

I don’t hide anymore. I now realize I am neither boy nor girl, feminine nor masculine, but a wondrous, fascinating, radiant manifestation of something in-between. I don’t have to confine myself to the silhouette on the bathroom door — I’ll wear the hell out of my skirt and catch every curve ball that comes my way.

So fuck your traditional heteronormativity Your gender binary Your Boy Your Girl.

I choose Androgyny, because I choose Me.

I wanted it
really really long like Pocahontas,
or short like Tinkerbell —
or shorter maybe... like Peter Pan?
Girls don’t have hair like that, sweetie.

My hair was a cage.
Grow it out, braid it up, cut it bangs, paint it blue,
I was trapped.

For nine years, trichotillomania turned my hands into jaws and they munched away at my hair until it hung in jagged chunks and gaps all split-endy and wrong.

My hair was a cage, and my hands knew it years before ever I did.

My skin twitched and crawled like it didn’t want to encase me, my scalp tried to creep away at night —

But when I finally got it all cut short, every bit of skin, every hair on my head settled into place. No urge to pick and pull, no need to escape anymore.

I could slide back and forth, from one gender to the next...

It was like looking in the mirror and seeing a person for the first time.
I Love Your Eyes

by Mary Ontiveros, Colored Pencil
“hook-up culture” by Anonymous

i traded it for money, affection, status, escape, validation, and security.

which left me tired, addicted, confused, and dejected thoroughly.

i want emotional, intellectual, and spiritual intimacy.

so i Trust


wait.

my first time by Alice Cowens

It’s bile and burning

and things I ate an hour ago.

Wasps through the wind-pipe,

my body flopped over the cold bathtub,

on every day that I fuck up and forget
to look right past your left ear

with this face that I’ve grafted

from the skin of my thigh,

the very edge of a pride

I used to keep
between us.
Silly girl
Grass-stained and dirt-flecked
Nose pressed to the chalked sidewalk
Poking roly-poly bugs until they curl into a ball
And stay there

But not for long
You wait
And your sun-kissed face slides into a smile
As they uncoil
Legs jittering
Plates grinding against concrete
In a momentous effort of self-stabilization
They squirm to achieve
equilibrium
With the world

Having won the battle, they lumber
Away, after some tidbit
Or runaway crumb
And disappear from you
To attend to secret affairs of the roly-poly

But some don’t uncoil
No matter how long you wait

Some stay locked in their balls
So tight and black they could be dead
Bullets scattering the sidewalk
Spilling into the cracks
Unable to crawl back out

Silly girl
They were on the terrace of a Japanese restaurant when it happened. Not all at once—as she bit into the first negamaki roll all her attention was geared towards the story her mother was telling. But it was starting. She may have laughed, hiding the food in her mouth with one raised hand. The sauce might have been overpowering, or maybe it was the wind blowing her hair in her face. She picked up another with the chopsticks, swirled it around in the teriyaki sauce, and plopped it between two rows of teeth. There might have been a pang on the back of her tongue, but she kept chewing. Slower, perhaps, as the taste grew stronger.

Soon focusing on her mother’s story became difficult. She crossed her legs and tried to swallow, but halfway through her throat shut down. Her chest started tightening. She lifted a glass to her lips, but water only spread the taste more throughout her mouth. She ate some rice, then chose another roll. As her teeth started working on the third a fresh wave flooded her tongue. It was dumb, just her imagination anyway, but she kept chewing. Slower, perhaps, as the taste grew stronger.

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Each piece brought with it a fresh coating. One ankle was hooked around the other now, her legs clinging to each other as if it were the middle of winter and not one of the hottest days of the year. She felt sweat start to pool on her upper lip and drip down her temples. She blotted her mouth with the napkin, but as she pressed her lips together a couple drops of sweat made their way onto her tongue. The sweat mingled with the rest and she began reliving old moments. Her lips on your neck. Your fingers interlacing. How it was on top of you, underneath you, around you.

And yet, it was not arousing. She longed for you, but she did not burn for you. She could feel you under her skin, inside her but not inside her. That you were not was achingly apparent. She missed you. Or you were missing of her. The more she ate the more she could feel herself growing hollow, the taste eating her away. It became overpowering; she could barely force herself to swallow, but each time she put her chopsticks down she found herself, moments later, raising them once more to her lips. It was insatiable. With each bite she could feel you moving into her, intoxicating her, traveling through her.

But even as she grew unstoppable, so too did it become untenable. There was no controlling it any longer, and she gave in to the taste. Roll after roll found its way into her mouth until all that was left on her plate was white rice splattered with soy sauce. She felt the tingling in the back of her tongue start to fade. Her legs unfurled. Her chest relaxed. Her throat opened and the lingering drops were washed away with a mouthful of rice.
My Very Own Pair

by David Mucklow

These are my balls;
they belong to me.
There are many like them,
but these balls
are my own.

They’re squishy and insecure,
flappy and wire haired,
sweaty and shriveled.

The left one hangs
low and lumpy;
the right one traced
with veins and blood vessels,

and they cannot care for themselves
for they aren’t self-aware.

But they are my balls,
and I’m proud of them and I must
care for them.

So please don’t grab and squeeze,
pull, or pry,
knead or pop.
Grasp lightly, not tightly
because they’re really
all that I have.
When I talk about antiqueerness and Greek Life on the Puget Sound campus, a common response I hear, especially from queer members of Greek Life, is that my critique devalues those queers who do choose to participate in Greek Life. The argument is that by arguing that Greek Life is foundationally anti-queer, I am erasing the experiences of queers members of fraternities and sororities. I do not think that this is the case and I do not think that this response is responsible argumentation. My argument is that Greek Life is foundationally heterosexist, that, at its core, Greek Life is founded on principles of antiqueerness and operates in a structure that reinforces and indeed calcifies gender binaries. Brotherhood and sisterhood are facades that dress up antiqueerness as if it were respectable tradition. I do not think that when I state that principles of brotherhood and sisterhood are both anti-queer and hetero-patriarchal this should be controversial: the banner of ‘brotherhood’ reifies fraternal citizenship that not all men can identify with and ‘sisterhood’ constructs versions of womanhood that not all women may be able to identify with. Between the broad notions of ‘brotherhood’ and ‘sisterhood’ there seems to be a profound gap, as if those who could identify with neither principle don’t have a place in Greek Life. That several queers may join in spite of these principles, may identify with these principles, or that some people may experience affirmation through identification with these principles, does not prove that these principles are not anti-queer and is not a sufficient response to claims about the ways in which these principles are designed to hedge against those whose presence poses a threat to this solid tradition of fraternal citizenship or womanhood: unruly queers.

