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### Making Kin with Kudzu

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# **Making Kin with Kudzu**

Abigail Bowen

A departmental honors thesis submitted to the Department of English  
at Trinity University in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with departmental honors.

April 29, 2020

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## Artist Statement

This creative writing honors thesis is a memoir inspired, influenced, and motivated by ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and biosemiotics. Biosemiotics looks at the biological realm through a lens of signs and codes that underscore the communication that all living beings engage with, emphasizing language as “world-making”—a practice that brings forth a construction of reality in conjunction to realities of other living and nonliving entities (Gagliano et. al, xix). In this piece and inevitably in my life, I am drawn to what plants are saying for themselves and what I can learn from them as a human living in their world. Writing this piece allowed me to explore the esoteric thoughts that erupted in my mind while reading the ecofeminist text *Staying with the Trouble* by Donna Haraway; the ecocritical text *The Language of Plants* edited by Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan, and Patricia Vieira; and *Material Ecocriticism* edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann. I wrote this piece with an intense energy to purge the rising truths within myself that came from an infatuation with plants and their affinity for communication and creation. Haraway discusses philosopher Vinciane Despret’s “worlding practice” of attending to “what beings evoke from and with each other that was truly not there before” (Haraway 7). This piece is the unraveling of what was not there before through a kindred relationship to the perennial vine kudzu (*Pueraria montana*). The kudzu vine is a critter that evokes a sensation of kinship in me that I have never truly experienced before, constructing a dynamic world between us that shows me how to make kin with other living creatures. Kudzu unapologetically lives and thrives and this empowers me to go on.

Part One describes kudzu living as an active agent in a material world, establishes how I identify with kudzu, and illustrates how I affiliate plants with my Russian family, who moved from Tyumen, Russia to South Carolina to join my mother five years after she left Russia. My

mother voices her story in this part to show a moment that she demanded her abusive father to deobjectify her mother (my grandmother) and to acknowledge that her material existence qualifies her as a living being with dignity and deserving of respect. In this section I tell vivid narratives of my own experiences with my Russian grandma (babushka) and grandpa (dedushka), which were impressionable moments that compelled us to function in a modified linguistic world. Even though we could not speak to each other directly in a shared spoken language, they introduced me to plants at an early age and engaged with me through active forms of language like cooking traditional Russian foods or working outside with plants. I notice a parallel between the nonverbal communication that arises between me and my grandparents and the nonverbal conversation that I have with kudzu in this memoir.

In Part Two, I watch kudzu transform and alter environments, which then inspires me to reshape the way that I perceive the social and physical boundaries placed around me. Kudzu culturally influences the southeastern United States even though it has historically been considered an invasive species. I am drawn to what it means to “invade” a space and acknowledge how my personal journey with invading social spaces as a queer non-binary individual living in a heteronormative, patriarchal society feels like an intrusion. Kudzu’s intrusion into spaces empowers me to continue forging into my identity despite the perceived boundaries placed to stifle me. In this part, I reflect on my experience while living in St. Petersburg, Russia for the Spring 2019 semester because I continually found my female sex heightened within social situations like walking home or riding the metro alone at night, experiences that are common in most large cities.

Part Three depicts the immense fear and loss of subjective self-identity when I untether myself from earthbound kindred connections. After taking a psychedelic drug alone at a state

park, without any other person to talk to and connect with, my physical body gets lost in the forest while my mind gets lost in the terrifying realization that I do not feel safe in my physical reality. Typically, psychedelics like LSD and mushrooms are described as eradicating the self (or ego) and realigning the psyche with a sense of universal connectedness. This quality is colloquially called an “ego death” and significantly impacts each mind differently. In this part, I describe a state of mind that has no truck with material reality and is forcibly self-isolated into believing that they are completely alone. I do not want to speak directly on kudzu’s behalf, whether it experiences loneliness or self-isolation. However, I do observe that kudzu has a self and therefore forges onward in opportunistic solitude. From my human perspective, this solitude sends me into a mental breakdown. Kudzu expresses an independence that I personally must cultivate; so I go.

In Part Four, I emphasize a currently relevant though sinister reminder that the human body will inevitably be connected and affected by interactions with environments. The coronavirus COVID-19 has forced all of us to reexamine our daily lives and completely alter our environments to prolong survival. COVID-19 expresses agency as a deadly infection that spreads through our environments and thoughts today. As humans continue to take over the last wild places on the planet, a sweeping virus that no human has immunity from comes as a reminder that humans are not the only active agents on this planet.

The essay structure echoes my perceptions gradually developing with each part expanding from the part before it. Within each part, I think about plant characteristics and relate them to my own narrated experiences to evoke what making kin with kudzu looks like and to illustrate the ways that this kindred relationship shapes my identity and world. The story does not follow a linear temporal path but skews time and space to suggest fluid movement among

temporalities and bodies. The entire piece unravels in present tense, suggesting the ways in which personal memory and generational trauma contribute presently to my active shaping relationship with kudzu. After introducing kudzu in Part One, I write about a memory of my mother telling a story. Her convoluted story-telling method heavily influenced me as a writer, and I imitate her form as my essay “stumbles” out into a multifaceted story and I weave “story and moment and reflection” into a narrative (Bowen 3). This fluidity also mimics the constant motion and communication among ecological players intricately connected to their environments and cohabitants.

Haraway reminds that all critters—living “more-than-humans”—are Neither One nor Other and “are in each other’s presence, or better, inside each other’s tubes, folds, and crevices, insides and outsides, and not quite either” (Haraway 98). I grapple with not being One nor Other with plants in my harrowing psychedelic experience at Garner State Park. I go back and forth between feeling comforted by plants and completely isolated within my own mind. For example, as I walk along a trail, “I feel enclosed and funneled by the cedars on either side of me. My skin brushes against tiny, scale-like evergreen leaves that sweep upward resembling brushed wavy hair or whipped cream” (Bowen 29). My body is shaped by my surroundings and I feel comfort in the way that “wispy, lichen-covered, sturdy trunks encompass me and in all their present stillness, show me their agile capability of movement” (Bowen 29). I find comfort in watching plants continue on, breathing and living. However, as I spiral deeper into a sense of loneliness, “I don’t sense the plants responding anymore, a cold emptiness has replaced them. My power is charged but spewing into dark directions” (Bowen 34). The dark place that I find myself is a sense of abrupt “Otherness” from my physical reality. Stacy Alaimo also explains the term transcorporeality to evoke how as embodied beings, all creatures are intermeshed with the material



world, which crosses through them, transforms them, and is transformed by them (Alaimo 2). In this essay, I consider what bodily trans-corporeality means to me and explore the flaws of my own deeply rooted isolation caused by trauma and human socialization. As I engage my body in trans-corporeal existence, this memoir is one of the abundant stories that comes forth.

I strive to respect plants' dignity by recognizing that plants are active agents communicating in their own lives and are also artists, creators of art. Throughout literature, plants have been placed in passive roles as beautiful landscapes or backdrops to human stories, or have been used as symbols for human emotions and concepts. While writing this essay, I intended to avoid these anthropocentric approaches while thinking about kudzu, and instead I pivoted attention to what kudzu actively does as an individual agent in the material world. Kudzu's actions do not symbolize my own actions nor does our relationship evoke a metaphor for kinship. I watch kudzu with my human-skewed eyes, emotions, perceptions, and biases and treasure empowered inspiration from what I see. I associate my human emotions to kudzu's actions as a conversation with kudzu as a way of befriending, just like a dear friend would inspire insightful emotions in me while expressing themselves in a personal conversation. Material ecocriticism explains how "bodies, both human and nonhuman, provide an eloquent example of the way matter can be read as a text" and that material forms (bodies) "intra-act with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meaning and discourses that we can interpret as stories" (Iovino and Opperman 6-7). I am not mirroring my human emotions in kudzu's material existence but instead creating a world with kudzu that shows us becoming-with each other as storied beings. Meaning emerges from my enmeshed experience with kudzu, as we converse and create ever-changing, perpetual worldings. The idea of "creating worldings" refers to the world-making function of language. Language shapes worlds through

storytelling, but also as proof that agency is in action, agency is expressed. The conversation in flux between me and kudzu, along with other plants, is not a metaphor but the byproduct of our agentic powers intermingling and structuring my human relation to materiality (Iovino and Opperman 4). I know that kudzu, along with the rest of the species that cohabit earth with me, do not particularly care about my human interpretations of them, yet I feel inclined to write them a love letter anyway. The vegetal world compels me to examine my own existence and models for me what that existence can potentially resemble.

The narrative form in Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* greatly helped me throughout my writing process by providing a model of how sporadic, interwoven thoughts can assemble into a whole piece. In *Bluets*, Nelson attempts to explain to the reader how she has fallen in love with the color blue with condensed, numbered paragraphs that do not typically relate directly to each other, other than the fact that they all relate to the color blue. The book does not follow a logical progression and evokes the convoluting style of narrating that I prefer to engage with in my own writing.

