

# PUDDLETOWN MASC

ISSUE #1

A TRANS(ITIONING) ZINE

*Dysphoria: Part 1*

lor lowell

CW:  
sexual violence/  
abuse,  
misgendering,  
suicidality

Have you ever thought about testosterone? my partner would ask in 2013, and the question knotted my insides like I'd been asked about a secret crush.

I couldn't. I couldn't.

I couldn't talk about my dysphoria. I couldn't explore what it meant, I couldn't let myself open the doors to what I knew existed, for fear of what lay on the other side of that. The concept of transitioning seemed daunting, impossible, full of too much fear, gamble, uncertainty.

And the language of transitioning; the concept of *being a man*, the rules and boundaries that seemed, at the time, built around transitioning, offered no place for me.

So forgive this fractured and potentially repetitive zine. These are the broken words of an unexpressed dysphoria I ran away from for so many years.

I came out to myself as non-binary in 2011 in an attempt to save myself from my own destruction, to reconcile myself together so that I would stop trying to destroy my own flesh through starvation and neglect.

I was fearful, and apologetic in it, clutching onto its edge, not fully believing that I belonged here. But my eating disorder had been a kind of proxy to transition; the only way I knew at the time to take the "woman" off my bones.

And if I had to let my body become what it was again, to let it out of its hungry prison and put the curves back on it, this was the only way I knew how to make it livable: to stop flirting with the want and desire of the label & concept of *genderqueer*, and give into it instead.

I'd read so many books in the few years prior on gender and sexuality, trying to find a place for myself. And then I read Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. My whole body trembled reading that book, desire turning my sense of self inside out. Flipping through, I turned the page on to a photograph from Bernstein's play *Hidden: A Gender*, and my eyes stopped on Sydney Erskine, playing Herman.

### Gender Outlaw



\*Doc Grindler (Kate) as "The Girlfriend," and Herman (Sydney Erskine) in the first production of *Hidden: A Gender*.

The page tore into me; want, need, longing, hope, dread, fear, excitement knotted my insides, and my eyes glazed over, my hands trembled and time stopped, I gripped the book, motionless on the bus. And there was a prayer on my lips, not to God, but to a future for myself I almost thought I could see.

I didn't know at the time that I was seeking my survival, that the future looked like absolutely nothing to me. And I was just starting to glimpse at a promise of want, a promise of a place I could go.


But fear is a great destroyer of desire. And I had a lot of fear.



I was a knot of trauma. My childhood was defined by violence and sexual abuse, by pain and silence and denial. My body and I were long at war with each other, at least that's how it seemed, though in retrospect, it makes more sense to say that my body was in a perpetual stun of hurt, frozen in place.

I couldn't move in it, not well. I imagined my bones pulling tightly inward, my consciousness curling away from my feet and limbs, escaping the touch of my filthy and contaminated skin.

I didn't get the experiences other people got: childhood self-discovery, truths of their internal sense of self they held onto into adulthood. I lived in the dull, flat plain of dissociation, counting down time and minutes, waiting for things to be over. Or death, whichever came first.




And then there was my mother, with her brutal, matter-of-fact voice, spending her days convincing me that I was not allowed an opinion that wasn't her own. The only positive affirmations I got from her were when I mirrored back to her all her thoughts and feelings, believing everything that she believed.

This requirement went all the way down to the core of myself. I was not allowed to feel something she did not believe I had a right to feel, I was not allowed to assert something about myself that contradicted what she believed was true about me.

She would call into question my very *sanity* if I did. My very sense of identity and self-perception were bound up in who she told me I was.

Everything about me was simply an objective, external observation. I was a good Christian girl who would grow up, marry a good Christian man, and raise good Christian children. Any other thought, any other feeling, was a contradiction to the path that was set in stone, the things I was obligated to do apart from my own self and desires.

Between that, and my conservative Evangelical upbringing, I was made to have no connection with an internal sense of self-*none*. And that was reinforced as a good thing, a healthy thing, to be completely divorced from your own inner workings, to interpret any discomfort as doubt, and any doubt as irrational.

A woman with long, dark, wavy hair is looking towards a large, vibrant red poppy flower. The flower's center is replaced by a realistic, detailed human eye with a black pupil and yellow iris. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with trees and a fence.

Between that, and my conservative Evangelical upbringing, I was made to have no connection with an internal sense of self-ness. And that was reinforced as a good thing, a healthy thing, to be completely divorced from your own inner workings, to interpret any discomfort as doubt, and any doubt as irrational. To surrender yourself to someone else's reality, to assert it as more authoritative than your own.

So much of queerness has long been defined as acceptable only in a "can't-take-it-anymore" way. The repression of yourself has to be the most painful thing you go through, and only when you reach a point where no amount of social pressure, bullying, and abuse will break the queer right out of you, only then can you say you truly are one. "I *couldn't* be normal, so I've *earned* being queer," is outcome.

But I've had the queer broken right out of me. I've had Self broken right out of me. I know how to survive pain, I can live through anything. I could get straight-married, I could live as a cis woman, I could do it all even though it would be dissociation and misery and blank and empty life. I could do it. I'm a CSA survivor: I know how to close my eyes, count down the minutes, not say a word, clean myself up, and carry on.

I know how to be nothing.

And that's what I tried to do.

