

This essay discusses instances of trauma and sexual harassment/assault.

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“You look familiar.”

The self is this verdant forest in my mind, with hues of green, and hills in the distance. It is supposed to be a continuum, one that has fragmented largely because of past events in my life, and as much as I don't want it to define me — because of trauma.

There's a significant break in this dense forest, where the leaves in the trees turn red from the radioactive fallout, where birds avoid. It feels — it is — devoid of life. Some parts of it are charred, burnt. A gorge runs through the middle, the Break, a gaping void in the continuum.

I remember when that forest was still green; more than 10 years ago.

“I think I used to know you, but that doesn't really matter.”

Compared to then, the current rift in the continuum — the event that preceded an entire change in my identity — is subtle; a small cliff, deliberate, as new forest grows onward and flowers bloom. That place feels whole. It feels constant, clear.

But the forest 10 years ago — back when it was a thin, sickly green — was ravaged by fire, by floods. Thick, deep gashes in the ground; silt and sludge in the rivers.

There was never a singular event that caused that degradation; there were many. Nuclear meltdowns; forest fires, pollution — abstracted trauma to the ecological system that is my self. Yet, I've been taught to never really see that Break in the continuum — the abstracted trauma — as something that defined me.

There's a morbid joy perhaps in looking back; panicked self-reflection in that uncertainty during my transition has evolved into a self-assured trek through the Break; it feels as though I'm a vlogger charting a newly reopened, rehabilitated wasteland for the first time, setting up a camera and recording what I see.

Then editing the parts that I know no one else will like and leaving them on the cutting room floor.

“Tell me about your life in primary school.”

My very first memory — or, at least, one that I preserved and brought from the continuum, one that is planted in the forest after the Break — was when I mistook the Mandarin phrase for

'white paper' for something else. I was telling my mother that I wrote a book, and used that word because I thought it just meant books that had white covers.

This little tree, the little abstract, has grown into perhaps a strong teak tree. It's bloomed, several times; and yet as I find its descendants in the quiet, lifeless zone beyond the break, I find several other memories.

One where I got my first prize for being good at English (a feat considering my household was mainly Mandarin-speaking); a set of Enid Blyton Noddy books.

One where I had a stomachache and rushed to a squat toilet only to produce a perfectly round doody.

And many others from a deterministic view of my old name — being given the YA novel [Switchers](#) as a Christmas present; reading that book and experiencing what I'm realising was a form of dysphoric envy for the first time. [Or at least that's what I'm telling myself now.]

Others, still intently repressed, dead trees surrounded upon other dead trees.

I know what they were. My birthname was easy to make puns with and people took advantage of that; to the point where it upset.

I know what they were. I bonded very well to my English tuition teacher, and considered being named after him when I was 11.

I know what they were. I never liked getting my hair cut, and the experience of having it cut by a razor made me so distraught; I don't know what happened but it never happened again.

I know what they were. Leafing through old *Our Daily Bread* from my sister, who converted into Christianity, and converting to Christianity, if only briefly.

I know what they were. But I don't know how they defined me.

“What about your life in secondary school?”

I am aware of important life events here. I obtained an aggregate of 253 in the Primary School Leaving Examination. I applied to go to River Valley High School, but couldn't get in, and was relegated to another school instead.

A Chinese school. A young self decided to go try taking Malay (Special Programme) but failed, completely.

I remember being loud. I remember being weird. I remember being obsessed with [Qzy and Millie](#), having read through its entire [webcomic](#) archive in one sitting.

I remember

too many things.

Or

not

enough.

“Was I, by any chance, abusive? When you used to know me?”

There is one memory that sticks out from that period, of a dismembered frog.

No, not of the one you would commonly encounter in Science class. But one we caught after hours in the hot sun practising for a dance performance the school made us go through, to perform for the National Day Parade, in the field that is still, today, empty State land.

I don't remember how it was caught. I don't remember touching it. Maybe I did.

I remember the penknife. I remember its dismembered self, bloodless, floating in a container of water. I remember the admonishments from a teacher who told us that maybe it could have been alive and that it could have passed out from heatstroke. I remember frantically trying to piece together what happened. I remember being tenuous friends with the person who owned the penknife. I remember his violence, and I remember him being tired of me. I remember his allergy to mothballs.

I do remember his name, of course. But that is irrelevant here.

The sun shines through the deadwood, blazing. I remember the leaves being tall, overwhelming, the forest coated in a thick fog.

I remember too many things, or not enough.

Maybe I am to blame, for how I was treated. For my own behaviour. But saying that belies a narrative that perhaps I should be responsible, and if I wasn't, that I would have been a victim.

None of that matters now.

