

# In the Forest & Against the Sea

by E.V. Mae

I am not myself. I am fractured into iridescent pieces that can not be put back together. My memory does not fail me—it betrays me. There are lapses, gaps where darkness bends like a branch above my head, and where the wind howls with hatred so loud it rattles the leaves of my soul. I do not know where I am. I do not know how old I am. Sometimes I am on the floor, clutching at the cold tile and hoping that the shaking will stop, and praying that I will sink back into the present. Other times, I am curled within my sheets with pillows pressed against me. I pull them around me like a shield, thinking that they will keep the darkness with green eyes at bay.

They don't.

I can not stop from slipping into the past and into the weathered hands of that six-foot-tall darkness.

But this is not that story. (It is). This story is one about the body that betrays me. This story is about the person I have become. This story is about my rebirth. This story is about the trees and the sea.

This story is about nature, and the power it has to heal.

I grew up surrounded by forests. I also grew up as a boy. Together, those two things carried a strange connotation that I was never quite satisfied with. Hikes became feats of masculinity. Mountains became things to conquer. Rather than swim, I would sail. Rather than sit, I would stand.

Time moved so quickly then. Is that what boyhood is supposed to be? (*Yes*). Are you supposed to conquer, to dominate, and to prevail? (*Hold your head higher*). Is there no time to stand still? (I have to keep moving). To appreciate the warm yellow-green light filtering through the trees? (I can see the darkness behind me). To brush your hand against the chalk of an aspen? (He tells me what to do). To dive into the lake and swim until your body is numb? (If I stop, he will drown me).

(I have to leave here).

Is that what boyhood is?



What does it mean to be a woman? When I first asked myself this question, I told myself that I did not know the answer—that I could not know the answer. I was a boy. I was a guy. And eventually, I would be a man. Whenever I became conscious of this, I became conscious of my body. The way my shoulders were broad. (*Uncross your legs*). The way hair grew on my skin like grass. (*Sit up straight*). Then, I became aware of the way my lips twinged down in response. (*Act like a man*). The way I hated it. (*Quit whining like a girl*). The way it made me hate myself.

Coming into my trans identity was like stepping into the warmth of the sun. It was welcoming, with the potential to burn. When I stepped into my womanhood it was so right that it overruled the fear, rejection, and hate. I ventured outside more often. I spent time in the grassy fields of Texas, and in the long mountainous forests of Colorado. I breathed in a world full of beauty and fluidity. I bathed in rivers and lakes. I ran my hand across trees larger than buildings. I often found myself in the forest, exploring what it meant to be connected to the land, what it meant to simply exist within it. And when I moved to California, I found myself at the edge of one world, pressing against the aquamarine abyss of another. (*Cross it*). I was scared as the water lapped at my feet, ruffling against the shore. It did not seem to have an end. It stretched over the horizon like a storm, but it did not sound like one. Gulls cawed above, a pelican swooped down and across the water. The wind was soft. The sun was warm. The air was crisp. I moved forward and the sea seemed to cradle my feet.

Then, I dove in.

There was a moment of fear, but as the ocean swaddled me like her child, I felt myself changing. In those waters, the shape of my body did not matter, the depth of my voice did not matter, and the things people called me did not matter. It was as if the water was stitching together those lost, hidden parts of myself. I smiled, I cried, and I embraced myself and the life that was given to me.

I still think of the darkness sometimes.

Sometimes it haunts me in my dreams, or invades my memories.

But it is not what it once was, just as I am not what I once was.

I am still fractured into iridescent pieces, but in the forest and against the sea, I am stitched together, thread by thread, piece by piece. I look away from that darkness, and to the sky – gray, blue, purple, orange – and I smile.

