

**I hope we choose love**  
**a transgirl's notes from the end of the**  
**world**

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*-How Neoliberalism Is Stealing Trans Liberation*

*-Where Did She Go? A Trans Girl Ghost Story*

## How Neoliberalism Is Stealing Trans Liberation

In spring 2014, *Time* magazine put the ever-regal Laverne Cox on its cover and declared that the world had reached a “transgender tipping point.” I have always loved that photograph. Staring out at us in her blue dress and heels, head raised high, Cox appears to be challenging the world: *Are you ready for us?* her eyes seem to ask. *Are you ready to celebrate us—and all the gifts we have to give?*

Trans, gender-nonconforming, and non-binary people have always had a great deal to offer the rest of humanity: historically, gender-nonconforming, third gender, and Two-Spirit individuals have been recognized as artistically and spiritually gifted in many societies across the globe. Although the ravages of European colonization have worked to suppress this cultural knowledge in many communities, it remains alive and relevant today. The resilience and brilliance of trans people have a long and proud lineage, rooted in the ancestral memory of colonized peoples worldwide.

Politically, trans people, particularly trans feminine people of colour, have paved the way for LGBT rights. As the legend goes, a trans woman (or “transvestite,” which was once a more socially accepted term among trans feminine individuals) of colour threw the first brick during the Stonewall riots widely considered to have sparked the modern gay liberation movement.

Perhaps more importantly, however, it was the work of trans feminine activists such as Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera—who called themselves variously gay, drag queens, transvestites, and transgender—that pushed the boundaries of the queer liberation movement to include youth of colour, queer sex workers, homeless youth, and other extremely marginalized groups. The legacy of those activists’ work finds its home today in the work of contemporary trans and genderqueer community groups such as the Audre Lorde Project, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, and many others.

## what does it mean?

what does it mean  
to be loved by a thing  
that cannot see you?  
how does it feel  
to love a thing  
that you cannot see?

that does not know how to love us. Perhaps this is why trans women's words are so powerful, in those rare moments when we are allowed to speak: we speak with the voices of those who have come before.

Perhaps this is why trans women dream so deeply—because we walk hand in hand with those in the next world.

When I ask myself the question: What happened to my mothers? I am really asking the questions: Where am I going? What will happen to me?

This world is a terrible and painful one to live in. I can hear the voices from another world calling my name. Sometimes I close my eyes and think, *It would be so very easy to go there*—whether through death or madness—and never, ever come back.

Dear sisters and mothers who came before: Someday I shall know you. In this world or the next.

But for now, something keeps me here: hope, I think, or maybe love. I wonder, can you have hope, or love, without faith? The faith that things will get better, that we will live long and happy lives, that some benevolent force in the universe will give us better endings? I think perhaps we can. What I hope for is to live as brilliantly as the mothers and sisters I've never met. I want to live for the ones who don't, for the ones who went before. I want to live as long and lovingly as I can.

Trans liberation politics, forged in the fires of oppression and the struggle to survive were and are the revolutionary spark of queer resistance.

Five years after the so-called “transgender tipping point,” however, not much seems to have changed for the majority of trans people in 2019. There is a strange disconnect between the social transformation that appears to have taken place in the media and the ongoing reality of violence, deprivation, and discrimination that trans people continue to experience.

There are more trans people on television than ever before, but trans youth remain vastly disproportionately homeless and suicidal. Trans people's visibility has skyrocketed, but anti-trans legislation and discrimination remain rampant. Trans rights are debated more and more frequently in major news outlets, but trans women who are Black, brown, and sex workers continue to be assaulted and murdered regularly.

How can this be happening? How can we be living in a world where trans identities are discussed seemingly endlessly, but trans people are no safer for it? Where the existence of trans celebrities—even trans millionaires—is possible, but trans people as a class remain seriously oppressed on every legal and social level?

Our revolutionary fire burns bright as always, but I am afraid that it is being misdirected, co-opted. Something is stealing trans liberation, and we must understand what that is—and resist it.

