

Transsing the Wild: Wilding the Trans

An Autobiographical Anthology
by Felix Bill

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Introduction

The best piece of advice I ever got as a young trans person was “there are happy trans people in the world, you just have to figure out how to be one.” For me, that meant getting outdoors and exploring the UK’s National Parks.

Transing the Wild: Wilding the Trans is a short story collection based on my experiences hiking, rock climbing, and cycling in and around the South Downs. It was written for a Campaign for National Parks ‘New Perspectives’ storytelling grant, funded by Canopy and Stars and supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

While all places, people, and events described in the collection are real, some names and minor details have been changed for narrative purposes. Readers will be able to enjoy the short stories in any order, but in-book the collection has been organised chronologically. The narrative spans roughly five years and I look forward to sharing them with you. All short stories were written with signed permission from those who features in them.

I hope this collection will spread trans joy and encourage people from all walks of life to visit their nearest National Park.

— Felix Bill

Cliffsong

South London scowl on a full moon face, Ash sinks lower in his seat. Sets his jaw like he isn't shit-scared, as he glares out at the passing countryside. Shoulders hunching in, he's man-spreading to make a point. Knees wedged against either arm rest on the train seat just in case anyone's looking. In case anyone sees— the train's not packed, but there are still enough people on it to make him feel bug-under-microscope trapped.

By this point, the capital's tower blocks and corner shops are long gone. He's not in the city now, not on streets he knows, and it's terrifying. Bare-knuckled pretending he hasn't heard the stories of what it's like out here for trans people, Ash shoves his hands into his pockets. Palms his keys instinctively, just in case something goes wrong and in the other pocket, finds— score! A mostly finished pack of mint gum. He'd forgotten he had that.

Popping a piece into his mouth, he cracks the shell. Flavour bursts on his tongue, micro-plastics blending with saliva as Ash closes his eyes. Momentary calm splintering to fear as someone half way down the carriage starts up a slurring football chant.

All at once, he's choking on the cold, mint-fresh air trapped in his lungs. Fight or flight activated, sirens blaring in his bloodstream, adrenaline pumping through every vein. He's trying not to overreact, trying not to react at all. Failing, because he reads the news, same as anyone. He knows what the fucking Daily Mail prints, hears the jokes the football lads at school make about him—

Thinking about that lot provides an anchor, at least. He can still hear them goading him about slitting his wrists in the bathroom that time, can still hear the way their laughter echoed off the tiles. In his chest, a white hot ball of rage begins to pulse, all razor edges built to cut through panic. Ash grits his teeth, narrows his eyes, because this— this is the whole fucking point, isn't it?

He's come out here to prove them wrong. Who's they? Ha. Anyone who's ever called him unnatural. That's who. (He's got a list, not that he has time to get into it now). He's doing this to prove he can go wherever he likes. To prove he doesn't need to be afraid of anything. Isn't some fucking coward who can't even—

Before he finishes the thought, the overhead speaker system crackles to life. "We are now approaching Lewis Station. Please change here for trains to Seaford and Newhaven." Ash jerks. Shoves his phone into his pocket and makes sure his hoodie's sitting right, before he stands.

Getting to his feet, he stretches awkwardly, twisting a bit to crick his back, then picks up his rucksack. Puts his head down, as he slouches his way along the isle. Through the first door, button press, door sliding into the train's recesses and fuck. There's a couple of others standing in the train corridor alright and they're—

Bike lifted down off the hook, and leant against a wall. Metal shield between him and the other people standing in the passage. Guessing game for which door will open, when

they stop. For something to do with his hands, Ash picks at the gaffer tape holding his bike saddle together. Better than his skin at least. He bites the inside of his cheek, worrying at soft flesh as he eyes the skinheads standing by the doors. Glances away before they catch him looking and— breathes. Shallow, quiet.

Most of the time, he passes. Most of the time he's not standing next to a big fucking herd of rugby-looking lads a couple of pints in, a couple of years older, and frozen in fear, but he's firmed worse. It'll be *fine*. Even if things did go wrong, he'd manage. Element of surprise, that's what matters for this sort of thing, innit? Bike pedal jammed into the shins, (he knows how much that hurts, every cyclist does), and they wouldn't be expecting it, would they? Then handle bars to the stomach, brakes first, (here's to hoping something breaks). Half turn, step back to kick the bike deeper, then down the train before the lot of them have disentangled themselves. See? He's got it all planned out.

Ash barely hears the announcers voice when it comes again, lost in hypotheticals. He doesn't even register the train slowing until that sweet Gatsby-given light blinks on. Picking up his bike with one hand, he rests the crossbar on his right shoulder. Readjusts his hoodie again to hide his binder strap and clears his throat, the sound two octaves lower than normal. Hits a third when he speaks.

"Sorry mate, can I get my bike through?" the wall of muscle parts, and he nods his thanks. A single downward jerk of the head (down's for strangers, up's for friends. He googled it once and apparently it's another of those unspoken things he's just supposed to know). Jams the doors-open button hard.

Hydraulic soundscape, industrial hiss, lengthening odds on his continued survival until yes— the gap is big enough. One step, two, the third takes him down to the platform and

just like that, he's home free. As train doors chime their closing anthem, Ash forces himself to breathe out, slow.

His heart's still thudding double time, hopped up on an adrenaline rush his body hasn't yet had time to register he doesn't need. Phew. Belly of the beast, that was, but it's over now. Thanking his lucky stars the rugby lot weren't getting off at the same stop, he rolls his shoulders. Looks around at the safe summer's day he's standing in.

Across the platform, a Mum is explaining how trains work to her minute, blond child, looking a mixture of exhausted and relieved that she's caught the child's interest. On a bench nearby, a well dressed, elderly man is reading something Ash can't see the title of. Above him, birds coo and flutter in the rafters of the station. This is not a scene for violence.

A glance at the departures board tells Ash the Seaford train's leaving from— come one, come on, no one needs to know when the Bromley train's going! Get back to the S's. Aha— there. Platform 4. He's got to go over the bridge then, and he's only got 10 minutes. Good. He'd been hoping for something like that. In his minds eye, the curtain rises on a stage set for his next scene.

Thundering up the stairs, Ash moves like the noise he's making is unintentional. Like he's not thinking about how everything looks, reviewing every move he makes from the audience perspective to reassure himself he passes as male.

Bike hanging on his shoulder like he does it every day, he storms his way upwards, every loud step echoing through the station— typical! Teenage boys never think of anyone but themselves, do they? He's putting the work in for it alright, doesn't even push his bike across the level part of the bridge. Takes the stairs down to platform 4 at double speed just to show off.

On the platform, he stands right on the yellow lines. Yeah, that's right, rebel without a cause, him. Ha! If only that were true. These days he's got more causes than he knows what to do with— state of his rights— state of the government— the list goes on but he's not thinking about all that today.

The train arrives in a cacophony of screeching. Metal brakes on metal tracks, tannoy announcement overlay, cawing birds disturbed by the mechanical presence in their midst. Ash hurries along the platform looking for the right carriage. Finds it two down from where he was standing, the grey bike symbol chipped and peeling, and hauls his things aboard.

This train's much emptier, almost empty, even, but not quite. As they pull away from the station, he notices a middle aged woman staring intently in his direction. Squirms. Catching her reflection's eye, Ash makes himself look as standoffish as he can, but she doesn't blink and just like that, his good mood evaporates. How did he ever fool himself into thinking he was passing? Abruptly, tears fill his eyes but he can't— he can't cry like some *girl* about any of this, can he? That just proves their point. Anger then, the safer option. Shoving his hurt down where no-one can see, Ash musters up a glare.

Wot you looking at? Teeth gritted— bared— jaw tight. Don't FUCKING look at me bristles under his every inch of skin. Coiled, waiting for— for a sneer, a word, for 'miss' or 'she' or 'girl'. On the tip of a too-sharp tongue, insults curl. Bitter, like he is these days, but then again, he has every right to be under present fucking circumstances, doesn't he?

Seconds warp, timeless, to a lifetime's intense, imagined eye contact before he realises the woman he's been staring at is— she's just middle-distancing. Not looking at him at all. Sheepish, he cuts his eye at the greenery outside, turns in his seat until there's no one in

his field of view. Yeah, he thinks, talking himself into a stare down narrative (victorious). That's what I thought.

Slumped in his seat like he's got nothing to hide, Ash picks at a bit of mud crusted onto the knee of his joggers. Artful Friday-night stain. Memoriam to a scrubby patch of grass in Clapham Junction, but he's not thinking about that either, not now he's finally on his way out. He snorts to himself (aren't they all?), digs a bitten nail into the brown smear.

Dry, the mud flakes off easy. Ash rakes his fingernails across fabric, peeling scabs of earth away in pieces until his joggers are back to looking mostly okay. Finished, he lets his hands fall back into his lap. Stares.

Normally he can't stand them. His fingers are too delicate, his hands move too much when he talks, (he does his best but that one's a hard habit to kick). Too small, too neat by any measure. He hates how much it bothers him, how little fucking difference he can make.

In revenge, he refuses to moisturise, bites nails, worries cuticles bloody with his teeth. It doesn't help. Now though— well, they look a bit better like this, don't they? A bit more masculine. The crescent moons of dirt trapped under every nail suggest he's been working outdoors. Working with his hands— with hands he could be proud of, maybe.

Seaford's not a proper place, as far as Ash is concerned. Just a couple of streets, an ice cream van, and a row of beach huts before you hit open country. He views it all with a city boy's innate contempt. Wonders what exactly you're supposed to do here if you aren't going on 90, as he cycles past the last row of house. Even if it is pretty, he'd be bored stiff in about two days.

Down at the sea front, ambling denizens of the deckchair are busy roasting themselves lobster red under the hot sun, or cowering beneath wide faux-Spanish parasols. Even from here, he can smell mingled salt and suncream on the breeze. Too much bare skin for the likes of him, but one day— one day when it's all over he'll go swimming again. Pull his t-shirt off over his head from the back the way they do in the movies and dive into cool salt water. He'll be some place where the sand is white and the sea is crystal clear and no one looks at him strangely for his scars— but not today.