I do not think it devalues queers in Greek Life to state that the principles that they affirm by participating in Greek Life are the cause of anxiety and suffering for other queers, and that for some this anxiety and suffering is because of a queer’s queerness. Such a social relation must be considered a relation of antiqueerness. I do not think it is my responsibility to be generous to queers in Greek Life when a central premise of my argument is that for many queers outside of Greek Life, Greek Life is a frequent and recurrent source of antiqueerness and the primary expression of a heterosexist culture. That this culture is affirmed by some queers does not mean that they are any less “queer,” it merely means that some queers do not experience the effects of the anti-queer foundations of Greek Life. That some queers participate in Greek Life does not mean Greek Life is queer, and it certainly doesn’t mean that Greek Life affirms all forms of queerness. I think it is irresponsible argumentation to claim that I somehow have a duty to speak for queers in Greek Life, or that their experiences somehow negate mine and others’. I would never be able to undertake such a task because that experience is not mine. To assert otherwise is to privilege the experience of queers in Greek Life above that of other queers; such an action would clearly reproduce the systematic denial of queer critique that I’ve already said elsewhere is a part of its heterosexism.

How is it that Greek Life is intolerable for many queers outside of Greek Life? If Greek Life were concerned solely about justice or questions of philanthropy, and Greek Life would attempt to make itself safer rather than perform the philanthropy with its community without making it gendered philanthropy, and Greek Life would attempt to make itself safer rather than amplifying its efforts to deny the need for criticism. If philanthropy were the goal of Greek Life, if civic service were its natural end, then we probably wouldn’t celebrate that service with safari parties that reinforce colonial and racist representations of Africa (which actually happened).

If Greek Life were concerned solely about justice or questions of philanthropic service, then it wouldn’t put on these spectacles. The point is that Greek Life is intolerable for many queers outside of Greek Life? A hyper-visible culture that routinely puts on parties that appear to many as heterosexual pageantry, a party culture that remains embroiled within a larger culture of rape and sexual assault. Why should anyone expect a queer to feel safe in those environments? Does anyone even care if a queer feels safe in those environments? And don’t pretend that this isn’t the case: the testimony of survivors of sexual assault and harassment demonstrate that this campus is not a safe space and, like almost all of society, conducive to such assaults and harassments.

I find it interesting that none of the responses Greek Life has produced to the articles in Wetlands Magazine from last semester respond to this criticism of party culture. I don’t find it surprising. Is Greek Life ever willing to talk about these issues beyond the context of their controlled environment in a seminar or talk? Seminars and talks where Greek Life chooses the speaker? Why doesn’t Greek Life respond to this criticism when it comes from someone other than a fraternity brother or sorority sister? This party culture is the foundation of Greek Life’s social capital. Any claim to the contrary would be ridiculous. If Greek Life were merely a philanthropic organization, then it wouldn’t have the kind of institutional and social power that it has on campus. If that were the case, it would do everything it could to hand over all of that institutional and social power to Multicultural Student Services and student groups organizing on campus for social justice. Greek Life would be open to anyone who wanted to perform the philanthropy with its community without making it gendered philanthropy, and Greek Life would attempt to make itself safer rather than amplifying its efforts to deny the need for criticism. If philanthropy were the goal of Greek Life, if civic service were its natural end, then we probably wouldn’t celebrate that service with safari parties that reinforce colonial and racist representations of Africa (which actually happened).

If Greek Life were concerned solely about justice or questions of philanthropic service, then it wouldn’t put on these spectacles. The point is that this party culture is already an unsafe culture, one largely dominated by heterosexual men, one that celebrates heterosexual values, values that reinforce hetero-patriarchal gender binaries. Greek Life’s “philanthropy”
A RESPONSE TO QUEERS IN GREEK LIFE

might be better conceived as a vague cover for hetero-misogynist bacchanalia. When queer people help to create these spaces where many queers, whether in Greek Life or otherwise, feel unsafe and feel unsafe because of their queerness, then what queer people are helping to create is a space of queer vulnerability. A space of queer vulnerability is an anti-queer space. That queers have not told you this before does not excuse the condition that you have helped to create and that some queers celebrate this party culture does not mean that it’s excusable. A great queer activist, Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, has a great line in some of her essays where she writes that elite gay activists hide behind “sweatshop-produced rainbow flags.” When queers hide behind the rainbow flag in an attempt to justify a culture bought at the expense of the happiness of other queers they are being anti-queer.

In the March 24 issue of The Trail, a student who signed their name as Emma wrote a letter to the editor arguing that my polemic “us” vs. “them” tone contributes to queer peoples’ “internalized homophobia,” concluding that “the Greek community is more than happy to have good-faith dialogue.” Emma, a gender-nonconforming member of Greek Life, offers a unique perspective on these issues that I respect and am appreciative to have read. However, I think this response demonstrates exactly what I have said is foundationally anti-queer within Greek Life. Any internalized homophobia I have is the fault of straight supremacy and the anti-queerness of society at large. I won’t deny that I’ve internalized principles of anti-queerness—there isn’t anybody in this culture who hasn’t. But this blanket denial of my experiences and the experience of others is a willful ignorance with respect to the reality of queer suffering: when multiple queers are telling you that something makes them feel victimized by virtue of their queerness and the instinctive response is to say “you’re making it up, you’ve internalized homophobia,” then no productive dialogue is happening. Instead of interrogating whether or not the accusations might be true, Greek Life asserts it’s already working on these issues in chapter meetings and in council meetings, and so therefore all must be fine. The “us” vs. “them” dichotomy is thus already there. When I say “us,” I mean those queers outside of Greek Life for whom Greek Life is oppressive. I have never claimed anything to the contrary. “Them” is anyone who supports anti-queerness, belittles queer rage, dismisses queer discontent, or behaves in heterosexist ways.