When I was a social worker, I spent a lot of time supporting trans youth and gender-nonconforming children (who are too young to identify with the word “trans”), as well as their parents. I often saw parents who were extremely reluctant to help their trans kids pursue social and medical transition. Interestingly, I also met a significant number of parents who were very eager to pursue hormone therapy for their kids, as well as to change the gender markers on their children's legal documents. The hope, many

of the latter type of parents told me, was that “no one needs to know” that their child was trans.

As I see it, the positions of both types of parents come from feelings of love, and protectiveness—the most natural thing in the world for a parent to feel. This protective instinct is, I believe, inherent to parents and guardians of children across cultures. What parent doesn’t want their kid to live a “normal” life, with all the privileges that come with “normalcy”?

Yet “normalcy” in this era of advanced capitalism, class warfare, and political instability is a loaded concept that comes with an oft-forgotten history of oppression. Here in the colonized West, the standard for a “normal” life is not only cisgender but also white, middle class, monogamous, abled, and (perhaps except for a certain form of upper-class white homonormativity that is beginning to be promoted in contemporary liberal society) heterosexual.

Although it has become more and more common for progressive mainstream media outlets to feature stories of trans kids who transition young, I find it very interesting that the majority of these children are white, blond, middle class—and very, very passable as cisgender.

As a visibly racialized trans woman who often does not pass for cis, I sometimes found it strange to provide support to white, middle-class parents who anxiously asked me well-intentioned questions such as: *Will my trans child still be able to marry? Have children? Will they still be able to travel? Will they pass? Will they experience any discrimination in school, employment, housing, dating?*

Sometimes, it felt like the implication was: *Will my child end up like you? Unpassable, visibly marginalized? Or, worse, will they end up like “those trans people” who do survival sex work and are murdered in the dark?*

Transition is a fundamental right that all trans people, of all ages, should have access to. But I believe that transition, ideally, should be offered to us as one option of many for bodily autonomy and self-expression. It should

The result was that I often felt as though I was going mad. In those terrible moments, it seemed as if there was no escape from the relentless projections of other people’s desires, needs, traumas, fears. I was pushed to be perfect at all times, for all people—and the consequence of failure was punishment. It was suffocating. It was devastating.

When I was an adolescent, I used to long to be seen—I thought that to be seen was to be loved. I longed to be noticed, to be talked about, to be lusted after. Now, everyone sees me, and all I want is to be invisible. To be safe.

Trans women’s bodies and behaviour endure intense social surveillance, both in and outside of queer communities. We carry the stigma of being, in the eyes of society, dangerous, perverted, mentally ill, deceptive, aberrant. On the flip side, trans women are also fetishized—not only sexually but also ideologically. To leftists and liberals, we are martyrs for social progress, cannon fodder for the cause. When I think of all those trans women activists and leaders who died or went mad before their time, I wonder: What if their well-being had been celebrated as much as their work? What if the communities that promoted their art, built social programs off their ideas, profited off their labour had been just as invested in preserving their lives and livelihoods?

If that had been the case, would I have a trans mother or big sister now?

This essay is a ghost story, a love letter, and a mystery.

All this time, I’ve been circling around the question: What happens to brilliant trans women who disappear? What happened to the women who might have been my mothers? We know part of the answer: Some of them died. Others went mad. Perhaps there are others who simply dropped out of the public eye—as much as any trans woman can—to try to live quieter, less visible lives.

I am haunted. All trans women are. Behind me stretches a line of ghosts—trans women, killed before their time by the hatred of a society

presence became more and more erratic, only to realize a few months or years down the road that nobody in our social circle knows where she has gone or what she is doing. At times, I have investigated further through the whisper networks of queer community and sex workers and their clients, finding only rumours that the trans woman I am searching for has “gone crazy.”

