

Imagine Me Like That

by

Kate Wilcox

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters
In Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Florida Atlantic University

Boca Raton

May 2023

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Becka McKay, Department of Creative Writing, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:



[Becka McKay \(Apr 25, 2023 10:32 EDT\)](#)

Becka McKay, Ph.D.,
Thesis Advisor



Nicole Morse, Ph.D.



[Andrew Furman \(Apr 25, 2023 14:32 EDT\)](#)

Andrew Furman, Ph.D.



[Oliver Buckton \(Apr 25, 2023 14:34 EDT\)](#)

Oliver Buckton, Ph.D.
Chair, Department of English



Michael J. Horswell, Ph.D.
Dean, Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts
and Letters



William D. Kalies, Ph.D.
Interim Dean, Graduate College

April 26, 2023

Date

Abstract

Author: Kate Wilcox
Title: Imagine Me Like That
Institution: Florida Atlantic University
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Becka McKay
Degree: Master of Fine Arts
Year: 2023

Imagine Me Like That offers an exploration into an experience of one coming to terms with one's unique trans and queer identity through ecological and nature-based connections, as well as through interpersonal connections. This collection utilizes both poetry and lyric essay to offer insights into the joys of queer ways of living, while also acknowledging the difficulties of occupying a marginalized identity. Ultimately, Imagine Me Like That seeks to affirm and acknowledge the multi-faceted modes of queer existence.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to my committee members, Dr. Andrew Furman and Dr. Nicole Morse, for their time and engagement with my work. I am also grateful for the guidance of Dr. Becka McKay in the creation of this manuscript. I wish to thank my family for their gracious support and care. I also offer my gratitude to my partner, Naudia Reeves, for her love.

Imagine Me Like That

I. With a Bare Chest.....1

 Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part one.....2

 Trying Out the Houseplants Thing.....3

 Gender Envy for Howl from *Howl's Moving Castle*.....4

 Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part two.....5

 I Should Buy Her One of Those Mugs That Says “Best” Boss.....6

 Non-binary Lesbian with Lapse of Judgment.....7

 Spellcasting.....8

 Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part three.....9

 I’m a Poor Lonesome Boy, I’m a Long Ways From Home.....10

 Optimism, with Lizards.....11

 What I Know About Sheep Is.....12

 Fingers Crossed it Doesn’t Stain.....13

 Portrait of Myself and Basil Plant.....14

 We Can Be So Earnest Sometimes.....15

 Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part four.....16

II. With Gentle Hands.....17

 I’m Supposed to Be Softer with my Body.....18

 Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part five.....19

 Is This Okay?.....2

Sapphic Apartment.....	21
I Live my Life with Each Small Breath.....	22
Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part six.....	23
Who to Root For.....	24
Grounding Exercise.....	25
Optimism, with Lizards, II.....	26
Gender Euphoria.....	27
Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part seven.....	28
Becoming.....	29
Beach.....	31
Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part eight.....	32
Healing.....	33
Changing of Seasons.....	34
Arboretum in the Afternoon.....	35
Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part nine.....	36

I. With a Bare Chest

Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part one of nine

I was hiking last fall and fell behind the group. I was too embarrassed to ask them to slow down and wait for me. I didn't know them that well. I was so tired. The green dots of the backpacks melted into the mountain. I stopped trying to keep up. I was angry, but still trying to be happy about the fact that I'm alive. I thought: *it'd be great to see a snake right now*. And so, one emerged from the thicket of grass, glimmered its way across the path in front of me. An eastern garter snake, shiny black with a yellow streak. This was the first time I wished for a snake.