So what is to be done? What can we do to make things better? Is there anything at all that isn’t anti-queer? These questions don’t have easy answers and they will never be easily resolved. Whatever can be done, I don’t think that having a few council meetings, chapter meetings, or simple personal conversations can change these things. These questions aren’t resolved after one night of introspection and dialogue. This dialogue takes time and people’s emotions will run high. Many have kept their emotions locked in closets for far too long. I don’t hate Greek Life and I respect many people in it: that said, I’m not sure if Greek Life on this campus is ready for the sort of structural changes that would be necessary to satisfy my critique. But at a minimum it would mean the end of arguments that everything is fine now, that there is nothing to see here after all, that Greek Life is already working on it and we should leave it to them, that chapter meetings are enough, that philanthropy means Greek Life should get a free pass, that queers who protest are the ones who are being homophobic. That sort of projection and denial is not helpful and doesn’t make Greek Life look any better to queers who feel unsafe because of these exact sort of social aggressions and erasures.

I’ll end with this one statement. To any queer in Greek Life who thinks I am denying their experience: is it possible that I’m not denying your experience, or speaking in your place, but rather that we have contradictory and antagonistic experiences with Greek Life? If that’s the case, then that means there are real problems, that the experience of me and other queers who feel the same way I do aren’t the result of “internalized homophobia” but are rather the natural result of our lived experiences, and that meaningful dialogue would require taking these arguments seriously. I do not deny that many queers love Greek Life. I only ask that people realize the existence of queers in a fraternity or sorority does not mean that the institution is “ahead of the curve.” The response of Greek queers and allies reveal that it’s right with the rest of this anti-queer society.
I can’t even keep track of how many times I have falsely told a man I was a lesbian, when in actuality I’m queer, bisexual to be exact. This is not coming from a place of internalized queerphobia, or even from annoyance and disgust and the lewd comments women routinely face in a variety of situations. It’s more coming from a place of knowing that I am already going to be objectified and sexualized because I’m a woman, but even more so if I even hinted that I date the same and other genders. Trying to explain that I date women, men and all sorts of folks usually turns me into a fetish; and this is particularly true if the person in question is a cisgender, heterosexual man. The second I say I’m not gay or straight (god forbid I say “I’m bisexual!”) I subject myself to the hot seat of inappropriate and uncomfortable questions about my sexuality.

“How do you feel about threesomes? Like, with me and my girlfriend?”

“That’s hot.”

“Do you like men or women more?”

“Do you miss dick when you’re dating a woman?”

“You should call up your bisexual girlfriends and invite them over!”

“Seriously though, what’s better? Sex with men or women?”

“How do women even have sex?”

“So I know you said you have a girlfriend, but do you have a boyfriend yet?”

These are all very real things people (men) have told me in response to learning of my bisexuality, and they are the more mild things people (men) have said to me in public, non-sexual contexts. Their entire demeanor changes upon learning that one pesky little detail about me. They go from being just generally unpleasant people to full-blown raunchy fuck-heads who assume I have some sort of beastly, insatiable sexual appetite and therefore they can ask me whatever they want, and talk to me however they want. It’s not even the overt sexualization and fetishization of my identity that really upsets me to my core, it’s the dehumanization and objectification that accompanies it that really gets to me.

It really truly can be very difficult for me to vocalize that I’m bisexual or queer around non-queer men, and it’s something I still struggle with. I was 11 years old when I realized I was not straight. That was 10 years ago now and I still have days where I struggle with being labeled bisexual and would rather just be a lesbian (let’s get one thing straight though, I most certainly never desire to identity as heterosexual). Growing up, I was always told my sexuality was ‘just a phase’ and all throughout my teenage years I patiently waited to wake up either a homo or a hetero. Turns out, the jokes on everyone else because I’m still bisexual!

But that aside, safe spaces are great, they really are, but queers don’t exist in a safe world. I do not feel safe when some straight dude eye-fucks the shit out of me because I’m a bisexual woman and so I’m supposed to be okay with that — I am not okay with that. I do not feel safe when people ask me if I like men or women more — I feel like they are trying to get to some root of my identity that doesn’t exist, but maybe if they keep digging I’ll turn out to be gay or straight anyway. I do not feel safe when men ask me about “my other girlfriends” or to have a threesome with them and their girlfriend — I feel like an object for their titillation and it makes me feel dirty and used. I don’t feel safe when men tell me it’s hot that I’m bisexual — I am not a commodity or a fetish, I am a human being with hopes, desires and feelings.
Clockwise from left: Heavy, Away, Curl, Profile.
by Erica Rochelle
The sunglow steam of midsummer dusk
Only coaxed me to emulate its heat once inside.
I thirsted to trap its swelter within our walls.
The bow of my lips and the trace of your thigh
The slink of your skin and the mink of the blanket
The arch in your spine so pronounced,
I could count how many bones God gave you.

With curves of moon
Even the Archer is envious.
Sweet Crescent, my love is
flowering like the stars,
and measureless as a kiss.
In you,
I find rejuvenation
Eclipse, so that I may vanish within you.
A Prayer
by Grace Penzell

Split wide open on the altar,
I find death in the weight of your body on mine,
breath in my ear as I unwind myself
from the day, from the weeks, from the months of wondering
if this is really what I want,
images taunting me, seducing me,
but I'm never loose enough to embrace you unless
I'm already halfway down a mason jar of Irish Whiskey
when you kissed me that first time
your lips were a cliff and
my soul knew to fly off
like I had missed it all along,
stumbling blind for years,
fears holding me back—
scarred by the symbols of what is ugly and what is good,
never believing that rules were for those same fools who
Believe
that canons of love were meant for war,
that cannons in war were meant to uphold taboos,
and I bruised myself wanting more,
kneeling on the floor while I gagged on the doctrine of dichotomy
but reached for the river to wash me dirty
Let me untie you, now, let us unite us now
before the queer queen
mother, howww I've longed
to light the candle hiding in shadows
sing your prayer,
not knowing where is up or down, heaven or hell
because I'll never be pure,
never sure
if I can live in totalities,
My presence in my present is not a flight pattern to tomorrow
Our time is borrowed
Break yourself over me because I am already broken
You left bruises in places I didn’t know I had
Sought out the secret pockets of my body
And crammed them with bulging bits of you you you
Sweaty unyielding you
You

I found you
Tucked between toes,
Stuffed in my bellybutton
Lurking in the shell of my ear
Infiltrating the private places

I felt you
In my sore scalp after you clawed at it
(my curls are not a leash)
In the way I deflated like a balloon when you pressed down
(I’m not a trampoline)
In the precious purples and greens dappling my body
Like soft spots on fruit
Or small scuttling creatures, fleeting parasites of lust
That kissed my skin with bloated lips
The little bloodsuckers
(How could I not love them?)