I attribute this not to any inherent tendency toward mental illness in trans women but rather to the intense public scrutiny, violence, and other forms of trauma that infringe upon our lives. Trans women are brilliant; we shine because we have to in a world where our futures can seem overwhelmingly dark. I have always loved this fire that lives inside trans women.

But sometimes, I think I can hear them whispering to me. And I wonder: How long can it last? And how long until I disappear too?

I have had three very serious mental health breakdowns in my life so far. The first was in high school, the second was during my undergraduate degree, and the third was just last year. At each of those times, I was experiencing—to all outward appearances—material success. Last year, I published three critically praised books, won literary awards, was “famous” in queer community, and was also maintaining a demanding job in public sector clinical social work.

Beneath the surface of that success, however, I was in turmoil. My critically acclaimed books, and the heightened public profile that accompanied them, exposed me to stalkers and frequent emails from strangers asking for attention or free work. My “fame” in queer community resulted in jealousy and gossip, sometimes well meaning and sometimes malicious, which heightened my anxiety to the level of paranoia. These factors, combined with my position as a therapist to queer youth, meant that there was no respite in either my personal or professional life from narratives of trauma, enormous responsibility, and scrutiny.

not be something that we have to do to make ourselves more acceptable to others, or to hide our transness from the world.

And transition should most certainly not be a privilege where the best options for hormone replacement therapy, surgery, and fertility treatments are reserved only for those who can afford them.

These parents expressed a certain desire that I think is mirrored in many—if not all—marginalized people. I feel it in myself. It is the desire to live the life of the privileged class, to exist without being marked as different, to fit inside the system the way white, middle-class people do.

When parents came to me with those anxious questions, I forced myself to take a breath. I remembered my responsibilities as a therapist, a healer. I thought of my own commitment to helping trans kids achieve an easier life than mine. I gave some answers, and I asked some questions of my own:

*Yes, your child will still be able to travel and find a partner and probably get married, if that's what they want. They might be able to have a child biologically, depending on what they decide to do with their body, and they also might be able to adopt.*

*They might experience some discrimination in different parts of their lives. How do you think you can support them in getting through it? Have you experienced discrimination in your own life, and how did you get through that?*

*Is it more important to you for your child to have an easy, “normal” life or a fulfilling, liberated one?*

The social system in which we live is the result of advanced, decaying capitalism and colonization: it is neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is, I believe, the force that is banking the fire of trans liberation.

“Neoliberalism,” a term coined in the 1970s, refers to the dominance of free market capitalism in every aspect of public and private life. Under neoliberalism, it is assumed that people are not entitled to any rights, goods, or services—including privacy, health care, housing, and education—that

they can't afford to buy. Under neoliberalism, traditionally government-run institutions such as hospitals, schools, and prisons are corporatized and run for profit.

Increasingly, this economic model is overtaking almost every country in the world.

Neoliberalism erodes human rights movements in an insidious way. It co-opts the thinking and operations of human rights activism by creating fear and scarcity so that our political goals are forced to focus not on envisioning a better future for all but on personal survival. Hoarding resources, assimilation into the status quo, and no-holds-barred individualism are second nature in neoliberal thinking.

We have already seen how neoliberalism has, largely, co-opted the mainstream queer rights movements of the sixties and seventies. LGBT rights once constituted a radical political movement based around concepts of free love, socialism, and solidarity with other marginalized groups. In later decades, however, it became increasingly focused on the narrower goals that primarily served the interests of white, middle-class, cisgender gays and lesbians: the rights to marry, adopt children, serve in the military, and work in prestige professions.

Meanwhile, the anti-poverty, anti-homelessness, and pro-sex work activism of trans feminine activists of colour such as Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson's Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) group was pushed to the background. Seeking respectability, mainstream gay advocacy groups publicly distanced themselves from trans causes and leaders.

So although we have seen certain gay rights "victories," such as the right to marry in many countries and the repeal of the "Don't ask, don't tell" US military policy, the neoliberal status quo itself remains largely unchallenged. The rich remain rich and the poor remain poor, and a relatively tiny group of queer folks got to join the rich while most of us stayed behind.