Virginia Woolf helped me approach the ending of my memoir, a piece that at many times felt like it could continue for eternity. In my mind, Woolf felt like a personal cheerleader encouraging me to speak my truth in relation to reality. In the closing thoughts of her inspirational text *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf writes, "if we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to *reality*; and the sky, too, and the trees or whatever it may be in themselves...if we face the fact, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women" [my italicized emphasis] (Woolf 118). This memoir is my relation to reality and considering the self-isolated reality we find

ourselves *right in this moment*, the impact of COVID-19 wraps up my thoughts. Woolf's quote also inspired me to keep telling my story amidst the moments that I convinced myself that my story held no important meaning to anything.

I would like to end this statement with a poem I wrote over Summer 2019 when I conducted ecofeminist research with Dr. Heather I. Sullivan in Trinity's Comparative Literature Department, which launched me into this realm of discovering my own material memoir.

### **material memoir**

always in motion  
humans living in a plant-ocean  
a leaf if not static but  
emerges  
the undead reanimated  
the aches i have  
queered  
non                      joy  
i am  
                    here now  
sunflowers growing in the gutters  
plastic, hard drive,  
dead hair and dried plants,  
mud, vaseline  
birth, my ocean, selfname  
form defined by its ability  
to forgo intensification  
Their precise malleability  
reinstating leafness, reimagining leafness  
                    everything is  
creating as  
                    fruition

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## Making Kin with Kudzu

By Abigail Bowen

Through languid growth, kudzu vines encase every living and nonliving material object in its path. Kudzu hunches into masses, revitalizes barren lands, and intertwines into strongholds. Looking out at a kudzu forest, you interpret kudzu's slow growing form as an active energy fast-paced and vigorous, as it weaves and settles vines, suffocating trees of the southeastern United States into submerged skeletons. You witness kudzu-ravaged land and sense the foreign and sinister vine as a puzzling contradiction to the vibrant, green fertility lush before you. If you look at a kudzu vine up close, judging from one unassuming stem of leaves, all you see are three leaves clustered on a semi-woody perennial vine. Looking even closer, you see three tips puncturing out from each heart-rounded leaf and follow the vine's direction of action as it roots into any soil nearby. These three leaves copy and repeat until they abound into a mass indistinguishable from any beginning. The stems—vines—behind those leaves multiply and seize entire land expanses, suffocating human and forest dwellings. Kudzu threads roots through dirt until an entire forest looks fastened down, the arched forms writhing in pagan dance to the earth.

Exhaustive plantation agriculture in the southeastern United States exploited African and African American slaves, then sharecroppers, and concurrently the exact soil in which

plantations produced cash crops like cotton, tobacco, rice, and indigo. By the twentieth century, the southeastern landscape became a barren, infertile wasteland uninhabitable for any native vegetation. To prevent devastating soil erosion in the 1930s, the United States government introduced the native Japanese kudzu vine to southeastern American farmers after noticing how the vine easily grew in the damaged, desolate soil. The drought-tolerant kudzu vine was originally introduced in 1876 at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia as an intriguing ornamental from Japan ([plants.ifas.ufl.edu/](http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/)). American farmers learned about the kudzu vine, hearing from others that it grew like a weed. They had to be incentivized by the government to receive \$8 per acre of kudzu planted on their barren farms (Finch, [smithsonianmag.com](http://smithsonianmag.com)). Kudzu quickly took to the southeastern climate and altered the desolate soil into fertile, lush landscapes, but by the 1970s was considered a widespread, invasive weed killing entire forests by enveloping a tree at a time and shutting out all sunlight (Bell and Wilson 383). Kudzu completely transformed disturbed lands by anchoring the soil from eroding, however, humans focus on kudzu's sinister behavior as it crushes native plant competitors beneath its impenetrable weight and invades any soil it can vine into. A single plant can grow as much as 20 meters in a season, at a rate of about 11-12 inches per day (Blaustein 56). Kudzu roots are often 7 inches or more in diameter, 6 feet or more in length, and weigh as much as 400 pounds (Blaustein 56). Kudzu thrives beyond expectations in a disturbed land, ignoring the boundaries imagined by the humans who planted it, and people degrade kudzu by labeling it as "invasive."

Generations before me remember the forests that lived before kudzu intruded and grew over forest tree-trunks, changing a stretch of trees into mere irregular punctures beneath a dense sea of vines. Those punctures remind me of the pinch of a cloth or an enveloping cloth over the peaked stake of a teepee. In the eyes of people mourning the forests, kudzu is a monster. In my

eyes, this monster reminds me of the types of chaos that will always coalesce within me and throughout my worlds.

I am not afraid of these twisted, writhing monsters because they are also within me and I am used to them; we have grown a liking to each other. Neither of us has the spirit of fear. We do not apologize for breathing. When I see the drooping, bunched vines of kudzu, they vibrate with my pulse in kinship. Our wildness keeps my troubled-self tranquil without tranquilizing it. We are a disturbing reverberation shaking off the obtrusive expectations that preoccupy a socially-bound body. As a sexually fluid, queer person who never felt comfortable and free within the gender binary, I grew up bound by heteronormative worlds, perspectives, language, and expectations. I was allowed to grow and change, but not too far into territories deemed taboo to a Christian Baptist mentality. Breaking into my own territory and ignoring the limitations which were placed on me are my first steps to invading a society not originally constructed for me. Kudzu is just as socially-bound as I am because humans decide whether kudzu has overstepped its boundaries and become an invasive species. The force behind kudzu's malevolence and fear provoked within a socially-bound space empowers me to thrive despite precedent.

As I reach my twenty-second year, Mom starts telling me family secrets. They stumble out of her mouth, as if the force of their emotional weight pressing on her insides overflow and bust out of her throat, her entire face engaged in the act of expelling demons every time she weaves story and moment and reflection into a family narrative. I am visiting home for winter break during my senior year of college when Mom insists we watch the movie *Defiance*. At the brink of a climactic scene, when two brothers Tuvia and Zus Bielski nearly kill each other in reaction to the

pressures placed on them as leaders of The Bielski Partisans, the Jewish opposition group in the Polish Naliboki forest, Mom notes that we tend to hurt those closest to us when we ourselves are hurt. She pauses the movie to tell me about an instance while growing up in a Siberian city located on the Tura River east of the Ural mountains.

“There were these—ah, you were in that apartment! You remember the main room in that small apartment in Tyumen, how there are glass cases all on the left side as you walk in?” she pauses for a deep breath, both hands stretched open facing herself, flicking her eyes quickly for an assuring uh-huh from me, “We had those glass shelves in there to show off our favorite things, since we didn’t have much space anywhere else to keep our proudest things safe and on display. My father would go on these trips by himself because I guess he didn’t have enough money to take us every time. Sometimes he would take some of us to the countryside or to the ocean because he knew children need experiences if they ever want to become anything. So my father went on a trip to some place in the Ural mountains and brought back this beautiful, delicate pottery set that was very expensive.”

A month later she sends me a text of links to a site describing the tourist destination Kungurskaya Ledianaya Peshchera, a karst ice cave in the Urals located near the town Kungur in Perm Krai, Russia on the right bank of the Sylva River.

“When my father came home he put the china on one of the middle shelves. We each had our own space in the case to put our own things. I was watching my sister Luba, I saw her piling heavy things on her shelf. It was above his. I remember when it all crashed. Luba’s shelf broke right there,” Mom flipped her palms upward and stretched her hands down and away from herself to signal a spectacle on the ground. She shook her hands to a pulse and continued, “and it all broke and shattered right there. The entire wall crashing down with my father’s pottery.



Everyone heard it. Natasha even told me she remembers that day and remembers finding shards of glass in her guitar case because it was lying nearby when it happened. It feels nice to know someone else remembers because usually I will remember these crazy things from our childhood and no one will remember and I wonder, ‘Did this happen?’ but they all must have happened. The entire glass case crashed down and my father runs into the kitchen where Babushka is cooking and just starts beating her. She had nothing to do with it but he had so much pain and he only knew how to beat it out.

“I was so done with this. Babushka was on the floor and my father above and so I run to there and grab the pan from the stove and hit him, *You are not doing this anymore*. I shouted this and shook him and made him see. He let go and I think he saw what he was doing. I never saw him do that again.

“There was a boy who lived above us who was in my class and he would always make fun of me and tease me, but that next day at school, I think because he heard what happened, he asked me how I was doing. That made me feel good. His name was Vovka. The only Vladimir I ever met who wasn’t horrible. Like Valdas or my grandfather.”

Mom demanded that Dedushka see Babushka as a sentient being with her own breath and her own motivations separate from him. Mom pushes her father to the ground so he would see what he was doing; he beat Babushka as if she was something inanimate to discharge his anger into. Russian patriarchal history deems women subordinate and controllable by a violent power. Today, in the year 2020, domestic violence is still not criminalized in Russia (hrw.org). Criminalizing domestic violence would remove a method essential for ensuring social compliance within a domestic household. Trauma to the body forces women into passivity before they can exceed boundaries and freely express autonomy.

In the same breath, Mom talks about her grandfather.