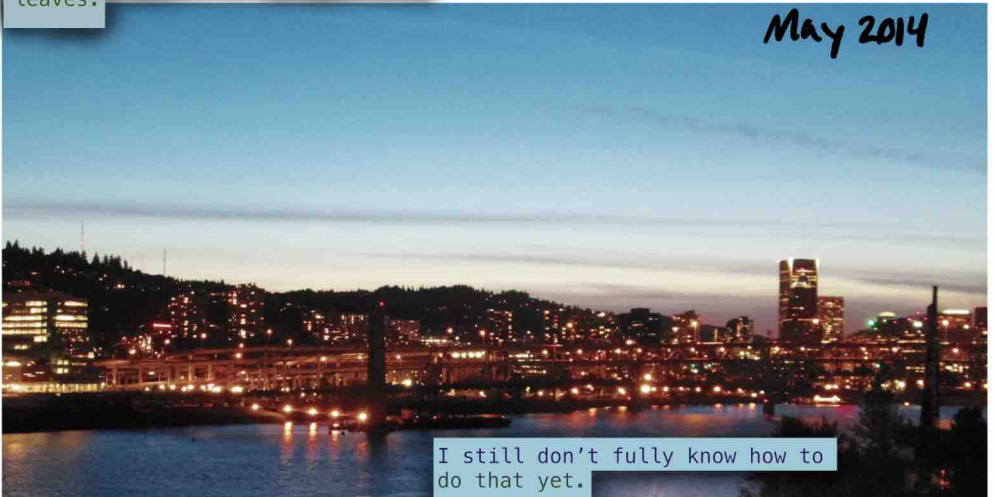
June 2013




I ran away from home in 2012, and I moved to Portland in 2013, a well of shock and pain, crashing into the city mute and wound up inside of myself, like a trembling animal hiding under a bush. I wanted to come alive, but I needed to know that there wouldn't be a swift and violent hand waiting to hurt me if I left the comfort of darkness and leaves.

I had formed myself in secrecy and silence, but the person you create in the pages of your journal, online, among friendships you keep private and away from public eyes, doesn't know immediately how to fall back into a body it long dissociated from to stay safe.

May 2014



I still don't fully know how to do that yet.



Coming out as non-binary in 2011 was a different sort of thing to now. For one, it wasn't "non-binary" but genderqueer, and I struggled always with the words, the dimensions of what I meant about myself. There was so much pressure to hammer genderqueer into shape, to make it "coherent" within a political theory which would then prove its truth.

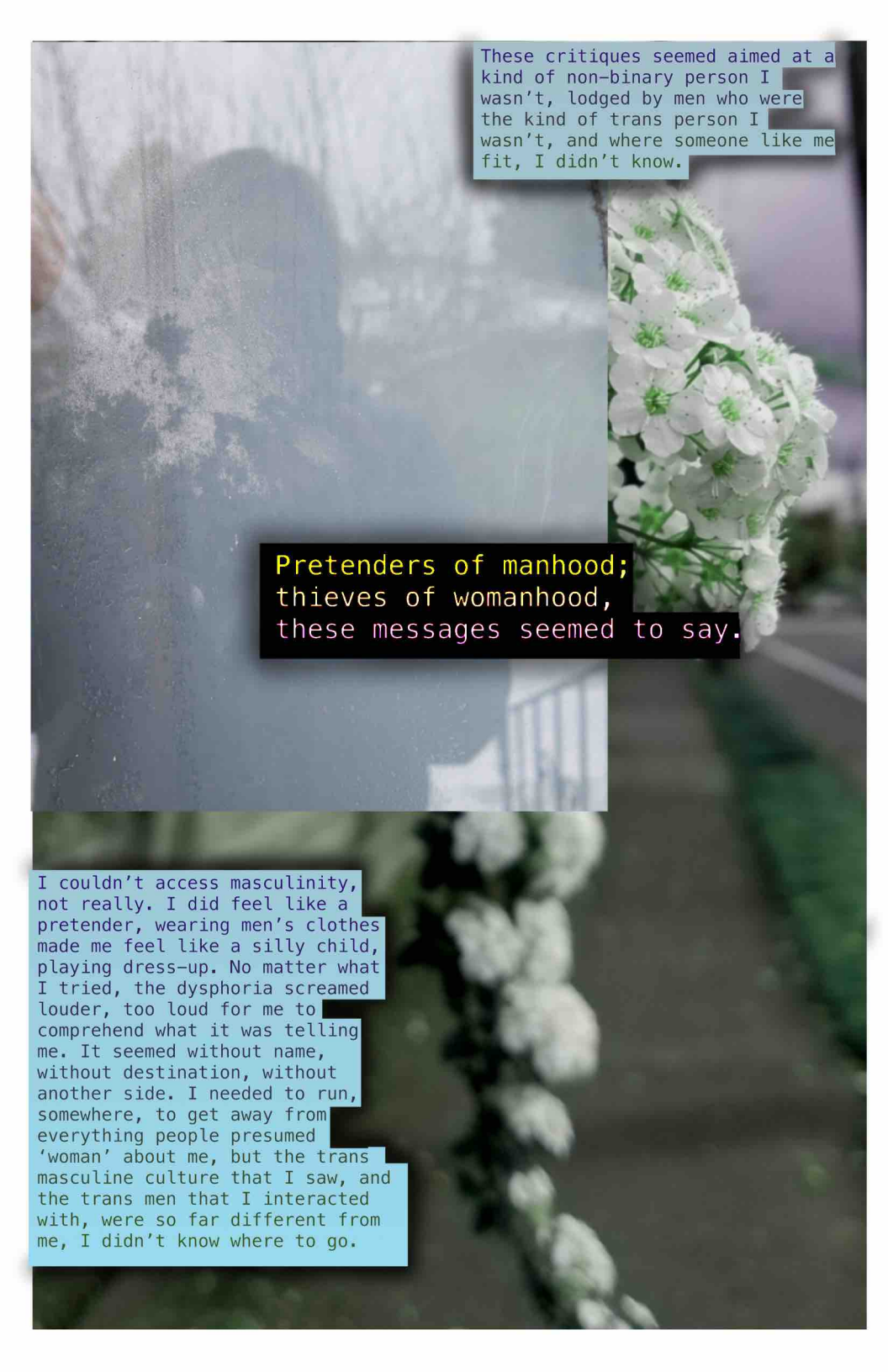
We lived in an unfamiliar place to both cis and trans people, who debated constantly where exactly we stood. What to do with these people who were neither a man or a woman, or at least not a binary one? And the answer, at the time, felt like *go away. You make things too hard, to convoluted. We don't know where to place you, so we're shutting the door.*

On the one side, was all the rhetoric that told me I would be "invading women's spaces" if I dared touch any resource, opportunity, or community space intended for women.