At that time, I could find no other trans women who were willing and able to mentor me in the field—I had many cis sex worker friends, but the worlds of trans and cis sex work are often radically different. So I did what millennials do best—I googled "how to be a trans woman sex worker" and was delighted to find an article with a twelve-point list on that very topic by an older trans woman that was both informative and personal.

I devoured that article. Here was hope. Here was guidance. Here was evidence that girls like me could survive and thrive in a field often literally equated to suicide by mainstream media. Hoping to find more pieces by the author, I googled her name, only to find that she had died by suicide just a year before.

There is something that happens to brilliant trans women. We don't seem to talk about it much. A story that keeps repeating itself: We burst into being; we give birth to ourselves. We burn like stars in the fight to survive. Like mayflies, we soar ever so briefly, then fall.

Over and over again, I come across the names of trans women who have come before, only to find that they have left this world—either by death or by suicide or by a madness that takes them so deep into themselves that they are lost to the rest of us.

My experience in trans women and sex work community has resulted in connections with many brilliant and revolutionary trans women. I do not know a single one who has not been seriously suicidal or in mental health crisis at some point in their lives—often more than once. Many, many times I have been woken up in the middle of the night by a phone call or a text message from a trans woman declaring her intent to die by suicide. On some terrible occasions, I have woken up to the news that a trans woman friend, or friend of a friend, has died.

On others, I have simply lost track of a trans woman acquaintance—fallen out of touch, watched from afar with some concern as her social media

Their names and contributions, their writing and artwork and activism are enshrined in queer archival and academic work. Younger trans activists and cultural producers refer to them often as forerunners and inspirations.

Yet the majority (there are always exceptions) of this cohort of trans women trailblazers seems to have departed from the public eye. Sometimes it seems that the higher a trans woman's public profile, the more totally and abruptly she disappears from public view. A friend of mine and I have semi-jokingly referred to this phenomenon as "passing through the veil"—like a mysterious ritual in a speculative fiction society composed almost entirely of young people.

You may have noticed that I'm not naming any trans women in this essay—except Marsha P. and Sylvia Rivera—though it's common practice to do so in queer writing as a way of crediting and honouring individuals. In this case, though, it seems more respectful to refrain from naming people and calling attention to them. People who have chosen to remove themselves from public visibility might rather stay unseen. In a time when so much of the queer rights movement is obsessed with visibility and representation, it occurs to me that trans women have rarely had the right to privacy in the first place.

Sex work and communities of sex workers have been present in my life for some time, as they are for many trans women. If you're a trans girl with trans feminine friends, you're probably, at most, two degrees of separation away from sex work. Like many industries based on providing services to humans, sex work can be both rewarding and harrowing. For trans women sex workers, however, the risks are exacerbated by transmisogyny and the stigma that surrounds our sexuality. This danger makes informal mentorships with more experienced trans women essential.

There was a time in my life when I was considering entering sex work to support myself financially and as a means of leaving a situation of precarity.

Nowadays, as the "transgender tipping point" picks up steam, I am watching the rise of a new generation of trans rights activists, and I wonder which direction they are going to choose: Neoliberal assimilation? Or revolution?

When I was a social worker, I started to see more and more usually white, middle-class youth and children coming out as trans. It's beautiful. They are brave and resilient, and sometimes, their families actually support their transition and advocate for their access to health care and education.

Yet I see just as many trans youth, mostly of colour, who are estranged from their families, living in shelters or on the street, blocked from accessing the resources they need for day-to-day survival, let alone medical transition and higher education.

Trans visibility is greater than ever; trans rights awareness is at an all-time high. Yet the class divide between trans people grows and grows.