“I wrote a letter to my grandfather, forgiving him. I looked straight at his little boy eyes and told him that I know what he did. My mother was raped by every man in her life. Her brain is like a child, she has no maturity. I mean, how can someone so abused grow up normally? She always seem like she expects a man to do this to her because then she has a baby and then she is doing what God wants. My mother kept having babies but made us take care of each other. I grew up with a child as a mother. Her mother knew what her husband was doing to Babushka and did nothing. She did not want anyone to find out because then maybe Babushka would not find someone to marry her. They lied to Dedushka when they set them up to marry. He came from a different city and knew nothing about Babushka. All he saw was that she loved God so much and seemed like she did not know how beautiful she was.”

Vines climb. They weave through and around space, towards light and with the eager energy of self-affirmed being. Vines occupy space and change it, turning a bland brick wall into something charming to our human eyes or dominating a landscape by subjecting weaker plants to bottom feed for light and nutrients. In the ecocritical text *The Language of Plants*, Joni Adamson and Catriona Sandilands assert, “Even when certain plants frustrate biopolitical insistences on utility, we can and must learn to live with them” and “move out of the botanical cold war in which we find ourselves” (249). For example, Adamson and Sandilands discuss the creeping invasion of the dog-strangling vine (DSV) in North America, noting that the vine behaves quite similarly to *Homo sapiens* in North America because both share a defining characteristics to their survival: the ability to significantly remake habitats according to their interests. Humans and DSV are companion species because they are both “prolific, opportunistic, urban, and thriving in

disturbance” (Adamson and Sandilands 248). Similar to humans and the dog-strangling vine, kudzu thrives in disturbed spaces and creates habitats that only support other opportunists.

The space that plants and I inhabit is disturbed. Dr. Heather Sullivan’s theoretical concept “the dark green” indicates the sinister agency expressed by the vegetal world in response to the corrupted and darkened relationship with humanity’s aggressive, thoughtless control and pollution (Sullivan 142). Invasive species are becoming the ones who survive in human-disturbed landscapes. The Anthropocene is a geological era marked by human impact on Earth since the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution. Humans impact the planet through pollution, deforestation, and climate change, leading to mass vegetal extinctions. Plants are actively responding to the Anthropocene, contrary to human perceptions that plants are passive, functioning only as ornamentation or usable resources. Invasive species flourish in toxicity (Thompson). Radioactive plants near Chernobyl are queerly healthy (bbc.com). There is a sinister satisfaction in watching a vine creep and thrive despite human efforts to stifle it. This expressed power in response to toxicity strikes me and I take notes.

Rising CO<sub>2</sub> levels in Earth’s atmosphere as a result of global warming will actually help kudzu spread even more, according to Sasek and Strain’s 1990 study published in the journal *Climate Change*. In response to greater CO<sub>2</sub> enrichment, kudzu “increased instantaneous water use efficiency by increasing photosynthetic rates and reducing transpiration rates” (Sasek and Strain). Invasive species can actually “provide ecosystem services” and “fill novel ecological niches created by climate change and inaccessible to native species” (Sasek and Strain). Kudzu’s resilience convinced American farmers to introduce their dusty fields to the eager grasp of a vine ready to thrive anywhere it finds itself.

I live on ground disturbed and polluted by patriarchy, heteronormativity, sexism, capitalism, nationalism, classism, and insane indifference to or hatred of ‘the gays,’ ‘shrewd women,’ ‘illegals,’ transgender individuals, and people of color. Millions of others live in spaces disturbed by racism and transphobia, along with living in spaces where entire cultural histories, identities, and livelihoods were erased. I have more privilege than my queer, trans, and cis black sisters to take up space and ignore the disturbances placed in front of me to stifle my growth. I do because I can, not because I am special or brilliant. I want to be clear that I navigate this disturbed space with the advantages that were given to me by those in power. Gender relations are organized around power and the unequal distribution of social resources that those in power decide. This socially constructed inequality is inseparable from other forms of social inequality of race, class, and sexuality (Lorber 7). Inequalities function as boundaries and control, stifling the marginalized ones and ignoring the underestimated ones. More-than-human species and marginalized humans are the underestimated ones, the ones that can break and morph expectations, leaving behind constrictive constructed realities that do not accommodate their unapologetic, freeing, open cosmoses.

As individuals, plants selfishly and critically think, plan, and create as they detect nearby harmful or beneficial organisms and negotiate further reproductive potential by tastily ripening for an animal seed-carrier or by poisoning predators. While sensing their environments, plants critically assess modes of action as they “perceive their own state and many aspects of their surroundings and adjust numerous traits depending upon these conditions” (Karban 3). To grow, plants require chemical resources such as CO<sub>2</sub>, water, and mineral nutrients and locate these resources using chemical receptors, also using chemical cues to communicate with other organisms (Karban 5). Plants are constantly communicating within their ecologies with other

organisms and environments. In *The Language of Plants*, Richard Karban explains that plants “rapidly adjust their uptake of soil nutrients in response to local conditions,” responding to cues that are directly caused by and associated with their environment (9-10). Plants are innovators, critical thinkers, creators, and advocates for themselves. Plants’ critical interpretation of their surroundings and innovative forms of communication with their physical world convey their creativity. I want to live as plants do: grow and retract with my environment as I converse with the elements and the other players surrounding me through the capable means and voices my body provides. I want to be of the material body and express my agency as a body in conversation with my surroundings. I take up physical space. I root myself and demand to be espied but do not need others to see me in order to exist. I get back to my body, burrow toes and mind in the dirt, twisting and pushing down and down.

Kudzu creates conflict with other surrounding living beings that forces them to interact with the limitations and challenges of fighting for dominance. All living beings negotiate for their space. This competitive language unfolds between beings to decide if they become competitors or companions.

Communication barriers stand between Babushka and me. In the first year she lives with us in our small brick house in North Carolina, time dazes and fades to hours of crying repeated over and over. No one had time to teach me the Russian alphabet or how to speak my desires in her language. Instead, I cry and cry for Babushka to understand my 5-year-old confusion. Mom works at Betty Limon’s Salon giving massages, and Dad works somewhere muddy; he comes home with red clay caked in his Carhart boots and matching clay splashed on the side of his white construction van. My youngest aunt Valentina goes to the high school across the street

while the rest of my aunts and uncles leave for different places everyday cleaning wealthy people's houses or mowing their lawns. Dedushka even gets a part-time job working at Goodwill, sorting donations in the back so he wouldn't have to speak to anyone. The rest of the time, he works at home with me and Babushka, giving massages in the back room. They leave me with Babushka all day. I cry and scream that Mom left me with no one to talk to, with no one to understand me. Those first few weeks, I sob on the living room floor, stomping just to hear the furniture rattle from every punt of my naked, stubby leg and screaming just to feel the pain peak in my throat. Babushka runs around frantic, grabbing an apple, a chewy vitamin, a glass of warm milk, a stuffed Laa Laa Teletubbie—but she can't make me smile. Her soft pleas in Russian just make me want to spite her more and my cruelty boils. She cups a granny smith apple in her weathered palms, shakes it in my face with urgency, hoping my watery eyes will clear up to level with her. She calls for God, *Gospeteh*, to help her as she paces the kitchen and waits out my wailing.

Our boundary melts when I smell the boiling pelmeni and beets. I eventually understand her commands to hand her a tea mug, or to get out of her way, or to bend down and get the bag of buckwheat shoved in the back of the bottom cupboard. These early months must have been during the winter because Babushka teaches me her traditional pelmeni-making process, getting ready for cold months ahead.

In the kitchen, Babushka always has the radio boombox playing Russian gospel CDs. She begins with mixing and rolling out the dough over a raised circular plastic board with two dozen or so smaller holes cut out of it all-around. Then mixes raw ground beef with onions, carrots, and spices with her hands, letting me help her mash the beef around the mixing bowl. I hope Babushka forgets about my hands after she washes her own so I can feel the squish of the meat

under my fingernails later on. After mixing the ground beef, we roll the meat into balls the size of the cut-out circles of the plastic board and place each ball in the dough wherever an indentation was hollowed beneath. Once every circle fills, Babushka rolls out another piece of dough and lays it tightly on top of the meat. She pulls up a chair by the counter so I can help her with my favorite part. She then slaps more flour on the rolling pin, puffing more in my eyes and hair. She closes me against the counter with her arms on either side to guide the rolling pin under my hands. Together we roll the pin across the tight dough covering the dumplings we made. I push with all might and wait to see the plastic outlines of the circular holes, hearing some dumplings set free to plop lightly on the counter beneath. More scraps of dough come undone as we roll the dumplings out of the holes, eventually pushing the ones that stayed behind through the holes. Babushka begins grabbing things to clean and I know that it's time to begin working on flattening together the edges of the dumplings to make sure they stay together in the boiling water.

