Once Out of Nature
Life Beyond the Gender Binary

BY JOY LADIN

LAST SUMMER, I promised myself that I wouldn’t miss a sunset. I would set out on foot along my suburban street, toward the blaze of molten gold limning our small local mountain. I wasn’t far from farmland. Half a mile away, a little-used dirt road threaded between fenced-off pastures and uninterested cows toward the purpling mountain. If I walked far enough, on the right hand side I’d come to a grass-fringed mudhole and startle two great blue herons.

This was nature, I would think, real nature, whose wings still beat in the mountain’s lengthening shadow.

But was it? The herons were here only on account of the mudhole, and the mudhole was here to give domesticated cattle access to water. My decision to label part of the scene “real nature” was a romantic simplification of a muddy intersection of living systems, a projection of human categories onto the unsubdivided sprawl of life.

There’s nothing natural about our notions of nature. “Nature” is a human category, a construct that reflects our longing to define the place in the universe we simultaneously inhabit and conceive. During my open-mouthed awe at the startled herons’ flight, “nature” meant an order human beings may witness, protect, or despoil, but necessarily stand outside, because “nature” is defined in opposition to us. But oddly enough, the idea of “nature” also grounds our conceptions of humanity. People seem natural to us when they reflect what we oxymoronically call “human nature”—our sense of how people are and should be.

The artificiality of ideas of nature and human nature is old news to philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, and others who study human mind and culture. But what’s

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old news in academia is still a matter of life and death to people like me—people whose gender doesn’t fit the “natural” binary categories of male and female. People who see us as “unnatural” have a tendency to ostracize us, fire us, kick us out of our homes, or verbally and physically assault us. But over my fifty-plus years as a transgender person—forty-five living as a man, the past six living as a woman—the worst harm I’ve suffered has come from self-inflicted wounds. Like many trans kids, I grew up tormented by my inability to understand myself in terms of “natural” categories of male and female. The combination of my male body and my unshakable sense of being female seemed, and still seems, to exile me from human and any other kind of nature. Even now, after years of living as a woman, my gender doesn’t feel natural to me. My gender is a mudhole, a conscious, willful reshaping of both physical and human nature that cannot fit comfortably into either.

Like the herons’ mudhole, in which the natural and the human intersect, my gender represents the collision of what logically ought to be mutually exclusive categories—male and female—and exposes the inadequacy of those categories. That, perhaps, is why some react so violently to people like me. We are mirrors in which they see the artificiality of the “natural” binary of male and female, its incompleteness, and the contradictions it conceals.

I understand that anger. I spent most of my life longing to be, as the song says, a natural woman. But the longer I live as my true self—as a woman whose every female X chromosome is invariably paired with a Y and who was born and bred male—the happier I am to live outside nature. I am what I am and I do what I do, without fretting about how what I am and do fits or conflicts with “natural” ideas about what a woman should be or do. It’s cold outside the gender binary, but you can’t beat the view of the gloriously category-confounding universe. And even when it’s lonely, we aren’t alone. The exploding universe we inhabit is filled by the God who, my Jewish tradition teaches, can be conceived only as that which is beyond human conception.

A Mismatch Between Body and Soul
You don’t have to be transgender or Jewish to see the limitations of nature. The unhappily aging speaker of W. B. Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium” declares:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress.

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Like me, Yeats’s speaker felt disgusted by the mismatch between body (Yeats’s speaker calls his “a tattered coat upon a stick”) and soul. But Yeats’s speaker went much further than I did, rejecting not only his “bodily form” but “nature” itself. In what someone somewhere has no doubt already identified as an early example of post-humanism, the speaker tells us he looks forward to spending eternity in “such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make/Of hammered gold and gold enamelling.” Becoming “artifice” rather than a “natural thing,” he believes, will enable him to sing of “what is past, or passing, or to come” without having to suffer through it.

“It’s cold outside the gender binary, but you can’t beat the view of the gloriously category-confounding universe,” Ladin writes. Artist Lauren Quock tears up dictionary pages to create these modified bathroom signs, which affirm queer and trans gender identities.
Like Yeats’s speaker, I looked forward to dying, to escaping the body that was doing such a bad job of reflecting my soul. Like many trans children, I occasionally tried to escape my body by killing it; unlike all too many trans kids, I wasn’t good at suicide, and my body and I continued hurting and being hurt by each other into my mid-forties.