In 2015, a year after *Time's* "tipping point" cover article, the world watched multi-millionaire reality television star and former Olympic athlete Caitlyn Jenner win both a *Glamour* Woman of the Year Transgender Champion Award and an ESPY Arthur Ashe Courage Award. That same year, Jenner stated in an interview that "the hardest thing about being a woman is figuring out what to wear," betraying a profound disconnection from the real daily lives of the majority of cis and trans women alike.

The lionization of Caitlyn Jenner by the mainstream media establishment has already been roundly critiqued by queer and feminist writers. However, what I find politically significant about Jenner is not her personal merit, or lack thereof, but rather the growing phenomenon of transgender celebrityism and its connection to the neoliberal myth that things are improving for trans people as a class, whereas in many ways it appears the opposite is true.

The myth of exceptionalism has always been a cornerstone of neoliberal philosophy—the idea that since a few people can "make it" under capitalism,

then everyone else can too. It is a myth that conflates the success of an individual with the prosperity of their entire class, and it is used to hide the barriers of systemic discrimination and violence.

Neoliberal thinking says, if a Black man has become president of the United States, racism in America must be over. Black folks who complain about police brutality and discrimination must just not be trying hard enough to succeed. If Caitlyn Jenner can get facial feminization surgery and win awards, if Jazz Jennings can have her own reality show, and if Andreja Pejić can model in *Vogue*, then trans people everywhere must not have it that bad. All the rest of us need to do is get famous too.

The truth is the capacity for trans celebrities to shift the realities of trans people as a class under neoliberalism is very limited—even when those celebrities are actively involved in efforts to resist.

Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, for example, are two famous Black trans women who have taken pains to stay connected to grassroots trans and racial activism. Yet they remain constrained by the nature of American celebrity culture, which is inherently elitist and exclusive. In order to remain celebrities, they must tread carefully between glamour and grassroots, between speaking truth to power and toeing the line.

Representation of trans identities in fashion, television, and film is important. We need to see ourselves reflected in the stories around us. But we must be critical of whose stories are told, and why. We must remember that representation and revolution are not at all the same thing.

Put another way: Why did Caitlyn Jenner, a wealthy Republican reality television star, win an award for inspiring trans people to be courageous, whereas CeCe McDonald, a Black trans woman who was imprisoned for physically defending herself from a transphobic attack on her life, did not?

Yet although the trans mother of the house is very present as a historical legend in the urban queer communities that I grew up in, her actual embodied presence has been lacking in my life. Sisters, I have many, but mothers, I have none. For one thing, I have met very few trans women older than their forties, and those I have met tend (understandably) to decline the roles of “elder” and “mother,” feeling ill-equipped or too young for the role.

There is a generational divide between older trans women who came of age in the 1990s and early 2000s, and those who transitioned after. This cultural gap is based in more than differences in perspective; rather, there is a literal lack of contact and communication between us. It is hard for young trans girls to find older trans women to be mother and mentor—hence, the emphasis contemporary trans culture places on transgender “possibility models” and celebrities.

One reason for this gulf is the impact of the AIDS crisis, the history of which tends to focus on gay men. Yet trans women, too, were implicated, their deaths often counted as part of the “men who have sex with men” category in social scientific research. Many trans women in the generation preceding mine simply died before we could meet them. Transphobic violence, which predominantly affects trans feminine sex workers, claimed still more.

Yet many trans women survived and continue to survive. Still, somehow they seem to disappear.

The legends of trans women and the work they have done to improve the living conditions of their sisters is littered throughout queer archives across the continent and the internet. In any major urban centre with a trans community, the work of a trans woman activist, artist, or community worker can be uncovered.

Toronto’s robust LGBT non-profit sector, for example, now populated with literally dozens of LGBT-specific health and social service programs, was largely founded in response to the work of a small group of trans women.

might have befallen her swirled in response to casual inquiries such as, “Hey, what’s that artist doing these days?” Respect for her privacy prevented me from inquiring further—just because her work was important to me didn’t mean I had any right to knowledge about her actual life (something that “fans” of trans artists and media makers too often seem to forget).

But I still wonder: Where did she go?

