

UC Berkeley

Parks Stewardship Forum

Title

Greco in Oz

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9cz9x4c3>

Journal

Parks Stewardship Forum, 39(2)

Author

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Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.5070/P539260960

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Greco in Oz

CJ GRECO

TRIGGER WARNING Suicide mentions, slurs, hate crime



I sat in my therapist's chilly, dark office on a leather couch that was probably older than me, getting metaphorically dissected to cure the crippling illness that nearly killed me. It had only been two months since I attempted to remove myself from this place that brought me nothing but despair and sadness, and I needed a reason to stay.

"So," my therapist injected into the silent room. "How are you feeling this week?" The gloomy air of the office filled my lungs as I sighed.

"I don't know what you want me to say," I mumbled in response as I stared at a stain on the wall just behind his head. I couldn't put words to the dread I constantly felt; "Fine," was an obvious lie, and "I didn't plan for anything beyond my planned death" sounded like it would have me end up back in grippy socks. "I'm just ... I'm lost," I said while doing my best not to cry just five minutes into an hour-long session.

"Lost. Okay, let's chat about tha—".

"I *really* don't want to," I swiftly interrupted. He paused, noticing that I was hesitant to dig into what was bothering me. Like I always was.

"I know, *deadname*. But we both know you need to. Otherwise, this feeling of being lost is never going to go away." I sat in that for a few moments, then took another deep sigh.

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"I don't know who I am. I feel like I never have. I'm trying to be someone my family needs me to be, but I...." My father had died only a few years prior, and since then my sense of self had slowly vanished. I had constantly been grasping at the remaining memories and sentiments I had of him, trying to fill the role that he had left as a good son does. But I couldn't do it, so in my head, I must be a bad son. Tears began streaming down my face and I softly whimpered, "I can't keep doing this." My therapist let me stew in this moment of vulnerability, something I normally wouldn't let myself do.

As my sobbing began to slow, my therapist broke me again by quietly but firmly saying, "You can choose to be someone else. You don't have to be who they want you to be. You can just be you." My sobbing resumed and did so for much of the remainder of my session. I could feel my face becoming red and my snot gathering in my nose as I wiped my eyes with the office-standard single-ply tissue.

"How?" I muttered through the waves of tears. "How am I supposed to do that?"

"Well, how do we get anywhere when we're lost?" After quickly realizing I was still far too deep in this much-needed sobfest to answer what could be a rhetorical question, he answered himself with, "By figuring out where we are first, then finding the way to where we want to go." He was good at leaving me to sit in something incredibly poignant.

I knew where I wanted to go but in a much more physical sense. Somewhere I never thought I would ever go. I needed to find myself.

"But what's the point when I don't even know where I want to go? Am I even really lost?" He and I finally made eye contact; I looked at him with a feeling of desperation, and he returned my look with one that just told me there was no need to be lost. I composed myself the best I could and said, "So how do I figure out where I want to go?" Where did I want to go? Who did I want to be? I pulled myself together just before our session ended, and got up to leave.

My therapist put his hand on my shoulder as I opened the door, and asked, "See you soon?" with a slight smile on his face as I turned toward him; it was a tiny light of hope in a world that felt colorless, gray, and dull.

"Yeah, see you soon," was the best I could say in response without breaking down in the waiting room. I got back to my car and my sobbing continued from where it left off. My dad always hated it when I cried, so I knew I had to get it all out before I got home even though he wasn't even there to judge me. I couldn't let any of them see what I had always been told was my weakness; this internalized weakness kept me confined to a role that I was cast in before I gave any consent to portray it. It would be a long time before I saw my therapist again. I knew where I wanted to go but in a much more physical sense. Somewhere I never thought I would ever go. I needed to find myself. And to do so I needed to escape beyond the societal prison that I felt so confined to. No one, not myself, my therapist, nor the world, was prepared for the cyclone of self-discovery that would aid in my escape. This whirlwind of emotions pushed me to become who I truly am.