Out beyond the last line of beach huts, the incline starts to bite. Cycling slower with every pedal's turn. Twice, he heaves, sickly city lungs frothing up with phlegm as he pushes himself up the hill. It's a rattling wet smoker's cough he's got at the moment, and the irony of it is, he's the only one of his mates who's never touched a cigarette. It's his bloody binder's what's done it, but then he knew that starting out, didn't he?

Half the time it feels like it's fused to him. A sweat drenched layer of dense, constricting skin that cuts under his arms and sends intermittent pulses of pain ricocheting through his lower ribs. It was third-hand when he got it off Jack, going on fourth now. Pretty gross, if you think about it (he's always thinking about it) but he'd go without over his cold, dead corpse.

About a third of the way up the slope, he gives up. Dismounts, wheezing, and leans over his handlebars for a minute. Jesus, this hill would be a Man vs Nature narrative arc all on its own if he wrote it down, but just this once, he's not going to wind himself up over losing a fight. Too busy trying to breathe for that brand of mental activity. Fuck, it's worse than he thought, this. He'll never make it the whole way to Eastbourne.

Raising his heavy head, Ash stares up the wall of green standing between him and the best view you can get on land of the Severn Sisters. It's all block colour, out here. Grass so

verdant it almost hurts to look at. Sky burning the same electric blue Casper dyed their hair last term. All of it impassible in this state, exhaustion already setting in behind his eyes, but hang on— a bit further up— there!

It's not much, just a hollow at the edge of the cliff with some yellow flowers growing in it, but it's something to aim for. He might not get all the way up this bloody hill but he can get that far alright.

The last few metres are a struggle, but he does it. Leans his bike against the uphill side of the hollow and lets himself keel over in a nest of wildflowers. Twists out of the straps of his backpack and unscrews the lid of his water bottle. He raises it to parched lips like he's spent the day collecting water off— he doesn't know, vine leaves or something out in a jungle somewhere. Tilts his head back and sighs.

As he catches his breath, he starts to feel a bit less like he's in of those survivalist novels. The banks of the dip are deep enough to cut away the rest of the world— a hideaway hollow with a view to die for, and for once, no one's looking at him. It's just Ash, the sky, and the Chalk-land wildflowers, before the cliff plunges down to meet the sea.

Out on the horizon line, he can see tiny white sails cutting back and forth across the waves, but no one that far away would be able to spot him up here. *And now at last*, he thinks, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, *I am alone*. It's been a bloody lifetime since that particular quote last applied. God, the staring's constant at school and not much better anywhere else if he's honest. Now he's up here in the middle of nowhere and he can't hear another living soul. It's beautiful.

He doesn't know when he decided to do it, but at some point while he's been sitting here appreciating the view, determination's wound it's barbed-wire coils tight. This hill won't see him off that easy.

When he emerges from the hollow, manic glint in eye, the slope doesn't even look that steep. He charges up it at a run, every breath hissing through clenched teeth as he shoves his bike upward ahead of him. World narrowing, blinkers slammed on. Blood roaring in his ears, boots stamping an uphill march in lockstep with his racing, war-drum pulse. This time it's personal.

It happens all at once, the flattening. Endless uphill battle abruptly finished with, and nowhere to put all the fight he has left over. Without warning, the gradient gentles to a plateau and he's— he made it to the top. A hand raised to shield his eyes from the sun's glare, Ash gazes out at the great expanse of the world with a textbook wild surmise.

It's all so small from here. Back the way he came, sits a bright watercolour miniature of a seaside town. The train tracks that brought him here look tiny, twin silver threads spooling out across the valley beneath him until they blur into one. Ahead, postcard pretty white cliffs ripple away into the distance, a line of deep green inked in between their glowing white and the sky's endless blue.

Ash swallows, something huge and undefined and wild rising in his blood as he stares down that glorious green causeway. A knowing far older than he is himself that this— *this* is what he's supposed to be doing. This is where he's supposed to be. Citizen of the world, him. Citizen of the wild. Just as natural as anything else round here, and free.

Ash flings his leg over his bike. Foots a pedal. Kicks off. In the split second between heartbeats, gravitational potential transmutes to motion, and in that first triumphant downhill rush, he catches a glimpse of his future. Ash chose his name years ago— the midpoint between death-fire and new-born phoenix. Trapped as he is, in this grey waiting room of a mismatched adolescence, it felt right. Now, he sees the match-struck

future waiting for him. How things will be when he doesn't have to fight the world so hard for every scrap of joy.

One day, a match will flare to life and the match will be a needle and the needle will inject him with the hormones he needs to be happy. When it does everything— every moment he's alive— will feel like this.

It's addictive. The uphill slog, the burning in his thighs as he tries to get as far up the next hill as possible on the momentum of the one before, the wobbling moment where inertia wins and he has to get off his bike to push. Finally making it to the crest of the next landlocked wave, and waiting on the other side? Free-fall, almost. Wheels rolling, bike picking up speed as it judders across lumpy ground, a scream building in his veins as he outruns it all. The fear. The dysphoria. The itching, neurotic certainty that he's being stared at wherever he goes. Everything falls away in the face of his exhilaration, the sheer rush of going this fast over open ground.

The sun races across the arc of the sky and Ash barely notices, skin wind-chilled and burning beneath the unrelenting glare. He stops on the peak of the tallest hill for lunch, heart in his throat as the view takes him by the shoulders and shakes awe into his tired, born-old soul.

The river gives him pause. Ash thinks of the Narnia children braving torrents of ice-melt inside their magical closet, the half a hundred fantasy novels he's read where characters have to swim their horses across a mile of open sea. Wishes he had a wizard or two to magic him to the other side, before turning inland.

That bit of the ride's awkward, chasing river down to marshy stream before a bridge appears, but soon enough he's across and cycling hard for the coast once more. Back on those photo-op hilltops (not that he's stopping for one, even as the light turns golden), he

speeds down into the next valley with a whoop. Pedals for dear life as momentum sends him rushing up the other side. Almost— almost— he's panting now but there's only a few meters left— only a few feet until all at once, he's done it. Bested one of the Severn Sisters.

In the valley below him, a great white hotel perches on the cliff edge, hanging in precarious balance over a long drop to the beach below. In Ash's head, his geography teacher's voice echoes, diagrams explaining cliffside erosion hanging behind his eyelids when he blinks.

He's almost sad about it at first, the knowledge that one day all this will crumble into the sea no matter what petty human defences they put in place, but hey, maybe the cliffs are looking forward to it, the way he is. At that, he smiles. Pushes off again, hurtling past the hotel and back into the wide, wild world beyond the reach of car or caravan.

By the time Eastbourne appears, spread out like a glittering puddle in the valley below him, he's chasing his long evening shadow east and for the first time, he finds himself cycling past trees— catching snatches of chirped and whistled conversation from the wild things that call this place their home. The wind amplifies their song, and as the sun sinks over the line of hills stretching out behind him, Ash fights the urge to turn back, sit and listen until their wild language takes on meaning.

He wants to learn to live on the wing like Swifts to. Call out to the bats fluttering across the sky in silhouette and understand the things they chitter back to him. After today, it feels more than possible. Still, his train back to London leaves at 8:14, and Mum will worry if he gets back late.

The next time he does this bike ride, everything will have changed. He'll have a voice that matches who he is and a name that doesn't make him sad to say, and the little hollow

full of wildflowers he rested in half way up that first incline will have fallen into the sea.
Laying eye on these hills, this dramatic bastard of a coastline, will feel even more like
coming home.

Revolution

It starts with “The Book of Trespass”, “Who Owns England”, rivers of ink spilling off bestseller lists and out into the world— a revolution. The Right to Roam’s an online movement first. Viral tweets and trending hashtags, a fury of words, essays, blogs— post-pandemic mass awakening to the vicious truth of quite how much the ruling classes still refuse to share. 8% is the figure that wakes people up.

Just 8% of UK land is public access, and after years of being shut up indoors— years Downing Street spent hosting parties and letting millions die unnecessary deaths in sacrifice to the economy— the public won’t— can’t— stand for it. Something’s got to give, and soon. Online and off, people want change and as spring turns to summer, a plan takes shape. A day— a meeting point—

Now this— hundreds of people swarming across the country by train and bike and car to answer the call. Before the journalists get their teeth into this foetal revolution— before country-file runs its one-sided 40 minute slots and PR puppeteers kiss a transphobic

reporter with the taste of boot polish still thick on her tongue— before the palatability of those white lines running down the middle of the road begins to sing its siren song— comes *belief*.

Here, now, an ember sparks. Sets aflame the hearts and minds of thousands, as the great injustice of it all rears its ugly visage high and hydra-like demands to be beheaded (promising, like all its kind, to send another two injustices hissing forth where the first was felled). Almost four hundred people came today. A bright, brilliant procession of the hopeful wild, ready to reclaim the land that should be theirs by right. This is more than protest. It's a peasant uprising for the internet age— a reckoning.

Between fluttering XR banners and hand painted cardboard signs, what feels like every walk of life is represented. Here, an octogenarian Rambler gesticulates wildly to a group of young Black women all wearing hoodies emblazoned with the words 'Black Girls Hike'. There, a for-life national parks campaigner is chatting with a group of barefoot hippies and two professional illustrators. A bit ahead, a famous author is deep in conversation with a Traveller woman about how anti-Traveller laws negatively affect the general public.

All around them, the summer of discontent simmers on. Mad blood stirring, lines drawn in the sand, heat-haze on the horizon. Every footstep is an act of defiance. War cry. The hill they plan to die on? An access island in a sea of fields that look just the same, save for the silence of ownership— the propriety of property that envelops land-as-gold, land-as-theft, land-as-sin— on either side.

A metric ton of wild-flowers burst out of every grassy verge and thick with botanists, the crowd oohs and aaahs over every species, careful where they tread. In their midst, heroes prophesy the end of the enclosures— the inevitable phoenix-rise of the commons

in their wake— but in even this crowd of passionates and revolutionaries, Moth walks alone.