I understood you
When you infected my mind
When you convinced me it was “normal”, that I should be scared
That I should appreciate it
People liked bruises, you said
It made them feel, you said
You peeled off your Metallica shirt to expose your own scar-spattered skin
(Guess you’re not so metal after all)
Then raked it against the smoothness of mine
Like sandpaper
(It felt, alright)
I heard you
As you tugged on the tendrils of my brain
And whispered through the guilt-flooded chambers of my mind
That to hurt is to feel, it's the same thing really
Maybe you didn't know the difference
(That's no excuse)

I tried to help you
Beat it
The Urge
I was your whim and your blanket
I built you bird nests and made chicken noodle soup
Offered up my body as your playground
Enfolded you in the warm sheets of my skin
Kissed your scars and told you it'd be alright

I enslaved myself to you
Because I thought I could keep you alive
Thought I could drag you from the shadowy corners of your own mind
Thought I could fix the broken parts
But every threat you made
Pierced me with a pang of guilt
Paralyzing and sharp
So sharp
Almost as sharp as the knives
You thrust in my hands to keep out of yours
Wicked, black jawed things with splintered handles
(I hid them under my pillow so my parents wouldn't know,
   dreaming sharp dreams)

It wasn't enough

So I told you
Sorry because I didn't know what I was doing
Because I felt scared for you
Of you
Because I thought it was my fault

And you accepted that apology

Asshole.

I don't forgive you
You bruised me then blamed me
And all I learned is sometimes it's better to forget
by Jonathan Steele, “Burnt in Effigy,”
Woodfired Stoneware, 29”x18”x7.5”
2014
A Thank You To The Men I Know  by Carson Jarrell-Rourke

I was soft
and gentle,
an early October stream,
pliant mud and docile water.
they weren’t.

Every idea that they’d sucked in like their mother’s vacuums--
scratch that--
their cleaning ladies’ vacuums
poisoned them against me.
And I loved them anyways
I excused them anyways
I fucked them anyways.
And then
I got hard.
Harder than them,

I became the gargoyle atop their cathedral
the one they’d built for me

And I left
as they changed,
And I turned mean
as men turned sweet

Set out in such harsh sunlight,
my change is set in stone.

And now I know
You’re just little paper boats in my early October river.
How would it feel to have your cathedral collapse,
and my crumbling bits
crushing your gentle little throat?

Leader of the Pack

by Alice Cowens

they told me he was bad/but I knew he was sad - The Shangri-Las

You’re a fighting fish
in a broken forty-ounce bowl.
I chain smoke to make you look at me.

Puffs of white, my little paws
against a big bad door.

You crack, I crawl.

Rub my back
across your too soft tongue.

Something lazy in those lips,
but if I close my eyes, its all adrenaline: gravel and road.

Later, you can ride over in your rusted car,
crush my body until it’s broken enough
to mosaic with the jagged pieces
of your soul.

I’m a nice girl who doesn’t want to be
anymore.

I think we are two halves
let me give you my whole.
Artists Statement:

The perfect victim has been posed. They have gotten over their violating experience and reentered society. They are empowered and are willing to speak about their experience when asked. They have turned their experience into something positive and creative. For me it is activism.

But by definition, the perfect victim is objectified. They have been brought back into society to speak about their experiences and empower others. Their storytelling is not for their benefit, but for the benefit of those listening. Society doesn’t want to deal with a sad victim. Society doesn’t want to hear that you still hurt. This leaves victims with two options. Either to be destroyed by their experience or to go through a rough patch and emerge strong and empowered on the other side. However, our experiences are not so black and white.

Although I come off as the perfect victim, I can never be that person. I would much rather be seen as someone beautiful, strong, and confident rather than sad and defeated. But I can’t be the perfect victim all the time. My perpetrator still goes to Puget Sound. I will never get over my experience when I know they are around. I will never fully get over it because my experience will morph as I grow. It is always going to be a part of my identity. There have been and will be times when I need to be sad, when I need to cry, when I need to get mad. I need to feel and express it all, regardless of whether or not it makes you uncomfortable. Support me when I’m powerful and support me when I’m broken. I need you.

by Sadie Boyers
My name is Sam, and I am a total nerd. Why am I willing to call myself a nerd, despite the negative connotation behind it? I love superheroes. I love reading comics of the Teen Titans fighting villains such as Deathstroke and Cheshire. I love watching Futurama with friends in late night marathons. I love the excitement I get seeing set photos of filming the upcoming blockbuster movie, Avengers: Age of Ultron. I love going to cons and seeing other fans, interacting with creators and cosplayers, and surrounding myself with the many fantasies I live for.

While I love being a nerd and being a part of nerd culture, this love is not shared by everyone, as the nerd and fandom culture far too often limits women and people of color from participating. In theory, you would think a large community of those bullied or ostracized for their interests would welcome others with similar experiences of isolation.

Within the past year, two major events further illustrated the ignorance and discrimination seen fandom and nerd culture: the castings of Gal Gadot as Wonder Woman in the sequel to Man of Steel, and Michael B. Jordan as the Human Torch in the upcoming reboot of Fantastic Four.

Both of these announcements were noteworthy for many reasons. Gadot’s casting as Wonder Woman saw the long overdue introduction of the most famous female superhero to a major live-action movie picture. In addition to her inclusion, it was met with the possibility of a solo-film, which if made would be the first female lead superhero movie ever. The casting of Michael B. Jordan, an award-winning actor, as the Human Torch gave visibility of an African-American superhero in a historically white-dominant franchise. Gadot and Jordan becoming involved in these movies increases representation of women and people of color in comic-book movies, and gives potential of increasing representation within our culture at large.