On the other was the rhetoric that said that non-binary people had nothing in common with the experiences and oppression of real trans people—including a lot of people who wanted to see these as two distinct, separate categories that did not overlap.

I broke down in dysphoric tears the night a prominent trans man, who was a reader of my blog, and I thought someone who respected me, wrote a piece about afab non-binary people with "dyke passing privilege" who *dared* to think they had any overlap with him and his trans masculinity, especially his *gay* trans masculinity. These afab non-binary people, playing at transness, playing at *gay maleness* without grasping its suffering, without being anything like him at all.





These critiques seemed aimed at a kind of non-binary person I wasn't, lodged by men who were the kind of trans person I wasn't, and where someone like me fit, I didn't know.

Pretenders of manhood;  
thieves of womanhood,  
these messages seemed to say.

I couldn't access masculinity, not really. I did feel like a pretender, wearing men's clothes made me feel like a silly child, playing dress-up. No matter what I tried, the dysphoria screamed louder, too loud for me to comprehend what it was telling me. It seemed without name, without destination, without another side. I needed to run, somewhere, to get away from everything people presumed 'woman' about me, but the trans masculine culture that I saw, and the trans men that I interacted with, were so far different from me, I didn't know where to go.

And maybe if my introduction to trans masculinity had been something else, things might have been different. If I hadn't read trans men writing pieces about testosterone and how it turned them into rage-filled misogynists, helpless to their objectification of women, to their appetites and anger, the ones that played at toxic masculinity and held up testosterone as proof of its biological reality, things might be different.




My 1st binder, 2015. It took so much courage to think I had a right to one.

If I hadn't come out just before the words *genderspecial* and *transreender* became things flung, originally, non-binary people exclusively, if I had found different trans men than the ones who built high walls around the word *man*, keeping out anything soft, anything feminine, anything worthy of derision or proof that you were smuggling traces of womanhood in with you, maybe it wouldn't have taken me this long to get here.

But I didn't, and *non-binary* and *transition* were anathema to each other, incapable of existing together, one always canceling the other out. Testosterone was for men. *Hairy, ugly, sweaty, smelly men*, these trans men would say, the way a small boy holds up a bug, thinking that he will evoke a squeak from the stupid and frightened girl. Only a real man wouldn't flinch. And only a real man deserves the hard and bitter road of testosterone, grim, and colorless. Unlike these stupid glittery trans special snowflake *trenders*.



I bought these shoes in 2015, too. I think I wore them once, the last girly thing I had before all the *transreender* talk and my own dysphoria broke me



This is what we were asked: if you are who you say you are, you will strip any complications out of your language.


Only women experience certain things. There are still things only allowable to be described as happening to women, and to be a "non-woman" in any capacity.

It's gotten lost over the years, but the original construction of "female-aligned/male-aligned non-binary" was original a way of demanding non-binary people announce what we were allowed to talk about. What experiences we were allowed to claim we had. Who counted as gay and a lesbian. Where you fit, still, in a binary world with binary definitions and a wall in between the two that could never be crossed.

So the message was: choose between being able to talk about what you experienced or to be yourself. Lose something. Redefine your past—and your present, in a way that fits you within our current understanding of how the world works.

If being trans required sacrificing my ability to talk about the misogyny I suffered, the abuse I lived through, the right to say that yes, I had been a girl, then I couldn't. If that was the sacrifice—and that's often how it is framed—dysphoria is not the worst thing that happened to me, and not the main thing I have needed to say.

So I gave it up, for the right to name myself.



Let's talk about something now.  
Let's talk about one of the main  
reasons I couldn't let myself  
think to transition. Here we go:  
I would rather die a horrible,  
painful, suffering death than  
ever set foot inside of a  
doctor's office. Then ever feel  
the sense of powerlessness they  
evoke in me, then be touched by a  
stranger in a context in which I  
don't know if I'd have the  
strength or the power to say no.  
Be vulnerable. Have my body  
looked at in a vulnerable way.  
Have anything touched that was  
once where I was hurt.

At least dying is a way of  
remaining in control.

If this doesn't make sense to  
you, I envy you.

And if this does make sense to  
you, I'm sorry.

There are not words for what what  
my father did to me, or the  
meaning it wrote into my body.  
That's the most I can tell you.  
I'll tell you what my brothers  
did to me. But not him.

(There are things only my partner  
knows. There are some things that  
die with the both of us. And I  
only told them because I had to  
confront them to transition. I  
had to fight, on my own, look  
them square in the eye, and tell  
them to one person in the entire  
world, before I could ever begin.

*I Cant even bring  
myself to reread  
what I wrote here*

Not all of us are so lucky.)

