Practices

Climbing

Hil Malatino

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Climbing

Hil Malatino

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For the best crag company: Jocelyne, Nicole, Mark, Cass, Az, Sam, Chrissie, Eva, and so many others;

the lovelies who make Homoclimbtastic such a magical space;

my brothers, both crushers;

Goozer, who sees so well;

Zena, who always gets it;

Laurie and Jim, for giving me something to outrun and something to run toward.

For the people who know how to give a soft catch,

and for Libby, who gives the softest ones.

1 To Failure

THE CICADAS HAVE LEFT their exoskeletons everywhere. They're abandoned on branches of broadleaf magnolia, clinging precariously to the cliff line, strewn atop the sandstone boulders. When the brood is ready to leave the underside of the earth, after years in the dirt, each one finds a convenient vertical and scrambles up. Once perched, they punch a hole in their skin and wriggle through it, delicate and exposed as they wait for their new hide to harden.

Libby and I park by the creek, past the gas station with the good jerky, the Not Your Vacation Rental sign perched at the foot of a steep gravel drive, the spot just over the county line where the Beer Trailer nestled into the forest for decades before it burned down. Past the concrete bridge with darker gray paint splotches covering up old graffiti.

I remember the graffiti. I remember when this was a dry county. I remember when it wasn't necessary to warn short-

term renters away from your property, because there were no short-term rentals here.

The trail is just past the Nada Tunnel, a twelve-foot-wide pass blasted through the hillside in 1910 by a lumber outfit eager to ship timber out from the small company town of Nada, Kentucky. Nada is long gone: The post office sorted its last letter in 1968. The land it sprawled on by the middle fork of the Red River now plays host to a highway, a cluster of cabins, and an RV park. The cemetery remains, and the Baptist church, but barely. You leave this behind as you pass through the tunnel, its far maw growing nearer until you're spit into a forest lurid in its greenness, cicada buzz so loud you have to shout.

The through-traffic these days is mostly climbers. What was a trickle, back when routes were first bolted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, is now a torrent. Over a hundred thousand climbers visit each year, adding more than $8 million to the local economy. No small sum for an area that has long been economically ravaged, first by the coal industry and then by its slow withdrawal.

We hike a half mile into the forest, following an eroded trail over exposed roots until it meets a tall band of sandstone, steep and generously dotted with pockets. Three climbs are clustered here, and all of them go at 12b. Not the hardest in the gorge by any stretch—there are plenty of climbs in the 13 and 14 range, and it's rumored that German climber Alex Megos is working on something in the upper 15 range at a crag called the Chocolate Factory. If and when that's sent, it will rank alongside some of the hardest climbs in the world: Silence in Flatanger, Norway; DNA in the Verdon Gorge; La Dura Dura in Oliana, Spain. Pro territory.

Still, 12b isn't easy.

Facing the cliff line, the rightmost route in this cluster is called Tissue Tiger. I've been staring at it for years, since I first came to this crag to work on a handful of moderates in my twenties, fifteen years and a handful of genders ago.

The holds start big and gradually diminish, which means that the route becomes more and more difficult in a rhythm counterposed to your exhaustion. I've put in one session on it and taken a whip at the last bolt six, maybe seven times. I can picture the crux sequence in perfect detail, having failed to latch the last hard move over and over again. I've spent the past three nights picturing it as I'm drifting off, building a miniature memory palace in the hopes that the information seeps into muscle. Left hand crimp, right hand crimp, high right foot smeared in a shallow alcove, big left hand deadpoint to another heinous crimp, bring right hand up, reset feet and cross right into a thrutchy, awkward pinch. This is where I fall.

Today, three tries in, I don't.

It's a slow day at the crag, midweek and at the tail end of the short Southern spring climbing season. Already, the swelter is setting in, a deep humidity that makes you grease off holds no matter their size. Libby lowers me to an audience of crusty, discarded exoskeletons and a couple of grad students from Missouri. The students congratulate me; the exoskeletons remain nonplussed.