He's too outdoorsy by half for queer spaces, is the problem— forever out of his depth in a world of thick, glittering lash extensions and incomprehensible slang— but he's too queer to enjoy the lads-lad hiking groups he tried. He thought it might be better today but even in this crowd of would-be change makers, he can't see anyone that looks like him.

It's what keeps him moving, keeps him flitting group to group. Hovering at the edge of every knot of people looking for a way in— an interesting point to add to someone's debate— a lull in conversation he could use to make his introductions— surely he can't miss every cue. There has to be *something*. After all, they're united by a common cause, this crowd, and yet—

More than once, words form on the tip of his tongue, but every time, the group closes ranks, shifts topic before he gets the chance to speak. Moth tells himself he doesn't mind, tells himself he'd rather not make small talk with strangers anyway, the way his voice is cracking these days, but that doesn't stop it burning. You're never more alone than you are in a crowd of people who look straight through you, and Moth? He might as well be a ghost. Unseen, all seeing. Invisible in the crowd until—

A set of deep black eyes meet his. Familiar smile on a stranger's face. Recognition and relief in equal measure— reflection to his own. Moth's moving before he realises it. Every step instinctive, like calling out to like in this sea of cisgender strangers.

She's moving too, weaving her way towards him through the crowd, long skirt fluttering slightly in the breeze. In her wake, heads turn. Some confused, second-glancing as they overtake, unsure what to make of her. Others almost hypnotised. Moth grins, blood slowing in his veins as the tension he wears like armour falls away. He's not alone.

He's not alone, and Bowie's *Rock and Roll Suicide* is playing in his head and he can't keep a smile off his face because even though he didn't bring his trans flag, he's found someone else here who understands. Someone else who knows what its like. As soon as she gets close enough, he introduces himself and this time, the words come easy.

"Hi, I'm Moth," he begins, voice cracking on the tail end of the greeting.

"That's a whole vibe." The girl replies.

"Thanks," Moth grins, then, unable to resist the obvious joke, "I picked it myself. What about you?"

"Oh, I'm Lyn." She replies, messing with one of the long green ribbons plaited into her dark hair. "How'd you hear about the march?"

"Nick Hayes' twitter," Moth admits with a shrug, "what can I say? I'm a fan. The man can *write*." Lyn laughs, nodding.

"Feels like that's how a lot of people found out about Right to Roam."

"You too?"

"Me? Nah, I grew up in the countryside, this kind of stuff was already important to me. I heard about today through Landscapes of Freedom. Got a DM about it actually, I run a trans hiking group and they thought we might want to come on the march."

Lyn says the words casually, like there's hundreds of them up and down the country, but in the space between them, the phrase echoes. Crackles. *A trans hiking group*. Moth can't breathe for envy. Longing coils tight around his tongue, half-strangles his "You run a trans hiking group?"

Any chance he had of playing it cool evaporates but with Lyn, it doesn't seem to matter. "Yeah," She replies with an easy smile, "I just thought, you know, the countryside can be really inaccessible for us. There's this idea that if you're queer or you're trans and

you're from the countryside, you have to leave and go to a big city to be safe, but I love the wilderness. It's where I feel most at home. I wanted to share that with other trans people so I started organising and here we are."

Moth's desperately trying not to overreact, fingernail-clinging to what he hopes is a normal expression as Lyn plays echo to his every thought, on stuff like this. "It sounds amazing." He manages, barely able to speak around the hope lumping in his throat. "I've done solo walks and camping trips, but it can get a bit—" he rolls his shoulders, age old fear rising, "outside the cities, you get— stares. People looking at you more than they would if it was just any other backpacker walking through."

"Exactly." Lyn says, "when there's a whole group of us, it's safer. More fun too. Our next hike's at the end of the month," then, sensing the question Moth can't quite bring himself to ask, "You should come."

He nods, wordless. Warm to his bones.

Skirting the Boundaries

Orion gets to Lewis an hour early. He's jittering, all fingers and thumbs as he buys himself an iced coffee at the commuter-trap station kiosk. Waiting mode activated. Knee bouncing as he fights down the horrible, consuming certainty that Lyn won't remember she invited him, or worse— who he is at all.

Finding a comfortable patch of wall to lean against, he makes a game of finishing his coffee as slowly as he can. The ice cubes end up melting— his last few sips thin and watery, hint of a hint of coffee— but he barely notices. Too busy trying to ignore the uncertainty crackling in his chest.

It's not that he's *scared* or anything— he's not that much of a coward, thanks— it's just that, well, he wants Lyn's friends to like him. Orion doesn't have many— any— trans

friends in London and today? Today's his chance to try out being part of a trans community he actually belongs in. Back home, he's out of place. Chronically offline, angry at everything, the only trans man in a support group that turned out to mostly be for non-binary people. He's not close with any of them, just an acquaintance who, even in trans spaces, doesn't— can't— fit in. Hiking in Skirts will be different though. It has to be.

As he waits, people pour through the station. It's high summer, a sweltering Saturday in the making, and apparently Lewis is the place to spend it. Here, a set of beleaguered parents cajole their children into putting on sun block before they leave the shade. There, a group of retirees bustle past clutching pamphlets for one of the town's historic sites. From his vantage point by the wall, Orion scans the crowd, hoping for another moment of that breathless familiarity— recognition— understanding— that happened when he met Lyn, but it's still too early. Still just him who's here for the hike.

When the Brighton train gets in, Orion spots a tall young woman in the crowd with a wild mane of bleach-dyed spikes for hair. Dark eye make up. There's no guarantee of course— she could just be a goth— but Lyn had mentioned some of her friends would be coming up from Brighton and this stranger does have similar vibes. Breath catching in his throat, Orion chucks away his empty coffee cup. Wipes sweaty hands clean on his shorts and— hesitates.

He'll just, he'll just wait here for a bit to make sure. Even if Bleached Spikes is trans, she might not be here for the hike and he doesn't want to make things weird. If she lingers in the station he'll go over and say hi but there's no need to rush in and make a fool of himself.

Again, the station empties out, but this time, he's not quite alone. She's still here too— still waiting. Orion swallows, tries not too look like he's looking, as he looks her way. Goes

for a tentative smile when she notices his not-so-surreptitious stare, not wanting to worry her, but still can't quite bring himself to go over.

Instead he mooches back towards the coffee stand. Pretends to deliberate for minutes that drag out like hours before picking the same drink he did last time. Texts a few friends and carefully, studiously, avoids meeting the trans girl's eye— but it doesn't matter. They're orbiting each other now.

Her, gravitating towards the kiosk as he makes his way back to his chosen patch of wall. Him, looking at nothing in particular a few feet to her left. Her, glancing his way every now and again. Pulling out her phone to check the time. A dance of not-quite-certainty, not-quite-recognition, matching each other step for step until the next train pulls in.

Passengers swarm off, cascading up the stairs in a many-headed mass of summer clothes and sweat. All but three of them stride straight out into Lewis proper— leaving two girls and a boy lingering inside the station just like he is and this time, Orion has no room to doubt.

With strength in numbers (or maybe just in-born confidence) on their side, the trio do what Orion couldn't. Walk over to the trans girl and say hi, their voices overlapping— collective, as they exchange greetings. As the echoes fade, Orion swallows his nerves. Makes his way over. "Er, sorry, but are you lot here for the Hiking in Skirts hike?" He asks, voice level— low. It's finally stopped cracking whenever he speaks, and the relief makes him smile. Prompts smiles in return, as the others nod.

"We are, yeah, have you been to one before?" Asks one of the girls. Orion shakes his head.

"'S my first."

“Me too,” says Bleach Spikes, “I thought you might be here for the hike when I got in but I didn’t want to—” she pauses, unsure.

“Make it weird?” Orion asks, “I know what you mean, it’s why I didn’t ask either,” then, anxiety easing slightly when a relieved look flashes across her face, “I’m Orion by the way. What are all your names?”

“Lorelei,” says one girl who arrived in the trio.

“Wisteria,” offers the other.

“Emma,” replies the girl who arrived first, “but damn, it seems a bit basic now you’ve all said yours.” The other trans guy snorts.

“Not all of us. I’m Jackson.”

Orion doesn’t know which of them starts first, but soon all five of them are cracking up and just like that, the tight ball of anxiety in his chest melts away to nothing. Leaves him strangely light, uncertain why he’d been worried in the first place.

“I mean, now’s as good a time as any to pick a new one.” He says when they’ve all got their breath back. “I chose Orion this morning.”

“Oh, how come?”

“Just felt like a change.” he lies.

“Fair enough.” Lorelei shrugs, and Orion releases a breath he didn’t know he was holding. Struck, all at once, by how easy these things are with other trans people. He doesn’t— he’s never had— *this* is why today’s so important to him.

He picked Orion for a couple of reasons. The hunter’s practically the only constellation bright enough to be visible in London’ night sky; in Greek myth he was strongly associated with Artemis, goddess of the wilderness; Orion’s a family name too, on his mother’s side, but today he doesn’t have to find a way to justify it.

Everyone here's chosen their own name at some point. If he picks something else next time he comes on a Hiking in Skirts hike, none of them will roll their eyes like his cis friends do whenever he re-introduces himself. They'll just accept it. Accept him. The realisation is slightly surreal.

Lyn arrives on the next train with an entourage. It's mostly girls, maybe twelve of them, to the five guys Orion can see, but either way, there are loads more people than he was expecting. This is— Hiking in Skirts isn't just Lyn and her friends going out for a day, it's a proper group. Orion had wanted to take Lyn's word for it when they met but until this moment, until he saw almost twenty trans people swanning through the Lewis train station barriers at once, he hadn't really let himself believe her. Now he has no choice.

There's another round of introductions— too many new names to keep straight. The ones who know each other hug, catch up on shared acquaintances and ask after people who usually come, but haven't today. Lyn says something about a couple of people being ill, then waves him over. "Everyone, this is—"

"—Orion." He interrupts, and Lyn blinks. Smiles, slow and easy.

"Nice one," she offers, "it suits you." That's the end of it, and again, a rush of affection floods through Orion— for Lyn, for the community she's built here— for trans people in general, but he doesn't have long to process it.