We spend the better part of the afternoon flattening these edges since we usually make at least five batches of the circular board. My attention switches between Babushka's radio playing her gospel and the living room TV playing PBS. Babushka pulls out numerous sky-blue foam trays, sprinkles flour on them and places the pelmeni in parallel rows once we finished flattening the edges of dough. We lay them out and stack the trays on top of each other so we can carry them out to the back shed to store overnight. A new batch of pelmeni will sit in the back shed for the next couple weeks with Babushka toting various batches inside for meals. If the day temperature isn't cold enough to keep them, she'll have to figure out how to fit the trays in the freezer until night time comes around. We finish the pelmeni process before late afternoon and I spend the rest of the day watching Dr. Phil while lying in one of my aunts' beds in the living

room or coloring at the table. Babushka learns that I love eating everything she makes. She has nothing to say to me, but always has something to share.

As the weather warms and the humid air begins to loosen up the soil, I notice a flood of new smells as I close the back door behind me and pause to look down at my white and rainbow light-up Sketchers, wondering if I could get away with wearing no shoes today. *Nash dom*, our squat brick home, nuzzles in the trees on the corner of Cuttino Circle across from the energy plant just down the road from the public high school. The front door is up the clay-colored concrete front porch on the right side and opens up into the living room. But since we had to shove two single beds against the far corner inside, the back door is the only way to get in. I sleep on a twin mattress on my parents' bedroom floor while the uncles Pasha and Dima sleep in the back-laundry room, the grandparents, Babushka and Dedushka, sleep in the smaller bedroom and the aunts, Masha and Valentina, sleep in the living room. These arrangements would shift and alter the structure of our living room walls as more aunts and cousins would arrive. I remember when my parents and I picked them up from the Greenville airport in March 2002. I tried lifting one of their brown plaid tarp bags instead of looking all the strangers in the eyes. They uttered fast in Russian, bent over me while caressing the back of their fingers on my soft cheeks, *kraseevaya malenkaya devochka*.

Now, a few months after they arrived, I brace myself for Babushka's threatening scolding if she sees what I'm about to do. I hop right off the back steps which have the same brickwork pattern of the house, making me trip up and down every once in a while because I can't pay attention enough to tell if my speeding foot will land on step or threshold. I reach the left corner of the outside patio that meets the grass of the backyard. The Russians have only been here for a



few months and every day I wonder what they'll be getting up to today. I crouch down to wave my hand in the grass to see if the grass is wet or dry or warm. It's not wet but it still holds a chill from last night and I think my toes would really love to feel that. Real quick, I slip off my shoes and then my socks, keeping the socks in my hands in case Babushka notices me out here and yells at me. I could put the socks back on as she watched me from a distance of the back door and maybe she'd think they were shoes and leave me be.

As I get deeper in the grass, I find patches of sun pouring over the house and know today will be good. Seems like all I do lately is sit inside and watch TV while everyone leaves me with Babushka. This sun today, though, will make something happen.

Oh, Dedushka hasn't left yet? He steps out of the back door and begins unraveling the green snakey hose and heads my way. I run past him so he doesn't look down and we switch positions in the yard. I grab my flip-flops from right inside the threshold and bang the door behind me so I don't miss watching Dedushka do anything. He must have taken the day off from sorting junk at the back of Goodwill. I copy him, keeping my white socks on while sticking the flipflop between my big and second toes; this feels so weird and I don't understand how he can do it.

"Solnichka sevodnya!" Dedushka chuckles at the sun today, coming out and warming up the ground for him to carve out a garden. I remember watching him a few mornings ago from the kitchen window that overlooks the yard. He must have been fooled by the budding blackberry leaves and the night-time chirping crickets, because when he went out there to break up the hard ground still thawing from February, his shovel barely chopped down into the dirt to upend a chunk that chipped out crusty and crumbling. But today, we hear the ground give from Dedushka's weight on the shovel, unearthing and pulling out roots from the loamy clay soil. He

creates rows and plans where each patch of vegetables will go, depending on the surrounding shade and slight slope of the yard.

As if he planned it all along, Dedushka soaks his patch of dirt with the snakey hose as the air got stickier. I follow the spray as it lingers on the edges of the dirt patch so I can cool down and have an excuse to mash my toes in the mud (the flip flops have already come off by now). Dedushka's tone sounds like he's telling me to stop but I can't actually understand him anyway, so I kind of just go back and forth between jumping on the mud edge and standing still in the grass. He must not be that upset since he doesn't let off the hose and I see his silver and gold front teeth reflecting in a glisten between his stretched cheeks.

I spend the next few days helping Dedushka plant seeds in his garden. After handing me a bunch of seeds, I lose a handful every time I try to place a few in a hole he poked in the soil with his index finger. As I bend over to hover one hand over the hole, my other hand holding more seeds forgets about the need to stay clutched, dropping seeds behind me, leaving me to forget I had seeds in my other hand in the first place. I come back for more seeds and he squints his eyes to roughly count the spaces he made and compares it to the seeds he already gave me to plant. He paces around confused but eventually gives up and hands me more seeds, pointing to a new side of the patch of holes to throw them into. By now, I make sure to be extra careful by sitting on my knees above each hole, then dragging in the moist dirt as I shift from one hole to the next. I help sprinkle mixed potting soil over the holes so we can pat them down in little mounds above our buried seeds. After planting our 8 by 5 garden, we work on the bricked-in flower beds against the right side of the house. I also want to make a flower bed on the back side of the house, but the water heater and air conditioning whirr back there and don't need us bothering them. Instead of seeds, Dedushka hands me bulbs of dandelions and tulips to place in

the larger holes he made randomly throughout the bed, this time scooping handfuls of dirt out. I thought flowers only grew above the ground like the way lily pads float on water. The way they delicately float on the water's surface seem as if they sprouted from a ripple here and there. No one ever told me about the roots that keep plants in place and hold all the nutrients they'll need to grow flesh. I piece together this information throughout the next couple times that Dedushka has me help him plant. We water our seeds and bulbs, watching them morph until the flowers open and the vegetables easily fall off their vines.

My body does and I do not question. In the yard of our second home in Greenville, we play the most epic games of tag. The plush, deep green grass was just laid down the day we moved in. I remember watching the rectangular grass patches slowly munch away the soft clay ground as men quilted our yard, hefting patch upon patch in the yard. The lines between each patch seemed so awkward to me. I thought yards were supposed to have grass that smoothed together like the ocean or a limb of hair. I didn't realize that the edges of each patch would grow over the lines and create a grass bridge between them.

I fall down after getting snagged by a tree after circling it to get away from my neighbor Jay Madden. Each small hill or dip in the yard accompanied by dotted tree trunks serves as an obstacle to whip around and tumble through in a stiff-shoulder squirm that launches each small body further and further from the stretched fingers of who was It. He slaps me hard on the back, "You're it," and I fall for a moment but already know I won't catch up to Jay Madden, so my mind continues to churn on the puzzle that explained the grass must still be alive, even though the bottoms of each patch reminds me of the bottom of carpet samples you see in Home Depot or the ones heaped by Dad's desk. The patches merge over growth, I do not question.

We never trample through the kudzu bed. The bed grows in a bricked-in crevice atop a set of brick stairs beside the garage, hiding the drop off to the lower level with growth spilling over the brick wall so that if I stood on the lower level, kudzu would trail toward me from the sky. Dad keeps the kudzu from leaking into the lower lawn by cutting back vines every few months. Every time I pass by the kudzu bed, it lures me to lay in the deep vines and wait for them to sink me deeper in. Dad catches me and tells me to get out because that's not my place to be. I don't try to lay in there very often anymore, even though I still kick my ball nearby hoping it'll get stuck in the bed and beckon me to retrieve it and stay a while.



To infiltrate the human experience is to reconfigure worlds by disregarding the bounding expectations that systemized spaces inflict on the material body. Systematized spaces are socially contrived by a human Western hegemonic dependency on patriarchy, capitalism, and heteronormativity and hinders the capacities of everyone involved. By thinking beyond inherited categories and capacities, “beings evoke from and with each other that was truly not there before, in nature or culture,” creating worldings that reside within the psyche in the same way that art does, testing boundaries and creating something completely present and new without ignoring the influence of the past (Haraway 7). “New” should not be mistaken for the hyper-active craving we have for ‘newness’ and the constant stimulation influenced by our growing dependency and obsession with social media. In regards to reconfiguring worlds to allow all living and nonliving creatures the freedom to live art, “new” is this moment, and this moment, this breath, this movement, this moment. The only thing “new” about it is that it is happening now...instead of earlier.