The forest is dead. I called myself Ozymandias for a very long time, after the Arctic fox character in Ozy and Millie.

That self, too, is dead now, repressed. I can see the abstraction that was that period of time; the forest that was that gentle self-exploration, of identifying with a character that was existing in a disjointed environment, much like the [disjointed remnant](#) of the statue in the poem we were named after.

I plant a little flower by the oasis that still exists, so it will not be missed.

By the flower is a little sapling, of a story I first wrote for English class, of two girls living in a fictional island in the middle of the Pacific. The story starts with one of them having psychotherapy, because she is queer.

I look at that sapling, and wonder if that was supposed to be aspirational.

“Your life in junior college. You were... bullied.”

Some time in junior college I decided that there should have been a big reset. A complete escape, a sprint away from the continuum that defined me then. A tiny cliff exists here; I say tiny, but it is tall still, compared with the deep gorge that defined the Break in the continuum.

I remember the desperate search for friends. The desire for the charm of my class manager, his self-confidence exuding and resonating with many. The attachment to a girl who was cool and confident, who dragged me to dance as I tried to navigate my awkward body. The *envy* as she did it.

I remember a friend from secondary school coming up to me and saying intently, in the kindest way he could, that this wasn't how I made friends.

I remember the idea of *wanting people to like the shell of a person that I was, so that I would, I hope, like myself too.*

And of course, I remember the latent desire for intimacy. I feel deeply disgusted here, so grossed out; seeing the tar pits from the latent want that always crept up beneath me and ate me up from the inside. The want that consumed me every morning and evening. The want that was simply a chore.

The want that should have been a part of me, but felt so foreign. The want that left a gaping hole in me.

It is here where the brokenness became distinct; the actions driven by it creating the first crack that would become the deep gorge that is the Break. The alienation, the dissociation, something I never dealt with before; these feelings creating that sickly green of the forest and thick fog. Fog that feels somewhat nearly solid. Fog that nearly has form.

But it is also here where a decision was made; closer to the end of junior college: to seek expertise in the thing that gave me the most affirmation, writing. To become a journalist.

There's a fork in the land around this singular decision; a forest that would have been unencumbered if not for the Break, divided in half by that all-encompassing ravine. The trees here are old, strong; I could live here if I wanted, and I did live here for a while.

But it ultimately feels, still, like something was not right. Like there wasn't a whole.

Like I wasn't a whole.



There is a certain ego death that happens when you enlist. Perhaps there is an excitement around the rite of passage marketed and whitewashed through numerous pieces of cultural content, but that didn't exist for me.

I went in, and I stopped existing.

No, that would have been a lie.

I did still exist, on weekends, during times I was alone, during time given to myself. But my self was given over to a collective. My self served a collective, as it always would have; it served what was in essence the functions of the State. In the mud, outfield, in uniforms, holding rifles, at the range, in the base, on the ship. There was no existence, and there was only the collective.

I remember, in the jungles that existed that marked this time, attempting to survive, attempting to be a functional part of the collective. Maybe, perhaps, even becoming a leader in the collective. Attempting to thrive in the collective.

I remember just counting down the days till I could be myself again.

Here lies deep gashes in the ground too, the collapse of the self within the Break. Patches of deadwood border the Break in the continuum. The void, within this exact time period.

“I went to a large group awareness training course. I don't know if I can call it a cult.”

The Break is a gash cut deep into the continuum; the erasure of little moments numbering in the thousands. All gone, clouded in a pervasive mist.

There is a note from the Break, from a [deleted Reddit account](#). The dreamy, dissociative quality of the Break disappears in this note; replaced by the unending fury, the fire that burnt at its creation and that continued to smolder. The fires that consumed several friendships.

Entering the Break, I find fragments. Here's what I remember:

The Boy Scout uniform I was given without any patches.

Spending two hours watching *Rent*.

The way people marvelled at my youth then, and the initiative I was taking to grab the tools I needed to "improve" myself.

The actress and coach sobbing on the phone.

Her anger at me, when a squadmate decided to take my phone by force and sexually harass her, insulting her, asking her for pictures, calling her a bitch.

When that squadmate sexually harassed me; and forced me to kneel over him before stopping, and telling me that I should never bend my knees for anyone.

The finality and calm I found after that harassment was over. The rage at her belief that it was my responsibility to stop him.

The fire that consumed the Break after.

"What's that?"

"Life coaching."

"Yes, those are cults."

I remember excitedly setting goals. To fix and define what I needed to do — to find love; to build a better society; to be a better sibling and child.

To enrol; to find new people, broken, and fix them by bringing them into the cult.