After a snack check to make sure everyone's got something for Lunch, they're off. Chatting and laughing as they walk out of the station and into open countryside. Before long they reach a break in the old stone wall that runs along the left side of the road, slip through it into the field on the other side. Orion can't stop smiling. Can't stop looking round at the group in wonder as snatches of conversation draw him in.

Two girls near the front of the group are swapping equally improbable coming-out stories. A pace behind them, four people are planning some sort of arts and crafts event for Tuesday evening the week after next, and further back, the trans guys are discussing a job opening at the nature reserve one of them works at.

Orion is briefly struck by an all-encompassing desire to move to Brighton. Abandon the degree course waiting for him in Bristol and apply for a job on a re-wilding project he has no qualifications for in a town he doesn't know, all on the off-chance that his life might look like this more often if he did.

Sense reasserts itself— there's no way he'd get the job in the first place and as for community, he can always visit— but barely. He's still on the point of asking more about the job when someone taps his shoulder. He turns to find Lyn standing just behind him.

"Enjoying the hike?" She asks.

"It's brilliant," he replies, "absolutely brilliant. Being here, meeting everyone, it's—" he pauses, not sure he has the words to describe exactly what he's feeling. Lands on "this is the first time I've ever felt like I belong in my own community." Lyn grins. Throws an arm round his shoulders as she replies.

"I know the feeling, man." Then, softer, "I'm glad you came."

By the time they're nearing the hour mark, Orion's legs are burning. Somewhere along the way, what began as a relatively flat woodland trail has turned into a proper hike. Their path up through the wood is hair-pinning back and forth for all its worth in an attempt to cope with the gradient, but it's still gruelling.

As they reach the tree-line, the last of the Oaks and Hazels give way to knee high yellow-flowering plants he doesn't recognise. When he asks, one of the girls identifies the

plant as Lady's Bedstraw. Introduces herself as Ellie, as they wander through a picture-perfect grassland scene. She teaches him how to spot the difference between Birds-foot Trefoil and Horseshoe Vetch, when they come across the two growing side by side. Points out three different species of butterfly fluttering around a patch of Fairy Flax and quotes their Latin names like old friends.

Orion takes photos of everything, sends them to himself on WhatsApp with the names attached to make sure he remembers each species. He doesn't know much about Botany really, but for Lyn's friends— for the chance to spend more time with these wonderful people— he's more than willing to learn.

For all that he hardly knows anyone, conversation flows easily when they stop for lunch— encompassing everything from the state of trans rights to their various forays into foraging (Lyn's something of an expert, Orion's wary of food poisoning, most of the others fall somewhere in between).

As he eats, two of the girls start cracking terrible, plant-themed jokes and Orion abruptly realises that he's actually, genuinely relaxed. As at home with these relative strangers as he is with his oldest friends from home. Maybe more.

Somewhere in the depths of his bones, Orion knows he's safe here and the warmth of it paints a sharp contrast to his usual distrust. Throws him off balance. He doesn't really know how to act without that barrier between him and the people around him, but sitting out here with a group of other trans people, he's starting to realise he wants to learn.

Robin Red

It's dusk. It's dusk, and tucked away from the world in a strange, stunted Hawthorn wood miles from the nearest road, two old friends are caught in a breathless, waiting moment. One tastes guilt, as he swallows. The other, uncertainty. Above them, the last of the sunset's red fades to a deep, bruised mauve. In the air, Midsummer heat lingers, pressing close as the shortest night of the year draws in.

Countless stars spill out across the arc of the sky, and the seeing of it holds both observers spellbound, born as they were amid London's endless glow. Neither of them are used to nights this dark— this silent. It hangs heavy in the space between them, the strange soundlessness of the country rustling like taffeta. Cloying, against the backdrop susurrus of wind-through-leaves.

Every indrawn breath prepares to break it, hesitates—

A gust tugs long strands of Robin's hair out of their braids, scattering the bluebells they'd plaited in earlier on the breeze. Beside them, a man they call friend closes tired eyes against the star-burnt abyss of space. A proper night sky always makes him feel small, insignificant, and this is not a night for minimising the role he cast himself in.

Tonight, he will speak it into existence. Admit to playing Cain, to the graves he dug in his youth and the things he buried there and despite it all, he has to somehow find it in himself to dare and ask Robin for forgiveness— absolution.

The first time he tries to speak, words turn to sand in a mouth so dry he can feel cracks forming on his tongue. He coughs, an age old smoker's rattle (binder born) flaring up again.

"You alright?" Robin asks, and Cain swallows, convulsive. Chokes down the same guilt-grief-love that always gets stuck in his throat when Robin does something as casually, unspeakably kind as asking how he is.

"Yeah." He manages. They're sitting close enough to share warmth, close enough to share secrets, and between them thrum a thousand unspoken things. It can't last, though. Not like this.

When he was small, Cain always loved the sallow, muggy heat of a building summer storm. Every time it looked like thunder he would climb out onto the narrow ledge of his bedroom window sill and stare up at yellow-grey clouds, waiting for the sky to crack open. It feels like that now, with Robin. Mounting pressure. Heavy silences. Endless, endless waiting.

Cain's sick to fucking death of it. Eaten-alive, wound up on tension woven into the core of what they share, terrified of what the lightning might illuminate, when it strikes.

Still, every storm must break and rising inside Cain is a strange, fate-touched certainty. If he doesn't tell them tonight, he never will.

Maybe it's the hawthorn wood that does it, (everyone knows May trees are the domain of the fae), but when he clears his throat in a second attempt to begin, he finds a fiction waiting. After all, when the truth turns bitter, he's always held story close. Spent years spinning fairytales where the villain always gets their dues and the princess is saved by a handsome, eligible knight, and no one ever has to admit to the terrible things they've done. In a friendship like his and Robin's, what's one more fable?

"Did you ever hear the fairytale about why the Robin's chest is red?" He asks. Already knows the answer because this isn't really a fairytale, is it? It's an apology ten years in the making.

"Don't think so," Robin replies, a smile in their voice, "go for it." Reaching out in the dark, Cain finds Robin's left hand with his right. Laces his fingers through theirs, and begins in earnest. This time when he speaks, his voice is soft. Steady.

"Long ago, in a time when the right net would let you catch the north wind and gods both great and small still roamed these lands, there lived a mournful prince. He was prince of the Little People of the Downs, whose word hold power over flora and fauna alike, yet he longed more than anything to be human."

"Why?" Scoffs Robin, and Cain sighs. Rolls his shoulders, because that— that's the whole point of the story, only Robin doesn't understand yet, do they? And Cain can't find the words to explain.

"It's just how the story goes." He says instead. "Every day the faerie prince wished himself a new body, a new life, and every day, despite his best efforts, he remained what he'd been born as. Like all his kind, he could cast illusions easily enough to wear a human

face, but at the coming of every dawn it would fade to mist, and when he swam in faerie pools, he still bore witness to his true reflection.”

In the dark, Robin laughs softly, catching on to the trans metaphor, and Cain feels another pulse of guilt. He’s always telling stories like this, but for all Robin’s understanding smiles, for all their knowing glances, he hadn’t put the truth of who they were together until the damage had already been done.

He’s all solidarity now of course, knows who the real enemies of their community are, but he’d been so— so angry— such a cruel child, when they were both still figuring things out. When he continues his tale, their tale, every breath catches on thorns growing in his throat.

“Unable to bear a life that looked like his, the prince turned to sages and magic makers more powerful than himself, hopeful that they might be able to enact change where he could not.

First he went to the weaver gods, Anansi, Ariadne and all their kith, hoping that they would craft for him a new-made skin, but they did not know how. Next he went to the gods of home and hearth, for surely if anyone could, they would be the ones to help him feel at home inside his body, but they too shook their heads at the solution he sought.

Finally, the Witch Queen of the Downs suggested he ask the Knower, finest potioneer and diviner in all Under The Hill, to brew him a potion that would turn him into a human. Seeing the sense of this, the faerie prince assembled a group of his most loyal friends with whom to travel and set out on a great quest.

With him travelled the brightest and best of his kingdom. From the wild grasslands, he summoned Round-headed Rampion, standing tall, and bright Adonis blue—”

“Ah, back on your botanist shit I see.” Robin interrupts.

Cain snorts, smiles into the dark. “Maybe.”

“Sorry, sorry, carry on.”

“From the heath, he called up a duo of green Sand-Lizards and a pear-treed Grey Partridge to act as advisor on their grand adventure. From the sea cliffs, he called forth three loud-lout Kittiwakes, and at his mother’s behest, urged Bonxie Wrath to join them. To his surprise, the Great Skua warrior (still so famous for it’s role in the battle at Beachy Head that younglings came up to it for stray feather keepsakes 300 years on) agreed, and so joined his growing motley of companions.

All these great and small miracles of the Downs were to be his questing company, but from the woodland valley he called home, he summoned only one. A plain, nut-brown bird with a beautiful singing voice and the worst temper of anyone in the wood. This bird, I’m sure you’ve guessed, is none other than the titular Robin, though in those days, it had not yet donned it’s famous red.”

“Oh, *thanks*.” Robin snarks, but even as they say it, Cain can hear a smile’s curl at the end of faux-offence.

“Can you honestly tell me I’m wrong?” Cain asks, then leaps back into the story before they get a chance to answer. “For a year and a day the prince made his way through lands mysterious and wild. He crossed shining forests of crystal and glass, danced amid the great plains where sky spirits grow their storms, and sailed a sunken human shipwreck across the dreaming sea before he came at last to the great library of the Knower.

Through valleys of fog and fogs of misery and miseries of contemplation, his stalwart friends stayed ever at his side, but when their fellowship came at last to the Knower’s lair, the prince forgot them all.

The Knower was white of tooth and curly of hair when it answered the door, looking for all the world like a polite young man in a blue button-down shirt and slacks. It looked, in fact, exactly like the kind of man you wouldn't have to worry about upsetting distant relatives, if you invited him to a family party, except for the glowing gold eyes."

At that, Robin laughs softly and the sound sends another stab of guilt through Cain. Here he is, laughing with them, smiling in the dark and waisting time— flanneling around with the set up when what he needs to do is get to the fucking point some time before sunrise.