Donna Haraway prompts us to arouse chaos in ourselves and in our worlds by “staying with the trouble” and “learning to be truly present...as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (Haraway 1). I envision staying with the trouble as a way to unapologetically assert materiality and to create with other beings. The body moves in all kinds of imaginable forms akin to creating art, taking shape into new worldings. Ecocritical biosemiotics studies prelinguistic meaning-making of signs and forms of

communication in the biological realm. In the ecocritical text *The Language of Plants*, Monica Gagliano explains language in ecocritical biosemiotics as “world-making” (or poiesis) and “how beings bring forth their lifeworlds in dynamic conjunction with the lifeworlds of other entities” (Gagliano xix). Kudzu creates worldings by rapidly spreading through new landscapes and prompting the humans who live there to interpret kudzu’s existence within a cultural understanding of place and environment. American mythmaking renders kudzu as a terrifying, invasive species that infiltrated the south. Southern literature reflects kudzu’s cultural influence in the human understanding of worlds as they portray kudzu as a shorthand characterization of the southern landscape, like in Willy Morris’s *Good Old Boy: A Delta Boyhood* (1971), or more specifically referring to kudzu in symbolic terms, like in Alice Walker’s 1973 essay “Choosing to Stay Home: Ten Years After the March on Washington” where she describes racism in the south as the kudzu vine that has never been fully uprooted and therefore continues to swallow forests (Finch, Walker). By rapidly spreading through American southeastern landscapes, kudzu infiltrates native ecosystems and frightens humans into rethinking a cultural understanding of nature and history. However, according the US Forest Service, kudzu occupies only about 227,000 acres of forestland, which is about one-tenth of 1% of the south’s 200 million acres of forest, a much lower number than the 7-9 million acres assumed by false sources (Finch).

Even if kudzu covered millions of acres of the southern landscape, I would still acknowledge kudzu as an agent calling forth our attention. Kudzu is provocative and I embrace kudzu as my kin, even if it will not have me. Donna Haraway describes making kin “in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present” (Haraway 1). I observe kudzu with a human mind but relish in the pockets of moments that allow me to feel kindred with kudzu and other plants.

I do not resign to kudzu but dance alongside it in material, earthly power. Environments challenge our survival and we continue to thrive. Kudzu flourishes in dearth landscapes, transforming them into fertile earth. Queer bodies morph constrained gender expressions into playful, creative, living art which is ever-changing and impermanent. Ball culture, an underground LGBTQ+ subculture that originated in the early twentieth century in major cities, defies gender conformity through gender-performative drag competitions, simultaneously epitomizing and satirizing gender and social classes (Bailey 368). Ballroom communities perceive categories of identity like expanded notions of sex, gender, and sexuality as “malleable and mutable” and allows members to articulate identities that their lives in normative society do not accommodate (Bailey 369). Physical and cultural intertwine, projectile, and reflect a fruition, a state of being. I am captivated by my faculty mentor Dr. Heather I. Sullivan’s discussion of Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832) in her article featured in *Goethe Yearbook*, which examines Goethe’s claims that plant agency unfurls and transforms through “intensification,” the term he uses in his 1790 *Metamorphosis of Plants*, describing a process which is always in motion, malleable and conversational with surrounding environments and influences (Sullivan 152-153). An emphasis on change arises from Goethe’s description that a plant “refines its juices” as it constantly experiences metamorphosis and precise malleability to its specific environment (Sullivan 153). Plant sex organs mature and intensify through their life trajectories, just as humans do, yet the shape and form of the plant also depend on how the plant reacts within its specific environment. Each unique individual plant changes through a relationship with its environment, apart from an expected life trajectory that human science may determine for a species of plant. Fruition, flowering, intensification, are all active transmogrifying experiences that bodies undergo.

After flowering, flowers die and fall away from their life source; they die and open space for more growth. Kudzu only flowers after about three years of growth, resembling a pea flower in the way the shape widens at the base and narrows to the tip (SE-EPPC). The half inch flowers are several shades of purple; the larger flowers at the base get the closest to indigo and become significantly more fuchsia, then almost gray lilac. Looking back and thinking about my four-month long study abroad experience in St. Petersburg, Russia, I realize that my own hair morphed through those colors, too, originally dyed as an electric indigo that faded to fuchsia and left behind gray, lilac hair. Although the colors are only coincidence, the relationship between dead flowers and dead hair is jarringly thought-provoking. Dead hair is also a byproduct of fruition; it signifies that growth occurred. To continue functioning in my world, my hair changes and grows and I eventually cut away the curls lapping at my ears and neck. We flower and fall away, everchanging. Dried flowers and dead hair both suggest a living owner, at least at one point, and are fragile crumbs of a body. As we molt our bodies, plants and I change form and interact with our environments. We find ways to grow in earthly power and assert ourselves in new spaces.

I find myself planted in St. Petersburg, Russia in February, a day before turning 21. I am alone and I must acclimate despite the discomforting anxiety coursing through mind and body muscles. On the walk from Chernashevskaya Metro Station to Smolny Cathedral, freezing air whips across every part of my body and seeps into the gaps between hat and coat, coat and glove, face and scarf, touching my skin and leaving behind goosebumps on the surface. Polluted, exhaust-colored slush sags like tired eyes on the sides of sidewalks. My nose and pores breathe air filled with gasoline fumes, cigarette smoke wind-carried from unknown exhales, and my own moist,



humid breath collecting on the inside of my coat collar. My university classes meet in the elongated buildings with classrooms placed behind the cathedral, their exterior sky-blue and white decorations mirroring the cathedral's late baroque architectural style.

I never see trees or other plants unless I walk through the Chernashevskaya Park. Chernashevskaya is the closest metro station to Smolny, about a 40-minute walk if you take your time cutting through the park. During that first month in Russia, I slip on the ice-covered walking paths through the park and learn that hesitant steps cause a fall more than a slipping foot. The naked, gray trees are frozen in memory and sight. While walking on the park paths with trees on either side of me, I stare at them as if they are only my imagination, they stand so quietly and so alone. I go off the path to put naked palm on naked trunk. For those few seconds before the cold air numbs my hand, I sense the taut bark stretched over dense wood. My hand goes numb and then the trunk feels like nothing particular and I keep walking toward Smolny.

Every day, the morning rush silently happens with only sounds coming from boots mashing snow sludge and polyester coats swishing between pumping arms. This morning rush habitually pulses through each one of us that must get off at Chernashevskaya Station on the Red Line to speed walk or bus to our next place.

I typically don't fully wake up until classes get out around 1:00 in the afternoon. My mind is awake but my body aches from a constant, overwhelming anxiety throbbing under my skin. Most days after classes, I return home even though I hate sleeping away the rest of the day. Mom told me that core exercises help with anxiety. A sturdy, stiff center dislodges and expels unwanted nerves. In my room, I shove all the junk on the floor to the side walls: clothes that didn't make it to the closet, papers and folders ignored for a later frantic day of last-minute studying, that one ancient exercise stepping machine with levers like ski poles that my host

mother brought out of her room for me to “exercise sport.” I create just enough space on the floor for me to plank in push-up position and practice the few yoga poses my body remembers. In the preliminary warm-up pose into downward dog, I sense the ripples through my limbs and almost cry. Involuntary ripples, like the muscle-spasms of a lizard tail right after it’s been chopped off a lizard body. I turn onto my back and close my eyes. My eyelids twitch from the strain and I massage my eyeballs behind eyelids to remind my eyes that they are safe in the dark. I curl up with a deep exhale and reach right hand to left foot. I bicycle curl through the twitching, as if every muscles spasm is a response to every strength-building exertion.

My anxious lizard-tail-twitch courses through me and is a byproduct of my precise malleability to place. My skin, mushy insides, and bones soak in sounds, permeated and polluted air, temperate St. Petersburg winds, and unexpected movements. That precise malleability penetrates a space, shields the body from fear, and absorbs anything hurled against it. A body coming from San Antonio, a body used to an ease seeping from sun-blazed sidewalks and dopey movements, thrown into frozen air and mechanical tunnels retracts with a rigid, frantic force. Malleable reminds me of warmth: heated metals melding, a mushy wetness to transform a dearth into fecundity. My body secretes anxiety as it intra-actively co-constitutes with a new environment and remembers that it cannot “simply exist out there” in the world because the world demands that the body address the complexities around it (Alaimo 21).

When Mom visits me in St. Petersburg during a week in early May, I notice a rigidity in her movements and her skittish wandering eyes as she faces the anxiety running under *her* skin, the forced push into physical malleability. As we walk arm-in-arm on the street, her bony fingers clutch and jab into my forearm to keep herself still amidst the rushing world around her. Mom was also a student in St. Petersburg 25 years ago and has not returned to the city until now. She

only saw the beginnings of capitalism in the city and now feels estranged by the unnerving, flashy advertisements and storefronts that litter every single street-level. The streets are louder, the advertisements more aggressive, her accent while speaking Russian comes off slightly Americanized. I sense her settle down when we rush into the backseat of a Yandex taxi where she learns the entire life story of our driver, a Caucasus émigré, and then shares her own life story while using complex Russian vocabulary that I wonder if I will ever learn.

While our worlds meet, Mom and I keep moving, rushing, expelling excess. Entropy teaches that stagnancy leads to rupture. We must keep moving and intertwining ourselves into St. Petersburg if we are to acclimate. Through movement we keep the body engaged and transform. We learn to coexist with our own individual memories of St. Petersburg and marry them to our present reality together.

I disturb spaces. The last time I rode the metro right before it closed at thirty minutes after midnight, I could feel creeping drunk eyes watching me on the train and then out on the street during the ten-minute walk from Primorskaya Metro Station to my apartment building. Around that time, about 50 meters from the mouth of the metro station doors, men slump outside the bars alongside the footpath to my apartment. Sometimes they are distracted by a screaming match with their own woman but usually around midnight the residential streets are quiet and I would be the first female to walk by in a while. They follow me with their eyes and taunt in a high voice meant to be alluring, *devoshka*, girl.

