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JOANNA POCOCK

SURRENDER: WHO WILL PLOUGH MY VULVA?

As for me, Inanna,
Who will plow my vulva?

Great Lady, the king will plow your vulva.
I, Dumuzi the King, will plow your vulva.

Then plow my vulva, man of my heart!
Plow my vulva!

- From an ancient Sumerian poem

EcoSexuality is about honoring the divine sexual nature of our planet and
of us as part of the interconnected web of all existence.

- Sarah Heartsong

1

CHUCK PICKS ME up on the dot of 10:00 AM from a house in
Northeast Portland where I am staying with friends. What you
first notice about Chuck are her long unshaven legs, huge blue eyes, easy
smile, and unflinching politeness. She is open in that American way as if
ready for just about any eventuality: rain, sun, the end of the world. It is
all to be taken in her stride. This is good because Chuck and I are complete
strangers and are about to drive two hours to somewhere called Wahkiacus,

where Surrender, the fourth Ecosex Convergence, is taking place. It wasn't easy finding Chuck. Back home in London, I had given up on getting to Surrender. I am not a driver and had come up empty-handed after asking every person I knew in the American West if they or a friend would be able to ferry a fifty-two-year-old woman to a sex festival. At the last minute, my partner remembered someone we knew who had recently moved to Portland. She had a friend who had a friend and so on... which led me to 27-year-old Chuck who had just quit her job and sold a house she had co-owned with her ex-fiancé. In her words, she was "out to find freedom." So when I suggested that in return for driving me to the Ecosex Convergence, I would fork out the 230 dollars for a ticket, she couldn't believe her luck.

We head east along Highway 14, hugging the Columbia River which cuts through high basalt cliffs strung with thin waterfalls. I am distracted from the scenery by our conversation. Chuck seems to know what ecosexuality is—put simply, it is a social movement whose adherents put their relationship to the earth on equal par with their relationship to humans. Chuck also tells me she is into the kink scene. She is twenty-five years younger than I am and identifies as non-binary. I air my concerns about ecosex—or more specifically, my reluctance to be sexually open with strangers.

"You'll just have to get in touch with the untouchable goddess within you," Chuck shoots back.

A dirt road after the tiny town of Klickitat takes us up some steep, sharp switchbacks. We come to a patch of cleared, hard-packed land dotted

with a few small wooden huts and some open-sided wall tents selling t-shirts and scarves. Beyond the cleared area is a forest of Douglas fir and oak. People are hefting coolers and backpacks out of their trunks. As we roll up to the Surrender reception booth in Chuck's white Subaru, we are greeted by three smiling women. They tell us where to park and where we can pitch our tents. A friendly middle-aged woman with close-cropped red hair, initiates me by sliding a bit of string around my neck upon which is a small dangling shell. This represents my chosen pathwork, or course of study.

She then asks if she can hug me, to which I reply, "Yes."

I stand slightly stunned in the drizzle. The planning that went into me being here has conspired to make me feel extremely tired. Crossing the ocean with borrowed camping gear and finding someone who would agree to drive me were only two of the many logistical issues. But here I am. The 175 people around me look so interesting. So free. So happy. So unlike me. I am wearing jeans and a heavy fleece to ward off the cold. But there are people in gauzy numbers, in bikinis, circus pants, flowing dresses, bare chests, leather straps criss-crossing torsos, hats, tattoos, and tribal piercings. I am a schoolmistress among mermaids and sprites.

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I FIRST HEARD the term ecosexuality while reading about Annie Sprinkle, the porn star, artist, and activist who is said to have coined the term. I had seen Sprinkle perform at London's ICA in the mid-1990s when she was keen to show us all her cervix. She surfaced for me at a point when I was

weighing up Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin's anti-porn stance with the more sex-positive attitudes in Sallie Tisdale's 1995 book *Talk Dirty to Me*. Sprinkle's openness wasn't something that came naturally to me, and yet it enticed me. I wanted to be the kind of person who could embrace it. This ecosex festival has grown organically out of Annie Sprinkle's mission to make sex less shameful and environmentalism more sexy.

In their *Ecosex Manifesto*, Sprinkle and her partner and fellow artist-activist Elizabeth Stephens write: "We are the Ecosexuals. The Earth is our lover. We are madly, passionately, and fiercely in love... We treat the Earth with kindness, respect, and affection... We are skinny dippers, sun worshippers, and stargazers. We caress rocks, are pleased by waterfalls, and admire the Earth's curves often. We make love with the Earth through our senses. We celebrate our E-spots. We are very dirty."