While many praised these decisions, there were still those who were against their inclusion in these movies. Rather than celebrate Gadot and Jordan, or even discuss their acting skills, many fans angrily stated that both were not fit for their roles. Their reactions were nothing short of offensive: Jordan was deemed not fit to play the Human Torch as a black actor playing a “white” character, and Gadot was viewed as “not busty enough” to play Wonder Woman. In both situations, the actors were disregarded because of an aspect of their identities that did not fit the standards set forth by many white male fans. Essentially, the most “visible” and archetypal nerds decided to enforce a paradigm of what nerd culture should be, and that paradigm alienates women and people of color.

If this alienation continues it will perpetuate a cycle of minimal representation of marginalized individuals, which will only further alienate them from participation in comics, tv-series, gaming, and other activities that white and male fans frequent; this catch 22 was highlighted well by actor Donald Glover. In 2010, a fan campaign was launched to have Glover play Spider-Man in the upcoming film reboot The Amazing Spider-Man. Many fans were excited due to the actor’s part in the tv-series Community, with Spider-Man creator and comics legend Stan Lee even advocating for Glover. Despite these nicer sentiments, there were many who still objected due to Glover’s race; many resorted to social media to denounce him via a barrage of racist slurs.

So why do these incidents of discrimination matter within fan culture? The answer is simple: representation. When asked about the campaign and backlash, Glover responded with an interaction with one of these so-called “fans.” Over social media, this fan tried to explain his views by telling the actor that a black actor cannot play Spider-Man as he believed “there are no black kids like Peter Parker,” Spider-Man’s alter ego. Donald Glover’s response was simple and completely on point when he said “It’s fucking 2011 and you don’t think there is a black kid who lives with his aunt in Queens? Who loves science, and photography?”

While these issues with movies may seem like singular issues, the fact is there is a lack of representation of women and people of color within fantasy and sci-fi genres. So why does the perception of superheroes and other aspects of fantasy matter? The paradigm of the nerd is constantly perceived as a social outcast, an introvert whose love of Star Trek and Magic: the Gathering has led to unrelenting ridicule and shaming from mainstream society. In addition, we are led to believe that once two nerds find each other that their mutual interests and experiences of social exclusion create an instant friendship to combat their woes. Unfortunately, this ideal is far from the truth.

In reality, women are called “fake geek girls” if they wear a t-shirt with Captain America on it. People of color are discouraged from dressing up as Catwoman or Aquaman and are asked “shouldn’t you be dressing up as a black character?” Too many women are given rape threats online simply because they play World of Warcraft. Too many girls are told that they watch shows like The Walking Dead or Game of Thrones just to get attention of men. On top of all that, nerds are portrayed as lonely.

The effects of the alienating marginalized identities out of fandom and nerd communities goes far beyond representation. The problematic displays of discrimination, racism, and sexism within these communities create an environment that deliberately shuts out women and people of color. But the most crucial thing is that these instances trick many into believing that these people do not exist in fandom and nerd communities. The fact of the matter is there are many women and people of color among characters, creators, and fans.

There are countless comic book characters, sci-fi writers, fantasy fans, and others who belong within these marginalized identities that are told don’t belong in nerd culture. And when these people are brought into the mainstream, they are attacked for intruding the white male dominated status quo. Despite ridiculously repetitive amounts of Superman and Batman movies, Wonder Woman or Black Panther films are considered ridiculous and ‘unrealistic.’

While it seems hopeless, there are steps being taken in the right direction. Such as Marvel comics recently introducing Ms. Marvel, a young female Pakistani-American superhero, and DC has introduced a young Cree superheroine, Equinox. Inclusions such as these further representation, but what is important is that it disproves the notion that individuals with marginalized identities can’t be present within nerd and fandom communities.

To put it simply, whenever the prospect of diversity and representation is met with “they can’t” among nerd culture, what they mean is “they shouldn’t.” The bottom line is that the status quo set by a dominance of white-male individuals limits the representation of women and people of color. How can we alienate voices of those who feel lost or alone, and say that heroes aren’t for them. I thought heroes were for everyone?
empty
I remember the first time I stared into a mirror,
my hands resting anxiously on a new seedling forest,
my body being stolen by a monster sprouting from beneath the skin
my malnourished identity had come to transform me
to give me gender, but
I was never taught how to love hair
only never to pluck their waving strands against the grain,
this was a body I never imagined

waxing
for years I fell asleep to their desert coyote choir
yipping and howling, reveling nocturnal before
I heard their canine voices finally sing to a teenage changeling:
“biFURcated gender;
two furs, two genders”
and so I slowly waxed with the moon, peeling back not the unwanted hair
but the confined uncomfortable flesh,
I agreed to let my naked self
ignite with moonfire, to become

full
now, a decade later in sylvan solace I rise
and every follicle turns to face the nighttime sun
a new face melts forward as the old body dies
paws to earth, snout to sky, howling at the moon, a new body won
wolf: a lunar scandal, a twilight fang grinning into the earth
I know something about this body now, a secret that was withheld from me:
I am a beautiful beast
and I will wear this pelt, let the world see me

waning
the moon sets - the hunt within is over
coming down from the high
of pine needle revelations
humming with hidden lunar hybridity
I feel myself becoming once again the WERE, the-once-was-human
my hair rolls back, a line receding to an old gender somehow

new
feeling this animal within
wholly right, holy queer,
having breached the liminal space,
escaped the lunar cycle, the binary face
identity found: queer wolf
not our gender (it is mine)
I have kissed that self divine

Poet's statement:
The word “hirsute” – meaning hairy – comes from the Latin hirsutus, which in turn comes from the Proto-Indo-European *ghers-tu, from *ghers – “to bristle.” There is evidence to suggest that the Latin horrére – “to bristle with fear” – shares this same root with hirsutus. For this is what we associate with hair, with beast-ness: fear. It is also what we associate with monsters. Throughout my life I have heavily identified with werewolves and shapeshifters because of an ongoing struggle both with body hair and to identify with my own body. This poem is part of a long exploration, and ultimately celebration, of a changing body and identity.
In the waxing light the land formations show themselves,
The smoothness of skin
Against the shadowy crags of bedclothes.