Tonight, they see an unusual purple-haired head and waste their one second window to say something to me as I dash by, debating in their minds whether I am a pretty girl or not. I could never know every single reason that contributed to my decision to bleach and dye all of my

hair electric purple, but the moment I noticed a confused face on those gross drunks instead of one with sneering lust, I knew that I disturbed their stupid hypermasculine, patriarchal blacked-out brains. I disturb or confuse the gender-conforming male gaze and attract intrigued gazes. I curb social interaction to my liking. If I look unusual and off-putting, the right people will feel comfortable around me and the wrong people will find me difficult to approach. With this hair, I can control the gazes I desire and this makes me feel empowered, giving me that strength to walk outside every day, to be in my environment. My physical appearance is a social language that I can manipulate. Gender expectations shape my decisions by reminding me that defying them is much more interesting and playful.

Kudzu expresses a blatant agency that creeps beyond human's idealistic limitations of plants as passive objects. Kudzu speaks and transmits a message to every spooked human brain that an entire forest could not stop this vine from choking it out. As kudzu grows in earthly power and reshapes landscapes, whether perceived as ugly or inspiring, it signifies a communicated change. Humans observe plants' physical forms but cannot readily perceive other linguistic planes that plants interact and communicate with. Plants are organisms that process information with complex communication strategies and negotiate ecologically with their environments through ancient chemical languages shared among insects and other plants (Gagliano xii). Plants emit volatile organic compounds (VOCs) to antagonize herbivores and pathogens and to mutually attract pollinators (Raguso and Kessler 27). Underground root networks interact in negotiating resources or even through battles for resources. An intricate vine winding through spaces is only one dimension humans see.

Since May 2019, the Japanese honeysuckle vine out on my San Antonio patio has been battling a nearby tree. The glass sliding door in my bedroom looks out onto a backyard patio, enclosed by a wooden fence with a fat-trunked live oak tree in the right corner. For months, I watch this vine with curved leaves sharp like arrowheads tug a baby branch down and surround it in coils. The honeysuckle vine has a sturdy, brown stem resembling a tree twig so I cannot distinguish tree branch from vine. The vines spread out all over the top of the wooden fence, beginning from the right corner behind the tree and protruding outward to cover the entire fence. Eventually, the vines will completely cover the wooden fence and imitate the sturdy and dense appearance of a hedge. Vine tips suspend in the air above the clump of vines, waiting for something to grasp and grow onto. They curl and twine on their own, reaching into any direction they desire.

Plants retract according to their environments, not solely on their biological makeup of form. The expectations that humans place on plant biology merely perceives plant growth through a tiny anthropocentric window that only shows a limited interpretation without the interpretive skills of other plants and animals who actively communicate together. Humans perceive the vegetal world as a passive landscape and reveals our own limited knowledge about plant intelligence and communication. Plants react to the expectations placed upon them by their environments and either adapt or die. The perception of plants as invasive beings within human context reveals our own expectations for plants to comfortably (in our perception) cohabit spaces that harmonize with the surrounding vegetal world, as in, they should all function within a weakness we can understand and perceive. When kudzu completely suffocates forests, humans deem them invasive because kudzu is not indigenous to the area and because kudzu demonstrates survival strength above many of the creatures and plants that reside there. Yet, when humans

perceive kudzu as a nuisance and invasion, the human role of implanting kudzu in disturbed environments in the first place is ignored.

Kudzu became a global symbol for the dangers of invasive species yet rarely posed a serious threat to the American southern landscape. American mythmaking powerfully generates language that focuses on the dangers of ‘invasive’ species in the popular imagination, pointing to the distorted way humans (specifically Americans) perceive ‘the natural world’ (Finch). This distorted view assumes a superiority complex that claims authority to decide who is allowed to occupy space and who is not. Kudzu is affiliated with fear-coated language that convinces the mass public that sometimes the plants we see around us do not ‘belong’ there—as in, they come from a place away from here, invade our ecosystems, and compete with ‘our’ wildlife. Kudzu stirs conflict and disrupts ecosystems that were ignored until something menacing appeared to destroy it. I imagine my Russian émigré family building massive houses in the undeveloped forests of Greer and Spartanburg, South Carolina. They contribute to the human invasion into forests. Every time I drive to my uncle Pasha’s house, I squirm from the hundreds of acres stripped and flattened. They always come as a surprise, as if they are valleys or asteroid craters to the dense forest surrounding it.

There is a xenophobic aggression in the language Americans use to describe invasive species. The connotation of the word *invasive* teeters closely to the word *illegal* as mentioned in the human phrase “illegal immigrant.” This phrase deems humans capable of becoming illegal if they trespass into lands without governmentally issued documentation legitimizing their physical existence within that sovereign land. Plants do not abide by sovereign borders but do face conflict among ecosystems. What can we learn from plants in the ways that they face conflict? Human governments would rather turn a human life into an abstract Other instead of conversing

with the peoples and lands that are forced into conflict. The Mexican-American borderlands of South Texas stage this abstraction in the numbers of bodies turned away, in the numbers of bodies interned, and in the numbers of bodies found. Humans decide what invasive means and they decide who thrives.

My Russian family thrives in the United States. My uncles both have their own businesses, their houses continue to grow and their babies multiply every few years. They thrive because America's environment allows them to. Their whiteness goes a long way although they are immigrants. They want the illegal Mexicans to wait their turn and get their papers, just like they did. They favor conservative politics because they believe in an American dream and want their hard work acknowledged. When I think like this, placing Them behind their own uninformed opinions and creating a barrier between us, I act like them: disconnected and alone in power.



It's my last semester of college at Trinity University and I lose my mind, going in circles over hills in Garner State Park. All week, until today just hours before I arrived at the park, the weather stayed in abeyance, somber and drab with sunlight that resembles a muffled lamp hidden from view. In the last thirty minutes of the two-hour drive, the sun burst, spurting light in pocketed spotlights across the flattened croplands in the Texas Hill Country. The clouds slowly break and split up to let more sunlight through. Clouds inspire me because they are perpetual artists, shifting form according to forces around them, yet have an unceasing force of their own. I expose the sunroof above my head right when I see the first beam and smile with a "hell yeah," getting excited for my solo hike. My car thermometer has gone up, hitting close to 80. The sunlight warming up my windows distracts me from an underlying loneliness and hurt that my friends bailed on this trip last minute. I had to pump myself up to leave San Antonio, telling myself *You'll have a lovely time either way. You've been missing plants. This doesn't mean they don't care about you. This doesn't mean that you're alone.*

This morning, my friend Mariano hyped me up for my plans to drive myself to Garner and drop LSD, texting me, "You're going to freaking love omg lol the dimension in the plants and landscape!" I've taken LSD a few times on my own before but never in a place without a friend nearby. I planned this experience to gift myself the weekend after my twenty-second birthday. Before leaving San Antonio, I check out a tent, sleeping bag, and sleeping mat from Trinity OREC just in case I decide to camp overnight on my own.



I arrive at Garner invigorated by the sun and disillusioned by a hazy mind. I'm so on edge that I revert to autopilot-chill-mode; I brush off every anxious press under my skin. I buy a campsite and the woman at the Information Center check-out counter asks, "You're...alone?" and I brush it off as typical motherly worry.

I drive up to campsite #96 and park my car where a tent would usually go, thinking a gesture like that would make sense for someone sleeping in a car. As the gel pyramid-shaped tab dissolves under my tongue, I pull everything out of the back seat, push the back seats down, and unravel sleeping mats and bags, pushing everything up with random blankets I grabbed from home. I prepare my bed for when I return from the afternoon-long hike. I launch my body in there just to test it out. My feet barely skim the trunk door but if I lay at an angle, I won't have to bend my legs.

I wander around the campground edges until I find a trailhead for White Rock Cave Trail. After hiking the 0.3 mile-long trail shaded by cedars, the trail becomes the steep Bird Trail of crumbling limestone. The LSD hits me right as I begin the climbing hike, making me unexpectedly lose breath quicker than usual and making me jump at every human voice I hear in the distance about to pass me on the trail. Inhale, *you're okay*, exhale, *you don't have to be polite, no one will care*. I look up and notice that I am climbing a hill and that my face burns from the unexpected sunlight. After passing a few people, I go off the trail to tuck myself onto a large rock covered with grasses and moss so I can wait out the distance men's voices I hear coming down the hill. I take off a shirt layer and breathe deeply to relax from the strain. I'm rolling now and every object or element looks sharper and every color looks brighter. I imagine this must be how vampires see everything, this must be how cats see everything. The men pass and I keep going up, speaking "Everything will be okay, you are with plants. The plants are with

you.” I reach the hilltop and the trail branches into Foshee Trail. I ignore my map, reassuring myself that *does it really matter?* I keep asking myself questions and then never answer them.