This same week, a coalition of climbers operating under the name "Trans Is Natural" drop a fifty-five-by-thirty-five-foot trans pride flag on El Capitan, protesting the second Trump administration's persistent attack on trans lives. It's all over my feed, which I check compulsively whenever we come into a

small patch of cell service. The flag was up for ninety minutes. Despite its enormity, it was dwarfed by the three-thousand-foot granite monolith. A small surface irregularity, but still a spectacle from the valley floor. Tourists gawked, binoculars raised and fixed tight to their skulls.

Cicadas shed their shells underground over and over again before they emerge, a series of quiet transformations before the big reveal. The husks they leave behind, thick-scattered and translucent in the spring sun, are only evidence of their final molt, the one that happens just before they take flight.

They emerge en masse—a plague, we say, biblically—to overwhelm their predators with bounty. They're greeted by a multitude of critters that want to eat them alive: frogs, birds, skunks, snakes, squirrels, possums. The predators feast until they're overfull and uninterested. This means that the rest of the bugs get to move on with their lives, unbothered.

We are everywhere, the cicadas say. It's another way of saying, *Leave us be*.

I came to climbing later in life. Growing up in the megapolitan sprawl of South Florida, dazed by sunshine and strip malls, the opportunity didn't readily afford itself. I lived in the heart of suburbs spawned by white flight out of Miami, on the eastern perimeter of a shrunken, mishandled, and overhunted sea of sawgrass that was sodden and inaccessible much of the year. The ocean, trashed and swarmed with sunburned tourists, was twelve miles away. Without a car, it may as well have been two hundred. I ranged from the parking lot of the neighborhood 7–Eleven to the gated communities where my friends with rich

parents lived. My own folks were anything but: Mom waited tables and helped out my stepfather with his small-beans general contracting business, and Dad worked odd jobs and gigged at the local Holiday Inn back in upstate New York, where we'd come from.

There were endless opportunities for detachment: pills and booze and harder stuff. The southeastern corner of the state is a purpose-built vacation destination, and millions have relocated there to commit to full-time good times. We ensconced ourselves in the sawgrass circa 1987, just after the heyday of the Medellín cartel, who would airdrop bales of coke from small planes over the Everglades, our backyard swamp. When we arrived, I discovered that my brand-new stepfather had an ultralight aircraft, able to fly under the radar, parked in the backyard. He also had a hidden safe and some business cards for an enterprise he didn't own or run emblazoned with our phone number beneath a name that wasn't his. When he died of a massive heart attack just a few years later, we found out that the house we lived in was still in his ex-wife's name. He was evading *something*, though I never learned exactly what.

In our new milieu, everyone seemed sunstruck. The kids I ran with learned early to discern which combinations of drugs the adults around us were likely on; we watched them closely to gauge their current state of consciousness, mostly so we could figure out what we could get away with while they were in the twilight zone. Often, what we got away with was stealing their booze so we could seek some sort of oblivion ourselves.

Growing up poor in a decaying leisure palace is an education in class antagonism. Kids come out aspirational and envious, full of hatred for the wealthy, or both. People ask me about

growing up there and I say, "That place shouldn't exist." We weren't meant to be there, not in such enormous numbers. The swamp, precariously drained, is getting closer every year to reclaiming the chain of cities that stretches out on the southeastern coast of the peninsula. Settlers were lured by promises of arable land and eternal sunshine and, savings depleted, tumbled headlong into a sodden mess. My family was just one in a long line of suckers.

It was there that I hit puberty. Twelve, thirteen rolled around, and I grew a mustache, never menstruated. My voice dropped. I was summarily ushered into a physician's office. Specialists were called in. By the time I was fifteen, these specialists had deduced I had an intersex condition. At the time, they thought it was partial androgen insensitivity syndrome. This is exactly what it sounds like: The body is only partially responsive to androgens. As I was assigned girl at birth, the medical team decided I should stay that way. They didn't give me a choice. Instead, they performed a gonadectomy, removing my body's main source of testosterone. They placed me on estrogen.