There is a playful and provocative side to Sprinkle and Stephens' manifesto, but they are serious about raising awareness of the earth's degradation at the hands of corporate interests. Their film *Goodbye Gauley Mountain: An Ecosexual Love Story* is about their efforts to save Stephens' home turf in the Appalachian Mountains (the second most biodiverse region in the world after the Amazon) from mountain top removal mining practices. But instead of earnest pleas for help, they reframe environmentalism in terms of love stories, tragedies, dramatic relationship upheavals, and breakups. It is *An Inconvenient Truth* directed by Pedro Almodóvar. This approach may not work for everyone, but it is moving the fight in another direction and rallying a more diverse group of people.

Chuck parks the car, and I scour the forest for a flat piece of ground. I am interrogating myself over my reasons for coming here. If I don't want to have sex with strangers, then what the heck am I doing? I am searching for a way of living on a dying planet with joy. I am searching for how I want to die. I am searching for a way of making sense of the greed and ugliness that is destroying the earth. I don't want to retreat and grow my own vegetables. I want to find answers. And part of the answer, I think, lies in this vision of sex and environmentalism embodying a shared landscape. With gender fluidity and identity politics usurping the old-fashioned politics of the Left, sexual relationships are changing beyond recognition. Meanwhile the ground under our feet is being shaped by hurricanes, superstorms, wildfires, droughts, floods, and all manner of extreme weather events. Ecosexuality might well be a part of our common future. The playfulness at the heart of the movement intrigues me. I am also curious about how much 'eco' is in ecosexuality. Perhaps lying somewhere between ecosexuality's impishness and its commitment to the earth lies a portal for me to skip through.

Once I have pitched my one-person tent, just big enough for my sleeping bag and a backpack, I lie down and pull out Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling of America*. I start reading the chapter "The Body and the Earth": "While we live our bodies are moving particles of the earth, joined inextricably both to the soil and to the bodies of other living creatures. It is hardly surprising, then, that there should be some profound resemblances between our treatment of our bodies and our treatment of the earth." I am astonished by the overlap between Wendell Berry, the author-farmer-

environmentalist from Kentucky and the sex-positive ecosex movement. Intersectionality is everywhere. As I read, I can hear laughter and birdsong and a woman having an orgasm in the woods nearby.

At supper that evening, I sit with Chuck and a handful of others at a picnic table. The rain is still falling, and we sit on towels, coats, plastic bags, whatever we can find. It turns out we are all new to ecosexuality. Over zucchini and asparagus cooked in tahini, someone brings up the idea of consent and how they can't quite work out how having sex with the earth can ever be consensual.

I say, "Well who said you had to do anything *to* the earth? Maybe you could let it do things to *you*."

They fall silent. One of them says, "You are so right! Like being rained on."

"Hey, I like that," someone else says.

A woman passes around some Ayurvedic seeds for us to scatter on our food which will help our energy flow.

The guy on my left tells me he is really into sacred clowning. Chuck gets excited at this idea. It turns out they are in the same pathwork, and it involves some "jester work." I zone out but come back to the conversation when the guy on my left announces that the court clown could "like fuck with the King and Queen." I head to the only dry place which is the inside my tent and make some notes until it is time to convene in the Dome for our evening's entertainment.

THE DOME IS a Buckminster Fuller-style geodesic structure about the size of a tennis court. Carpets and cushions are littered about, and coloured banners hang from metal struts. Sitting in chairs across from the entrance are the two women who have made Surrender possible: Lindsay Hageman and Reverend Teri Ciacchi. Lindsay lives at the Windward Education and Research Center which occupies adjacent land. You can just about see the center from here, and their goats can be heard bleating throughout the campsite. Lindsay, fresh-faced, dark-haired, and I would guess somewhere in her mid-thirties smiles readily and has an easy, but focused manner. You sense when she puts her mind to things they get done. She begins by welcoming us to the land, which she says is “happy to have you here.” She tells us a bit about the Windward Community, “an intentional community dedicated to loving the land and to loving each other. We embody ecosexuality every day!” Its members are aligned in their dedication to sustainable living and an open approach to sexuality.

Teri Ciacchi on the other hand is a sexologist, priestess of Aphrodite, and holistic spiritual healer in the Living Love Revolution Church. The Surrender website tells me that she is an EcoMagick practitioner who “translates the teaching she receives from mycelium (mushrooms), bees, and stardust into usable social skills for human beings.” She also “generates sex-positive culture by teaching Cliteracy Salons, Clitoral Revelations, and Vulvic Explorations.”

We remove our shoes before taking our places cross-legged on the floor. Rain is pounding onto the Dome, and the air is moist with sweat and wet, earthy smells. Teri asks if we want to make a joyful noise, and people whoop. As an aside, she says maybe folk shouldn't be naked for our first meeting as that would be "just weird."