Trying Out The Houseplants Thing

Look, I'm the kind of person who buys enough herbs for a windowsill garden and can't keep the basil alive. And my name is Basil. After the plant, and also after a vampire character from my gayest favorite book. Maybe I should try the vampire thing instead of the plant thing. But that morning, blurry-headed, first time waking up in her apartment, gave me the idea that it might be worth something to try to keep something alive. It's been three years since I tried to kill myself in the pink bathroom, and the thing about that morning was, I was happy. Watching her wake up and water the plants, touching the leaves here and there, tending. I was happy. It takes effort somedays. This whole being alive routine. Just ask my basil, it'll tell you. But still I water it, careful not to splash the droopy leaves, on the off chance it'll bounce back again. These days, I can be hopeful.

Gender Envy for Howl from *Howl's Moving Castle*

I don't want my chest anymore

I want it slopping onto the floor I want to step on it,
get it under my boot

and walk home barefoot.

Howl would love me because of my meltdowns,
because of my affection for stained glass windows
if nothing else about a church.

I'd like to be a man in a stained glass window,
they look so serene I'd be out of place.

None of them have scars under their nipples,

I'd be too proud to have them left out of my portrait.

Caterpillars go liquid in their cocoons, melting away.

I bet it feels great.

The way it feels when all of your clothes fit how you want them to.

The way the wind must feel against a bare chest.

Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part two

It's the second month of quarantine and I'm watching Sarah's new burlesque routine over Zoom. I send her tips through Venmo, type little exclamation points in the chat box. I don't feel so empty. Freddy Mercury is her ball python. He ripples over her shoulders, slithers in time with Jimmy Hendrick's guitar. It's beautiful, really. I'm trying to remember that things can be beautiful.

I Should Buy Her One of Those Mugs That Says “Best Boss”

Evelyn is telling me that I’ve put all the stones on the wrong side of the house. I’m trying to listen and I’m in love with her. She is the oldest and best butch lesbian I know. That makes her wonderful. If we put the river stones on this side of the house, we’ll have nowhere to put the roses whose roots need to sink into the dirt when it’s still soft and anyway I’m not a very good landscaper. When faced with a difficult decision, I do things like shake the galaxy magic eight ball I got at a garage sale, spin around with my pointer finger jutting out, stop when I’m dizzy and then I’m off. These days, my talent is lifting heavy things for Evelyn and setting them down gently and usually I’m quite good at it. Baby trees, cedar two-by-fours, an orange leaf-blower. Some evening we’re all sitting under the willow tree, dirt still on our knees. Someone is telling me a story I’ve already heard, but I like it, knowing when to laugh and when they want me to look right at their face. The mosquitoes all come out, but here comes Evelyn with more beer. I can be so devoted sometimes.

Non-binary Lesbian with Lapse of Judgment

I don't mind being a girl that much when I'm with her.

All it takes is a little mashing together of our chests
and then, delight.

I kissed a man who saw me as a girl the other day.

To cope, I bought a hamster.

A little furball hiding in her hut
who doesn't see me as anything.

All she wants,
to burrow herself beneath
soft shreds of cedar.

The man tasted earthy,
then sweet.

He left quickly.

Spellcasting

Just forty-five minutes ago, I was sobbing in my car.

Now, I am reading a book about a boy witch.

He knows spells to make apples fall from trees.

A palmful of red, just from his voice.

Just two hours ago,

I burned the metal grip of a pen and pressed it into my thigh.

I used my voice to scream, and that, too, an incantation.

Dear life, please be gentle. Just be gentle. I need you to be gentle.

At first, the boy's spells didn't work.

He misspoke, and the trees did not listen.

Did the trees not love him then?

Why did they wait for him to get it right before dropping the fruit?

Why not give, why not relent?

Relent life, relent. It's all so hard, please relent.

Spells I keep whispering,

wishing for an apple,

a bone, a new skin, anything,

to appear.

Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part three

What I know about rats is, they can play hide and seek. In two weeks, six adolescent rats learn how to be both “seeker” and “hider” in a game with a scientist. The rats stay silent while they hide, but make ultrasonic squeaks when they seek. This hints at a higher-level cognitive capacity called theory of the mind, where they can imagine what others are thinking and predict their actions. According to the researchers. If the rats could speak, they’d tell you your OCD rituals are becoming too time- consuming. That’s according to me. We don’t even know where rats came from, really. Just that they’re everywhere now. Every continent where humans are, except Antarctica. We call them “model organisms” in laboratory research, stow them in boxes under fluorescent light then hide behind the door and have them come find us. Their squeaks are cute, sure, and we like to think that maybe they’re happier here than wherever they came from.

I'm a Poor Lonesome Boy, I'm a Long Ways from Home

I'll lay my head right down on your floor.

I get halfway through a cup of coffee and think I have a good idea

When we have sex, you see me as a woman

After, I tremble for a long time.

I'll lay my head right down on your floor

Naomi Ginsberg plays the mandolin wearing a flower crown

Later spends several weeks in a dark room,

The biographer calls it a nervous breakdown.

I'll lay my head right down on your floor.

What is it called when all you want is to be replanted?

Only gentle hands on my stem, a new terra cotta pot.

What I want so badly, to give nothing away.

I'll lay my head right down on your floor.

I'll lay my head right down on your floor.

Optimism, with Lizards

Today another Florida lizard skitters across the sidewalk
on my morning walk to the coffee and empanadas stand.

Tomorrow I will deliver a letter to my family
and come out to them as non-binary trans.

I love the lizards. Lived here for three months now
and they still give me a nice little thrill.

I want to be loved by my family.

A friend tells me I care too much about what people think.

Have I mentioned my new running shoes?

They're supposed to be bouncier than other shoes.

I'm supposed to be jogging.

(I'm not, but I keep telling people I'm going to.)

Today I will eat empanadas.

Tomorrow I will deliver the letter.

And perhaps tomorrow I'll jog.

The iguana will watch me bound by from the palm tree,
nodding his head in approval.

This means he loves me. (I love him, too).

What I Know About Sheep Is

if they fall on their back, they're stuck.

There's no scrambling themselves up, righting the wrong, rolling it out.

Eventually their digestive systems will fail.

Left this way, they die.

What I know about my OCD is

it's getting harder to remember the little things.

I remember to wash my hands each time I pet the cat,

touch a blue sock, scrape the white part of my fingernail
against the pickle jar my housemate might have touched.

Left this way, I miss my dentist appointment.

Find new blood spots that scrawl my knuckles,

Say things like the cure for now is holding my breath.

Later the cure is remembering to breathe.

Later it's washing my hands again.

What I know about the sheep of North Ronaldsay Island is

their internal clocks are set not to light and dark, but to the tides.

Even on a night without moonlight, they clamber across rocks, scrape
themselves to the ocean. Their little hooves sink into moss,

a rope of seaweed falls from pink lips, they bump softly into one another,
with the ocean making all its sweet angry sounds just beyond.

What I know about the sweet angry sounds of the ocean is

that when you are on your back floating atop it,

it likes to shut its perfect mouth.

Fingers Crossed it Doesn't Stain

I want to be more than just one thing. I want to be carved
under a knife held in your pink palm, sanded down,
shaped into something new.

Today I spilled coffee on my shirtfront
and spent the day with coffee-shirt.

Do you know the last time you were happy?

The soft wood from the gumbo-limbo tree,
once used to carve carousel horses.

How it might feel to be cut down,
someplace else, and spun around in circles.

Portraits of Myself and Basil Plant

It's my seventh time reading the "Are You a Lesbian?" document today
and it's been one revelation after the other.

Basil was once believed to wilt in the hands of any woman not a virgin.
Basil left moist under a rock was believed to form a scorpion.

Sleeping with men makes me want to self-harm again.
I never have to let a man touch me again if I don't want to.
One of my favorite fantasies used to be me,
as a tree, in the deepest part of a forest
where no one has ever touched me and no one ever would.
Then I was touched by her and everything was different.