I started taking T in my thirties after waffling about it for years, convinced my body wouldn't respond to it. My endocrinologist placed me on a very high dose, assuming that would be necessary to effect any significant changes given my body's reluctance. "Let's try this out," he said, "as long as you're OK being an *n* of one." My friends said, "Don't expect it to happen quickly—transition takes years." Contrary to their gentle cautions, I transitioned practically overnight. Changes that had taken years to manifest in the trans men I was close with happened in just a few months. I started T in the spring. By August I was losing hair up top and sprouting it on my back.

We realized I had been misdiagnosed. It turns out I have 17β-hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase III deficiency, an autosomal recessive trait that meant, despite having XY chromosomes, I experienced "undervirilization" while floating around in the womb. Somehow, in the great dice roll, both of my parents happened to carry the same genetic mutation, which was no big deal for them—it didn't outwardly manifest. They had no knowledge of their mutant potential. I inherited their powers combined, and it turned out to be a doozy. A miracle or a tragedy, depending on your take; a sensation or a scandal. Or both.

It was a relief to finally crack the case. The Mystery of My Weird Body, solved. I'm glad to know now, but it would have been great to know back then.

What I knew back then: I had been raised as a girl and was supposed to stay that way, though I didn't think I wanted to. I knew that everything I had been told about biological sex differentiation had failed to mention one very important fact: It was not binary. I knew that my body was liminal and ambivalent, loath to take a side. This was an impossible knowledge to live with given that the world around me denied the very possibility of ambivalence at every turn. I tried, for a very long time, to minimize my awareness of the source of the trouble. To treat my body like an annoying tagalong. To shake loose of it by any means I could find.

I could run fast, but I refused to be on a team. I skated, but not very well. It was an alibi for getting fucked up, and sessions became time spent sitting on my deck with a quart of malt liquor, passing a joint. If you had something that helped me float out of and above the problem-space of my body, I'd take it. But even through this fog, I had begun to appreciate the language

of the body as it manipulated the board, as it flowed through space and rendered the watered-down brutalism of the built environment a playground, when seconds before it had been merely ugly. I cultivated a lasting fetish for dirty white Vans and lanky-limbed creatures who flew down the street, wind whipping their T-shirts tight against their frames.

I married a lanky-limbed creature with a closet full of dirty skate shoes in a dyke bar in Bloomington, Indiana, some years later. They had honed their technique during the aughts while living in Portland, Oregon, waking before sunrise to put in sessions at Burnside before the regulars showed up. They learned how to piece together lines on the rough concrete in years when my only acquaintance with that park was through photospreads in *Thrasher* and watching my brothers play through its digital proxy in *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*. Although both our childhoods had happened at sea level, just three counties away from each other, they couldn't have been more different. Theirs was spent on boats at sea, learning martial arts, surfing small breaks; mine was spent reading books, getting stoned, taking someone's grandmother's pain pills in pursuit of an increasingly familiar numbness. They were curious about the capacities of their body, dedicated to shortening the gulf between what it could do and what they desired for it. I was interested in various means by which I might forget I had one.

But the body is relentless.

It was sticking around, despite my best attempts at abandonment. I had to learn to live with it, which meant admitting that either its form or the form of our relationship needed to change. It was clear that I couldn't think my way into this new relation, or out of my skin. No amount of feminist deconstruc-

tion, no theory of bodily habitus would do the trick. I had to live differently. Luckily Libby, the lanky-limbed creature I'd become so rapidly fond of, was game for most anything. We made a pact: every weekend, a new adventure. On the second week of this agreement, we went to the local climbing gym. Then we went again, and again. Every week, multiple times a week. We started to spend weekends cragging in the Red River Gorge, lazing beneath wide-leaf magnolia between attempts. My expendable income—an entirely novel possession—fell readily to the coffers of the gear shop. Climbing sessions became the anchor of my week, and my downtime was spent prepping for or recovering from them. Friends would visit, and I'd take them to the gym and proselytize, a missionary in search of converts.