The cisgender public labours under the assumption that trans women cannot be mothers because we are “unnatural” women, but the truth is that the trans woman as mother, nurturer, and protector is a pre-eminent archetype in queer cultural narratives.

The most famous examples of this archetype are none other than Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, a pair of racialized trans feminine individuals (many call them trans women today, but they are also on the record referring to themselves variously as drag queens and transvestites—terminology changes over time) who founded the STAR House for trans sex workers. These two heroines have acquired a practically sainted status in politicized queer communities for their radical politics and grassroots organizing work, in which they provided housing, care, and essentially, mothering to queer and trans young people.

Yet Marsha P. and Sylvia were not unique in their roles as trans mothers and mentors. Their work forms part of a frequently forgotten/invisibilized cultural tradition of trans women coming together—especially in the heavily racialized ballroom scenes of North America—as social outcasts and forming families based on mutual care, a tradition currently represented in the mainstream television show *Pose*. The heads of these families were older trans women whose greater experience and survival knowledge were a respected and essential part of queer survival. Such practices of informal, or “chosen” family (the level of choice is debatable, given its necessity for survival) are, I believe, alive and well in many places.

I am not the first trans person to make these arguments. As a diasporic trans woman of colour, I come from a history of brilliant thinkers and fierce activists.

And I will be far from the last. As a generation of young trans people like myself, with access to education and a public platform, emerges, we will each have to ask ourselves the question: What battles will we choose to fight, and for whom? Will those of us with the greatest chance of succeeding within the systems of the neoliberal status quo fight for our piece of the pie alone, or will we try to overturn the tables of capitalism and white supremacy, as our revolutionary foreparents did before us?

I know that I don’t want to live in a world where trans people can only access medical transition care if they have the insurance to pay for it. I want everyone to get the health care they need.

I don’t want to live in a world where middle-class trans people can use public washrooms that match their gender identities, but homeless trans people are barred from public spaces. I want to live in a world where everyone has a home.

I don’t want to live in a world where trans people can join the military or law enforcement and participate in the violent oppression of people of colour around the world. I want to live in a world without wars or police brutality.

I don’t want to live in a world where trans people are put in prisons that match their gender identity. I want to live in a world without prisons.

I don’t want to live in a world where a handful of trans celebrities make millions of dollars while the rest of us struggle to survive. I want to live in a world where we all have what we need to thrive.

I don’t want to live in a world where some trans people are considered normal and others are considered freaks. I want to live in a world where all of our freakish, ugly, gorgeous magnificence is celebrated for its honesty, glory, and possibility.

My dear trans kindred—weird sisters, brothers grim and gay, siblings-in-arms: What kind of a world do you want to live in?

the most reliable way for a trans woman to survive economically), and a thousand other things.

Being a “big sister” is often a fraught position. Although many of my “little sisters” remain among the most special relationships in my life, the responsibility of such a role is daunting, particularly when one is young and relatively new to transition oneself. I started mentoring people in my early twenties, and it wasn’t really a choice—there was no one else to do it. There were so many things I didn’t know that I wish I had, if only so that I could have passed them on sooner. So that I could have been a better and wiser older sister.

One question I have asked myself throughout my life is: Where were my big sisters? Where were my foremothers? Where were the older trans women, the accomplished trans women, the fierce survivor trans women that queer culture is so fond of mythologizing, in my life?

When I moved to Toronto in 2016, I had hoped to meet a particular trans woman artist whose body of work remains among the most challenging and brilliant in the world. Her star shone brightly while I lived in Montreal—she appeared in theatres and in newspapers, she wrote and performed and was written about constantly, it seemed. When I watched video clips of her, there was a magnetic glamour to her, a genius that was undeniable. She carved a path that continues to benefit trans women thinkers and artists today. I didn’t presume that we would be friends, or that she would mentor me in any actual in-person way. I just thought that it would be inspiring or, I don’t know, fulfilling in some way to stand in the same room as this incredible person. Trans community is small, and smaller when it comes to artists—I assumed that we would cross paths somehow, sooner or later. But by the time I arrived, she seemed to have abruptly disappeared from the public eye. Her performances and appearances, once so numerous, have—at least for the time being—ceased. Rumours about various misfortunes that

mundanity of our actual lives as well as the cultural and historical lineages that contemporary trans feminine individuals stand to inherit. Trans women are always new and shocking, despite the fact that we appear across cultures globally throughout recorded history.