Basil is a token of love in Italy.
An emblem of hatred in Rome.

I am learning to let myself be so many things,
all at once.

We Can Be So Earnest Sometimes

If I had enough money to buy a better computer, I would. Until then, I'll giggle when the heat of the charger singes your fingers after it's been plugged in too long. No, I don't know what's going on in there. All the circuits screaming at me, probably. Begging for my mercy. And it's not that I want bad things to happen to your perfect little fingers. I've grown quite fond of them. They're so good at typing things on your fancy keyboard, cutting red apples for us in the morning, grasping the grit of my skateboard. We're not very good skateboarders, you and I, but that doesn't matter. I like the way you look when you try. Later, we'll ride down the ramp as an armadillo watches beneath a banyan tree. No, I don't think he cares but I like to imagine he does. Thinks we're silly. We are. Venus is blinking at us from above, so you point at her. I look up, then encase your fingers in mine.

Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part five

All those years ago, the little gray rat Roxy surveyed the house from my shoulder.

Evenings she lounged in the Barbie Dollhouse on a plastic bed. Her rat ancestors watched from some other place and sighed. *Good for you, Roxy. You look like you're going to be okay. Do you still know how to climb a tree? Could you burrow and find warmth in a soft spot under the earth?* She'd probably say no. No matter. What we all need to do is take a deep breath at the same time and think of The Some Other Place. Then stow ourselves into boxes under fluorescent lights in a sterile environment. If we're quiet enough, we'll hear our ancestor's ultrasonic squeaks and eventually they'll find us. The lid of the box comes off and it's all light, color, everywhere. After, we all go back to our beds and in the morning we wake up knowing how to climb trees again.

II. With Gentle Hands

I'm Supposed to be Softer with My Body

Only, I want things desperately. I want with devastation. I want to buy a packer just to feel it between my thighs. To make this body even more mine. Is that so bad? And yesterday I saw an old lesbian couple on the beach, collecting shells. And yesterday I wanted so badly to cut across my thighs, but didn't. And I'm not ever certain of very much, but this:

If the old lesbians saw me this morning, my darling's fingers warm against my perfect legs, they would be so proud of me. They would say *hush, hush* with such sweetness, all the doors of my body would open at once.

Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part six

One autumn in Ann Arbor, Sarah takes me to the gay bar for the first time. It's all color everywhere. Her purple dress and the Wet 'n' Wild gold eyeliner she stole from the drugstore last week. The emerald of Jamie's grandpa's slacks that she hemmed herself. And then there's Elliot's powder blue dress, made of silk seamless as sky. Yes, please don't tell anyone, but sometimes I love the way rich people dress. I'm weak in the face of pretty things. I just can't help it.

It's not until we leave the dance floor and smoke on the patio that it sinks in that I'm alive and at a bar and I'm not scared. I've been scared of bars after what happened in the parking lot of the straight bar that autumn before. I've been scared of a lot of things. Sarah has two Marlboro Menthols in her mouth at the same time so that she can light mine and hand it to me. Purple lipstick clings to the end. I'm not scared. Later, the lights on the dance floor are pink when she asks, "Can I kiss you?" and I'm not scared I'm not.

Is This Okay?

The sweetness of being asked before I'm kissed,
a thousand mulberries bursting on the tongue.

I used to hate myself for the way I need
gentleness. But these days, you ask first and
I recognize this as recovery. I want to get better,
I do. Mulberry trees have adapted to grow in
concrete sidewalk cages. I am adapting to this
newfound caution, a mouthful of sugar.

Sapphic Apartment

Sun breaks through a glitter sticker,
and throws rainbows onto our floor.

The new kitten tears down the tapestry,
and I sleep next to my darling.

Would she know what it meant if I said
that no one has ever been this kind with me?

Me, struggling to take off a chest binder,
and living a life that makes so many people hate me.

And my sun is in Libra, and I hate to be hated,
but still I am here,

bending my arm as she lifts the binder over my head.
The new kitten paws at our feet, impatient.