In the overzealous throes of these first months on the wall, Libby and I had dinner with Dana. She was in Libby's PhD cohort in religious studies, writing a dissertation on evangelical ritual: an expert on the work of proselytizing. She listened to us ramble about our new, all-consuming hobby, nodding, chuckling, somehow familiar with all the minutiae we were describing. She had grown up in Boulder, Colorado, so I assumed that all this sport-specific knowledge had just been transmitted through the thin mountain ether. Then she outed herself as the daughter of a notable first ascensionist, a lifer who had started climbing in the 1960s and was still climbing hard well into her sixties. She'd grown up acquainted with the luminaries of the sport. Dinner parties would include folks like Lynn Hill, the first person to climb all thirty-four sparsely featured pale granite pitches of the Nose of El Capitan without aid, who finished the climb and taunted her cohort of Yosemite hardmen with the line "It goes,

boys!" For Dana, these were just the people crowding the table that you couldn't wait to be excused from.

"There is nothing more boring than listening to a room full of climbers talk about climbing," she says. She didn't care about whether someone sent, or how damp a monopocket was. Or the exact angle of position a right knee should be in, or the distance between points of protection and the likelihood of a ground fall if you combine that distance with an inattentive belayer, or debates about the ethics of retrobolting.[1] I imagine it's exactly how I feel listening to my baby brother explain how a Slant Six engine works. For the first two minutes, I admire the rigor of his dedication to learning these mechanics. For the second two minutes, my eyes slowly glaze over. In the fifth minute, I excuse myself to go change his kid's diaper.

All insider languages operate this way: opaque and alienating to those outside the loop. That's why learning them is so pleasurable. Grasping them transforms your social world. Speaking them produces intimacy between folks similarly obsessed. After a while, you find that you're at home anywhere this weird and motley collective is gathered. For me, it's at gyms and crags around the world. For my baby brother, it's in a greasy garage or at a car show. To experience such a sense of belonging after years of social marginalization is first a lure, later a solace.

I get what Dana is saying, for sure, but I'm also an obsessed newbie, and she is a conduit to the legends of the sport. I'd just finished reading Lynn Hill's autobiography, *Climbing Free*, and was in the middle of Steph Davis's *High Infatuation*. I was mainlining climbing lore, an acolyte at the gates of the temple. Dana had grown up on the grounds. I wanted to know everything.

But climbers had been at the periphery of Dana's world, the way the usually stoned middle-aged guys who played guitar with my father had been at the periphery of mine. We'd nod quick greetings on our way into or out of a room, but they were fundamentally uncool by virtue of their association with our parents. I grew up with folks crowded into the tiny living room of my father's apartment, cranking out three-part harmonies to Neil Young songs. This meant that I couldn't even cop to liking *Rust Never Sleeps* until I was in my mid-thirties, never mind admit that some of those arrangements were *good*.

It turned out that Dana's parent was coming to town in a few weeks and wanted a belay partner for a session at our local gym. In the days leading up to her arrival, I combed the internet for stories of her first ascents: the chossy twelve-thousand-foot Emperor Face of Mount Robson in the Canadian Rockies, the first free ascent of the Diamond of Longs Peak.[2] She was putting up free ascents of routes that legends like Royal Robbins had only been able to aid climb. I was agog.

Years later, Dana's parent—Jamie Logan—would describe transition as "scarier than the Emperor Face."[3] The day that Libby and I met up with her at the gym, she was embarking on that journey after decades of hesitation. I don't know when transition starts—perhaps at the first imperfectly repressed foreknowledge, thrumming and insistent—nor when it ends. But I do know the nearly incapacitating fear that adjoins so many small steps in the direction of gender affirmation, how terrifying those first forays are, how the presence of other queer, trans, and gender-expansive folks can be a literal life preserver. This isn't because of what such collectives have in common, but be-

cause of the breathing room they offer, the space to be known beyond the most obvious semaphores of difference.