But unlike Yeats’s speaker, I had a longing for death that was driven by despair rather than hope. I didn’t want to escape nature—I wanted to fit into it, to have a body that would fit my female gender identity. If I couldn’t live in a body that felt like mine, I didn’t want to live. Around the age of eight, I discovered my first glimmer of hope that I could find my way into nature. One of my mother’s magazines included a poignant maternal tale of a son’s transformation into a daughter. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one of my kind. In addition to males and females, humanity included people like me, transsexuals. (These days, transsexuals are recognized as one among many groups gathered within the category “transgender,” an umbrella term that includes every relation to gender and identity more complicated than the “natural” binary of male and female.)

I knew that being transsexual wasn’t the same as being male or female; nothing I’d ever heard about nature or human nature included people who were born as one sex but felt they truly were the other. For the author of the article in my mother’s magazine, not fitting into the gender binary was a medical problem, and she and her child were grateful for the medical process, called “sex change” then and “gender reassignment” now, through which transsexuals can take what feels to us like our natural places in the gendered world.

The Artifice of Gender Reassignment

Most non-trans people think of gender reassignment only in terms of genital surgery. But gender reassignment isn’t genital reassignment. Few people express our own gender or recognize others’ by comparing genitalia. Sex is physical and biological. Gender, as many have noted, is a language, an arbitrary collocation of public signs, such as hair length or handshake firmness, and private signifieds: the genitals within the clothing, the gender identity beneath the skin. Like other languages, gender is mutable, negotiable, historically and culturally contingent, a combination of individual idioms and long-established conventions that simultaneously serves as a medium of public expression and, as Teresa de Lauretis pointed out, a means of understanding and defining ourselves.

Gender reassignment isn’t a medical intervention; it is a rearrangement of the language of gender that enables those who feel wrongly “assigned” to male or female identities by our bodies to express our true selves.

From the outside, gender reassignment can seem artificial, superficial, a silly insistence that the trivial nouns and verbs of gender—suits and skirts, tones of voice, arcs of arm and swings of hip, and, God help us, makeup—have existential importance. But Yeats considered artifice the ultimate expression of self (in “Sailing to Byzantium,” artifice is one of eternity’s main selling points), and when I began my gender reassignment, I realized how stunted my artifice-starved female gender identity was. My male persona was just that, a persona, a conscious attempt, driven by fear and shame, to look and act the way others wanted me to. Everything, from my personal taste to my morality, was a mask, a way of hiding who I really was. As a result, when I began living as my true self—as a woman—I couldn’t answer basic questions about who I was, because I had spent my life avoiding them. Was I the kind of woman who wears scarves? Climbs mountains? Belly dances? Runs for public office? I didn’t know. Like anyone learning a new language, I needed to master the basic nouns, verbs, and syntax of femininity, to learn how to dress, talk, and move through the world as a woman, before I could attempt any grander statement about who I was or wanted to be.

The artifice of gender reassignment, the changes in my physical appearance and social presentation, enabled me, after forty-plus years, to finally see myself in the mirror. But
gender reassignment also enabled me to step outside the mirror, to walk away from the self-defeating cycles of introspection through which I, like so many trans people, kept trying to determine whether my sense of gender identity was indeed my identity and not, as most of the world insisted, delusion, sexual fetish, or mental illness. The gendered artifice that identified me to others as a woman was to me a crucial sign of selfhood, a means of embodying and making visible my disembodied, invisible identity. It enabled me to speak as myself, write as myself, teach as myself, care for my children as myself, make friends as myself, suffer, endure, and love as myself.

The artifice that enabled me to walk the world as a woman helped me recognize my body as mine and feel at home within my skin. When I lived as a male, I tried not to feel. Awareness of my body made me feel sick, buried alive in a not-me that was supposed to be me. Gender reassignment changed all that. Suddenly, I felt connected to my body—I realized that I was my body—and between the thrill of physical existence and the elevation of my estrogen level, I found myself awash in feeling. But having had so little emotional experience, I had no natural responses to feelings. I almost never cried when I was a man. Should I cry now, and if so, when? When I was in pain? When I was sad, afraid, happy? When I met a friend, should I hug at the beginning of our interaction? At the end? What were the right ways to express feelings, the ways "natural" women expressed feelings, the ways I would express my feelings if I had grown up female?