Weeks passed and it was time to go. My mom, sister, and I drove to the airport in near-silence, only the radio playing softly in the background over the sound of zooming cars on the highway. I watched through the window as the farm fields and suburbs ebbed in between each other until they were eventually replaced by nothing but buildings and concrete. As we approached the drop-off area for international departures, my mom spoke, nearly finally taking me away from the window's gaze.

"Are you sure this is what you want, *deadname*?" she said gently. I nodded firmly in response. As we pulled up to the terminal, I hugged her and my sister goodbye. I had left home before, but not like this. Not with no idea of the person I would be at the end. I'd never adventured for adventure's sake. What I felt I needed was the scariest thing I would ever do; with every step walking away from my family, I could feel the uncomfortable box I'd been forced into slowly disappear.



Before I even knew it, I was there. The cyclone came and went—in only 28 hours. I put one hand up to shield my eyes from the blinding light as I stepped out of the plane into this strange new world, while the other held tightly onto a strap of my backpack. At first, I was worried things felt the same. The water was blue, the grass was green, and the familiar pigeons of home strutted along the sides of the streets. But the more I watched, the more I realized I wasn't in Chicago anymore. Colors were brighter, the wind was brisk, and the sun glowed with a shimmer of green and gold. Vibrantly colored birds scattered the skies and flowers the earth. Even the gray of the concrete was somehow different. This place was far more than I could have ever imagined. It was overwhelming and I had never experienced anything quite like it. I was terrified. Fear must have been written on my forehead from how many people began to look at me with concerned looks as I stared at a row of taxis. Frozen, I stood outside of the airport for what felt like hours but were mere moments.

"You 'right, mate?" asked a cabbie, his peculiar voice breaking me from my trance. I was hearing the same language I spoke my entire life but in a way that I'd never experienced before. I took a deep breath before responding.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm okay, thanks—sorry."

"Oh, no worries," he said with a smile. "Did you need a taxi?" he asked endearingly.

"Um, sure," I responded. I swung my backpack off my shoulders and into my arms as I hopped into the back of the taxi.

"Where we headed?" he asked as I closed the door. I had no idea what to say or clue where I wanted to go. The cabbie started driving out from the airport and towards the city. I did my best to investigate this wild place I was now realizing I was in from behind the glass of a taxi. As we got closer to the city, the cabbie asked again, "Mate, where do you want to go?" almost as if to remind me that I had not yet answered his question.

"Uh ... just a hotel, I guess?"

"Um, yeah, sure. I can do that," he answered slowly. I could tell he was a little confused as to why I had no specific destination in mind, but he wanted to help me. "So," the cabbie quickly said to clear the air, "What's your name, mate?"

As he went on to describe this land and his profound love for it, I was feeling a sense of shared admiration for it, yet also a deep longing for a place I felt as proud of.

"Uh, it's *deadname*."

"Nice to meet you, *deadname*. Where did you fly in from? States, right?"

"Yeah," I responded with the ambiguity in my voice matching his description of where I was from.

"I could tell. The accent gives you away," he chuckled, bringing me my first smile abroad. His thinking that I had an accent tickled me in a way I wasn't ready for. Noticing my small joy, he asked, "First time in Oz then, mate?"

"Oz?" I asked.

"Yeah, mate!" he explained loudly and proudly, "Oz, 'Straya, the land down unda'...." As he went on to describe this land and his profound love for it, I was feeling a sense of shared admiration for it, yet also a deep longing for a place I felt as proud of. It felt like an honor to hear this true blue cabbie share his love for this land that I was hoping to use to discover more about myself. The land of Oz was a seemingly mystical world that was literally upside down from what I was adjusted to. I tuned back into what the cabbie was saying as he said, "Big man like you will probably love footy too, you'd best check out the MCG while you're here."

“Yeah, maybe,” I said; the smile he brought me quickly faded. Something about how he saw me hurt me in a way I wasn’t ready for. I once again felt the pain I was trying to escape from. I couldn’t place exactly what it was, but I knew that something about how he addressed me wasn’t comfortable. Fate took me to this strange land to find myself, and I knew that whatever I was feeling was not it. I had a journey of sorts ahead of me.