We learned more about technique in that one session than in all the preceding months during which we'd made the gym our second home. Lowering Lib after they bailed halfway through a moderate lead, Jamie asked, "Has anyone ever taught you how to read a route? Your hands were mixed up the entire time."[4] We blushed, hung our heads. No one had, and we'd never asked. We'd just been throwing ourselves from hold to hold without really thinking through their linkages, without considering the flow and coordination of movement between them. Like ballerinas who never moved past the five basic postures, or toddlers able to point out the word *dog* on the page but totally flustered when it comes to stringing together the rest of the sentence. Jamie taught us how to visualize moving through the entirety of the climb, how to plot sequences and identify tricky sections from the ground. To approach each route with a plan and a vision. To recognize that every position is only part of a larger series of transitions. To learn the grammar of movement.

Watch any climbing competition and you'll see people staring up a route, miming the moves they're planning to execute in gestural shorthand. A bizarre, truncated dance: half-clenched hands jabbing the air, torsos twisting, heads bobbing and weaving. I had thought this was just something elite climbers did, something that mattered mostly in competitions, when you had a limited number of tries and were performing to a ticking clock. Jamie made clear that, comp or not, stopwatch or not, you still have a limited number of tries before the body gasses out. Better to make each one count.

There's a story Jamie tells about a mountain and a skirt, about her when she was young, in the windswept boulderfield beneath Changabang, a 22,520-foot peak in the Garwhal Himalayas. She had bought the skirt in a market in New Delhi before heading into the mountains, and she would wear it while alone in the shadow of her chosen objective (the Japanese Route on the Southwest Ridge, first climbed in 1976).[5] Though she was scared of being found out, the desolation and solitude of the range provided a safer container for this experiment than her home life did. I didn't know this story in those short hours we climbed together, but I know very precisely the terror of this desire being discovered. I know the great lengths one goes to to avoid being seen, the contortions one practices to camouflage likely tells. She tells this story to say this: The risk of ascent is nothing compared to this terror. Both involve exposure: One risks life, the other risks being. Few things are scarier than being seen when to be seen is to risk being understood as abject, as a failure, as a mimic or false proxy. To risk violence. No climb is as hard as the act of simply showing up in the world embodying the maligned truth of trans existence.

Today, it is more difficult to find the kind of alpine remoteness that offered Jamie haven. For those of us who aren't big-wallers—which is most of us—climbing outdoors is often a matter of dealing with crowded crags, picking up other people's trash, sidestepping poorly trained dogs and arguing couples. The mystique and allure of climbing, so wedded to a romantic vision of the heroic individual at war with the elements, couldn't be further from the realities of climbing in the contemporary moment, shaped by what philosopher Margret Grebowicz has called "peak climbing." She argues that climbing culture has,

"at least since [George] Mallory" and his well-documented expeditions of Everest, been a site of "cultural and semiotic extraction, and this extraction seems to have reached its 'peak' moment."[6] I agree. Pro climbers regularly appear in advertisements (for banks, for credit cards, for car companies, for sportswear, for apps). Feature-length climbing films like *Free Solo* and *The Dawn Wall* have ascended to blockbuster status, a far cry from the old-school slide shows that had been the preferred way to report back about big-deal attempts and legendary ascents. The sport has become increasingly accessible, largely on account of a veritable explosion of climbing gyms. In 2000, there were about 150 in the United States; in 2010, when I started climbing, there were about 100 more. Now there are well over 600. To climb today, at levels from elite to absolute gumby, is to climb with an audience. To be in close contact, not out of range.