I knew those were silly questions. I knew that everyone grows into our own versions of human nature through a combination of socialization that teaches us how people “naturally” are, experimentaton through which we discover how to adapt those inherited notions to our own needs and situations, and habitual repetition that makes what we do seem natural to ourselves and others. But I had spent my life longing to take my place among “natural” females. Now that I was finally becoming my true self, I found myself in a world of people who doubted, sometimes violently, the claim that someone like me had a place among the naturally male and female. Those skeptics took very seriously the same silly questions that kept me up at night: when I spoke as a woman, dressed as a woman, presented myself as a woman, was I doing the right things, the things "natural" women would do, things that would qualify me to take my place on the female side of the gender binary, or was I, as feminist scholar Germaine Greer has called people like me a “ghastly parody” of women?

**Haunting Our Bodies**

I don’t know how Yeats would have felt about gender reassignment, but it’s clear that he would have been delighted by gender reassignment’s demonstration of the fact that human beings create and reveal ourselves through artifice. Intellectually and practically, I agree with Yeats; it’s silly to fret about whether what I do qualifies me as a real woman, and such anxieties tend to reinforce narrow, damaging stereotypes of what women are and can be. But I am still saddened by the knowledge that my identity, like all human identity, is not the revelation of some buried “natural” self but an act of self-fashioning, artifice, imagination. I grew up imagining that others, unlike me, really were the boys and girls, men and women they appeared to be, that their identities weren’t identities at all but natural, unchanging essences. I spent my early years in a silent argument with Pinocchio, sympathizing with his desire to be real but unable to understand why he wanted to be a real boy.

And so it came as a shock to me to discover, when I began the gender transition process, that identity was so mutable that I could refashion mine in a matter of minutes. Because my height is within female norms, long before I had begun the medical aspect of gender reassignment I could walk into a single-stall bathroom as one gender and emerge minutes later as the other. For a couple of years, I commuted back and forth across the gender binary, sometimes several times a day. It was magical, but spooky. All my life, I
had thought of gender as a natural law, to be circumvented only through divine or medical intervention. Now, I saw that both the male persona within which I felt imprisoned and the female “true self” I had longed to become could fit in the same shoulder bag.

Many transgender people happily express their gender identities via this sort of manipulation of the language and artifice of gender. But transsexuals are defined by our need to reshape not only our public gender identities but also the “bodily forms” in which we live, because those bodies don’t feel like ours. Transsexual writings are strewn with attempts to describe this painful, disorienting, often life-destroying disjunction between body and soul. Therapists say we are experiencing “gender dysphoria.” We say we haunt our bodies (when I played with my children as a man, I saw myself as a paternal version of Casper the Friendly Ghost), or that we feel like the living dead, that our bodies feel as numb as diving suits, as flat as cardboard cutouts. We can’t stop feeling our estrangement from our bodies, can’t stop yearning for bodies that fit our gender identities, imaginary bodies that seem as real and tragically out of reach to us as amputees’ phantom limbs.

There haven’t been many scientific studies of the neurobiology of transsexuals, but phantom limb syndrome may suggest a physiological basis for our conviction that we are living in the “wrong” bodies. Human brains constantly map our bodies, distinguishing self from not-self, coordinating relationships between senses, limbs, and the world around us. Male and female brains are physically different in certain respects, and the physical sex of the brain is determined by a hormonal cascade at a particular stage of fetal development. My favorite theory of transsexuality holds that if the normal developmental sequence doesn’t occur, the result is a more or less physically male or female brain in a body of the opposite sex. This theory is supported by a study of six dead male-to-female transsexual brains that showed distinctly female characteristics, several experiments that create transsexual mice by interfering with the gestational process, and recent brain scans of living transsexuals. These studies aren’t definitive, but they are suggestive: transsexuals’ sense that our bodies are “wrong” may, like amputees’ sense that amputated limbs are itching, reflect the attempts of brains that weren’t normally sexed during fetal development to map male or female bodies that aren’t there.

It’s comforting for me to think that there is a “natural” explanation for my “unnatural” gender identity, but even if a brain scan showed that my brain fits male norms, my sense of who I am would remain. And whatever the cause, transsexuals’ sense of gender identity is so profoundly at odds with the sex of our bodies that we endure enormous costs—physical pain, social exile, loss of family, home, profession—in order to make those bodies, and the lives we live through them, better reflect our souls.