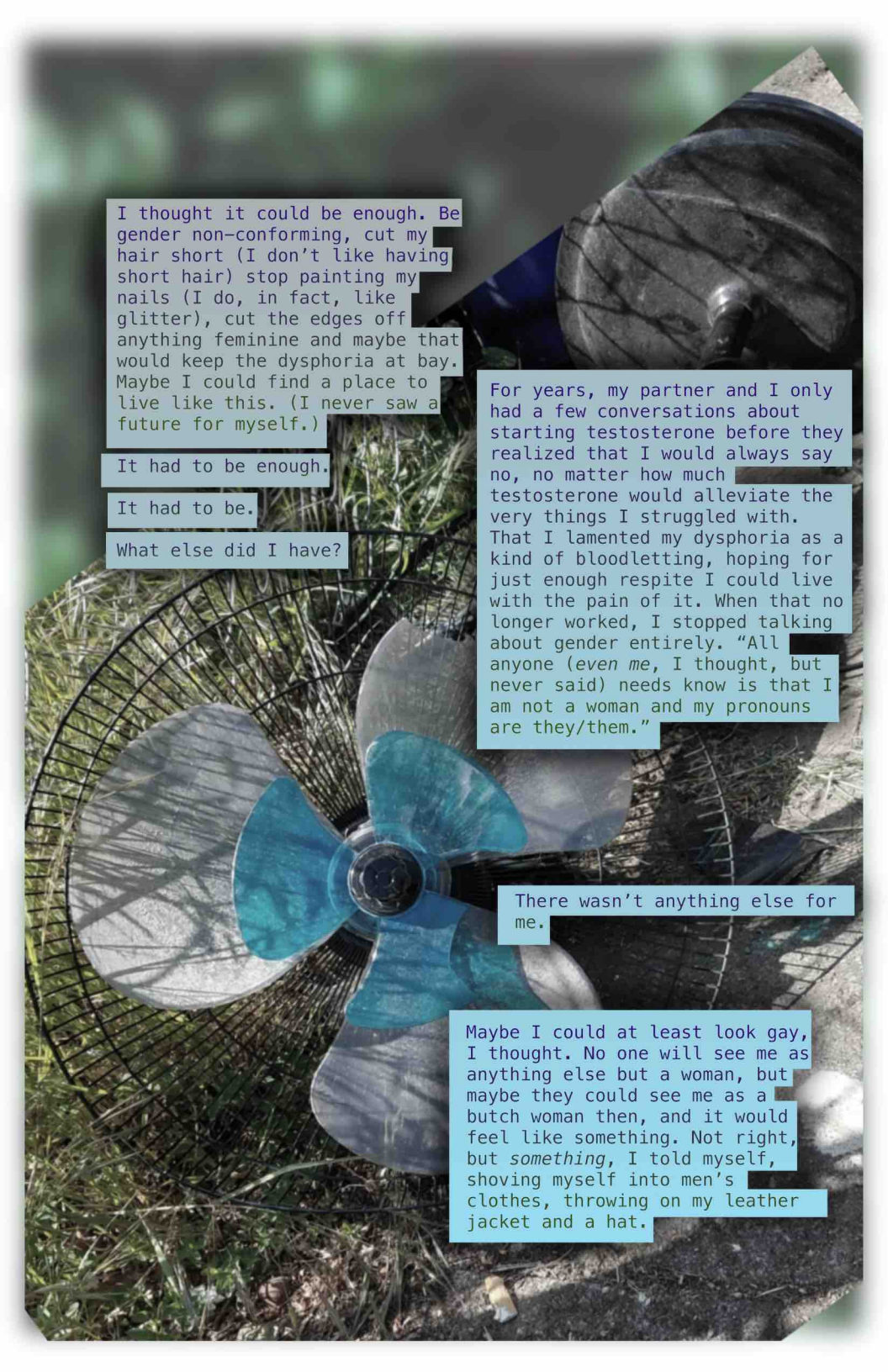
There's a lot of silence still, and stigma, about the ways that child sexual abuse affects you. We don't get to talk about our sex lives, about our bodies, about anything that makes a non-survivor uncomfortable, and what about sexual abuse would make anyone comfortable? We don't get to be hurt in any way that is embarrassing, private, vulnerable, grotesque, or disgusting, and what part of sexual abuse is free from that?

People expect us to heal in the dark quiet of a therapy office, come out shiny, new, and untraumatized, and go through life not needing anyone to understand our trauma, or any help beyond that. We rarely have any of the resources we ever need, and rarely have anyone willing to believe that we need them.

So I shut these things down. Without access to the language that I needed, and without anyone I felt like could help me navigate doctors as a sexual abuse survivor, I shut the door before I ever opened it, wrote it off, without any belief I could ever reach it. I couldn't do it. I just couldn't.

My body was a horror story, to great for me to look at, too much for me want to see. This is, at its heart, what dissociation is: it doesn't save you, it merely makes it so that you are not destroyed by what you might see. Stare at the ceiling, avoid your reflection, and certainly, for years, never take a photograph. If you can't see yourself, if you can't name yourself, maybe you can live.

(i'm planning  
a whole zine  
to devote  
to this)



I thought it could be enough. Be gender non-conforming, cut my hair short (I don't like having short hair) stop painting my nails (I do, in fact, like glitter), cut the edges off anything feminine and maybe that would keep the dysphoria at bay. Maybe I could find a place to live like this. (I never saw a future for myself.)

It had to be enough.


It had to be.

What else did I have?

For years, my partner and I only had a few conversations about starting testosterone before they realized that I would always say no, no matter how much testosterone would alleviate the very things I struggled with. That I lamented my dysphoria as a kind of bloodletting, hoping for just enough respite I could live with the pain of it. When that no longer worked, I stopped talking about gender entirely. "All anyone (even me, I thought, but never said) needs know is that I am not a woman and my pronouns are they/them."