"Drawing up his courage, the faerie prince asked the question he had travelled long and hard to ask. In reply, the Knower only shook its handsome, human head and told the faerie prince he was not ready. That he did not yet know his own mind, and therefore could not drink of the potion that would grant him his greatest wish.

'Give it five years.' The Knower said. 'You sound like you have some other issues going on, sort them out and you might find you don't need to be human at all. If you come back five summers from now and still want it, I'll see to it you get your potion.' This being done, it slammed the door in the prince's face, and would not for all the knocking in the many worlds of physicists imaginations open it back up again."

"Are we still talking about a potion and a faerie prince?" Robin teases, "it's all sounding a bit familiar," and Cain breathes a sigh of relief. They're properly on the same page now. Reading from the same cast-list. Biting his lip, he steadies his nerves and continues.

"The Knower had passed its chosen sentence and knowing he had been thwarted, the prince flung himself down and wept. Like all the Little People, he cried not water but molten metal, and as those helpless tears tracked down his cheeks, he grew angry.

Why, with all the great wish granting power in the vale, could he not transform himself as he desired? How could the cold, cruel world have played upon him such a terrible trick as this, to see humanity, but never be a part of it? At that thought, he flew into a terrible rage.”

And oh, hadn’t he just? Shunted from waiting list to waiting list, mocked by the press, laughed at at school— the only other option would have been to curl up and fucking die, and Cain refused point blank to become just another headline about a dead trans kid. It was no wonder he’d got angry. It just should have been directed at different people.

“Gathering up all the metal tears he had shed in a handkerchief, our prince made his way to the faerie blacksmith, and at that great fire of creation where all the gods of craft had learned their trade, melted down his anguish and from it, forged a set of silver knives.”

Cain bites the inside of his cheek, voice thickening momentarily with tears of his own, “From his sorrow, he smelted knives of derision” *‘What do they mean their gender’s a fluid? Oh, Come **on.**’* “and knives of distain,” *‘I’m just— personally I’m not **that** kind of trans, you know? My experience has nothing in common with theirs’* “and knives of half a hundred other things too unsavoury to name, and at last, felt like he was in control of his own destiny.”

As if he hadn’t just been being transphobic, when you got down to it. As if it hadn’t been Cain’s desperate, traitorous attempt to weaponise his dysphoria, use it to hurt others in the vain hope it might hurt him less in turn. As if he didn’t hear cis gays saying beat-for-beat the same thing about binary trans people that he’d said about non-binary ones. Robin had sat there and been forced to listen to it all for years and they’d never— never even said a word. Bile rises in Cain’s throat but he can’t stop now. The story has to have its end.

“This being done, the faerie prince raised Scorn, sharpest of all his new knives, to his own breast and cut from his soul every shred of pity he could find. At last, he could focus. The path forward was as clear to him now as a river’s flow. If he could not change himself, he would force the world to change instead.

Armed with his new-made knives, he set forth to enact on the Downs a great change, come hell or high water, and discover some way to transform himself into a human without the Knower’s help.”

He’s half way through a breath in when it happens. In the dark, Robin squeezes his hand gently, comfortingly, and just like that Cain feels the glass hollow of his heart shatter into countless shards. Heavy laceration to the chest, they’ll put on his death certificate, and it’ll be all his own fault when they do. He takes a shuddering breath, blood pooling in punctured lungs. Carries on, because he’s almost there now. Almost saying what he needs to.

“When he returned home, the prince went about learning to throw his knives, always admiring how their cutting edges glittered in the sunlight.” *‘I just think they’re separate issues you know?’* “Loving the rush of exhilaration as they flew from his hands, he was careless as he played war, and neither knew nor wondered where his knives might land.” *‘Non binary people should have their own spaces, not take up mine’*

“Being prince of the Little People, he was never short of friends, but as his knives grew sharper and his throws more wild, how people saw him began to change. Some of his companions refused to meet him, fearful of the bloody cuts he left in his wake.” *Vi. D’juan.*

“Some only shook their heads and pretended not to see, wondering all the while how the prince could act this way when they knew he still cared deeply for all the living creatures of his kingdom.” *Juliet. Andre. Misha.*

“Still others welcomed their beloved knife-thrower prince with open arms. The Silver Maiden and the Robin fair, he held the closest, for they laughed when he laughed and of an evening, helped him to sharpen his many shining knives. For a rhyming couplet (well, quartet) of years, the faerie prince gave himself up to his dancing, spinning blades, never seeing the carnage in his wake, until one day, he noticed a patch of red on the Robin’s light brown throat.

‘You’re hurt.’ said the prince,

‘It’s nothing,’ replied the Robin, ‘just a scratch.’”

“’Tis but a scratch.” the real Robin murmurs next to him, their voice ringing with quotation marks, and in the midst of all his messy storytelling, Cain finds himself smiling. They’re both thinking of the scene from Romeo and Juliet of course, and it’s— this is why they’re still friends, after everything he’s done. There’s too much history here for either one of them to pull away. Too much lore.

“But it wasn’t a scratch.” His voice is louder than he wants it to be, angrier, and as he speaks, he feels Robin withdraw ever so slightly. A microscopic distancing, a tiny rearrangement of their hand in his. Enough to fell Cain in a single blow. His anger (only ever at himself, these days) transmutes to some sort of horrifying, wet emotion too big to name. When he continues, his voice is wobbling in earnest.

“Protruding from the Robin’s feathered neck, staining its surroundings bloody crimson, was one of the prince’s knives. As he looked closer, he realised it wasn’t the only one. In the Robin’s chest, another two, three— too many to count, had found their sheath. When he saw at last what he had done, the prince—”

Taking a deep breath, Cain speaks the words he’s been working towards for months, years, aloud. “The prince cried out, ‘but why did you not tell me I was hurting you?’” In the

dark, he turns towards Robin. “Why’d you never say?” Silence stretches out, condemning—damning, until—

“Because—” they begin, then pause again. Serrated seconds linger, doubtful, in the space between them. Bleed uncertainty. “Because if I had, you might have gone on throwing knives anyway,” Robin’s quiet when they speak, their words closer to admission than explanation, as if tonight is anyone’s turn but Cain’s, for apologies. “At least this way it wasn’t on purpose.”

Cain’s knee-jerk reaction is *gratitude*, rather than guilt, and it turns his stomach. Robin never gets enough credit for how thoughtful they are but it’s obvious when you look for it. Things like this, like the thousand times they’ve played soundboard or listening ear or any of the other parts Cain needed them to play. At that, guilt does slam into him. He fights to swallow around it, find his voice, but there are no words left inside him. Just a hollow echo-chamber of regret. It’s Robin who breaks the silence.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Telling the story.”

Cain swallows. “I didn’t know how to end it.” The admission is ragged. Afraid. He’s said his piece, offered his apologies the only way he knows how, but Robin— they’d have every right to a bitter ending, if that’s what they want. Eye for eye, tragedy as catharsis. Instead, he feels Robin turn towards him. Reach out in the dark until Cain fumbles his way into their arms.

“It ends like this.” Robin mutters into his shoulder.

“Like what.”

“Like this.” They reply, squeezing tighter, and in Cain’s mind, a faerie prince pulls knife after knife out of his friend’s feathered chest. Stems the flow of blood with words of power, words of healing. *I accept you. I’m sorry. I understand now.* Words Cain doesn’t have to actually say, because Robin— Robin understands— has always understood, right down to their marrow, what Cain means when he starts telling his tall tales.

The rest of the night drifts like sea-mist. On chapped lips, other fairytales take shape. Ones that cost less to tell, this time. Every-day anecdotes take on prophetic significance and fledgeling ideas flit back and forth, hand to hand, until they take narrative wing in the small, quiet hours when the sky is losing the first of its stars to creeping daylight.

When it comes— their desperate, hoping dawn— they both fall silent. All around them, countless crepuscular creatures begin to stir. Bats fluttering to home to roost and mice rustling in the long grass. A thousand peach tones burn hot on the horizon and in the wood, larks begin to sing.

The sunrise lights Robin’s smile all in gold.

Godlands

It's a tiny little thing, the delicate cross Francis wears. Barely noticeable until the sun catches on an edge. Transforms gossamer thin gold chain to light, aglitter against pale skin as she leads the others through the dappled shade of the wood.

One of her companions does a double take as he spots it. Raises an eyebrow, as the doubter's name settles into place across his shoulders. Mantle, or shroud? Thomas— no, he's not that formal, Tom— never went in for churches. More likely to jump over a solstice bonfire than attend a Sunday service, but today he's— curious.

A cross would have kindled wrath, if they'd met back when he went by Ash. A barrage of statistics about the various atrocities you can lay at the Church's door— crusades— nonces— doors closed on homeless people for the sin of being trans— how can you possibly justify— but he knows better now. Doesn't understand it, by any stretch, but even playing the Skeptic as he is today, taking testosterone has taught him to be *kind*.

When he asks, Francis lights up. Begins a meandering tale of water into wine as the original transition— blue-print for a modernising world capable of making its own magic. She's passionate about this— eyes wide and dark as she speaks. In them, Tom can see the green of the wood reflected in miniature.

Branches straining ever for the sun, rooted in Francis' belief— bedrock-deep— that her transformation was as miraculous— as God-sent— as that of communion wafer to Christ-flesh. Her transition ordained not like Tom's was by fate's fell hand or the prophetic name-choosing uncertainties of his mother, but by some loving maker of all things.

“—it's how I chose— hang on.” Francis pauses— narrative rupture— as the crowd re-congregates.

They've been splintering, different walking paces spinning the flax cloud of the group out to a fine thread. Now the gravity of a style pulls them in. New-old crossing place, blackberry-steeped borderlands. Here, the thread is wound onto its bobbin, coiled close once more. An exchange of bright smiles follows.

“Alright, how are we all feeling?” Francis is nervous-grinning as she asks. Wearing her first-time leadership with a quiet, self-conscious pride. Fledgeling route planner, she's out for reassurance, and it comes.

“Grand.” From Lyn.