For many, that’s what seems most unnatural about gender transition—our insistence on altering apparently healthy bodies in response to feelings non-transsexuals can’t imagine. Of course, many of the ways transsexuals alter our bodies during transition are “natural,” or rather common, practice among human beings, who in every time or place seem driven to refashion our bodily forms by shaving, trimming, clothing, coloring, scenting, and otherwise physically modifying ourselves to reflect personal preferences and social norms. I did a lot of shaving during transition, but so do many “natural” women and men. I got my ears pierced, I bought new and very different clothes, and I started wearing makeup. Such behaviors might seem unnatural because they violate social norms for male gender expression. But as I’ve learned during fifty-odd years in which it’s become common for women to wear jeans and men to wear earrings, it’s natural for the social norms we dub “human nature” to change.

**Hormone Replacement Therapy**

Ear piercing is common among both men and women these days, but only transsexuals modify the sexual characteristics of our bodies. None of those interventions are natural—this is Western medicine we are talking about—but the most important, hormone replacement therapy, actually prompts our bodies to naturally change themselves. Most
“secondary sex characteristics,” the physical traits that lead us to identify someone as male or female—presence or absence of breasts, proportion and distribution of fat and muscle, type and distribution of hair—are responses to the ratio of sex hormones. When female sex hormones predominate, our bodies respond by expressing traits associated with female bodies; when male sex hormones predominate, our bodies respond by expressing male characteristics.

Hormone replacement therapy isn’t only, or even primarily, for transsexuals. Many genetically female women undergo it, taking artificial estrogens and progesterones for menopause, birth control, and medical conditions that have nothing to do with gender reassignment. Genetically male men undergo it too, taking testosterone for conditions ranging from prostate cancer to sexual dysfunction.

But as its name suggests, for non-trans people, hormone replacement therapy is designed to replace what doctors have determined is the natural, normal, or healthy level of sex hormones. For transsexuals, the purpose is to shift our bodies’ natural ratio of male and female sex hormones (human bodies naturally produce both) to ratios associated with the opposite sex.

The result of this shift is a natural process: adolescence. For most of us, adolescence refers to the one-time process of transforming children’s bodies into the bodies of men and women. For transsexuals, hormone replacement therapy prompts a second adolescence. As my endocrinologist’s treatments decreased my testosterone level below male norms and increased my estrogen level to female norms, my body naturally responded by growing breasts, moving fat cells from my cheeks and stomach to my hips and buttocks, thinning my body hair, softening my skin, slowing my metabolism, and otherwise acting like a female body. Had I undergone hormone replacement treatment before my testosterone levels began to rise when I was thirteen, apart from my chromosomes, internal organs, and genitalia, I would be physically indistinguishable from any “natural” woman. But it isn’t natural to go through a second adolescence, and some of the changes of my first can’t be undone: neither my voice, nor my bone composition and skeletal structure, nor my voice box was changed by hormone replacement therapy.

Though the results of my medically induced second adolescence fall short of a natural female body, I thank God every day I wake up and my sleepy brain finds itself in a body that feels like mine.

**Living Beyond Binaries**

There are two kinds of people in this world: people who fit binary categories (male and female, natural and unnatural, and so on), and people like me, who don’t. It’s natural for human minds to sort nonbinary phenomena into binary categories, it’s natural for human cultures to ensconce binaries as the cornerstones of worldviews and values systems, and it’s natural for human psyches to cling to and defend binary categories when confronted with category-confounding people like me.

But binary categories are as artificial as the binary ones and zeroes of computer languages. If you look hard enough at any aspect of nature, you will find things that defy the either/or of binary classification. The binary categories of “life” and “nonlife” seem to cover all the possibilities, but virologists and EMTs trying to revive heart attack victims can testify to the crowded murk between them. The interminable American debate over abortion demonstrates how desperate we are, and how futile it can be, to try to reduce humanity to binary categories like fetus and person.

Given the human propensity for binary thinking, it’s understandable that many people aren’t sure what to do with folks like me: which pronouns to use (common courtesy dictates using the pronouns we prefer, but things get more complicated when it comes to identifying us as mothers or fathers, sons or daughters, sisters or brothers, or referring to past and present versions of us) or whether to admit us into same-sex groups or spaces (bathrooms, locker rooms, public showers, dormitories, prisons, same-sex colleges,
women-only events, rape-crisis hotlines and shelters, gender-limited religious roles like Catholic priest, and sports competitions provoke some of the strongest disputes).

Some find trans people so unnatural that they deny our very existence, arguing that trans identities aren’t identities at all but sexual fetishes, symptoms of mental illness, or attention-getting stunts. Some say that our existence is an affront to God, society, morality, and the binary order on which everything, they believe, depends. A majority of Americans still believe that it is natural to deny us employment, housing, health care (some doctors refuse to treat transgender patients), community, dignity, courtesy, and respect.