Montreal in early November is gray and waning, on the cusp of a long dormancy. It's cold and getting colder, though that doesn't stop my friend Az and me from sitting outside, perching on the brim of a concrete planter full of sticks that have already shed their leaves. Both of my parents are dead, newly. I'm not talking about it. It's half repression and half not yet having the language, which amounts to an ouroboros of silence. I'm a live wire, though, viscerally attuned to the general fact of mortality, which is suddenly everywhere I look: the denuded trees, the dead labor sunk into the built world around us, and the fate of every living creature in our midst, from the squirrels scurrying on their seasonal hoard to the well-coiffed

mothers ushering their children through the rotating doors of their apartment blocks.

I've been reading the journals Roland Barthes kept after the death of his mother. On November 16, 1977, less than a month after her passing, he wrote, "Now, everywhere, in the street, the café, I see each individual under the aspect of ineluctable *having-to-die*, which is exactly what it means to be *mortal*.—And no less obviously, I see them as *not knowing this to be so*."[7] Beneath this short passage I write, "Girl, me too." I am in the "girl, me too" phase of my grief, newly bonded to folks who have gone on living in the wake of massive and mundane personal loss, especially folks who, like me, happen to be early inductees into the Dead Parents Club. There is a knowingness and gallows humor that shapes the way they handle mentions of death and dying, a world apart from the pro forma banalities that otherwise meet such mentions. I am learning from them how to put the reality of my parents' slow release from the world into words, but my mouth is still struggling to form them.

What I know how to talk about is work, and so we are talking about work, clutching little cortados in cardboard cups and shivering in the wind that whips through the steel and glass canyon of downtown. We're both professors who have been around long enough to find ourselves in administrative roles. We're also leftists who come from queer and trans anarchist scenes, which means that we find ourselves in the odd position of being committed to nonhierarchical organizing and nevertheless ensconced in middle management roles within massive bureaucracies. It's a joke, but it's not that funny. This is what we talk about. There are sighs.

Then he asks what I'm working on. "I think I'm doing the most trans thing possible," I say. "I'm writing a book about climbing." He laughs. It's not just that we know so many trans people who climb, and it's not just the outsider mystique that attends climbing culture. It's the culture of transformation that climbing offers, the revelation of finding a practice that enables you to be in your body in a collective space without dissociating. The gym and the crag are small pieces of the world that can hold you as your configuration and capacities shift, full of other folks who have gravitated to such spaces because of this collective alchemical process.

Much goes unspoken between us: How transitioning can be a long process of realizing how estranged from your body you had become. How it offers, finally, some modicum of rest within the flesh you spent so long running from. How you realize on your very first climbs—as your forearms brick up with lactic acid, as you flail, as you panic—just how opaque your relation to your body is. How you could spend a lifetime repairing this relationship, only to have it fall apart again and again. How the fact of finitude ensures this.

An aphorism thrown around by climbers: Climbing is 99 percent failure. It is a sport where, if you're training at your limit, failure is the rule. You might try to link a sequence, even pull a single move, for days, months, years. Gender failure, too, is an enduring leitmotif in queer and trans thought, and I'd been failing at gender for as long as I could remember. If you're failing, you know you're at the edge of what's possible.

The semester that I first entered a climbing gym, I was teaching a grad seminar called Queer Becomings. It was about, among

other things, how habits transform us, how we are what we do; about the primacy of practice, about there being no Being but in doing. The course was organized around a question Baruch Spinoza posed in The Hague sometime in the back half of the seventeenth century: What can a body do?

It's a big question, and nested within it were others, equally preoccupying me: How is change possible? How do we, at levels ranging from the cellular to the social, become otherwise? What forecloses the horizon of the possible, and how does that horizon shift?

I thought that teaching this seminar would help me figure it out. It turned out I needed a practicum. The answer to these questions seemed to have something to do with learning how to scramble up a 45-degree wall on tiny holds. With trying hard and failing, interminably. With accepting that failure is the entirety of the process. With learning the lessons that make their home within failure: about imperfection, the difficulty of staying attuned, the inevitable entropy that is a precondition and destination for every one of our bodyminds.