And so, he is picked up by my beloved.
His eyes blink shut,

as if in the face of such care, such love,
everything gets soft at the edges, goes quiet.

I know that feeling.
I am there, too,

bare-chested,
safe.

I Live My Life With Each Small Breath

1. in the bed under the blanket after work

you tell me to exhale and I do. I give everything away: the blue weight in my wrists, the tightness in my jaw, that sour pooling at the base of my throat. I give it away. And the crochet threads of blanket, they go soft against my skin.

2. alone this morning on the bathroom floor

and it is not easy. This life and all its labors.

3. together before we sleep

your exhales deepen, so I stitch mine alongside. I inhale the lavender pressed into my wrists and I inhale the clean sweetness of your conditioner and I exhale and I exhale and I exhale again.

This life, it is so small and so vivid.

Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part five

What I know about the television show *New Girl* is, someone wrote in the script that the character Cece should say: “There’s nothing less sexy than a dude asking if he can kiss you.” I don’t know who wrote this, but I would like all of their teeth to fall out and for a rat to shit in their sock drawer.

Who to Root For

I root for my hamster
to heave herself up the little wooden ladder.

On occasion, she eats banana
pulled from my fingers with careful, sharp teeth.

How I love her.

She climbs and climbs
and we have come to an agreement.

Only watch me. Don't touch.

So I don't. It is that easy.

My love for her, sharp and careful.

It is that easy.

Grounding Exercise

I hold my breath while you play the silly video game with werewolves. Except, these werewolves actually look scary. Fear is something manageable when I can control it. You are controlling it, red controller between your palms. Except, I am here too, tapping on your thigh, telling you when to press the button. It pleases me to tell you things. Except when it hurts. In the showroom of Ikea. We were shopping for bookshelves. The men were too close to us, talking under their breath. I was okay, except the men were too close to us. I was frightened. Except, I was frightened for a long time. Later, I said, *i am stuck like this so long ago they hurt me and now i am stuck like this*, except I wasn't stuck. I am here with you now. I tap on your thigh.

Optimism, with Lizards, II

I love the lizards. Lived here for three months now
and they still give me a nice little thrill.

An iguana blinks at me as I walk past and I know
what love is. I'm no stranger to the way it feels
to have her fingers whisper across my chest.

Like slipping under cold water, losing your air
only to earn it back again in spades. This iguana is
good luck: a reminder that the earth itself is kissing
the backs of my heels with every step. And I'm no stranger
to affection. I know what it means to root kisses into
her spine, to plant something that will grow soft, sweet,
a new kind of earth. The iguana watches me
as I bound past, nodding his head in approval.

This means he loves me (I love him, too).

Gender Euphoria

I know there's not much to this silly little body,
but you make me feel good to be in it.

You're supposed to cut the flowers
from basil to make it grow fuller,
but you never do.

I like that about you.

These days, my chest,
no longer an emptiness.

Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part seven

Everybody has to wash their hands now and then. Especially now. Still, I can't say that I don't miss the grosser version of myself. My vertebrae bends uncomfortably under my skin while I crouch over the sink and if I had to give up my blue hair and the new folds of my skin to be less compulsive, that's fine. I drank moldy apple juice when I was teenager because I didn't want to waste the rum I'd poured in it. I worked in the rows of strawberries and green beans and came home with dirt in my teeth. My therapist tells me to chart the amount of time I spend a day washing my hands. That first we have to understand how much time it consumes so that we can celebrate when the time eventually lessens. That many of my contamination fears seem to relate to water. That it's interesting, given the way I used to love water. I think it's interesting that I now know words like "contamination fears" and what they mean in reference to myself and my life. It's like you get over one fear, then one day you're walking in the woods and go to pick up a cool rock and underneath it, you find seven new fears.