Once out of nature, it seems, we aren’t allowed to take our place among natural things.

**Drawing Closer to God**

Many (though by no means all) of those most inclined to shun trans people for our failure to fit the “natural” binary of male and female belong to traditional religious communities, which read the first chapter of Genesis (“God made human beings in God’s own image . . . male and female God created them”) as not only building the gender binary into the fabric of Creation but also sanctifying it by linking it with “God’s own image.” The rabbis of the talmudic era recognized that a literal reading of this verse—a reading that decrees that human beings could only be “made” male or female—didn’t fit the facts of human physiology. They observed that some children are born with what we now call “intersex” conditions, with ambiguous genitals, genitals of both sexes, or genitals that make it hard to assign any sex at all. The rabbis approached this not as a problem of theology (are these babies made in the image of God?) but as a practical question: how did such people, whom they divided into two categories, tumtum and androgynos, fit into the rigorously gendered system of Jewish ritual law? In posing the question in these terms, the rabbis made it clear that they considered intersex Jews human, Jewish, bound by God’s law, and part of Jewish community. Though they didn’t say this, it must have been clear that although relatively rare, intersex conditions are natural, part of the range of human variation.

Like intersex people, trans people don’t fit the gender binary decreed in Genesis, but unlike intersex people, our difference isn’t visible at birth or inscribed in sex-defining genitalia. Not only doesn’t our difference seem natural, it also doesn’t seem real, in the sense that there is nothing but our feelings and actions to attest to it. But traditionally religious people build their lives around intense personal relationships with someone who is even worse at fitting into human categories or definitions of nature than we are: God.

It was lonely to grow up outside of nature, but even in the loneliest depths of childhood, I knew I wasn’t alone. God was always there, beside me.

Like most transgender children I’ve heard of, I had a close relationship with God, and even as a child, I knew that closeness was connected to my transgender identity. Because I lived in a body that didn’t feel like mine, I didn’t feel that I existed—and that sense of nonexistence enabled me to experience God as a palpable presence. I felt God with me, in me. I felt personally created by God (though I felt God had made a botch of it). I talked to God all the time and had no doubt that God was listening.

My family was Jewish but not religious, so I didn’t have any theology or religious authority to tell me that I was wrong, and despite the verse in Deuteronomy proclaiming God’s abhorrence of those who cross-dress, what I read in the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, seemed to confirm rather than challenge my intimate connection with God: God and I were both beings without bodily form or place in the natural order who were desperate to be loved by people who had both.

It’s hard for trans children to hold onto our relationships with God. As we grow up, most of us are taught that God can be found only through religions, traditions, and theologies that until recently were more or less universally agreed that God despises us.

Trans inclusion in religious communities lags far behind the still-contested inclusion
of gay and lesbian people. But trans children today are growing up in a world in which there are more and more synagogues, churches, mosques, and temples that will tolerate, accept, and even welcome them. Every year, fewer trans people feel forced to choose between being true to their gender identities and true to their religions. Inclusion of transgender people will require not only tolerance and accommodation from religious traditions; it will also require profound theological and spiritual growth.

The work of disentangling religious conceptions of God from what was long seen as the "natural" domination of women by men has taken generations and is still far from complete. But even religious communities that have renounced patriarchal gender hierarchy in favor of the egalitarian paradise of Genesis still struggle to think about God, humanity, or the Divine Image they share in terms that transcend, or expand, or otherwise escape the gender binary.

The gender binary is the idol planted in the Garden of Eden: we don’t know what “in the image of God” means, but we know what “male and female” mean, and the first chapter of Genesis prompts us to see the gender binary as a concrete, natural link between God and humanity. To truly include transgender people within Abrahamic religious traditions, we have to shatter the idol of the gender binary and face the truth that trans people embody—the truth that the gender binary represents neither the nature of nature, nor the nature of humanity, nor the nature of God.

However radical this may seem in terms of religious belief, practice, and community, this truth is as down-to-earth as a grass-fringed mudhole, where, without fuss or fanfare, binary human categories collide, collapse, and coalesce into more capacious, messier forms; where bullfrogs thrum amphibious hymns under gliding great blue herons; and where someone who lives as a woman after a lifetime as a male whispers, “Thank you, thank you, thank you” to a God who knows all about human gender and couldn’t care less.