In the waning days of a long-distance relationship, I had regular video dates with my now ex-partner. I gave him updates on my biceps, lats, and forearms. "Oh, cool," he'd say flatly, and half laugh at me flexing my arms over and over by way of goodbye. I was thrilled to be getting bigger, thicker, stronger; to be, finally, becoming something else. He wasn't particularly interested. This was about gender, but not only. Sometimes, maybe always, becoming what you desire means disappointing the desires of others.

Az asks me how the writing is going. "I'm working on the through line," I say. He asks if I know what it might be. I hedge,

articulating a worry that it's too simple to be compelling. That the story is this: I hated having a body, and now I don't. He laughs, having heard this echo in so many narratives of transition, so many stories of trauma and healing, so many accounts of negotiating illness and disability.

"But that's the story!" he says.

"I know, I know," I say. "If we're lucky, that's the story."

I think about something another friend said about transition: It is not easy, but it is possible. That's the lure. The rest is process.

You could say the same thing about climbing.

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed meditates on lines, directions, orientations and orienteering: how we situate ourselves within and move across space. A life, she writes, can follow a line.

It is easier to live a life that follows a line well trod. It is clearly defined, the way stations well marked. The support for the journey is substantial, and the rewards for arriving are both alluring and already agreed on: security, safety, comfort, stability. "Following," Ahmed writes, is "a form of commitment as well as a social investment."[8] The investment promises returns: "If we follow this line, then 'this' or 'that' will follow."[9] This is how we become oriented toward specific goals, aims, aspirations, destinations.

Some of us are drawn to the path of most resistance because it mirrors the conditions of traversal we've already encountered. Trans lives are so often lived astray from the logic of the lifelines that Ahmed tracks. I was blown wayward young, attracted to strange portals and paths that stuttered, stop-start, and abruptly diverged, sometimes growing altogether

impassable. You either got stuck or learned to bushwhack your way through the overgrowth of the understory.

I was used to wanting the wrong things, which meant that I had grown conditioned to the brutal rebuff, habituated to doing life on hard mode. Pulling onto a line only to have it sooner or later shut me down was familiar. Motivating.

One of the crucial lessons for beginners: A route rarely follows a path that moves directly from bottom to top. Ascent is shaped by lateral movement, not just vertical. The line strays. You learn to stray with it.

Later that same day we meet up at Café Bloc, a bouldering gym on Saint Laurent Boulevard. I arrive with Cam; Az arrives with Cass. We've all known each other for years, connected via our work in trans studies, our academic careers, our citations of and collaborations with one another. Climbing, too, is part of these relationships. Cass and I met when we both skipped a keynote at the first ever big trans studies conference to go to the local climbing gym instead. I found myself ambling away from the shadow of the Catalinas and into a light industrial zone south of downtown Tucson, and the whole way there a boy was in front of me, block after block, turn after turn. We arrived at the gym at the same time, and while filling out waivers, one of us—I can't recall who—asked, "Are you here for *the conference*?" We climbed together that day and have been close ever since. Shortly thereafter, he and Az got together, and Az started learning the ropes, both literal and metaphorical. And while Cam isn't a regular climber, he *is* in an adult gymnastics league, which transfers easily to the acrobatic comp-style setting at Café Bloc. He flashes V3s with ease.[10]

We order coffees—Café Bloc, living up to its name, is one of the more recent gyms that adds amenity to amenity, so far from the dismal, poorly lit warehouses I started climbing in—and check out the setting, the space, the locker-room situation. We change and warm up, moving in a little swarm from one cluster of problems to another. It's an unremarkable situation—four guys in a low-key group, having an evening session. The next day, I'd walk behind a group of teenage boys on their way to the same gym, climbing shoes dangling via carabiners from their chalk-covered backpacks. In some ways, the distance between those boys and the four of us is not so far. We're all just figuring out how to live in these demanding, longing, recalcitrant bodies of ours. We're pursuing what feels good and the worthwhile pain of recovery as these bodies gradually transform. We're marshaling and managing our obsessions.