Teri is about my age. She has difficulty walking and rides a golf cart. Tonight a leopard-skin pillbox hat (just like the Dylan song) sits atop her turquoise hair with its pink fringe. She invites us to inhabit our bodies by doing "the Line, the Cross, and the Circle." We sit or stand up straight, our bodies establishing a vertical towards the sky. We are then told to picture ourselves sending roots or "a monkey's tail—whatever works for you" down into the ground. That's the Line. The Cross is formed by our outstretched arms, and the Circle is made by rolling our heads.

Once we are grounded, Teri goes on to say that we are "languageing a lot about the figure 8." At this point I lose her. The words I manage to write down are: "We're being portals", "We speak regularly with non-human living things", "the elementals", "the fae." Then she brings it all together: "We've got to be in relationship with these things. What we want isn't more important than what they want!"

Lindsay adds, "We need to listen to them, to do what the Earth is telling us to do."

And Teri finishes off the idea: "And with the same rapt attention as we do with someone we want to fuck."

A lot of discussion around consent follows. Lindsay tells us to

repeat after her: “We aim to have zero consent violations!” We repeat it, and she says, “That felt good!”

There are readings from the Surrender handbook by people in the audience. Once these are finished, a guy gets up to tell us that we all need to respect the shrines that are in the forest and in clearings on this land. There is a shrine to Inanna, the Sumerian precursor to Aphrodite and Venus. Like her later incarnations, she is associated with love, beauty, sex, desire, fertility, and war. “It’s really important that you don’t move anything on a shrine as that can be very traumatic for the person whose object it is.” People click their fingers and clap in response.

Once the housekeeping is out of the way, it’s time for the ice-breakers. We are instructed to move our bodies like jellyfish: “a school of them! Wiggle!” The two people leading the ice-breaker tell us we are allowed to make eye contact with people around us. “*Questioning* eye contact.” Then we are to turn into lava and move like molten rock, before forming small groups of around six to eight people. One of the guys in my group looks like Larry David with impossibly white teeth. He had approached me earlier and commented on my plimsolls. We laughed at how cloth shoes are the worst shoes to wear in the rain. After our short chat about footwear, he had said, “Hey, we should *interact* sometime.”

“Yes,” I had replied, looking away.

That small exchange made clear to me that I have zero interest in “interacting” with this man. I have a partner back in London, and now that I’m on the other side of menopause, my need for men has shifted. I

see them more as companions, friends, accomplices, rather than people to seduce or be seduced by. I only really want one lover, and that is the guy I live with.

I wasn't always like this.

I was rapacious in my twenties and thirties and led by sex. Boyfriends accused me of being a nymphomaniac. I was wild and hungry for experience and had several boyfriends on the go at once. Being sexually faithful is something that only happened once I had a child in my forties. Sex for the sake of it has lost some of its appeal, and I am surprised by how comfortable I am about this new phase in my life. It feels more like a gain than a loss.

We are told to sit on the floor, close our eyes, and cup our hands. The moderators silently walk around the room placing edible objects into our palms: strawberries, cress, zucchini flowers, tomatoes, and grapes.

“Taste, lick, smell, use all your senses. Feed yourselves and each other!” The dome goes quiet but for some “Yums” and “Mms” and the licking of lips.

We open our eyes and are told to say our names and for the members of our small groups to whisper them back to us. We are to make a gesture and a sound to go with it. I rub my stomach and say, “Yum.” Everyone in my group repeats this. We place our right hand on our heart center and our left hand on the back of the person next to us and hum. We chant “we” and “me” over and over, and the energy in the room rises. Someone gets up and reads the Mary Oliver poem “Wild Plums,” which I

hang onto as a return to the world I recognise. Mary Oliver! Sanity! I slip out before the cuddle circle gets going.

Lying in my sleeping bag, I pray that the tent will hold out against the lashing rain and high winds. The swaying branches above me are making me nervous. I hear Chuck walk into a tent pitched about twenty feet from mine. I had met my neighbours earlier in the day while they set up their camp: two guys and a woman, all beautiful, tanned, confident, and in their twenties. Chuck tells them, “Tomorrow I’m doing sacred clowning!” The strumming on a guitar stops, and a deep voice replies, “I love this world.” Chuck and the deep voice talk about heading to the smoking lounge, a large tarp stretched above some chairs and a coffee table. It is the only place where smokers can gather. I hear the tent unzip.

Someone else in the tent starts strumming Deep Voice’s guitar. There is more whispering. Then a guy practically shouts, “If you spray it in your butt hole, you’ll get high!”