I never understood how disempowered I was back then. How the initiatives I wanted to make, as a boy at 19, were unsupported. How political paranoia nearly torpedoed one of the things I wanted to create — a writing course for people interested in political commentary and citizen journalism. How my father would never be happy with me unless I found true independence (something that now, I see as an act of love from him). How I lost control, and how I never had control from the start.

Exploring the fragmented space that is the Break — I find the source of my own anger. The desire to light everything on fire, to destroy everything associated with what happened. The smoldering rage that remains.

Perhaps that's why, despite many other moments preserved in an archive that I can try to navigate from my phone, nearly nothing remains from that era.

Of course, I remember who was there. While trying to find things that corroborated these memories, while trying to remember what the Break looked like before, I found a name list.

People who were openly yet quietly queer; who I had admired for their bravado.

People on the tangent, circling the media industry I am in.

People who I realise have so many red flags.

“I remember a brokenness that I was desperately trying to fix.”

The Break was a catastrophic division in this continuum of selves, that occurred because of a desperate search of a solution to this brokenness.

That quest never ended; the hole in my personality always led to me feeling as though I was mirroring the people around me, a kaleidoscope of behaviours I mimicked. The gap in my identity that led to me pursuing intent and purpose, that led me to the cat shelter; that led me to devote my time towards a purpose there. The brokenness led me to fill my heart with ideas of a grandiose resolve; ideas of changing hearts and minds through thoughtful opinion, through thorough reporting; through journalism.

And yet the Break made me distrustful of myself, especially when I began my gender journey.

The Break, a place where I was consistently told that I was supposed to feel this way or feel that way, where I was told that I was responsible for everything that happens to me and everything that will happen to me.

The Break, a place where I was told that I was insufficient for not bringing “positive energy” into the room, for not being happy with myself.

The Break, a place where I expected to take control, but lost control instead.

And so I find myself asking — am I not experiencing the expected effects of a thing I believed was a solution? Is the problem, of my unhappiness, my brokenness, not solved? Would having intent be the resolution to that brokenness?

What am I supposed to be feeling?

What am I supposed to know?

“So, when did you know? During childhood?”

I'm here, beyond the Break, for a particular reason — to find that tree, that memory of a very first non-binary self, whose descendants populate the verdant forests of the Now. They bloom like cherry blossoms in a clear blue sky, populated with the occasional cloud.

That gentle sapling never really had the room to grow, not in the compulsory masculinity, the trauma, the dissociation, that ravaged the forests before the Break. And yet it still spawned... something.

It's gone now. There are a thousand candidates for saplings like it; from the oddity I felt while reading a model composition, perhaps, about aliens who transformed people by taking apart their skin from the seams; the first time I orgasmed; the first time I understood the importance of my boyhood; the first time my sister insisted upon the importance of National Service in shaping me as a man; the first time I saw a trans woman on a Taiwanese talk show; the first time I read about gender confirmation surgeries on Wikipedia; the first time I listened to Beyonce's *If I Was A Boy*; the first time I wrote about two lesbian characters in a composition; the first time I stumbled upon yuri manga...

None of them

feel

true.

“I don't remember.”

In a world obsessed with narratives, stories, prequels, lore — never having a clear beginning, a clear explanation — is anxiety-inducing. It's an opportunity for existential crises; the way we understand the world being so linear means that there has to be a start; there has to be a beginning.

When that beginning can be defined in so many ways; when we debate about what that beginning looks like, and how it feels like to people who have never experienced anything close to the transgender experience — it so deeply ingrains the argument that my queerness is inherent, that it is an *essential quality*. Yet the (often binary) alternative seems to be this idea that people wake up and decide they want to be another gender, when that too hasn't been my experience.

Was there a very first non-binary self, or was I non-binary from birth? Was the non-binary experience always there, or did it only begin when I started telling people of who I truly was?

Was there a truth, or just a narrative that approximated the truth? Was there even a narrative, or a series of disjointed moments, of a disjointed self, or a disjointed Continuum of Selves?

My world was not linear. Any semblance of linearity was forced upon myself by the cruelty of being pushed through space and time; I line the various moments, the various selves of the Continuum, in one line — like pearls on a string — because I have to.

Doing so is where the Break is the most stark; when you look across the Continuum, you see it — the gorge, the chasm, dividing my selves into two.

I can define that brokenness now; the *alexithymia*; the idea that I couldn't understand or empathise; the many times I was told I lacked emotional intelligence; the inability to love completely; the inability to relate to others, despite desperately trying to do so, desperately learning to do so.

I can define it, because the feeling of brokenness has largely disappeared.

I am whole, in the moment. But I was broken, and by the nature of my self, I am broken. I am whole and broken at the same time. The Break does not define me, but it does. The Now does not define me, but it does.

I am standing in front of the cherry blossoms.

I am home.