In other ways, though, the distance is vast. I imagine—there's no real way of knowing—that for these boys the interface of body and world is a problem only intermittently, when a taken-for-granted connection becomes problematic (the lawnmower won't start, your cell phone dies on a long hike, you break a leg). For those whose experience of gender is modulated by transness, the interface of body and world is very often a problem. *Privilege* is another word for the experience of the world as ready to hand, for the experience of moving through it with ease. Injustice produces obstructions. Disenfranchisement manifests as arrested mobility, truncated possibility. This means that the problem-spaces proliferate, and it's beyond our ability to solve most of them, at least not single-handedly, in the short-term.

Routes on boulders are called problems. They ask questions, demand answers. Climbing them provides what the world so often doesn't: a problem that can be solved and the satisfaction and relief that attend such solving. Which is why, like clockwork, I found myself ducking out of the spaces where I was caretaking for my mother and, just a few months later, for my father to head to the nearest climbing gym.

Their diseases—aggressive, rapidly spreading, terminal cancers—were insoluble. The V6 I was working on was not.

It took me a long time to convince Jocelyne, my climbing partner of well over a decade and one of my closest friends, to boulder.

In the gym where we both learned to climb, bouldering was in a distinct room, a long, windowless, rectilinear space, open on one end to a common room with lockers and cubbies and gear for sale. This was back when most gyms were built in preexisting industrial spaces and natural lighting was an afterthought; people trained in cave-like chambers lit only by sparse flickering fluorescents that were always too dim. Coming in from the street, your eyes would need a minute to readjust before you could even make out the basic contours of the space, let alone specific problems. Jocelyne and I would stand together at the open maw of the room, watching a parade of shirtless white boys with beanies rotate onto whatever set of problems was the freshest. They were, without exception, guys: guys who screamed, guys who grunted loudly, guys who swore like sailors after falling off a crux move, guys who huddled around spraying beta at anyone within earshot. Earshot was extensive, given that they were usually yelling to be heard over whatever that

NOTES

1. To Failure

1 Retrobolting is the practice of adding bolts—metal hangers from which one can hang a quickdraw—to a climb that had heretofore been climbed "traditionally"—that is, with gear that was entirely removable, rather than permanently fixed to the rock. Bolts make the climb safer and more accessible for a wider range of climbers, but in making the climb less risky, they also compromise the boldness of the style in which the climb was established. Underlying these debates are concerns about the supposed "purity" of the climb, as bolts, in addition to being democratizing ability-wise, are also a violation of a Leave No Trace ethic.

2 A first free ascent is when a route is climbed for the first time utilizing only the natural features of the rock, rather than relying on artificial aid to move through difficult sections.

3 Ellison, "'Scarier than the Emperor Face.'"

4 When you climb a route using a rope someone else has hung

for you, that's called "top-roping" or "climbing on follow." When you hang the rope yourself, that's lead climbing.

5 Ellison, "'Scarier than the Emperor Face.'"

6 Grebowicz, *Mountains and Desire*, 11.

7 Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, 52.

8 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 17.

9 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 17.

10 The difficulty rating system for boulders in the United States is called the V-system, named for John "Vermin" Sherman, who popularized modern bouldering in the United States. The easiest problems are V0. The hardest boulder problems in the world are currently around V17.

11 Breitwieser and Scott, "Femininity, Body Size, and (Mis)Fitting," 149.

12 Breitwieser and Scott, "Femininity, Body Size, and (Mis)Fitting," 149.

13 Breitwieser and Scott, "Femininity, Body Size, and (Mis)Fitting," 150.

14 Breitwieser and Scott, "Femininity, Body Size, and (Mis)Fitting," 152.

15 Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 139.

16 Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 145.

17 Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 146.

18 Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 147.

19 Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 145.

20 Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 268.

21 Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 268.

22 Sanzaro, *Boulder*, 26.

23 Sanzaro, *Boulder*, 26.

24 Hörst, *How to Climb 5.12*, 88.