“Yeah, it's been so great,” from Elliot, “I'm excited for the rest of it!”

“We're good.” echoes from a duo he doesn't know. Tom looks over, tries to pinpoint whether it was Short Pink Hair and Tweeds (hand-sewn, hard fought) or Gothic Monochromatica who spoke.

“Where’re we stopping to eat?” Someone else asks. The girl who says it’s one of the Brighton set, more Lyn’s friend than his, but at the mention of food, Tom’s stomach clenches in agreement. Francis ducks her head, tucks a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

“Glad you asked! Lunch is our next stop, and we’re heading down to the old Church for it. You can’t see it from here because we’ve got a bit of a hill between us, but it’ll come into view in ten-ish minutes when we reach the ridge. We’ll probably get there in about half an hour, so if people are already getting snacky, let’s get going.”

The ancient boundary point they stand at creaks beneath the weight of a fresh wooden style, not yet a year old. On either side, a path that predates the enclosures act snakes its way across the bones of a changing land. Up ahead, their wooded valley gives way to sloping chalk grasslands. Beyond that, the ridge, silhouetted against a backdrop of scudding clouds shot through with sunlight.

Alive in the wind and whispering their history, the grasses beckon, and one by one the group answers their call. Climbs the style. A freed-path waits on the other side, half wild and fading, child of that timeless combination— feet uncounted, and cyclic repetition. A path summoned (like its makers) by the Church’s bell.

As the group unspools into its walking form, little knots of conversation— common interest— form along the line and Tom gravitates back towards Francis. There’s a story there— unfinished. Plot threads left loose, dancing in the wind. She was half way through an explanation when they stopped and he’s never been a fan of cliffhangers.

“Where were we?” He asks when he reaches her. Francis smiles, eyes crinkling up at the corners. Picks up where she’d left off.

“I was telling you how I chose my name.” A pause, to pack away her water bottle, then hurrying to catch up with herself at the front of the walk. “I picked it for St Francis— you know, the patron saint of ecology?”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“They’re pretty gender-y bender-y, so I thought why not? Plus, it’s a gender neutral name and I thought I was non-binary back then.” A shrug. “Either way, St Francis would probably approve, they were pretty cool. Welcomed a female disciple into their monastery as ‘Brother Jacoba’, preached to birds and trees, wrote about having visions of God in the form of three women.”

Somehow, Tom can see it. In his mind’s eye, a 12th century beggar-priest takes form, beset by visions of Arianna Grande’s hit single at the side of the road, but it’s more than that. Tom knows these myths, these symbols. Hears St Francis’ sermon through an older, wilder lens. This is the tale of a renegade— madman— seer. Preacher man for a tripartite, tryptic, triple goddess in all her pagan glory— This version of the saints is new to Tom, but Francis isn’t done yet. “They’d probably be in prison if they were around today.”

“Wait, what?”

“Oh man, St Francis one hundred percent has eco-terrorist vibes. They saw no difference between humanity and the natural world. With everything big oil are up to, they’d probably think *not* taking direct action was a sin.” Tom is starting to think he might have a favourite saint. “That’s why I found it so frustrating finding a Church I liked. First you have to find one that’s solid on trans rights, then you’ve got to make sure it preaches the same Word you read, at least roughly.”

“How’s that been?” He asks with a wince.

“Oh, my family go to a really great one now.” Another smile flashes across Francis’ face, grief-dyed at the edges— other, less happy memories of Churches past creeping in— and Tom catches it. Regrets asking as he reaches out to touch her arm, attempts to bring the present back into focus. He might not want Churches and sermons himself, but that’s not what she’s talking about now, and they all know what it’s like— rejection like that.

Awkwardly searching for something else to talk about, Tom lands on “what about you then, planning any direct action?” Francis looks at him sideways for asking, trying to gauge how serious he is, but Tom— the truth is, he has no idea.

“Sometimes—” Francis swallows, fire in her eyes, “I think about changing my name to Joan.” Tom’s breath catches in his throat. *Joan* means Joan of Arc, of course. Fighter. Martyr. Most famous of the crossdressing saints. The silence between them stretches out, thick with everything Francis isn’t saying, and Tom— he knows exactly how she feels.

Everything’s getting harder. Not for him, now his transition’s mostly finished and he’s just waiting on the last bit of paperwork, but the kids, they’re still hurting— still dying— as the health secretary smiles and smiles and pretends he’s on their side. Pretends he wants to protect them as he bans puberty blockers (but only for trans kids) because they’re obviously something new and dangerous (but only for trans kids) rather than a medication that’s been used to stop precocious puberty for decades.

Every time he thinks about it, Tom’s back there, sitting in one of those shitty waiting room chairs with the peeling fake leather and over-stuffed cream cushions. Even T-mellowed and optimistic as he is today, the things he went through as a child to get his diagnosis make him *breathtakingly* angry. Question after doubting question— psychologists looking for an excuse— any excuse— to tell him that he wasn’t actually trans, that he was just confused, that he was—

The view from the ridge takes his breath away. Steals the lump right out of his throat and wipes the slate clean, as the bright, endless green of the wilderness fills his lungs. Spread out before them is a tapestry of rolling hills, the garden of England in all its summer glory. Wooded valleys, brambles growing long and wild in every dark corner. Distant whitewashed cottages almost aglow against the surrounding green. A patchwork landscape just waiting to be painted—

Peace.

In the valley below, the Church Francis mentioned earlier sits nestled between sloping meadows, forgotten by the world. Tom inhales and tastes on the air a strange stillness, as if the valley itself is holding its breath. He doesn't know how long he stands there, staring, until a voice breaks the silence. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" Francis is quiet, as she says it. Tom nods, wordless.

Sudden laughter echoes from somewhere close behind him— the rest of the group catching up, he presumes— but Tom can't tear his eyes away to check. Busy memorising the shifting play of light and shadow on the ground, he barely hears the greetings of the others. It's only when Lyn steps past Tom and into his field of view that he snaps out of his daze. Finds enough of his train of thought to put one foot in front of the other and step into the perfect picture waiting for him.

With every step Tom takes, the valley's stillness resonates more deeply within him. Steals away his voice, his words, even as the others laugh and weave their way around him. Can't they feel it? This place is immune to time. Untouched by passing centuries. The old Church nestled at the base of the valley could have been abandoned yesterday or three hundred years ago. It would make no difference.

It's not the only place like it in the Weald, not the only valley Tom's been in where the world stands still, but here— every breath rings with eternity. Seconds move in slow motion, double back on themselves to linger near a wild buttercup or dance on the summer breeze. In a valley like this, you could spend hours admiring the lazy, buzzing flight of passing insects. Lose days to cloud gazing or sketching out the silhouettes of trees. Time loses its meaning, in places this beautiful. He can see why someone would build a Church here.

Where the valley slows Tom almost to a standstill, weighing his pockets down with awe and stretching out every heartbeat to a lifetime, it speeds Francis up. She's walking faster now, her slightly longer legs taking her down through the valley way ahead of the rest of the group. Faster and faster she walks— iron filing to magnet as she nears the Church— until all at once, she stops. Looks back to find herself alone. Tom grins, raises a hand to wave from where he's walking at the back of the group. Lets the slope of the hill pull him into a jog as she waves back.

By the time he catches up, the others are sitting down for lunch on the overgrown Church lawn. Every which way, bright maxi-skirts fan out across the grass— compliments on them flying back and forth as people unpack their various Tupperwares. Elliot is lounging in the sun, filming the afternoon as Liv chats with Mason in the shade.

Francis is standing a bit apart from the others, silhouetted in the arched doorway of the Church. Against the backdrop of the hall's shadowed interior, she's haloed in a beam of sunlight. Transformed from girl to glowing statue. Inside the Church, multi-coloured light pours through a stained glass window, illuminating a single, withered rose.

Waymarker

In summer, Stanton Drew's stone circles are the third largest Neolithic monument in the country— a fascinating glimpse into our distant past, eternal monument to religious rites long-lost to time, to be sure, but quantifiable. Man-made. In autumn, they become something else entirely. Mist-soaked and wild, the Great Circle is transformed to a ring of granite teeth— the remains of some long-dead giant, or a group of ancient dancers turned to stone. The kind of place that could make anyone believe in folk tales.

Today marks summer's end— a watershed, and the stones are overrun. Half a hundred barefoot activists have made a dew-damp dance floor of this ancient place, and the valley rings with music.

Violins and flutes dare every listener to join the dance as those too tired to continue clap in time. Hand in calloused hand, laughing strangers don't register the afternoon's misting drizzle, too busy learning their Lucky Sevens and trying to remember how to Strip

the Willow. Lost in the sweat of movement— the warmth of camaraderie— they bring the stones to life. Dance a timeless, gleeful Cèilidh into being.

As the last high note of the song rings out, one of the dancers stumbles. Chokes on a name he never thought he'd wear again, as familiar brown eyes meet his. Seconds slow to standstill, the dancers all around him fading to a blur. Beneath the spray-painted roof of the band's gazebo, violin in hand, stands a ghost.

Living haunting of the city Lear never quite made home— a friend of friends but never close enough to cross no-mans-land— acquaintance. Maverick violinist— land activist— dreamer— Max is many things but first and ever foremost, he is *child*.

Child, the way youngest siblings in a set will always be The Baby to their family. Child, the way people over sixty see anyone who's not yet forty-five. Child, it seems, in every sense but physical, these days. Max is changed since they last met. Thinner in the face, more adult. His youth etched into sharper focus by a scant handful of months. He's more confident too. It's written in every line of him. The set of his shoulders, the tilt of his jaw, the loose, casual way he's holding the bow of his violin. Max looks— happy.

Lear finds a smile. Lifts a hand to wave as the weight of it all hits him, every second of his life, a year. 22 sits lead-heavy in his bones— but then he was old at fourteen, wasn't he? And he's been out for so long now— a community elder in every way that counts. Max was the first trans man Lear had ever felt old, meeting, and that was years ago. Now look at them.