There wasn't anything else for me.

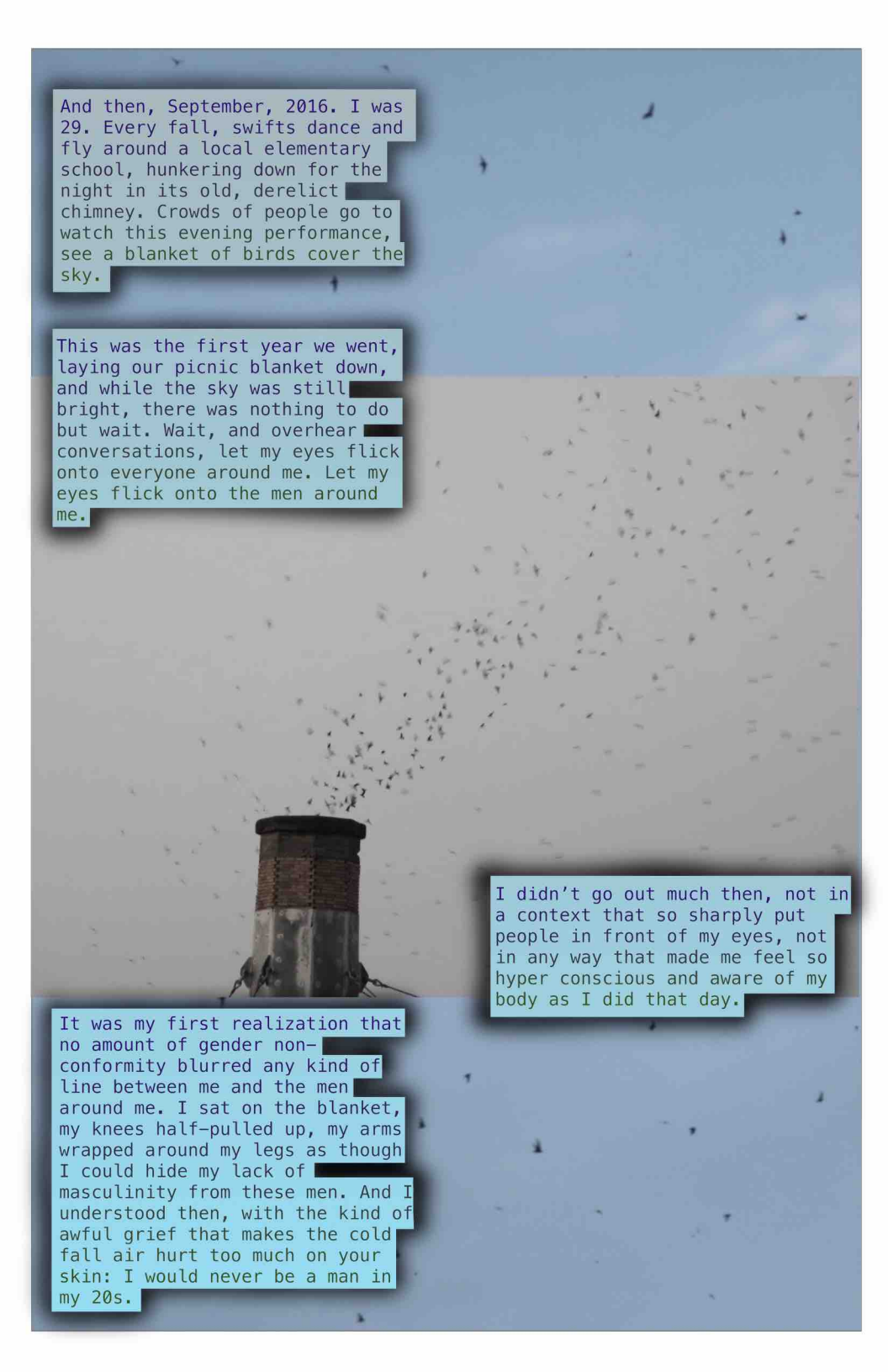
Maybe I could at least look gay, I thought. No one will see me as anything else but a woman, but maybe they could see me as a butch woman then, and it would feel like something. Not right, but *something*, I told myself, shoving myself into men's clothes, throwing on my leather jacket and a hat.



*I'm sorry, my partner would say, wincing for me when we were out and someone had greeted us with Hello, ladies or something similar. I'd nod my head, my expression stiff. I don't care, I'd be chanting in my mind. I don't care I don't care I don't care I don't care. I know what I look like. It's okay. It's okay. I'm okay.*

I never called myself trans. To do so felt as though I was intruding on something that wasn't mine. I couldn't meet the gaze of any trans friend I had, for fear that they saw me as a fraud, playacting their own experiences. For fear they too would wonder what a silly little non-binary like me was doing thinking I was anything like them. And I buried away any language I might ever have used to explain how I felt.

So I isolated. I isolated hard. It's very easy to convince yourself that you don't have dysphoria if there is no one around to confirm it for you, not even the mirror in another person's eyes.