The boulders of his shoulders
Emerge above the chasm between
Duvet and pillow
Worn smooth and rounded
By the current of her whispered words as they flowed
Over them in the moonlit era,
Pale, barely distinguishable from the
Paleness of the sheets,
Spotted with freckles,
The chalk of Dover’s cliffs against a soft white sky.

In a rift in the sheets
The valley of her back lies exposed,
Hollowed slowly by his hands,
The glaciers of the midnight era,
Between the cliffs of her shoulder blades
And the rolling hills of her hips as they twist
Toward the wind-worn ranges
Of their intertwined legs, knees, ankles.

On these oceans of cotton
Have two continents drifted
In tranquility, or in fire
And friction
As the night hours wore on
To arrive here, in the gray
Morning hours,
These breathing landscapes,
Two slumbering bodies in a lovers' bed.
The rest of my night at the bar is a blur. I'm not drunk, just intoxicating even when I know I'm being obvious. Eric chuckles in resignation and I meet Ari for the first time through a mutual friend and she has of my body has a much more positive reaction. Seriously, I can't stop staring. My barely B cups get sad just looking at them—but whew! The rest and there is truly no competition. Her wildly curly hair is everywhere and her is cute in a bland sort of way. I've honestly considered sleeping the influence of a fruity cocktail. I absentmindedly chat with Eric, who I have I am out on the patio at my favorite bar, my brain unwinding under the of a fruity cocktail. I absentmindedly chat with Eric, who I have I am restless and full of tension. I shimmy into my favorite dress that is had one of those long weeks where rather than feeling exhausted by the I am restless and full of tension. I shuffle into my favorite dress that is the same time playing on my insecurities. She is playfully snarky in a way that occasionally borders on cruel, so taking to her always leaves me feeling off- I am restless and full of tension. I shimmy into my favorite dress that is I am restless and full of tension. I shuffle into my favorite dress that is is she sexy. The curve of her ass swoops up into the arch of her lower back; I am restless and full of tension. I shuffle into my favorite dress that is I am restless and full of tension. I shuffle into my favorite dress that is

The rest of my night at the bar is a blur. I'm not drunk, just intoxicated off of Ari’s presence. It’s one of those nights where everything goes smoothly—flirting is easy, all your jokes are witty, it feels totally natural to move onto the dance floor and slowly get closer and closer until your bodies are pushed up against one another in the sweatiest, sexiest way possible—even the music is good, which is a crapshoot at this particular venue. I know we are garnering stares but it doesn’t matter. We are radiating sexuality in such a pure, concentrated form that everyone around us can’t help but pick up on the energy. Soon we are hand-in-hand flagging a taxi from the curb. Ari directs the driver to her apartment without hesitation, and any doubts I had about this night are immediately put to rest with her directness. As we settle in the cab I feel her hand slip sneakily between my thighs and begin to travel upwards. I am instantly aroused; a lightning bolt hits my low belly and sets the center of my body ablaze. I shiver and my skin rises with goosebumps. Sensing my mood, Ari grins devilishly and leans over to whisper into my ear: “I am going to make you feel the best you’ve ever felt tonight. That’s a promise.” The blatant sexuality of her words washes over me and I sigh out loud, my head dropping backwards. I swear I almost come right then and there with her hand on my thigh and her lips to my ear.

Then we are up in her apartment, her hand slipping around my waist and

gently brushing my ass as she takes off my coat. She excuses herself to the bathroom while I move into her tiny kitchen and fill up a glass with water. So far, everything has worked exactly how I have fantasized, and it is completely surreal. I sip slowly and try to calm my energy. But then Ari comes out of the bathroom, her hair tied up in a knot that barely holds her tight black curls. I look her slowly up and down, languishing in the overwhelming awesomeness of sexual expectation. The curve of her hips and calves are outlined in her overly tight jeans and my eyes brighten with attraction. I gravitate towards her without thinking and I hear her breath catch. There we share our first real kiss, and it is soft and sweet with an underlying sharp urgency. Our movement escalates quickly, her hands move down to squeeze my waist and push me back against the counter. I put one hand around the back of her neck, the other shoves deep in her hair, and I pull back her head so I can lick and kiss her neck and collarbone. It tastes of sweat and perfume and I inhale deeply to take in all of her lovely musky scent. She moans breathily and an aching need throbs between my legs. Ari wordlessly leads me to her bedroom. After removing the clothes off her bed, she pushes me down and straddles me. I can see the top of her full breasts peeking out from her shirt; I can’t help but reach up and pull one side over until her flushed nipple comes free. I dip to reach it with my mouth, sucking and nibbling until she squirms. Her hips grind on my bare thigh, she can’t control herself from moving. It is an incredibly erotic motion and I can feel her warmth through her jeans. I grab the bottom of her shirt and pull it up and off. She is practically overflowing her lacy bra, the cups are low and one strap is off her shoulder. In a hurry to see all of her, I pull down on the sides and her tits pop out of their confinement with a satisfying bounce. Cupping the bottom of both in my hands, I brush my thumb lightly over her dark nipples and watch them harden into perfect nubs. My mouth finds her chest again and wanders from one breast to another, licking, sucking, biting, kissing. Licking, nibbling, moaning. She grabs my head and hugs my face in closer to the softness of her body while sighing and grinding her hips a little harder into me. I undo her bra with one hand, gripping her ass with another. Awkward and fumbling I unzip the side of my dress so I am left in just my underwear.

“Do you always go braless?” Ari asks, teasing with the hint of a laugh on her face.

“I laugh too, “F**k bras. I figure if I’m lucky enough to not need them I should fully embrace it.”

Hear hear, I wish I could do that,” she mumbles, her mouth dipping down to kiss my neck. Her hard nipples brush against mine, and mine instantly respond in kind. I moan quietly and arch my back to push my body up closer to hers.

“Selfishly, I’m glad your body is exactly how it is,” I say into her ear, and her laugh rumbles into my chest. Where my body is ribs and muscle with little give, she is soft and feminine and everything sexy. The delicate skin of her soft belly rubs against mine and feels like flint sparking along my skin. I undo the buttons of her jeans, sliding them down with her underwear so I can get a grip on her bare ass. I dig my nails lightly into the plump roundness and she responds by gasping and pushing her warm wetness hard onto my thigh.