Him, teetering on the edge of giving up his crown. The swords he hung up long ago grown rusty with disuse. Diplomacy. And then there's Max. Lead character in the opening chapter of a bildungsroman novel. A young man on the cusp of coming into himself, ready to realise his every passing daydream.

“Hey man, it’s been ages. How are you?” Max’s voice cuts through Lear’s internal monologue, sets indignation ablaze in his throat. It’s been ages, he says! Not Lear’s fault though, is it? He tried his best, back when they met. It was Max who decided they weren’t going to be proper friends. Not like he can drop that into their polite, ever surface skimming small talk though, is it? So all he replies with is

“Yeah, I’m good.” A pause. “You?”

“Yeah, all good.”

Lear’s stuck now. It’s his turn— his line, but there’s something about this— something about Max— that strips away his usual chattibility. Still, he has to try. “How’d you hear about the Cèilidh then?”

“Right to Roam twitter.” Max replies. “You?”

“Yeah, same.”

It’s Max’s turn to ask a question now, but he doesn’t bother. No, maybe Lear isn’t being fair. True to his namesake, he’d rather lay the blame for all this awkwardness at Max’s door — but the truth is, it’s always like this. Their every conversation stilted through too much understanding— or too little. “So,” he tries again, painfully aware that he’s going to sounds like all of Max’s distant relatives when he asks, “how’s uni going?”

“Oh, yeah,” Max replies, nodding at nothing in particular, “yeah it’s good. You?”

“’S Alright, yeah. Last year’s a bit stress, but it’s going okay.”

“Ah, I can imagine. Must be tough.”

Lear nods. Tries to muster up something half-way interesting to reply with. Fails. Before he has the chance to make his excuses instead, one of the other musicians appears. Flings her arm round Max’s shoulder, friendly with him in a way Lear never has been—

doesn't know how to be— and grins. “Hate to interrupt, but we need Max. Next song's starting in about a minute.”

Both men relax slightly at her words, each a perfect mirror image to the other. They both notice it too— both pretend not to see. Max lets his friend pull him away with an “uh, gotta go, bye!” Melts into the crowd a split second after something his friend said makes him laugh. A bright flash of joy— wild as they come, and in the aftermath, Lear swallows his regrets. Turns away.

He knows already that they won't talk again today— will make a point of avoiding it, if only to save himself another awkward pause, but he's off kilter now. Out of sync. Talking to Max always makes him feel like he's missing something. As if he's misstepped somehow in conversation— chosen an incorrect dialogue option or said something thoughtlessly offensive— and not noticed until too late.

It's difficult. The two of them have acres of common ground. Right to Roam stuff, Botany, folk society, you name it. There's easily enough to build a friendship on, or there should be— both of them trans men living in the same city with a hat-trick of similar interests. They they share a circle of friends, even, but it just— doesn't stick. Never has, even back when they first met.

The first time Lear saw Max is decade-distant, in his mind. These past two years might as well have been twenty, for all the changes they've wrought— personal or political. When they met, Lear had still been getting used to the unease he causes, walking through the world as a man. Still getting used to queer people— his people— registering *threat* as he approached, rather than friend. These days he's used to it.

It had been bang in the middle of a sprawling Easter break— privilege of that unique, late-stage adolescence induced by university. Lyn and the others had all been busy with various projects when Lear rang but it was too beautiful day to waste in town, so for the first time in years, he'd set off into the South Downs alone.

It was strange, hiking by himself again after so long. Quieter— less joyful, without the others— but closer to the wild. Alone, he could meet the other creatures of the wood on even footing. A single seasonal visitor to their habitat, rather than one of many amid his usual brightly coloured flock.

He'd spotted redstarts and nuthatches already— tried in vain to catch a glimpse of the woodpecker he could hear— even seen a butterfly he was pretty sure he recognised as the threatened High Brown Fritillary, resting in a patch of sunlight. By the time he laid eyes on a huge Ash tree his walk guidebook had told him to look out for, he was so thoroughly in naturalist-mode that it took him a second to recognise the human silhouette beneath its boughs.

As he got nearer, the stranger came into focus. Old boots. Acorn-brown hiker's legs— bramble scratched and strong. Long shorts in navy blue. Dark curls, cut short enough to reveal the back of the neck above an incongruous white shirt collar— shoulders hunched in, protective— a heavy duty camo jacket worn despite the heat—

The stance— the style— all of it was inherently familiar. Familial, almost. Lear had learnt to recognise his own long ago, and stood beneath the Ash tree was a man like him. He strode over, within speaking distance before he'd sorted out his lines, and opened his mouth with no idea what might come out of it. Found himself saying "I always take a minute to appreciate an old Ash tree like this when I find one, what with the dieback and

all.” The stranger started out of his skin— turned like a hare on the wrong end of a hunt— and Lear realised he’d got the wrong of it.

This familiar stranger wasn’t a man like him— not yet. The nerves— wide eyes, fingers busy picking at a loose thread in the cuff of his coat— the tight, tense way he braced himself for an insult— however old he was in physical years, in Lear’s eyes, this was a *child*.

Fractured reflection of what Lear used to be— mirror pool eyes wary— weary— the boy cleared his throat before speaking. “I do too.” His voice was carefully low, hovering self-consciously in the right octave— trained to sit there, rather than hormonally induced— and Lear felt his heart go out to him. “Ash trees are one of my favourites, they’re really important to their local eco-systems and...” he trailed off, looking back towards the tree, “I mean, just look at it. They’re magnificent.”

“That they are.” Lear offered. “Makes it more tragic somehow, the way they’re dying. Beauty, but a fleeting moment and all that.” At his words— careless, callous— the child glanced back towards him. Half-uncertain, half-suspicious— hackles rising. Lear had gone and put his foot in it, hadn’t he? Got caught up in the aesthetics of the thing, when the child was probably expecting more ecology. “Biodiversity too,” he added hurriedly, “They’re good for hazel growth, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, for a lot of forest wildflowers too,” the boy replied, relaxing into a more familiar topic, “because they loose their leaves so early in autumn, more light reaches the forest floor and then you get— look down near the roots—” he pointed, “there’s some wild garlic there by the trunk, couple of bluebells too, and a bit behind the tree you can see a patch of dog’s violet. Woodland floors should look like that everywhere. The trunk’s great too, see all the different lichens and mosses? There’s—” Then, abruptly awkward, as if he’d

suddenly remembered his audience, “Sorry, sorry about going on a bit of a tangent there, this is kind of my whole thing— I’m doing Plant Sciences at Uni.”

“No no, I’m interested. What Uni are you at? I’m Lear, by the way.”

“Bristol, I’m Max. ’S good to meet you.”

Not for the first time, fate’s hand, pressed in between Lear’s shoulder blades, gave him a nudge to see where the conversation led. It felt— important, somehow. Last time he’d felt something like this, he’d met Elliot—now closer to family than friend— and it would be nice to have more trans friends at uni, wouldn’t it?

“Ah, so am I. Kind of funny that we’ve never run into each other in Bristol, then happen to meet on the other side of the country. What year are you in?”

“First.”

A *child*. Again the thought echoed through Lear’s mind, louder this time. Resonant with just how much his life had changed since he could call himself a first year. “Ah, it’s my second—” then, in a flash of inspiration, “but I took a gap year so I could transition before uni, so I’ve probably got a couple of years on you.”

The change in Max was immediate. Relief and hope in equal measure. Surprised stare, growing grin. A question dancing in his eyes. “Oh cool, what halls were you in last year?”

In the split-second before he replied, a sudden, vicious certainty struck Lear that Max’s answer to the question would match his. “Ah, it was a small halls, you probably wouldn’t have heard of it—”, he began, tasted *lie* in the speaking of the words, “Hillside Woodside.”

“No way, that’s where I’m living!” Max replied, “Wait, this is such a cool coincidence, I never meet anyone who was in Hillside. What room were you in?”

A shiver ran down Lear’s spine and all at once he knew— knew down at the base of his skull where the brain’s still more animal than human— what was about to happen. “2.7”

“No way,” Max breathed, “same. Yo, 2.7’s bringing the trans vibes year on year man, this is insane.” Lear laughed.

“It’s actually mad. Do you have Instagram? We have too much in common not to meet up in Bristol next term.”

“Yeah, hang on— here.” Max held out his phone and Lear squinted, the screen dark against their bright surroundings.

“Okay cool, I’ve requested to follow you.”

“Great.”

They’d chatted a bit more after that; set dressing, mostly. More about plants, more about Hillside, a bit about what their respective uni societies and courses were like, but nothing serious. Just water and sunshine to help the seed of friendship they’d planted take root— or so Lear had thought at the time.

When it comes to Max, Lear is many things. Paternal to his bones— protective and condescending in equal measure— always certain in his understanding of the facts at play — and always flawed, but this much, he knows to be true.

They’d crossed paths again the following term— at Folk society, on hikes with friends, up the occasional tree in the park nearest campus— but there was always something awkward— something off— to their encounters. A kind of socially engineered distance that permeated their every meeting. Reluctance in every word exchanged.

Max was never free for coffee, when Lear asked. Never made it easy to reach across whatever gap existed between them and create the sense of community that he’s so accustomed to sharing with other trans people. Lear might be slow to learn in social

situations but he's not stupid. When something's this obvious, he can read between the lines.

Ultimately, he did his best but then so did Max and this is the result. A decision made but never given voice— an opportunity for friendship not lost, but silently refused— an awkward silence, fathoms deep, but underneath all that, there's still a bond. Something that binds them together more closely than all the friendship or camaraderie in the world ever could.

Solidarity.

Chalkdust

“—yeah, yeah you’ve got it now, come on! The next handhold’s a jug—” as they approach the crag, a hubbub of voices sharpens into focus. Climbing centre ambiance. Universal language. Elliot’s smiling all over his face as they turn the last corner and in the spring sun, Cliff (because what other name could he use, for a trip like this?) can barely contain his excitement. They’ve finally done it. Stopped treating outdoor climbing as some wistful hypothetical and actually made it out to a real rock.