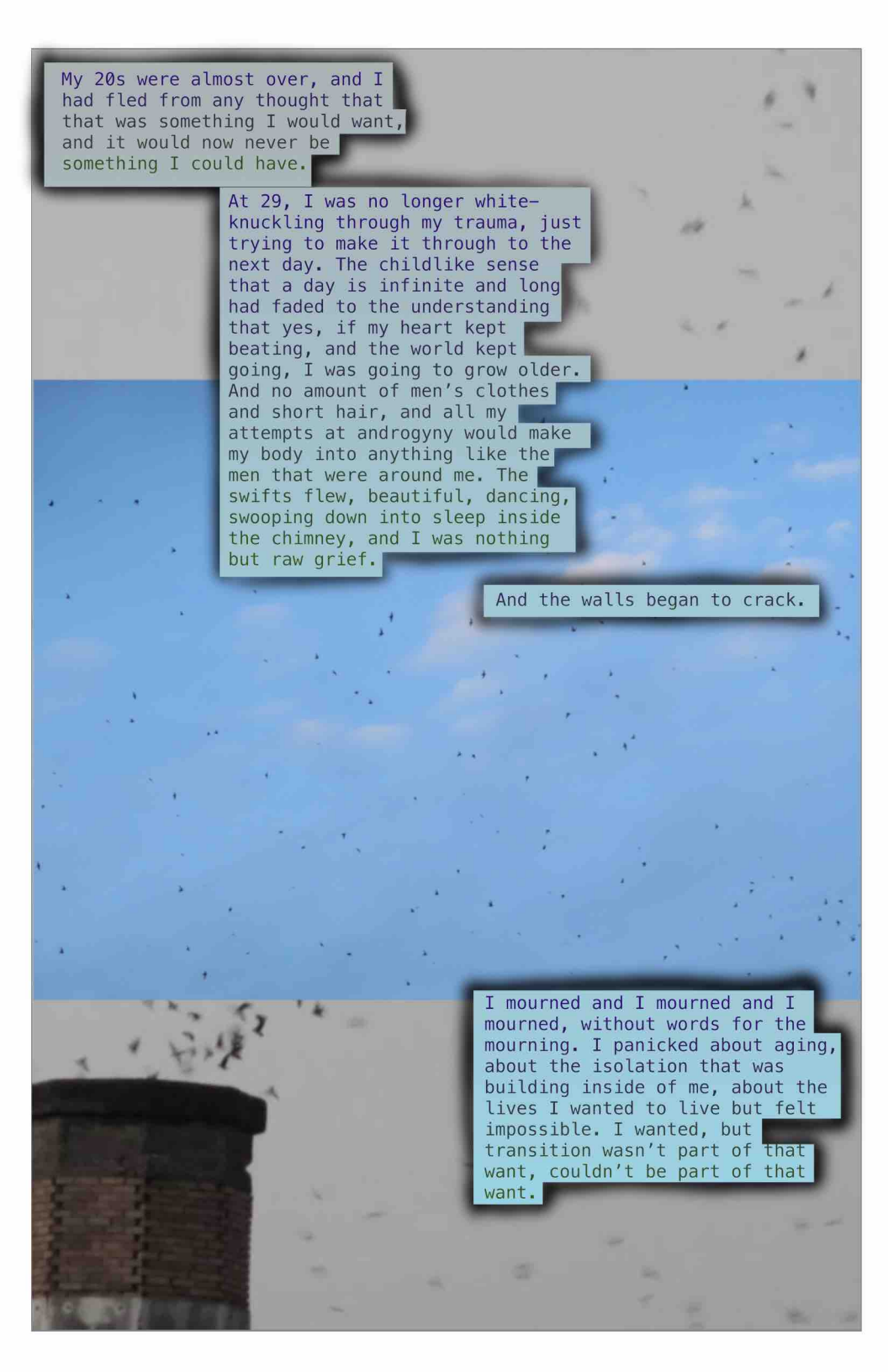
And then, September, 2016. I was 29. Every fall, swifts dance and fly around a local elementary school, hunkering down for the night in its old, derelict chimney. Crowds of people go to watch this evening performance, see a blanket of birds cover the sky.

This was the first year we went, laying our picnic blanket down, and while the sky was still bright, there was nothing to do but wait. Wait, and overhear conversations, let my eyes flick onto everyone around me. Let my eyes flick onto the men around me.

I didn't go out much then, not in a context that so sharply put people in front of my eyes, not in any way that made me feel so hyper conscious and aware of my body as I did that day.

It was my first realization that no amount of gender non-conformity blurred any kind of line between me and the men around me. I sat on the blanket, my knees half-pulled up, my arms wrapped around my legs as though I could hide my lack of masculinity from these men. And I understood then, with the kind of awful grief that makes the cold fall air hurt too much on your skin: I would never be a man in my 20s.






My 20s were almost over, and I had fled from any thought that that was something I would want, and it would now never be something I could have.

At 29, I was no longer white-knuckling through my trauma, just trying to make it through to the next day. The childlike sense that a day is infinite and long had faded to the understanding that yes, if my heart kept beating, and the world kept going, I was going to grow older. And no amount of men's clothes and short hair, and all my attempts at androgyny would make my body into anything like the men that were around me. The swifts flew, beautiful, dancing, swooping down into sleep inside the chimney, and I was nothing but raw grief.

And the walls began to crack.


I mourned and I mourned and I mourned, without words for the mourning. I panicked about aging, about the isolation that was building inside of me, about the lives I wanted to live but felt impossible. I wanted, but transition wasn't part of that want, couldn't be part of that want.



I tried to pretend to myself this was a game. That my real self was a cis woman, that I was making a compromise with something else—the trauma, perhaps—in calling myself non-binary. I tried anything, but it admit to myself what I was feeling.

I made the male sim of myself in Sims 4 one afternoon, like it would be a playful experiment. Gave him my brown hair, my freckles, a “male body” with as much of my own structure as I could. The most careful sim I had ever made. I gave him my traits; made him a writer. But after I watched him walk through his house, write on his computer, talk to his neighbors for a day, I quit the game, and never looked at him again. He stilled my blood. The want made the world go wrong, like a car teetering on an edge of a cliff. Don't move.

Because moving could save you, or you could fall, fast and broken, to your death, but you're alive right now. Don't move, while you're still alive right now.



