

## **Fertility and Femininity**

by Alli Mancz

I run beside the Hocking, feel its energy plunging me into the next moment. Mid-November, and my bared shoulders glisten with sweat. The river meanders and flashes through Ohio's Appalachian hillsides. Blood pumping in my ears, thighs clenching with each step, I taunt the autumn water and leaves rushing about me. I can outlast them, going farther, faster.

63° and sunny, I can't remember the last time I traded in gloves for shorts. A tank top. The last time the river was this low. But the grass, it gleams in the wind. The slopes, they shine with an afternoon glow. The land and I look healthy, from a distance.

I forget about my latest prognosis, explained at an afternoon visit to the ob-gyn while office doors and floors creak, and nurses call out first names. I feel the concavity of my stomach as other women fidget and rest hands over their proud ballooning midriffs. A nurse escorts my mother and I to an exam room. She checks vitals (*all healthy though your pulse seems high*) and glances over bloodwork (*normal range for my age?*). She shrugs; the door snaps shut behind her.

We wait.

In *Refuge*, Terry Tempest Williams reflects on her relationship with the natural world, speaking to her preference, among other desires, for solitude. "It is what sustains me and protects me from my mind," she writes. "I am desert. I am mountains. I am Great Salt Lake."

As I run along the river, I think only of this moment, a fleeting journey. No doctors, no needles. Just one mile, two miles, three, each evaporating with the sun.

Hours after running, day approaches night. A down jacket envelopes my arms, cocooning me from swirling flurries as I walk home. Hard to believe it's still the same day, now 25°F and snowing. Jeans and a sweater nestle tightly against my body.

Sun and sleet, fever and chills.

Sickness is in the air, without any promise of planetary healing.

I have never questioned the connection between women and nature, seeing myself reflected in the way we converse about her, our metaphorical Mother Earth in the media descriptions of *fertile* or *barren lands*, *virgin forests*. Our bonded, female bodies echo each other, and these descriptors only enhance linguistic associations. Take the romance languages, gendering nature as female: *la natura* in Italian; *la naturaleza* in Spanish; *la nature* in French. The list goes on.

But this analogy is older than language. Deeper, divine roots ground our present in her past. The Greek goddess Gaia is referenced as one of the “female spiritual incarnations of the Earth” by Sarah Milner-Barry, her words advancing a religious solidarity.

Our souls understand biological and geographical mothers as one.

My mother, having brought me into this world twenty years ago, occupies a chair nearby. I feel like a child, shifting on parchment paper as it crinkles and scuffs my thighs. My ob-gyn has joined us, and her hair bobs with anxiety as she types.

I try not to notice her ticks, choosing instead to stare at an office logo on the wall in front of me. Maroon and pale pink, shaped like a lotus in bloom, it fails to fully distract. Her head won't stop shaking.

Doctors and scientists affirm natural connotations of the earth's interconnections as feminine and pulsing. To James Lovelock, such qualities were embodiments of Gaia herself. A name “redolent with mythic, poetic, and religious resonance,” *Gaia* became an obvious choice when Lovelock labeled his planetary theory—a hypothesis which posits earth as one living, global ecosystem that functions in the manner of a vast self-regulating organism. Like the human body itself.

Fertility and femininity as inseparable:

Lovelock preferred Gaia, not Uranus. Goddess, not god.

“If this doesn’t fix it—well, I don’t know if you’ll be able to have kids.”

Her hair stills and she sighs, as if it’s a relief. Bad news delivered, job done, my gynecologist can now wash her hands of my hormone deficiencies. But I can’t shake her words, staring straight ahead, tears blurring the flower before me. It feels safer than looking away.

I sense my mother’s eyes, the doctor’s secondhand embarrassment, but I don’t know what to say, practically apologetic for my emotions. All I’m feeling is loss. All I’m hearing is that phrase:

*I don’t know if you’ll be able to have kids.*

My mother steps in and does most of the talking. I close my eyes, hoping to bar the petaled logo from my mind. But the tears get shut out too. My strength, emotions, femininity each drain from my body, and I look down, perhaps expecting to see something staining the plastic below. *It’s leaving me, isn’t it? Why can’t I reach down, scoop, and swallow it back into my being?*

I know it’s too late. The lotus has lost its livelihood.

Society blends “the productive and reproductive qualities of women and the environment,” Milner-Barry suggests, furthering our tendency to fuse the two without question. Motherhood and childbirth connect human ecology to natural ecology, both of which depend upon life cycles only capable of cultivation within female bodies.

Natural logic. How could I dare to defy it?

Woman to woman, I see how our world is under siege. Of the nine planetary boundaries, reports estimate that we have already transgressed three. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and the disruption of the nitrogen cycle are just the start of nature’s worsening imbalance. And she has us to thank for that as we blindly speed into a new geological age manipulated and molded by insatiable hands. We have entered the Anthropocene and still, we cling to our consumption patterns, our status quo.