More laughter. I finally work out they are talking about “weed lube,” which another guy says is for your “lady bits.”

A woman asks if it works on your “man bits.”

“I don’t know,” comes the reply.

Then the woman speaks again, “I think my pussy always has the munchies! It’s hungry *and* horny!”

I turned twenty in 1985. AIDS had just hit, and the free, open life I’d been inhabiting in the early eighties seemed like a dream. It became cool to be celibate. Having sex with people was conducted with the spectre of our

sick and dying friends hovering around us: people we had gone clubbing with, taken drugs with, kissed, and fondled. We were still into pleasure-seeking, but by then it involved some degree of sadness, fear, or uncertainty, and lots of condoms. None of this features here. What does feature is a lot of talk about consent. “We live in a rape culture,” one woman had said during the meeting that evening. “So we need to create a consent culture.” We are going to be having a two-hour talk about consent the following afternoon. I cannot imagine what you can say about consent for two hours, but even in my short time at Surrender, I am aware that I know nothing about love and sex in 2017. I hadn’t even heard of weed lube until now. I fall asleep to the sound of more rain, more laughter, and multiple orgasms.

3

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I wake to a downpour. My tent is starting to leak, so I take the dirty clothes out of my backpack and line my nylon floor with them. My mouth tastes horrible, and everything smells like mildew. I can see my breath. My will to stay here is starting to crack. Here’s another thing I am swiftly learning about myself: I want desire to sneak up on me, to find it in unexpected places. I cannot switch it on or off at will. There are plenty of beautiful people around me, but the fact that most of them seem so up for it makes me shut down. The sexiest place on earth for me is the British Library or somewhere equally buttoned up. All those brains whirring away, and all those people *not* thinking about sex. Now that *is*

horny.

Breakfast that morning is buckwheat porridge with cryogenic cherries. The woman next to me tells me about her friend who got cryogenically frozen for “like a second” as a way of boosting her immune system. A few people chime in saying they have heard it’s good for you, but that it’s really expensive. The rain falls into our buckwheat, and I slip away to brush my teeth.

The first day of my Eco-Magicks pathwork has arrived, and I am relieved to have a place to go, a place where I can sit and learn something and not feel inadequate. Those of us doing Eco-Magicks are told to meet at the entrance to Lillith’s Forest (more on that later) near Inanna’s shrine. Our group of about fifteen people is led by Teri, who today is wearing a furry pillbox hat, purple leg warmers, Birkenstocks with socks, and a faux leopard skin coat. Next to her is a pretty fifty-something witch called Melanie, and a guy called Benjamin Pixie who is dressed in hand-tanned salmon leather, and what Teri refers to as his “bee skirt”, a concoction of black and yellow fabrics sewn in stripes. He is bearded, tattooed, and pierced with tribal earrings. He has an alert animal intelligence about him.

There are brief introductions. We say our names and also the pronouns we would like people to use when addressing or referring to us. I say that I am fine with “she” and “her.” Many people here prefer “they.” One woman says she has started using “zhe,” whose object form is “zhim,” and possessive form is “zher.” It is an archaic, non-gender specific, Chinese pronoun. The “zh” is pronounced like the second “g” in “garage.”

We are given an alchemical potion called “Saturn’s Anchor or the Embodiment of Rooted Desire.” I think I hear Benjamin say it is made with ground elk antlers and dinosaur bones. Benjamin speaks like a prophet, in a quick staccato. He is passionate about the earth and the honey he makes, the mead he brews, the skins he tans. In his relationship to the earth, he will “fuck up” but “mistakes are the beginning of knowledge.” His brain is a rapid-fire machine, and he talks about the natural world as if reciting poetry that has been dredged up deep from a bog or the inside of a tree. He is someone who has the practical skills needed to live in the wilderness. He is someone I wouldn’t mind being stuck on a desert island with.

Melanie then introduces herself. She is soft-spoken, with wispy reddish hair, pale skin, and fine features. She is a high priestess in the Sylvan tradition of witchcraft, which emerged in the 1970s in Northern California as a way of life that honours nature. An elderly gentleman in our group puts his hand up and asks about the ritual of mixing semen with blood and drinking it. Melanie tells us this was used in blood magic, but that nowadays the concoction is yogurt and pomegranate or cranberry juice. “It’s safer.”

We are asked to visualise a Sheela-na-gig, the Celtic female figure with a large, open vulva, to “let her come to us.” The images in my mind are pathetic: the witch from my daughter’s illustrated Hansel and Gretel followed by the animals in the Disney version of Snow White. I feel utterly deficient. Teri and Melanie discuss how important it is for us all to connect with our non-human ancestors and plants. “They can guide you,”

Melanie says. Teri adds that our ancestors would have “listened to plants,” but that “monoculture, monotheism, and monogamy” have destroyed this communication.