In 2018, in an attempt to counter my isolation, I started volunteering through the library. The application form had a ticky box for being non-binary, so I thought fuck it, why not. On the phone interview, the woman told me that the volunteer coordinator of the library I would be volunteering at would be informed of my pronouns. Great.

When I arrived, I was greeted by a woman with all the demeanor of a very warm and inviting mother, who took me around, individually, to each person that worked there and introduced me as such, *This is Tor! She's going to be volunteering here if she likes it! I hope she decides that she likes it here!*

Just like that, with all the awkward superfluous sentences that allowed for more pronouns. To every. Single. Person.

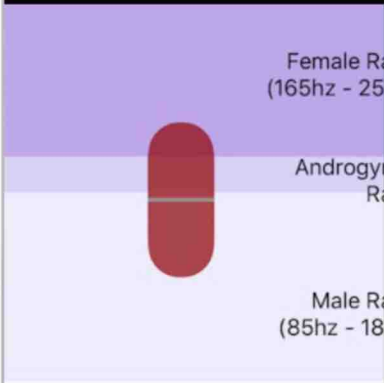
And I lived as a shadow.

I got the flu in early March of 2019, and as I lay there, too sick to sleep, too feverish to do anything but be honest with myself, I stared at the walls of our apartment in the dark and said the words I had never let myself say.

*I'm not happy. I'm miserable. I've been miserable for years.*



Fri, Mar 1, 2019




And it was like something broke through in my brain.

Something had to give. Trapped, alone, desperate, too many years of too much isolation. And then, one afternoon not long after, talking with my partner, the words...just poured out of me.

**NICE SCREENGRAB,  
PAST TOR, YOU TOTALLY  
DIDNT WANT T, RIGHT?**

I can tell you the shirt I was wearing: my grey and blue pullover with a drawstring and hood. I can tell you that I was sitting on the couch. But I don't remember why we started talking about it, or even what I said. It was like the words bubbled out of a desire that I hadn't even expressed to myself until I said them.



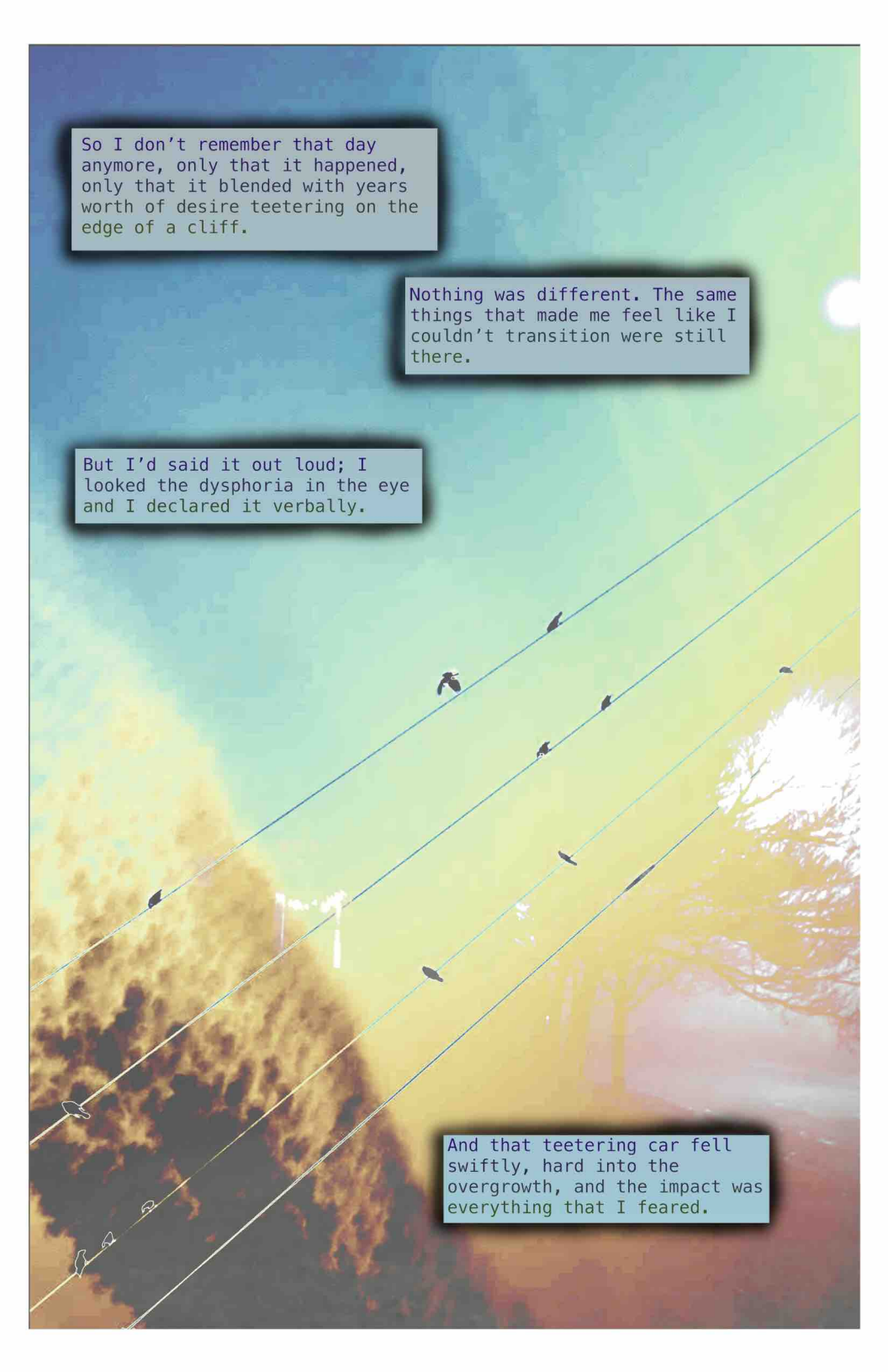


And then, they were always there, because of course they were: hadn't I been leading the conversation on like this for years? Wasn't it like those love stories where you want the other person to want you, but you can't agree to it? A secret affair, without commitment? *Please ask me if I want to go on testosterone, even though I'll always say no.*

How many years had I pressed my partner on their attraction to men?