Becoming

I love the warmth of my mother's hugs and the lengths my father will go to just to make me laugh. And I'm talking elaborate dances, theatrical performances, drama, drama, drama. And I do laugh, and I do sit close to my mother and the dog on the couch every time we watch a scary movie. And I do feel a sense of peace, wonder even, as my dad's dancing arms twist and turn, cutting patterns into the air.

It is hard to live in this body.
I want it to become something new.

Beech tree parents stretch their leaves, blocking light from reaching their children, rendering them unable to grow. It sounds cruel, and maybe it would be, except growing slowly at a young age is necessary if a tree is to live a long life. With this context, the beech tree canopy, all of its green leaves, does not deprive the child, but instead, protects.

On gray Florida days like this one, I miss Michigan pumpkin patches.
Plump in a Carhartt coat, pink-cheeked and smiling beneath a knit hat,
my parents *oooh* and *ahhh* at the pumpkin I pick.
That is a good pumpkin, they say,
And I would feel the sweet heat of pride in my gut.
I would feel proud of a choice I made.

I see a handsome guy and I think,
I want to be him. I want to look just like that.
Just like that, possibility opening up before me,
casting its glow on everything.
Images of me
with my same gentle hands,
and a flat chest,
sharp angles on my face.
It would be perfect.

Beech tree parents stay in contact with their children through their root systems. Through the roots, they gift them sugar and nutrients. They want them to live.

And I'm going to say it again:
They want them to live.
They want their children to live.

My dad serenades my girlfriend with a heavy metal song on the back porch. My mom nods her head to the drums and my girlfriend laughs and seems a bit confused. Which, yeah, makes sense. Everyone, perfectly themselves. My dad, lost in song, the fire against his jaw. Have I ever felt so at home in my body?

I live in Florida now, and the palms still feel unfamiliar. I drive by them and I go, *Wow I really am living here, huh?* And yes, yes I am. I am here, I am living. I'm wanting, and trying not to hurt anyone, and I'm wanting so badly. A body, me, becoming.

Beach

This soft pocket of earth
we've just sunk ourselves into.
Small nest of sand,
a blanket of shells and grit and okay, maybe
a stray cigarette or two.
But we'll step over them.
One step, another, another.
And okay, maybe I will leave our home
in the sand, after all.
But only to let the ocean lap up my thighs.
Only to kiss myself against the waves.
Only to delight in the salt of it all, the bubbles
stirring in the ocean. Only to delight.

Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part eight

It's Thanksgiving weekend and I'm drunk at the gay bar with Sarah. There's a buffet set up in a corner of the bar, and this is before we had to worry about things like bars and buffets. There's turkey legs and mac and cheese. Hushpuppies and potatoes. Is it strange to eat from a buffet under color-changing LED lights? Maybe, but that doesn't make it any less delightful. She tells me she bought Freddy Mercury off Craigslist and that might just be one of the best sentences anyone's ever said to me. I tell her I've been thinking about buying a snake, but I'm not sure if I could feed it. I was the kid in middle school with a pet rat that hung out on my shoulder. When people came over for a slumber party, they had to be cool with Roxy the rat first. I don't think it's so bad, she says. Snakes have to eat and something has to feed them.

Healing

If you asked me to imagine a lab rat, I would not think of them in a cage with soft aspen bedding, plucking a sunflower seed from between the index and thumb of someone who loves them.

Instead, I would think of them on the table under fluorescent lights. Blue-gloved hands that touch them without explanation. Latex against skin.

When the surgeon asks me to roll onto my side, I do. I do not want to, but I have always been very good at doing what I am told.

Rats can be trained to answer to their names and offer you a paw to shake. My darling and I named our pet rats Glimmer, Fiddle, and Lilac. Hearing her call to them is a sweet sound, like the tinkling of bells.

Glimmer, Fiddle, Lilac. The rats place their paws on her open palms, pink little gifts.