IN THE DOME that afternoon, we gather for the consent talk. It is 4:00 PM, and people are dancing to loud house music. The rain is still falling, and the air inside the dome is thick and damp. Teri is rapping into a mic, “It only takes one individual to start a revolution!” Participants are hugging, lying on their backs with their feet in the air. As the Dome heats up, more people are stripping off and swirling in ecstatic, naked dancing. I sit at the edge of the Dome next to a woman in a lawn chair. She tells me she is a Buddhist and, like me, doesn’t seem keen to get up and dance. I don’t feel judged for not taking part. I feel ungenerous.

Lindsay and Teri are sitting where they were last night. As we are about to begin, Lindsay announces she wants to run naked in the rain. “Well, do it then!” Teri tells her. About a dozen people stand up and run outside to feel the rain on their bodies.

Once they are back, the lectures begin. There is talk of body sovereignty. The Jesuit philosopher Teilhard de Chardin gets a mention as does the writer and activist bell hooks. There is a discussion about the colonising of the very land we are sitting on. The whirlwind lecture and presentation could be a liberal arts college course called “Gender and Ecology in Post-Colonial Times.”

We are encouraged to engage with the earth and not to deny our part in the colonisation of it but to move beyond that thought by getting in touch with our own ancestors, with our own histories. Place is a big part of this movement. We not only need to feel grounded, we need to know where we come from. A woman stands up and tells us she was raised by radical hippies, and she struggles “with the idea of going back to the land. The global population is so high. We can’t all go back to the land!”

Lindsay replies, “Solutions have to be place-based. It isn’t one size fits all.”

It’s time for the consent talk. “We are creating a new culture here. Part of its soil is consent. We’re building it into the soil,” says one of the three people leading this presentation. Subtleties are outlined in various hugging techniques. When someone asks you for a hug, are you expecting the two-second “greeting-style hug” or one of those long, constricting ones? They illustrate this with play-acting. They talk about the feeling that comes from someone’s body when they are saying “yes.” I find it strange that we have come to a place where this all needs to be outlined. How have we moved so far from being able to understand each other?

We are reminded to continually check in with ourselves and that “consent for one activity is not consent for others.” The speakers tell us to be aware of “pop-up boundaries” which are described as akin to “stepping on a rake.” The difference between “consent” and “compliance” is explained.

We list situations that can get in the way of consent, such as being drunk, stoned, or in a “trance state.” Environmental factors like being in the

dark also prevent full consent.

I can see how this will take two hours.

If we ask someone to do something with us and they say “no,” we are given some appropriate responses, such as “Thank you for taking care of yourself” or “Thank you for being true to your authentic boundaries.”

One woman stands up and says how sick and tired she is of her kids having to “go kiss Grandma.” Her kids don’t want to kiss Grandma, and it feels like coercion. She gets applause.

Then Lillith’s Forest is brought up. This is the twenty acres of woodland set aside for consensual group sex or any kind of consensual sex play you can think of. But you must negotiate with your partners beforehand. A “Negotiation Station” is set up just outside the Forest for this purpose. And if things escalate, and you want to go further or try some new things, you need to leave the forest and renegotiate before heading back inside. I am told by a woman sitting next to me that there were two consent violations last year. Nothing big but enough for the organisers to make sure everyone feels safe.

The meeting comes to an end after some more play-acting, exercises, and questions from the audience. The rain hasn’t stopped. I head to my tent in my soaking wet shoes, my soaking wet coat, and my soaking wet bag. Lying on my sleeping bag (the one thing that remains dry), I unzip the front flap of my tent and squeeze out the dirty clothes that have been absorbing the water on my tiny floor.

I am disturbed by what I have just witnessed and am trying to pin

down why. It all seems so logical, and yet it feels there is something crucial missing. Consent, for me, de-eroticises desire. I think about the thrill of sex in my twenties, of not knowing where I would wake up and with whom. How wonderful it was to trust the person or people I was with to not go beyond what I wanted, and how sometimes I did go beyond and was elated that I had. I can't imagine finding sexual fulfilment by negotiating every step, every move, and kiss. Some of us want to lose control and inhabit the unbounded mystery of bodies at play.