*Are you lost? Does it matter? Do you feel lonely? Are you spiraling?*

I feel enclosed and funneled by the cedars on either side of me. My skin brushes against tiny, scale-like evergreen leaves that sweep upward resembling brushed wavy hair or whipped cream. They press into many little branches at twig ends and seem sharp where seedlings and new growth perk out. The gray, shaggy bark moves and frays upward, twisting around the trunk. The stripped shreds evoke movement and reminds me of rushing river water, each trunk another ripple in my periphery. Wispy, lichen-covered, sturdy trunks encompass me and in all their present stillness, show me their agile capability of movement.

My body takes me down the trail while my mind stays stuck reflecting. Emotional phantasmagorias flood me. Mom. Dad. Mom. Dad. Brother. Mom. Dad. Brother. My mind trudges out memories of emotions to play on repeat. I heave and buckle with panic. I bend my torso and head down between my thighs and a scream escapes. Mom tucking me in at night and sitting on the edge of my bed, petting my hair until I fall asleep. I never fall asleep with her there, only waiting for her to believe it, so I can watch the lined beam of light get smaller between the edge of the frame and the door as she closes it. Before she gets up to leave, she takes one more breath before stepping off; I always wonder what she thinks as she pets me. Dad hunched at his drafting table late at night. I sneak out of bed several minutes after Mom leaves my room so I can prove to myself that yes, Dad’s lamp is still on and yes, he is still hunched over the five-foot-long floor plans. I’m sure he tucks me in sometimes, but all I want to remember is the rounded bone of his spine sticking up as his head dips down, his elbows splayed out, his hands always hidden behind his body, tucked in front of him and drawing, labeling, erasing, writing on the

table. Brother five years old and pouting at his YMCA basketball game. He screeches and plops down on his ass in the middle of the court. No one really knows why he's upset, just that we all feel ashamed he's so sore. Me and brother hiding in the narrow walk-in closet of our shared room in Dad's apartment playing a handheld Leap Frog game and making sure the sound effects don't travel through the walls to Dad's room beside ours. One sound could be a little too loud and annoy Dad's nap. He'd bust our door open and scream "Could you just fucking SHUT UP," so we resort to the closet. Every memory sends me deeper into a well, the ground water whamming wave after wave, making me hold onto myself as I drown and sink deeper. I moan *thank you thank you* to the cedars guiding me and stirring me along. My mind has sunk but my body pushes forward.

My eyes are tear-blurred. I remember to wipe them. My sweaty collarbone and temples get chills from a breeze and I notice the sky is blanketed gray again. I spot a gray, holey basalt rock and sit down to stare at the lumpy clouds. A kaleidoscope of violence rolls before me, the gray clouds as backdrop with my mind's projected visualizations. I shake my head over and over, "Fucking *leave*," to get rid of the men and their grotesque movements contorting on replay in the treetops. My Russian uncles. The men from Russian Church. The Russian family friend with a bald spot and deeply dimpled chin. Dedushka on his wedding night. Mom's grandfather, Babushka's father. I only see the men because the women they assaulted were rendered invisible and subaltern.

"Aaah, get out." I jump up and keep going forward; my legs keep me moving and I let the crying flood back.

I come around a bend and gasp from the view. The sun is peaking out again and I see patches of sunlight push their way out of the clouds. Light falls on the repeating, green-sloped

hills in front of me and I throw all my stuff on the ground to feel lightness return to me. I see signs of the early stages of a sunset: the light feels deeper, heavier, more golden. Large shadows shade entire hillsides, the sun inching west. I sit on the overlook and begin to calm down. I take photos and send them to Dad and Mom, pushing away any teetering anxiety coming from thinking about them again. Texas sotol agaves surround me. I first notice them from their tickling, long, narrow leaves with spiny edges brushing my hand as I stretch my arms. Their claw-edged leaves are flat, slender, and curve toward a leaf tip, coming from a hidden base within the dense central plant clump. I pet them for a while before getting up to stretch. I repeat the Russian verb *to pull* in both aspects, *tyanut*, *potyanut*, as I bend and focus on muscle sensations. Tension typically builds up in my neck and I feel the constricted pain pulsing right below the back of my neck. I windmill my arms until I remember that powerful whooshing does not bode well on a cliffside.

I collect my things and keep on the trail. I pause because I see a Mexican-American family of about 15 resting on the hill adjacent to mine. I watch grandparents and great uncles and aunts rest on the steep rocks while younger family members and children climb and explore the region, waiting for the rest of the family to make moves further upward. One particular old man's red snapback trucker hat catches my eye; it reminds me of my Papa's: white front with a red rim and red mesh on the back. Another old man has a wide-brimmed brown hat that shades his face, the indented peak angled toward our valley. I know they can spot me because we both peak above the trees at such a steep slope, a valley of trees between us. I am reaching the end of Foshee Trail, which branches off to Old Baldy Trail, the trail the family rests on now. Old Baldy twines up the hill to guide hikers to the Old Baldy peak, which overlooks the clear-water Frio River. The moment I start back up and lose sight of the family as I get deeper into the tree-

covered valley, they gather themselves to keep going up. Am I invading their space? I want them to know that they don't need to move because of me. Would I make them uncomfortable? Or are they simply not in the mood to face a stranger right now? The self-conscious anxiety that I am intruding on their lovely resting time together plays on repeat in my mind. *I should have stayed put.* A trail creates an opportunity for movement and I walk on.

I hike up Old Baldy and perch on the cliffside. I gawk at the idyllic scene below me on the Frio. Families wade in the shallow end, I can even see their blurry feet from all the way up here, the water is so clear. I can see the edges of land underneath the water creating rounded drop-offs and mini cliffs under the surface—all typical river-bottom landscape that I never thought I would be able to perceive. I imagine them as tectonic plates about to rub and rupture the peace settling here. I'm watching a treasure dim as the sun sets.

I go back down the hill but cannot decide if I should get back to my campsite while the light is still out. I plunge my body back toward the Foshee Trail, opposite the direction back down to the campsites at the base of Old Baldy Trail, and don't even wonder why. I reach the spot from where I watched the family and sit back down to gape at the full moon waiting for the sun to completely fall underneath the horizon. I forget that night is coming. Mom is facetimeing me and I want to talk to someone, so I answer. She sounds concerned, "Are you all by yourself out there? Why? Is it already dark?"

I blurt with an unconstrained shrill tinged at the tip of my voice because the acid hides self-awareness of any sort of insanity disgorging, "You know, I had a feeling I would get lost but I honestly was just lost all day and didn't think much of it since I could just keep going until this all ends."

I look at the tiny rectangle in the right corner of my phone screen, my curly head just a shadow with deep ocean blue behind me. Mom looks concerned and I hear her let out, “Ummm I—”

“Mom, it’s all good!! I’m getting the map right now and will head down the hill right now. I’ll get back right now. It’ll all happen right now. Bye, love you.”

The black silhouettes of the tree tops seep into the deep blue sky; black bleeds into the sky as my mind smudges more at the edges. The full moon is tonight. It looks so fat and beaming, all the light around me coming from it. How does the moon look so precisely round? Round things make me want to snatch and rip them before my imagination of their precise roundness matches the possible reality. Humans think symmetry is beautiful. Humans think binaries are inevitable. Chaos moves beyond binaries and I rest in this rushing ongoingness in my head, a still body moving hundreds of miles on an airplane. The chaos here is not opposite to the creative chaos that catapults my expression into something ethereal and thought-provoking, the chaos that expresses kudzu’s power. These two chaoses are in and of each other. They are not side by side, suggesting opposition. Forget yin and yang for a second and imagine ugly, banal mud with indecipherable mounds inside the blended umber. You do not even have the chance to see the different chaos swirl together like a vanilla chocolate pudding snack pack. All we see is the mashed earthen umber.

In the dark, I spaz. I’m coming down and edging from the LSD. I pretend I’m sober because I need to get off this fucking hill. I hear children’s voices around and soothe myself *It’ll all be okay, there are also kids out here. We have fun hiking in the dark.*

This stupid iPhone flashlight is a joke. It blurs a circle around me and I still have to squint if I want to feel reassured about what I see in front of me. I pass a map and I keep walking

past it. Ten minutes later I realize I passed a map and did nothing. I have internet access and can find a map on my phone but every time I open Chrome, I scream and just keep walking. I want to avoid maps because they require a tethered, practical mind to decipher and follow.

I am alone and this settles into my skin.

I whimper to the plants hidden by darkness around me, “I wanna die, I wanna die, I wanna die, I wanna die, what the fuck is that, I wanna die, why the fuck did I do this, I wanna die, I’m alone. No one fucking came with me and I’m all alone.” I don’t sense the plants responding anymore, a cold emptiness has replaced them. My power is charged but spewing into dark directions.