She has to roll off the top of me to kick her jeans off. I turn on my side and prop my head up so I can look her up and down fully. But goddamn, she is sexy. The curve of her ass swoops up into the arch of her lower back;
her breasts push up into the air as she lifts off the bed to remove silky black underwear from around her ankles. She turns back to face me and takes her gaze down my body in return. I feel my cheeks flush at the attention, although not in embarrassment. I like how I look naked. I am strong, I love to run and do yoga and I know it shows when my clothes are off. She nods down at my underwear.

“Take those off.”

Without breaking eye contact, I slip off my remaining clothes. Ari moves closer to me so her fiery skin is pressed up against the side of my body. She slides her top leg over mine and moves it up and down. She kisses my mouth and gently pinches my nipple. Her hand travels down my stomach and circles lightly around my belly button, I squirm and let out a sound between a giggle and a gasp. Anticipation builds hotly in between my legs as her fingertips approach the top of my mound. She moves so gently, so sweetly, and oh so painfully slowly down through my curly patch of hair. Her fingers swirl as she pushes and pulls at my swollen and flushed skin. She teases my outer lips with her first two fingers, rolling and stroking and softly pinching, not quite reaching the wetness just between them. Her torment is the best kind of agony. When she finally dips in one finger and slides down the middle, I exhale loudly, realizing only then I had been holding my breath. A satisfied sound slips from her mouth in reaction to my obvious arousal.

Minutes, hours, days, years pass all at once. I gain energy from her kicks and hair and breasts, and I luxuriate in the sensation. I feel powerful and alive and human. And she laughs, and she smiles, and we sigh, together momentarily as one.

Her come covers my face, my mouth, my fingers, my eyelashes and hair and breasts, and I luxuriate in the sensation. I feel powerful and alive and human. And she laughs, and she smiles, and we sigh, together momentarily as one.

I am still moving, still pushing my hips rhythmically into her hand, her fingers now pumping in and out of me, her palm rubbing indirect but intense pressure onto my swollen clit. My heavy breathing quickly drowns my weak cries of protest, and when she asks if I am ok I find myself nodding her to continue. My world shifts and the only reality is the place where her hand meets my body and where my body responds. Something overwhelming is twisting, building inside me, more than before. Much more than before. I close my eyes tight, only able to focus on the intensity of the feeling. And then I feel a moment of pure and total calm, absolute blankness; I take a deep breath into this plateau and my body explodes, coming harder than I can ever remember, my body shaking and arching and shivering, soaking the sheets beneath me. Forgetting to breathe and clenching everything so hard I am seeing stars by the time I come down from the high. Panting until my breath evens. Breathing roughly. Breathing slowly, melting into the sheets.

I am laughing, trembling slightly, legs twitching, and Ari finally moves her hand and lets me rest. I hear her laughing too. But really, I suppose all she did was deliver on her promise. And once I catch my breath, stretch out my body, let my muscles relax, I am more than ready to show my gratitude. She is obliviously grinning and basking in her victory, so she squeaks in surprise when I roll on top of her. I work my body down in between her legs. I am still pulsing and throbbing inside like a heartbeat. I kiss her mouth and trail my lips and tongue teasingly down her neck, to her breasts and nipples, and down her soft, warm belly. I dip my tongue into her belly button and she squirms. I move my body down farther on the bed, planting a kiss on each of her hipbones, then reaching to grip under each of her knees and pulling her legs further apart. She is a pallet of wonderful hues—dark, rich purple rimmed with an ashy grey, shiny candy pink leading to a deeper, more swollen looking red, and all framed by her tightly trimmed curls. She is breathing heavily, her eyes hooded as she watches me gaze upon her. I move my hands closer and closer to her center, gently circling patterns on her thighs, tracing scars and fading stretch marks, admiring the map of her body.

I reach her vulva, shiny with her arousal, and slowly sink a thumb into her opening. She gasps, her head falls into the pillow as I move in and out at a languid pace. I begin to kiss down the inside of her thigh. I reach her cunt and deliver a deep, wet kiss into her sweetest spot. I make my tongue wide and flat and lick slowly from the bottom of her slippery crevasses and folds as if I am trying to find a pulse deep within her. Her taste is musky and rich and tangy and sweet and an overwhelming sensory flood. I begin to lick and suck and swirl, zig-zagging back and forth, circling precisely with the tip of my tongue and then burying my face into her, penetrating her with my tongue and rubbing her clit with a finger. I eat her with total abandon. Minutes, hours, days, years pass all at once. I gain energy from her kicks and moans and her thighs strongly gripping my face and riding me as hard as she can. I circle my lips around her clit, move two fingers into her pussy, in and out, in and out; and I suck and lick and suck on that exact spot that makes her howl and shake and grab my hair. I push harder, make my tongue strong, and Keep. Up. The. Precise. Exact. Rhythm. She. Wants. Mmmm. “Yes there YES please yesss!” and I can’t breathe, but when she takes in a deep breath I feel it like it goes through me as well. And then she squeezes one last time hard and then releases and groans, guttural and deep and plaintive and loud. She is shaking in my arms, I am reaching under her legs and circling around to hold her trembling belly, my face still buried and my mouth still working. Her come covers my face, my mouth, my fingers, my eyelashes and hair and breasts, and I luxuriate in the sensation. I feel powerful and alive and human.

I am still moving, still pushing my hips rhythmically into her hand, her
WHAT IS “SURVIVING?”

FINDING THE LANGUAGE OF LIVING AFTER VIOLENCE ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS

There is a “national conversation” right now about “the issue of sexual violence on college campuses.” I place quotes around these phrases deliberately because at this point, to me, they are devoid of any meaning. It feels like semantic satiation with a human cost. Sexual violence is not an “issue.” It is a lived reality. There is no catchphrase that can encapsulate the feeling of your body no longer belonging to you. There is no language to describe watching the person who did this to you move freely through space while you stand paralyzed. There are no words for the loss of your own spirit.

I have read more blog posts and articles about this “phenomenon” than I can count. I have been to “round table discussions” and I have read the “perspectives” of rape culture denialists. There is a consensus that college campuses have failed to address sexual violence and that rape is collateral damage for women who inhabit these spaces. And YES. INSTITUTIONS HAVE FAILED. The University of Puget Sound has failed to bring justice to survivors. The University of _____ has failed to bring justice to survivors. The world has failed to bring justice to survivors. And none of it is fair.