When we hook up with someone, we are hooking up not just with their body, but with their morals, their sense of decency, their ability to read our body language and understand our words. But are we not also hooking up with their indecency, their perversity? And here is my problem with consent culture: sex for some of us needs to be spontaneous, dark, unwholesome, and with an element of surprise for it to be arousing. This self-policing in the arena of sex feels anathema to its essence. In discussions around sex today, there is rarely a mention of pleasure or desire—these are subsumed into “yes” and “no” answers as if all the information you need from your sexual partners can be found in a multiple choice test.

There are indeed good reasons for steering clear of the non-consensual: sexual abuse is all too real. We are seeing its pervasiveness now more than ever. But paradoxically by placing the emphasis on consent, we are placing the responsibility onto individuals to avoid rape and abuse rather than seeing it as a broader societal ill. As I am thinking all this, I realise I am old, romantic, and very out of touch. I still like to feel there are

elements within myself and others that can surprise, enchant, and disturb me. In fact, I *want* there to be these places inside myself.

While the rain pings against my tent, I recall an interview I did in 2015 with the writer Sarah Hepola. We were talking about her book *Blackout* which deals candidly with her alcoholism and its impact on her sex life and her writing. In the introduction, Hepola describes her route to becoming a feminist: “Activism may defy nuance, but sex demands it. Sex was a complicated bargain to me...It was hide-and-seek, clash and surrender, and the pendulum could swing inside my brain all night: I will, no I won’t: I should, no I can’t...My consent battle was in me.”

Here is heart of the debate: *our consent battles are inside us.*

“Feminism today is about identity politics and consent. We didn’t use the word consent in the 80s, and now it’s everywhere,” she had told me during our conversation. When your consent battle is within you, how can it be legislated for? There’s the rub.



SUPPER HAPPENS QUICKLY. It’s still raining, and the eating area is drenched. I am thinking of leaving the festival as the rain has penetrated almost everything, and the floor of my tent is slick with a centimetre of water. I have a word with Chuck about leaving the next morning, and she looks distraught. She didn’t get any sleep, and has that energetic glow from having been up most of the night.

“OK,” I tell her. “But if the inside of my sleeping bag is wet by

tomorrow, we're leaving.”

She agrees.

That evening we are back in the Dome for a performance. It is a re-enactment of the Sumerian myth of Inanna and the Huluppu tree from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. As I am watching this tale of female power and fertility triumphing over man's destruction, something very strange happens. I feel something between my legs. It is wet. I run to the outhouse in the pouring rain and see that I am bleeding. Not just spotting, which is how my period came to an end last year, but gushing. All this talk of nature, sex, ancestral pathways, the goddess Inanna, consent, orgies, and weed lube has brought back my period. I head to my tent where “just in case,” I had packed a few pads. My head is throbbing. I am impressed that despite my reluctant mind, my body has decided to show me that it's listening.

The next morning as I am walking to the outhouse, I realise I haven't got any tampons. I pass someone in the forest and ask if they know where I might find some. This person smiles at me and says, “Hey, I don't get my periods anymore. You can have these!” They reach into their pocket and pull out three tampons. There is no way of knowing whether the people you meet here have ever bled, are still bleeding, never did bleed, want to, or don't. We have moved beyond the simple assumptions around our biology. There is something strangely touching about this, as if we are in the process of stripping away some of our communal skin to reach a very young and raw humanity. We are children in this forest, in this new world, and maybe this is why consent is so important. We are working it all out for the first

time.

The rain is still falling, but the sky seems to be lightening. We gather for our pathwork chanting “Great Mother, Grandmother, Great Grandmother” to invoke our ancestors. Teri is stark naked but for a necklace and a robe falling open around her ample, curvaceous body. She talks about how there is no escape from our ancestors: “Their blood is your blood, their DNA is your DNA, their success is your success. We need to undo the mess in our bloodlines, to undo the harm being done to the Earth. We need to take on this work, to tend to the hungry ghosts.”

She then passes around one of her sacred oils. A few drops of it on our tongue will encourage safe passage from one sphere to another. She speaks of epigenetic trauma: “If you are doing ancestral work, there will be magic. If a spirit comes to you, ask them to identify themselves.”

We lie on the ground, and Teri talks us into what I can only describe as a trance state. I don’t remember anything of what she says, but I do remember what I see: I go through my mother’s side of the family. And through her mother. To Ireland. There is a path lined with straw, and the name Maria surfaces. My body takes on the shape of an Irish St. Brigid’s cross. Maria is tending the fire. Teri brings us back from our trance state, and I am not sure what has just happened. A woman from our group is sobbing hysterically. She is escorted into the forest, naked, howling, and screaming. Melanie comforts her and escorts her back to us, and we complete our pathwork together. The session comes to an end.