This spaz topples any fears of dying and craves self-destruction. My mind is not instinctually following my bodily desire to live, as it tends to do while I express through my world. My mind does not give a fuck about living or not. My mind and voice fire out groans and breaths. I feel like Grendel groveling to his cave, completely immovable and unphased while swimming through fire-water but screaming when he reaches his home. I have outcasted myself and the monsters in my head are playing along, jeering and stabbing fingers into my flesh, looking up at me to seek my approval to continue, so I chide them on, *Yes, you’re doing wonderful, dear*. This chaos is an art, too. Instead of the clouds moving and morphing through charging whips, the agency is inverted and the air surrounding the clouds are compressing and crushing the clouds into shape. The environment tells flesh what to do and I stumble down paths to get off the hill with no other option but to lose my self.

The moon still shines above me but sometimes trees block the light and I must breathe deeply until the moon comes back into view. The sky feels like an upside-down pit hovering above me squeezing and mashing me down like the kneaded erasers Dad always left on his

drafting table squished from the force of his thumb and index finger. I am a thumb pressing into the sky, yet the sky eraser leaves my skin with a tactile memory that means nothing particular. In my forging, forceful motion I am alone.





About a month later, at the closest gas station outside the Chisos Basin entrance to Big Bend National Park, my phone lights up with an email notification, the first notification I've received since Julia and I left our campsite located outside Terlingua this morning. We only get phone signal the moment we crest the hill right into Terlingua. I just swerved into the four-pump graveled gas station and shimmied the butt of my car beside a pump, navigating around the crowded lot of cars and hazy air from tires kicking up dust. As I open the passenger side door to get out and pump the gas, I only read the email subject heading from TU President: "COVID-19 UPDATE: Changes to Campus Operations." I barely scan the email with phrases like "synchronous remote teaching" and "suspended semester" before throwing my phone down in the front seat as I struggle to force my worn sneakers on bare-skinned feet, jamming sandy feet into fraying sneaker guts. Julia already left the car to go get maps from the store and I don't have anyone to scream to about how frazzled my brain feels. I feel the inside ridges of my sneakers rubbing against my feet and sweat collect under my toes, with the back of my left sneaker still stuck under my heel, as I pace back and forth in front of my car. The gas station isn't paved and has the same white dusty sand as our campsite. I'm pacing and dust is bellowing around me. I must have looked like my own little tornado with my anxious, stormy thoughts manifesting into every jerky strut coming out of dust-coated legs.

Out here, my skin collects dust and reminds me of the resin of dirt and sand my porous skin leaves behind as it inhales air around me. I actually love it, being reminded that my body is

also on sandy earth alongside the dried shrubs, grasses, and agaves that nestle into the west Texas landscape. Receiving an email from my university about the sweeping dangers of a novel virus invading congregations of people, forces me to reexamine the way that I previously ignored the severity and power of COVID-19, a novel, never-seen-before corona virus that has swept through about 160 countries and still traveling, every day more and more alarming numbers of infections and fatalities rising.

Julia and I get back in the car and drive to the Chisos Basin entrance. A mile past the entrance into the park, as we wind through hilly turns and dart across wide-open expanses of flat land valleyed by massive canyons, I already forget about the virus and look in awe at the earth surrounding us. My coronavirus thoughts go in and out like my cellphone signal: unexpected, alarming, and then vanishing. I already feel minutely small and insignificant surrounded by the Chisos Mountains, 38 million years-old molten rock shaped by soil erosion to form the forested slopes, gorges, and rocky spires that are evident today. My human problems and fears disappear into the ever-reaching openness around me. Jackrabbits trigger gleeful grins from my face. Roadrunners rush on their way, never pausing to study us, on its way to some objective. A desert mouse plays curiosity like I do, unrestrained and unexplained. These mountains and the plants and animals that have made their homes here will not sense our panic as less and less people come to visit the park, following the guidelines for social distancing.

We set off to hike the Window Trail, a popular hiking trail for Chisos Basin visitors. Everyone we pass by gives a cheerful, pleasant “Hello” or “How’s it going,” adding to the pleasant ambiance of being outside surrounded by massive, dense rocks and kindred people who also sense the vast beauty around us. Cool sweat on my neck and forehead reminds me of my skin during that solo hike at Garner State Park. I try not to get too triggered by the Chisos

Mountain landscape, reminding myself that Garner was much greener and moist. There, red-ribbed stone did not loom over me, forcing me to crane my neck upward and sigh from a calming scan of the shapes formed by millions of years of erosion. The shapes seem random to me, reminding me of the chaos of art in everything existing and imagined. Chaos Theory perceives chaos as the irregular and unpredictable movement of time in nonlinear complexities but I am more intrigued by the chaos that occupies my creativity and molds affective memories and stimuli into something else—into art (Jorgensen 550). On that solo hike in Garner, I fell into a deep hole that lied to me, untethered me from every connection that my body and material reality—my environmental surroundings—symbiotically link to. Wind eroding stone, thoughts eroding self.

In a sinister way, COVID-19 reminds me of my body's connection to everything and everyone, ecologically depending on the earth from which we emerged and on those that cohabit with us. This virus outbreak reminds me of humanity's destructive influence on the binds between animals, plants, and environment. Humans disturb ecosystems, forgetting that counterpunches can arise at any moment, out of any ecosystem. Coronaviruses are zoonotic, meaning they transmit from animals to humans, making removing the virus difficult because they have an animal reservoir. In her TEDtalk, global health specialist Alanna Shaikh explains how "COVID-19 most likely skipped from animals into people at a wild animal market in Wuhan, China" and that there are going to be more epidemics as a result of the way humans interact with the planet ("Coronavirus is our future"). Climate change caused by detrimental human impact in the Anthropocene is only part of this reality, as humans push into the last wild spaces on the planet. Shaikh stresses: "When we burn and plow the Amazon rain forest so that we can have cheap land for ranching, when the last of the African bush gets converted into

farms, when wild animals in China are hunted to extinction, human beings come into contact with wildlife populations that they've never come into contact with before, and those populations have new kinds of diseases: bacteria, viruses—stuff we're not ready for" ("Coronavirus is our future"). Humans are susceptible to destruction caused by the agency of other living organisms.

As an upper respiratory infection, COVID-19 hinders breathing, the essence of living as bodies evolved to take in oxygen from earth's atmosphere to produce energy to go on. Surrounded by ancient rocks and dirt that beckons me to grovel in, I know I will never be left alone. Inevitable change reminds me I have breathing to do and that my energy will not waver as it precisely retracts and interacts.

Back at our campsite, Julia and I stand naked in front of a plastic five-gallon water container with a spigot for water to run. We scream from exhilaration and mania. We didn't think ahead that the spewing water would turn the desert dirt into mud and we mash our toes in with surprise, dancing from the absurdity of the moment and fidgeting from the goosebumps forming all over our cold skinned bodies. The horizon is blood orange behind Julia's laughing face and shrub silhouettes crown her head. We are at least ten miles away from the closest road and we have the surrounding hills and dirt to keep company.

There's no virus out here and we revel in the last moments of freedom before we head back to our heavily human-populated lives, where we must socially distance and adapt accordingly to dodge human-carried environmental dangers. By pushing into a wild space, humans contracted a novel virus that can rapidly travel from human to human, our fluids and germs interacting more than we like to realize. No generation alive today has lived to see a pandemic like the one unfolding in front of us now. Coronavirus spreads and feeds and humans must act accordingly.

Three weeks have gone by and we are still in isolation, separated from each other in a bid to slow down the virus. I stare at the plants in my backyard even more than before.

I set my squeaking wooden desk chair in my backyard to give myself a clear view of the honeysuckle vine. For the first time in the ten months I have been living here, I notice a thick, interwoven mass flanking the side of my apartment building. The honeysuckle vine threaded into a thick cord with infinite stems twines around and around all the way up to the gutters, allowing the vines to disperse from the center cord into trailing movement along the side wall. The vines are strapped to the side paneling as if they were trailing through fertile, densely packed soil. They must be clutching onto every ragged mark, chip in the paint, or frayed wood of the side paneling in order to tether onto my upstairs neighbor's windowpane and the gutters flanking it. I look back at the vine stretching and pouring atop the wooden fence and follow the vine trailing up the live oak twiggy branch, I return to the question of whether the vine strategizes and plans ahead to intrude on the live oak tree trunk or if it trails up what it can get its vines on, as demonstrated by other curled vine tips suspended in open air. I've learned to watch plants as exemplifiers of what the living can and will do. A vine tip reaching out does not have to be calculated or a reckless frivolity. The honeysuckle vine is shaped and does the shaping.

Metaphysical consciousness is not an experience unique to human minds and I wonder if wind can be songs and if leaves warmed by sunlight can be praying. These similarities reside in my imagination and I don't expect them to resemble plant experiences or to speak for plants. I find kinship in the spaces between us and in what we can create together as companions.

In my isolation, I find comfort in remembering kudzu and what I have learned about my world and myself while making kin. I invade the spaces that I can and watch what materializes in

the spaces that I cannot. Every breath I take is a prayer of gratitude and I eat my heart out in love letters to kudzu, which will outlive me and continue to shape and change. Even monsters find their resting places inside me, dotted in temporal time as a vine, a virus, or trauma.

I ferment chaos, twined and tethered, in perennial kinship.

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