But our great acceleration gives the planet fever chills. Temperatures won’t stop climbing as fires rage across the globe, the Amazon charred and record-breaking flame

counts climbing in California. This infection can't be contained—it isn't localized—and it's spreading faster than nature can adapt.

There's only so much that can be suppressed by feminine will.

After my appointment, mom suggests we talk over lunch. My face indicates a desire for silence and a lack of appetite. Twenty minutes later, I'm picking at mix of kale and tuna as my mother explains how I could mend over time, just needing a pill or two each month to compensate for low estrogen levels. She says that I could heal by gaining back some of the weight I'd lost coming into college and eating more healthy fats. She squeezes my hand.

*For now, not forever.*

I nod, pushing wilted leaves around at the bottom of my bowl—a sad consumer of this sad salad. It turned out that we had left the gynecologist with very different understandings of my health, and I couldn't admit to her my takeaway: a loss of identity and future family plans. So instead, I listened to her consolations, agreed with her logic, and took my leftovers to go.

But ever since that afternoon, my doctor's words reverberate whenever I see my nieces swaddled in their mothers' arms. I smile and dote just the same. It's all I can do, my sisters believing this to be my destiny as well: that I will hold and nurture and resemble my very own pink, blooming child one day.

But there's a potential inability to carry on such tradition.

Biologically, this could be my forever.

Run after run, I watch the continuing change in landscape, note how my physical body mirrors nature's seasonal shifts—in autumn especially, as the earth reflects my mental unrest. The leaves redden and ripen and fade, leaving bald patches in groups of maples and oaks lining the river.

The trees, thinning like my hair. The river, dropping like my weight.

Yet, these leaves always fall. Rivers are subject to seasonal rises and drops. A fluctuating cycle, indistinct from the nature of female bodies. Slowly changing, ours waxing and waning with the moon. But are women's shifts expected? Or are they more

gradual, hidden until some threshold is reached? A few pounds lost, meals forgotten here and there. Can't amount to much.

Can it?

Our approaches to healing the earth embody the problematic thinking employed when it comes to our own health. Of course, people want a cure-all, a quick fix. We look to science, and science looks to fiction. People have proposed placing mirrors in space, pumping sulfate into the stratosphere, scattering nutrients in the ocean—and Pandora's box sits, waiting for our excitement to surpass our logic. Perhaps, it already has.

The attraction, or what Dianne Dumanoski coins as “the temptations of technofix,” positions us and our disillusionment at the heart of the problem. They're simply other forms of human-centered compromise. We overwhelm our earth with plastics: just one of many prized, and non-biodegradable, contributions of human innovation. We continue to give her pesticides—chemicals pregnant with PCBs—and test other forms of scientific tinkering aimed in boosting her fertility, her productivity. Her worth.

But Rachel Carson was right. These pesticides are *biocides*, or chemicals that might just kill us all if we aren't careful. And plastics? They'll simply break down into smaller and smaller bite-size pieces for all creatures to digest, eventually becoming the microplastics seeping into our bottles and later collecting in human bloodstreams.

The science is here—it's been here—but we can't fight what we don't acknowledge.

Ob-gyns and endocrinologists have told me I potentially can't follow in my mother and grandmother and great-grandmother's footsteps. But I don't want doctors' words to shape me. One doctor said I shouldn't run more than five miles at a time. Another specialist: I'm not eating enough proteins. *What about fats? Too heavy. Too thin. Take calcium and B12 and iron (even though calcium inhibits iron absorption). Maybe you should try this dosage instead?*

I see their framed degrees on the wall, their name plates and boxes of latex gloves near at hand. They are the medical professionals; *why can't I listen?* Let them

sell me on some magic medication or modified exercise regimen? But my sister says one day my body will balance, that my hormones will naturally regulate.

Women see hope.

Still, I can't deny that I may not want kids anymore, fearful of what it would mean to mother in this century. Cowardly? Maybe so. Still, I'll refuse to believe doctors' warnings until proven true because they merit identity. My pride. I am a woman first, mother second. Kids or no kids, my femininity will persist.

If nothing else, my understanding of it will.

*I am place. I am placed. I am this place.*

The wind ripples through my hair, sunshine searing exposed limbs, and I stop to catch my breath. Pain floods my body, but my mind remains with the river. My chest heaves, knees throb, and I run on.



**Alli Mancz** is an emerging writer, essayist, and advocate. Her work is forthcoming in *prose.onl* and has previously appeared in *Scribendi*, merging matters of a Midwestern self and meditations on sexual assault with surrounding ecologies. She currently studies as an MFA candidate at Northern Arizona University, teaching English Composition and Creative Writing while serving as the Editor-in-Chief of *Thin Air Magazine*. Her portfolio contains pieces that intertwine research and medical memoir in a hybrid format, combining lyrical prose with scientific data and self-reflection. Mancz lives in Flagstaff, Arizona and she can often be found hiking amidst the ponderosa pine.