Yet every time a trans woman transitions in public—and in this era of social media and advanced surveillance culture, every trans woman transitions in public—she is immediately thrust into the role that our culture has made for her. She is a sexual sinner to conservatives, a tragic hero to liberals, and a revolutionary saint to leftist radicals. As a larger-than-life symbol, she stands alone. Symbols always stand alone.

I came of age as a trans girl in the early 2010s, in a cultural moment generally understood in the West to be the “tipping point” of the trans rights movement, accompanied by a kind of renaissance in trans cultural production. That is to say: we now had trans people on TV, (some of) whom were actually played by trans people. In my own field of writing and performance, transgender fiction and poetry finally began to break free of the sensationalized tell-all memoir genre to which we have historically been confined.

I was one of the first trans femmes in my cohort of queer friends to transition, a process made exponentially more public by my growing profile as an artist, writer, and general person-about-town (it’s not that hard to become famous in the small pond of queer arts and culture). As a result, I frequently and quite unintentionally found myself in the position of “big sister” to many trans femmes, some of whom were older than me in years but coming out later in life. These relationships often took the form of brief, intense friendships in which the other person would ask for mentorship, with various degrees of explicitness.

To an emerging trans femme, mentorship is everything: we need mentors to teach us how to dress and apply makeup, how to carry ourselves, how to survive street violence and sexual harassment, how to do sex work (often

## siblings

*how could you do this to me?* said the Sun to the Moon  
*how could you steal my light?*  
a tear rolled down her pale cheek.  
*i just wanted to be seen,* said the Moon.

i live in the earth now  
stomach full of stones  
my eyes full of dirt.  
maggots wriggling  
in the chambers of the heart.  
but let us not speak  
of what happened between us.  
let us speak of the tree that is sprouting  
from the centre of my throat.  
of the luminescent fungi growing  
on the inside of my skull.  
of the flowers that still bloom  
in every dead part  
of me.

## Where Did She Go? A Trans Girl Ghost Story

This essay is a ghost story, a love letter, and a mystery.

I have loved so many mothers that I never got to know. They slipped through the cracks in the world as I was born, seconds too late, into womanhood. Like fairy-tale princesses, they left traces behind, a shimmering trail of disjointed clues: pieces of art, political manifestos, grassroots community programs and services that they'd started from scratch on a shoestring budget. The evidence of their incredible lives, their fabulous gifts, their struggle, their survival shine brightly to trans girls who know where to look. The women themselves, however, are nowhere to be found.

When I was in my teens and early twenties, living in Montreal and still flirting with the idea of transition, there were already a handful of prominent trans women in North America—mostly artists, activists, and sex workers, though some others worked in the fashion industry or in health care. The prevailing media narratives around them were similar (if less politically nuanced) to those that surround trans women today, such as Janet Mock and Laverne Cox: stories of “gender revolution,” societal boundary-pushing, tragic family histories yielding to triumphant reclamations of the body and soul.

As a writer and performer, I've noticed a tendency on the part of cisgender commentators to label any transgender-related phenomena as “new” or “groundbreaking.” However, there have been famous (or, rather, infamous) trans people, particularly trans women, in every generation of Western media since at least 1930, when Lili Elbe scandalized Europe by undergoing one of the first gender reassignment surgeries, in Germany.

The public is fascinated by the stories of trans women, or rather, by what they imagine our stories to be: glamorous, scandalous, titillating, tragic. This narrative maintains itself in perpetuity, erasing both the inglorious