In my tent later, I hear crickets. I look out and see swallows

circling overhead. The weather has turned. I have also been told of the Venus Lounge, which serves coffee in the morning. Things are looking up.

The next day, I head straight for the coffee drinkers. The caffeine hit feels illicit. I am surrounded by people my age and older. A guy in his twenties shows up. He is dressed in zebra print leggings and a green velvet smoking jacket. If you were to blend a young George Michael with Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and throw in some tribal piercings, you would get Thumbs. He describes himself as a “peripatetic communitarian.” All his belongings fit into his pick-up, and he travels from one intentional, or alternative, community to another offering his services. He tells me he has just been to the Farm, the well-known community, which started in 1971 when eighty school buses and assorted vehicles brought 320 hippie idealists to a cattle farm in central Tennessee. The banner on their band bus read “Out to Save the World!” Thumbs also spent time at Twin Oaks in rural Virginia, which was founded in 1967 and is now home to 90 adults and 15 children. The millennials he knows are on the move and experimenting. This nomadism is as much a seeking to find their place as a survival tactic. They are looking for ways to live on a planet whose background hum is one of mass extinctions, including our own. They are trying to find stability in a society with no center. He is smart and articulate, and like many of the twenty-somethings I speak with here, he is holding two opposing ideas in his head: that there may not be a liveable planet in his lifetime and that he wants to have a productive life despite this. These are ideas I did not have to grapple with in my twenties.

After coffee, I head to my final Eco-Magick session. We check in with each other, and someone says they had a miscommunication with a spirit the night before. People nod. The lecture today is on deities. Teri tells us that “the gods are living out their lives through us.” She reinforces that we “need to choose the tradition from which we choose our gods. They can sometimes come to us over time.” After yesterday’s vision, I am beginning to understand.

We are led again in a guided visualisation on ground drier than yesterday’s. This time, I go deeper. I see a young woman giving birth in a hovel with a floor strewn with straw. There is always straw, and a fire burning in the hearth. She is still in my maternal grandmother’s lineage in Ireland. A man dressed in black, a Catholic priest perhaps, stands by the bedside. When the baby appears, he strangles it for being born out of wedlock. He feels he is doing the young mother a favour, but the woman is distraught. Also by the bedside is Brigid. She is furious that the baby has been murdered.

Teri brings the meditation to a close and astonishes me by knowing that I saw Brigid.

“How did you know I saw her?” I gasp. She says I mentioned it yesterday, but I don’t remember that. Much of what Teri tells me about Brigid makes sense of my vision. Brigid is the goddess of childbirth, straw, mother’s milk, writing, and the protectress of women. There are other things from my past that come to light such as the fact my mother had wanted to call me Brigid, but my father won with Joanna. And so much more that I

cannot write about. And then I wonder if I am going crazy.

4

THAT AFTERNOON, I sit in a field. What is niggling at me is how sexuality and environmentalism are linked—in a Venn diagram, what would be the middle lozenge joining the “eco” with the “sex?” I am just starting to see that ecosexuality is a multifarious, many-tentacled beast. It can be fucking in the woods, a cuddle pile in a tent, naked forest bathing, a sensual massage, the wind up your skirt, a vision quest, or feeding an altar with your semen or menstrual blood. Its close links to paganism give it a strong mystical dimension. And this is where our “ancestral work” comes in. To connect with the land profoundly, one has to connect with where one has come from. The ecologically minded want to get close to the earth, honour its fecundity, explore and share the indigenous rituals around it, but want to do so without appropriating them. Some get in touch with their roots by researching their genealogy, while others do it through ancestral channelling, which brings in elements of magic, myth, and story-telling.

If you allow yourself to get in touch with your pre-Christian ancestors, you are then open to the freedom associated with pagan worship, gods, goddesses, wild stories, orgies, and ecstatic dance—or in other words, sex and physical ritual. Things are starting to coalesce into some kind of coherence for me. Environmental mysticism is what I am seeing around me.

After my pathwork, Teri senses I am shaken by the whole thing.

She tells me she'd be happy to talk to me later in the smoking lounge. That evening after supper, I head up there. She is holding court, chatting to some people about hydroponics and permaculture, herbal tinctures and the history of BDSM. A woman is saying that there should be a pathwork devoted to sex workers. I wait for a lull in the conversation, and Teri turns to me as if to say, "And, so?"

I blurt out that I was upset by the fact that I seemed to know how to go into a trance state without being told how.

"You've never done it before?" she asks.

I shake my head.

"Wow. And you saw all that?"

"Yes," I say.

"You're a natural!" she laughs.