But behind every “institutional failure” is a pulse of someone who still wonders what kind of person they might be if this had not happened. “1 in 3” is a statistic that continues to take casualties. Human. Casualties. I am one. And at this point, I am not sure what “justice” means anymore.

So right now, I do not want to talk about the “institutions” or “culture” or “administration” that may or may not uphold this reality. I do not want to interrogate or problematize the “consent revolution” as the fulcrum of the movement against sexual violence. There is a place for those conversations and they MUST happen. But just for a moment, I want to talk about what it feels like to live through the violence on my body. As someone who feels simultaneously angry at these faceless institutional realities and grateful to share the love I have with other people, I want to say that being a “survivor” of sexual violence on a college campus is not a one-dimensional existence.

Yet there are all of these things people tell you are “common” or “expected” after violence.

They say, “The victim often experiences self-blame.” And self-blame for me felt crucial, then terrifying, and then devastating. Crucial because I needed to believe I had some control over what happened to me. Terrifying because I realized that I had failed to protect myself and might fail again. Devastating because I felt responsible for the event that eroded any sense of autonomy I thought I possessed.

They say, “Dissociation from the attack is a normal response.” But I can tell you that the feeling of watching yourself from outside your body knowing that you have zero control over what happens to you does not feel “normal.” It feels isolating and alienating and so very alone. All of it feels completely fucked up and confusing. It feels like you may no longer call your body, your flesh, or your own breath, home. And no pamphlet I received prepared me for the shame.

They say, “Victims may experience Post Traumatic Stress.” And I can say that memory would play back in my head in class, eating meals with people I loved, or before I went to bed. Memories felt like a tape recorder cemented to the walls of my brain. I have recoiled from the touch of a woman I loved. I have felt myself walking away from relationships because of distance and misunderstanding and the unwavering toxicity of the memory of violence I could not shake off of me.

This is rape on a college campus. There are days when I cannot get out of bed because I feel completely worthless. I have felt anger saturate my chest to the point where I had to direct mental energy to breathe. I have come home and wept until I have thrown up. There is no “policy recommendation” or “administrative fix” for this. No hearing on “sexual misconduct” can ever bring “justice” to those who have had to cauterize their soul.

For a long time I have held anger so close to me I felt it physically. It was the kind of anger that made my chest hurt and my arms restless. Needless to say when I stood in front of a crowd of people in Kilworth Chapel during the “Speak Out Loud” portion of “Take Back the Night” I planned to deliver a tirade. But after listening to other people step up to a microphone and announce their existence, I realized that is all I really wanted to hear. People stepped forward and spoke about what it means to actually get out of bed and continue to live your life after feeling like you have lost everything. Because, behind all the scheduled “campus conversations” about this violence, live the people who stand in it. The people who, after everyone goes home, live in those moments of silence and stillness and reflection and invisibility. So when I stood and announced myself as a queer woman and as a “survivor” of rape on this campus, both identities that in tandem I feel render me invisible sometimes, I finally felt seen.

I know the word “survivor” is empowering for some, yet the word has never felt comfortable to me. I do not want to “survive.” I want to live. And living, to me, means confronting and making visible my own pain. It means opening myself up to the possibility of one day loving beyond it. The process of reaching that place is soul work. And no amount of “justice” I sought replaced the work of healing. I made the decision to forgive. And then I did the work of forgiving myself. This process is something endured by all “survivors.” It cannot be done in a focus group or a panel discussion. It is not institutional, or national, but something deeply personal.

All I know is that I am still here because I decided that my desire to live and to heal was stronger than anything else. Healing, for me, has been the simultaneously cruel, yet empowering acceptance that closure is a myth. Searching for closure felt like trying to bottle air that I would much rather breathe. I rarely wake up shaking anymore. I wake up angry even less often. There are things I understand now that I wish I didn’t have to. And there are things that will never make sense.

But there are also days when I feel no shame at all, and I have learned to hold onto these moments of joy for my own survival because I do not know when the next one might come. Every time someone tells me I am “strong” or “brave” I try to understand what these words mean because I still feel weak and confused and cowardly for not coming forward sooner. I have stood in fear and I have witnessed the ambiguity and the failures of justice. But I am still a sister, a caregiver, and a legal guardian. I am still fierce and still proud to be queer and even prouder to be a woman. I am still strong and I still wake up and get out of bed in the morning and go to work and sometimes that is all I can do and sometimes that is enough. I have gained my power back through giving my love openly and freely. I feel lucky and grateful to be living. And I am here.
i am trying to
open my mouth again
recreate the sounds i
muffled into the
palms of my hands
because i was
quiet like you asked
trapped in a body
with too much skin
trapped in a room
with a boy who
cracked his knuckles
cracked my back

you tried to
shut me up
you told me i was
a little cry baby
a little crying bitch
that i asked for this
that you knew i wanted
you
not like this
i whispered into
your pillow that smelled
like the perfume of another
girl

i relearned all the
words in the dictionary
hung them from my limbs
like wet wings
of a moth
but i still
mispronounce

fumble over
these letters i
shoved underneath my
fingernails, stained red
from all your dried up blood
my hands clawing at your back
carving my name into your flesh
i wanted you to remember me
i forgot to wash my hands

you are still trying
to keep me quiet
place your finger on my lips
and make me say
shhhh
i still want
you
like this

there are still places
down my throat
that can echo
your name
a thousand times
a thousand different harmonies
but my tongue can’t
cut through the glass
of your bedroom window
so i will sit outside your house
with my finger on the
concrete
tracing out the
words
i should have
screamed
POLO

GREEN

by Anonymous

your soft fingers and there are tremors
down my spine and in my mind from a fear
i didn’t ask for
i am not afraid of bites and bruises
anymore
but you whisper that my skin is so soft and i
return
to a familiar place
like a child, praying that i can outrun the dog
in the street
for once
never trusting the silence
i fear nothing but a false sweetness
and when we hold hands you send a surge of
crippling doubt into my spirit and at once i am
so far away that you might as well be holding
hands with a different girl or a somewhat limp
dead fish.
Untitled
Alissa Hartnig. Photograph