Up ahead, an outcrop of Southern Sandstone looms large. Pocked and creased like an ancient face— horizontal fissures scoring their way across a hulking mass of grey-green stone— the crag’s a monumental relic. Ode to Britain’s Crustaceous era. A fragile rock for climbing. The site is carefully protected by the British Mountaineering Council, and for good reason. It’s the softest climbable rock type in the country, and as close as it is to London, this is one of the most popular.

Even on a working Wednesday morning, bright ropes of red and neon orange snake downwards, connect each climber to their belay partner on the ground below. Lifelines in every sense of the word, each carefully placed to do the least possible damage to the crag.

Shouts of encouragement overlap as a climber half way up her pitch tenses— coiled to spring upward towards the next hold. As she readies herself to take the leap, Cliff's breath catches in his throat. Sympathetic tension burning in every muscle, he slows. Transfixed by the waiting, the gravitational potential of the moment until— "YES!" She makes the jump.

Her shout doesn't echo, not here. If they'd been at a city climbing wall it would have, all that joy bouncing off artificial rock on every side. Out here in the open, the sound has room to dissipate. Fade on the wind. The climber doesn't even stop. Already reaching for a hold above her head— another further up. Humanity abandoned on the ground below, she all but flies up the crag, transformed by her climb into a creature of pure muscle and momentum. Adrenaline roaring— lure of the summit— a rising cheer as she reaches the top of the crag— and just like that, the moment loses its grip on Cliff.

Their brief role as audience members over, he and Elliot press on, heading towards one of the less populated pitches. As they walk, Cliff double-checks a map of the area against what he can actually see. Frowns slightly, until he rearranges things in his mind and gets a handle on which section of the diagram matches what.

Motioning for a pause, he points out where they are on paper, suggests a nearby scramble to do so that they can set up their ropes for the first few proper climbs. Elliot agrees and Cliff folds up the map, shoves it into a knee pocket of his trousers. Looks up, to find Elliot a couple of paces ahead and grins.

Tossing their backpacks down for chairs at the foot of the rock, both climbers change into their climbing shoes. Trade in practicality for pain— the right shoes will make you a better climber but no one's every called them comfortable— and look back up at the waiting scramble.

It'll be easy. Practically a set of stairs but that's best practice when they'll be hauling all the gear up with them and haven't set their ropes yet. On tougher stone, one of them would lead-climb, taking the rope up with him and securing it as he went so that if he fell it would only be a couple of feet. The sandstone here's too fragile for that— just a thin, weathered crust of rock shielding lightly compacted sand from the elements. It wouldn't survive a piton, hence the scramble.

Elliot goes first. As he climbs, Cliff watches him test his weight on a risky handhold, find a better one. Like always, Elliot's figuring things out as he goes— making the route that much safer for those who come after. Faint instructions float down to Cliff, waiting at the bottom— “there's a good hold here” and “this foot's a bit high but really steady.” Scant minutes later, a thumbs-up is visible in silhouette against the sky. Elliot's at the top.

Cliff follows him up, sun hot on the back of his head as he gets used to accommodating for the extra weight of his backpack as he climbs. The scramble's fairly short, or it feels that way, and soon he's grasping Elliot's hand at the top-out— hauling himself up onto the summit.

On top of the world, they consult the map again. Head along the ridge, scanning the rock at their feet for the double bolt anchor at the top of the next pitch over. When they reach the anchor point, Elliot sits down, settling back against sun-warm stone as Cliff takes the safety gear out of his bag.

First, come the slack line and carabiners. The actual belay rope can't touch the rock—it'll be moving constantly when they start climbing, could permanently damage the sandstone— so they adapt. Cliff links his slack line to the anchor with a carabiner, screws it shut, and wraps the metal in an old fleece to protect the crag. To the loose end— long enough to dangle comfortably over the edge— he clips another carabiner.

Then there's the rope— 36 meters of Decathlon's finest in Golden Rambler orange— barely used until today. He's had it since before he transitioned— since he was too young to properly carry the weight of it, even. An impractical gift for an impractical child, but it's starting to look like he might finally get round to climbing with it.

He feeds it through the second carabiner, hand over hand like he's spent his life doing just this, until he reaches the grey-marked half-way point on the rope. Grabbing the slack line with one hand— his countless future selves all wincing at the hubris of youth— he leans out over the crag without a safety rope to check there's no one standing at the bottom of the pitch.

Satisfied, Cliff tosses his rope over the edge and watches it fall, his free hand on the midpoint to make sure it doesn't move. When everything's set up, he re-centres his gravity— weight back on his feet as he lowers the slack line to the ground. Set up finished, he nods to Elliot and together, they scramble back down.

At the bottom of the crag, they unpack harnesses. Adjust straps and crack well-worn jokes about rock climbing being a trans man's sport before letting rock-paper-scissors decide who'll climb first. Elliot lucks out— paper to Cliff's rock— and ties one end of the rope to his harness. Cliff pulls on the other, taking in loose rope until it's taught, then attaches his belay device.

Before Elliot starts the climb, he reaches first one hand, then the other into the chalk bag clipped round his waist. Withdraws his hands caked in a fine white grit and claps to get rid of the excess. Chalk swirls upwards in geometric eddies— a brief, billowing cloud of powder fine enough float— countless tiny particulates saturating the air between them.

Elliot flashes Cliff a grin through his man-made mist and pivots on his heel— turning towards the climb. Rolling his shoulders, he steps up to the wall and Cliff double checks his carabiner's locked, four heartfelt words rising in his throat— ancient spell— memento of his childhood— invitation:

“Climb when you're ready.”

“Climbing.”

A call and response stamped across both speaker's hearts.

As Elliot climbs, Cliff gets into the familiar rhythm of belaying. Neck craned back, he watches his friend closely, ready to take in slack at a moment's notice until Elliot stretches out his right hand high. Something about the image— the tilt of his head, the way he tests his higher foothold before putting his weight on it— sends Cliff tumbling back through time. Through place, until he's standing in a different world watching Elliot try a different climb— back at the start of it all.

It had been summer then, not that it mattered at Mile End. London's oldest climbing wall has always been impervious to the passing of the seasons. Cliff had been climbing alone, mid-session and sweating buckets into the thick fabric of his binder when he saw Elliot for the first time.

A man about his height, half way up a yellow climb— the same difficulty as the one Cliff had just been defeated by in another room— tattoos poking out of his t-shirt as he

stretched upward for the next handhold— how could Cliff not notice him? Near the top of the wall, the man reached what had to be the most difficult move of the climb— crux of the problem— and faltered. Fell.

In the brief moment of weightlessness between wall and floor, the world went still. Silent. Cliff swallowed, heart thudding against the back of his teeth, ears popping in the pressurised air-lock of a defining moment until— caught by thick bouldering crash mats, the man landed. Safe.

As the stranger got to his feet the world sped back up and Cliff— child of such familial prophecies as his great aunts' unanimous certainty that his mother would have a son— Cliff, who had been attacked by a misandrist cat of his friend's years before he came out— Cliff, who's mother, when choosing his deadname, had been inexplicably sure that the child in her arms would one day choose a new one—

This fate-ordained name-changer child, who had all his life been taught to trust his intuition, looked between the yellow climb he hadn't yet tried and the man who had just fallen off it's penultimate hold— and *knew*.

Feet sinking into the mat with every step, he closed the space between them, seized by a two-fold premonition that would prove as accurate as his mother's nominative guesswork had been, eighteen years, two months and nine days beforehand. The first, that he would 'flash' the yellow when he tried it— finish the climb first time. The second, that the man who'd just fallen off it was going to change his life.

The bleach-dyed back of a head alone was enough to trigger it. Some ancient, animal recognition of kith— *kin*— Cliff didn't understand. Unwarranted, unearned by this total stranger but present nonetheless, was trust. Wound into Cliff's bones as if it had always been there.

“Mind if I have a go?” He asked, and the man (who had until this point been staring meditatively up at the hold he’d fallen off) turned to him with a charming, lopsided smile. Waved him forward.

“Go for it, man.”

Cliff did.

The climb was tougher than the stranger had made it look— all finger-straining handholds and untrustworthy feet— but Cliff clung tight, fuelled on by fate-leant certainty that he could, would, complete the climb. At one precarious moment during the crux a sharp intake of breath echoed through the space below him— a much needed reminder to breathe himself— and Cliff closed his eyes. Steadied his left foot. Went for the final move and, triumphant, slammed both hands onto the bright plastic of the top hold.

Below him, someone whooped and Cliff grinned. Sure, without knowing how, that it was his fellow yellow-attempter doing the yelling. Climbing down, the first of his prophecies fulfilled, Cliff introduced himself.

“I’m Elliot.” The man replied, and just like that, they were off. Chatting about their lives, their interests— a blur of tall tales so fantastical Cliff couldn’t help but believe them to be true.

At some point, he mentioned the summer heat, sweat trickling uncomfortably down between his shoulder blades. In response, Elliot nodded. Put his hand to his chest and grasped his t-shirt— pulling it away from his body and wafting the fabric back and forth like he knew exactly what Cliff was going through. Like he’d spent years pulling his t-shirts away from a chest binder too.

Just like that, everything shifted slightly on its axis. All at once, it made sense. The inexplicable, instantaneous sense of kinship. The immediate way they'd clicked. He just hadn't realised—

“Are you—” he started, then, not knowing how to finish the sentence, copied the shirt-pull— universal signal of transmasculine solidarity. Elliot laughed.

“I am. Are you?”

“I am.” Smile growing, Cliff pulled out his phone. “What's your Insta?”

They've both come so far, since then. Elliot's the first person Cliff ever went clubbing with. Cliff's bourn witness to Elliot's last three heartbreaks— every one of them terrible— and fallen in love himself. Built an adult life in another city and written half a million words he doesn't know if anyone will ever read. The better part of a decade's wrought its changes— both good and bad— but here they both still are, and there's a hell of a lot of power in just being able to say that.

Up above, Elliot's shrinking into the distance as he climbs. Reaching ever skyward, a dizzying ascent and not the only one, these days. He's on the cusp of change— the cresting wave of making it big. Stage lights calling— recording hiss at the end of the tape— heads turning in the street— it's all spooling out ahead of him, but here, now, it's only the climb that matters. Only the joy of the day that counts.