If you asked me to imagine a pet rat, I would think of Glimmer and Fiddle's bright red eyes and Lilac's black spots. I would think of the way Glimmer looks in the arms of my beloved, sniffing the air and wobbling her head to see. She takes Glimmer to the window to see trees, palm fronds, all the green, the life. *"There's a whole world out there. What do you think?"*

When I return home, I cannot care for my wounds on my own. It is up to my darling's patient hands. I roll onto my back, and she tends. I cry often. Though I am grateful, I hate so much to be this thing with a body. Recovery is difficult.

One day, we take out the garbage together. It's my first time outside in a long time and I move about the earth at tortoise speed. I watch my feet to avoid misstep. One step, two, three. There are other things, too: the sun on my neck, a bark from the neighbor's dog, the crunch of a leaf under my heel. Four steps, five, six. Will the tortoise ever make it across the parking lot? I am tired. I look up.

And there is my beloved, in the sun! And smiling!

I notice the neighborhood trees behind her, with their leaves that tickle one another and hold the afternoon light like something precious.

There is a whole world out here.

I walk to her, and together we take out the trash.

Changing of Seasons

I am approaching brown bear maximum age. Which is to say, I am turning 25. There's no way to say if the bear on my tarot card is a brown bear or sun, but there is this gentle look in his eye. And I am a short boy who cries a lot. And I haven't lived long, but I've lived longer than I meant to. *Huff huff*. Brown bears make a huffing sound when tense. Their roars can be heard from a mile away. *Roar! Roar!* Listen to me. Look at me go. I've lived long enough to realize I am a boy, and long enough to meet someone who loves me as I change. Who will love me in spring, when I emerge from the den with more acne and broader shoulders and a deeper voice. *Roar roar!* I'll say. Just imagine it. Imagine me like that.

Arboretum in the Afternoon

The grass around the banyan tree lays flat to tell us that people just can't seem to stay away from it. People like us. And here I am, jealous of the small boy for the way he can lift himself onto the low branch with minimal effort. For me, it would take lots of effort. Maximum grunting. And anyway, I don't want to climb the branch. I want only to look at whatever it is you're looking at like that. Every part of you gleaming. *Monstera deliciosa*, you say in a way that makes me say, *What?* just to hear you say it again. *Monstera deliciosa* and you grasp the leaf with boldness, with gentleness. I've never held anything like that so I try now. *Monstera deliciosa* bends in my palm and I quite like living in this world of yours. Where all the pretty green things have names and get to be held.

Every Autumn I Shed My Skin, part nine

When I finally summited the mountain on the hiking trip, the group cheered and I went and sat on a rock and cried. Not out of embarrassment or anger, but because my body had carried me all that way. I'd forgotten that my body was strong and capable, even when it doesn't feel as strong and capable as others'. I forget this often. I wished for a snake again, mostly just to see if it would work. If I could make snakes appear simply because I wished for them, people could abandon me on mountainsides all the time, that's just fine. I'd be the Snake Summoner. Snake Seeker. Other Cool Snake-related Names. Alas, the snake never showed up on the mountain and so I went back to the group, sat on a different rock, and ate trail mix.

A week later and I'm sitting on the dock by our camp. It's hot and I'm friends with everyone now, so I'm half-naked in the sun with my feet in the lake. I close my eyes, stretch out, and doze off. Doze away. Somewhere else. I love to sleep sometimes. It feels almost like I'm rebelling against a world and a brain that demands so much of me. When I wake, a northern water snake is basking next to me. I could reach out and touch him if I wanted, but what I know about water snakes is that they can be aggressive when cornered. Though nonvenomous, northern water snakes have an anticoagulant in their saliva. If they bite you, you're likely to bleed more. He doesn't bite. His maple-syrup colored scales are dry, as if he'd been basking beside me for a long while. I wonder if an old relative loved snakes. I like to think so. To imagine them thinking, *Look at you, Basil. You look like you're going to be okay.*