I then tell her what I have never told anyone before: throughout my life I have been approached by people who tell me I am psychic. My eighth-grade science teacher Mrs. Peat took me aside one day and told me that she had been born with a "second sight." She could tell I had been too. I mention how Mrs. Peat knew I was the seventh child, and that I had been born on the seventh of May. Teri laughs.

"And I often know things are going to happen before they do," I tell her.

"What have you done about it?" she asks.

"Nothing."

"Why?"

“Because I don’t believe in it. I am a rationalist,” I tell her.

Teri encourages me to do some work on my ancestors, to get to know them, and to get in touch with the sides of myself I haven’t wanted to know in the past. It all seems mad, and I am finding it hard to understand how I can have been sucked into this way of thinking. I have had enough talking for one night. The circuitous conversations around me have scrambled my brain. I don’t want a cigarette. I don’t want a hug or a cuddle or to be humiliated or spanked. I want my bed. I walk to my tent under the stars. They are bright tonight and the air, finally, is warm.

5

ON THE LAST day of Surrender, I witness ten people marry the Earth. Some spit into the ground, some writhe in the dirt, some have written moving elegies to the planet. After the ceremonies, we gather to dance. The sun is beating down, and I stand outside the circle under the shade of a Douglas fir. Some of the dancers are ecstatic, many are naked. There is drumming, chanting. As people scatter in the woods for a last fuck, cuddle, laugh, or story, I realise that what is going on here really is a quiet revolution. What I have been living these five days is not some nostalgic harking after the past, but a desire to create a different future. Most ecological movements look back. Some communities model themselves after an agrarian idyll from a hundred and fifty years ago: the life of the homesteader growing their food, keeping goats, making their own soap, and raising bees. Some

communitarians go even further back, to our Palaeolithic ancestors with their migration, their foraging, replanting of seeds, hunting, and brain-tanning of hides as their baseline for the Good Life. What all rewilders, off-gridders, ancestral skills practitioners, and those seeking to live in harmony with the planet have in common is a nostalgia for a world that once existed but is now lost.

The striking thing about the ecosex movement is its insistence on looking forward. Social change in their eyes is needed to envision a planet fit to be lived on. Their focus on consent is perhaps necessary for the uncharted waters they are diving into. Nostalgia is replaced by excitement over what the world can be. Who cares what it once was? Ecosexuals are not trying to recreate some lost Eden, but are instead imagining a whole new one with a whole new society better suited for survival. Yes, they all drive cars, and most of them rely on technology—a Surrender Facebook page exists. But they do not profess to be off the grid. For ecosexuals, society needs to be reimagined before the planet can be saved. It is an approach that stands out from the others. Unlike so many ecologically based movements, this one is not misanthropic—it celebrates humans, rather than wishing them dead for their planet-killing ecocidal ways.

Back in Portland, I am still making sense of my five days of Surrender. I am somewhat disappointed that I did not want to run off with the proverbial circus. Unlike some of the rewilders I have met who have made me consider renouncing all my belongings, hop on a horse, and replant the wild gardens of the West, the Ecosex Convergence did not make

me want to join a polycule, grow my leg hair, and get down with the weed lube.

On the plane to London, I am still reading Wendell Berry. Although *The Unsettling of America* is primarily about agriculture, his section on the relationship between the body and the earth resonates forty years after he wrote it: “The question of human limits, of the proper definition and place of human beings within the order of Creation, finally rests upon our attitude toward our biological existence, the life of the body in this world. What value and respect do we give to our bodies?...What connections or responsibilities do we maintain between our bodies and the earth?...We come from the earth and return to it....It is hardly surprising then that there should be some profound resemblances between our treatment of our bodies and our treatment of the earth.”

By linking our bodies to the ground we walk on, we are unifying our struggle with that of the planet. Therein lies the center of the Eco/Sex Venn diagram. I am no ecosexual. I am not going to marry a mountain or lick a moss-covered stone, but I will happily align my actions to the needs of the planet. Not to do so would be mad. What is the sane response to the industries, individuals, and governments getting rich from the extraction of minerals, the burning of fossil fuels, the poisoning of oceans, and felling of ancient forests? It remains to be seen how this plays out, how much of the future of the planet relies on how we have sex and reproduce. But by wresting sex from procreation, we are also opening up the debate about population. Fewer people on the planet means less consumption and

less resource depletion. Putting the earth before human procreation is a necessity.

After my week in the woods with 175 ecosexuals, I see that they are the future. Like it or not, gender is breaking down, consent is rising up, and the planet is dying. How do we want to spend the next decades on mothership Earth? Dancing naked in a forest might just be one of the sanest responses to the melting ice caps. There may even come a time when dancing naked in a forest is one of the only choices we have left.