'You like him? You think he's cute?' remind me you like men. Remind me men are attractive to you. Let me stand behind this photograph of a man while you tell me he's hot, and I'll pretend that it can transmit to me.

Hadn't I glanced at this doorway for so long, hadn't I put mistletoe above it, hoping testosterone and I would meet beneath it?

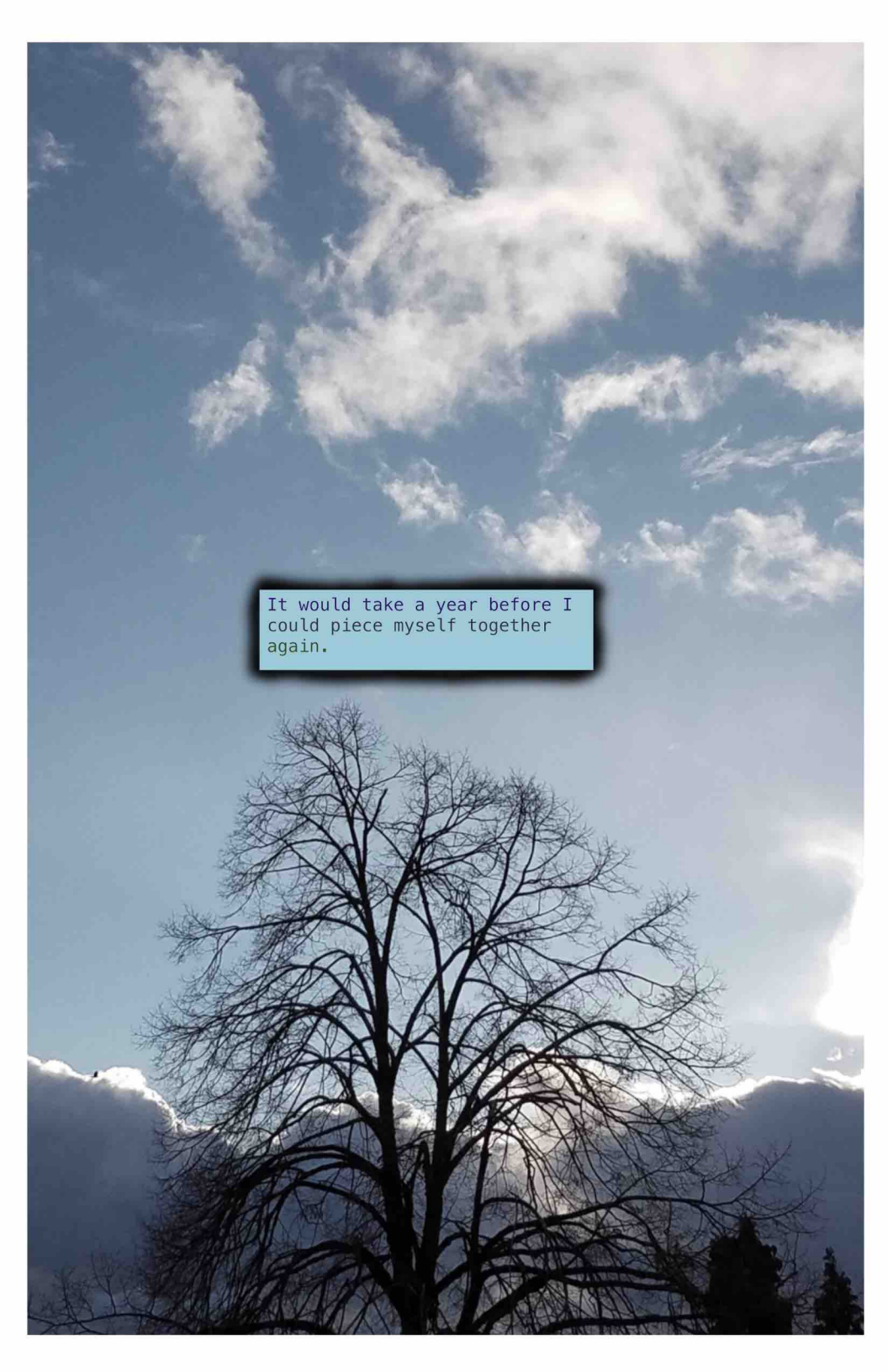


So I don't remember that day anymore, only that it happened, only that it blended with years worth of desire teetering on the edge of a cliff.

Nothing was different. The same things that made me feel like I couldn't transition were still there.

But I'd said it out loud; I looked the dysphoria in the eye and I declared it verbally.

And that teetering car fell swiftly, hard into the overgrowth, and the impact was everything that I feared.

A photograph of a bare tree against a blue sky with scattered white clouds. A text box is overlaid on the sky.

It would take a year before I  
could piece myself together  
again.



Thanks for reading!

The next issue of this zine will cover Dysphoria: Part 2

You can find my other zines here:

[gumroad.com/bitterteahymnal](https://gumroad.com/bitterteahymnal)

find my other work at:

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Portland, OR

Tor Lowell

Bitter Tea Hymnal

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