After traveling to a land unlike anything I’d ever seen, my instinct was to ask a stranger to drop me off at just any hotel. What was I even thinking?

The cabbie, true to his word, took me exactly where he said he would; a hotel. A five-star hotel that cost more money per night than I even brought with me. After traveling to a land unlike anything I’d ever seen, my instinct was to ask a stranger to drop me off at just any hotel. What was I even thinking? Knowing this wasn’t going to work, I thanked the cabbie, and I began to walk in the opposite direction looking for a sign of my next steps as he drove away.

As I walked, I took in more of this city. There was so much more than I could see from the taxi window. Gorgeous street art, laneways with the most stunning sculptures, and hidden coffee shops and cafes with better drinks and pastries than anything I’d ever tasted before. But as beautiful as the city was, it wasn’t why I was here. Melbourneland was just where the cyclone took me, but I had the entire land of Oz to explore. I needed to be in the wilds. That’s where I would find myself; I knew that to be true, but I didn’t know why. I only knew for sure that my way home was in the Emerald City, a large city on the ocean with green expanses, a large population of Oz-ies, and notable architecture. I had what felt like too much time to travel across Oz and find myself. A lofty goal to be sure, but I was off to the Emerald City—knowing that the ghost of my former self was chasing me the whole time.



I left Melbourneland and headed on my journey to find the Emerald City. The path away from this town that welcomed me to Oz was dusted in what seemed like red-colored sand, vibrant and distinct, seemingly seeping from the earth onto the road. I decided to follow the red-dust road and it led me further and further from the city. The red-dust road I followed led me to an expansive desert; yet another reminder I wasn’t in Chicago anymore. I was what I thought was a city boy and the rough-looking tumbles of the red waste I was rapidly approaching felt utterly horrifying. I barely ever saw the sand in my own country and now I was in one of the largest and infamously dangerous deserts in the world.

Upon arriving at a small town in the Red Center, I noticed a group of adventurers planning an expedition deeper into the desert to explore some of the rock formations and historic sites. This group was made up of a wide array of people: individuals from all over the world, of all different ages, body types, and backgrounds. I was drawn to them almost immediately, watching them talk about their upcoming adventure while sitting a few tables away. It seemed as if these people barely knew each other, at least far less than it initially seemed, given the camaraderie I sensed. I listened as they introduced themselves to one another. Saying their name, city or country of origin, and something I had never really heard people use in an introduction, their pronouns. It didn’t take long for them to notice me observing them. My glance was met by a person about my age with medium-length blonde hair, and I turned away to break it immediately. If I only had the brain cells to not stare at strangers.

“What’re you looking at, mate?” asked the stranger in an aggressive and protective tone, gaining the attention of the rest of their group. I remembered hearing them introduce themselves as Alex, they were from this town and leading the group into the desert, and their pronouns were they/them/theirs.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” escaped from my mouth, unsure what I was defending myself from. “I was just listening to you all talk about a trip into the desert.”

“Yeah?” the stranger asked with a growing grin on their face, telling me they knew something I didn’t yet.

“Yep.” My brain—usually trained to be wary of new people in a new land—wasn’t sounding the alarms it should have been. While my mind was distracted by why this group of people didn’t give me anxiety, I opened my mouth and said, “Do you think you’d have space for another?” to a complete group of strangers.

“I don’t know if this group is for you. Plus, we don’t even know who you are. I’m not keen on strangers watching us.” It was a good point, but then again they were just introducing themselves to each other. I quickly followed suit and introduced myself.

“You’re right,” I nodded. “I’m, uh, *deadname*, I use the pronouns, um ... I use he/him?” I stood up and extended my arm to shake their hand.

**I opened my mouth and said,
“Do you think you’d have space for another?”
to a complete group of strangers.**

“Sure ’bout that, mate?” they laughed as they reached for my hand and matched mine for an introductory shake.

“I guess I’m working on it,” I meekly responded with a small smile on my face full of genuine confusion, eager for their response on if I could join them and their expedition. I looked down at our handshake and then up at Alex and the rest of their group.

“That’s good on ya, *deadname*. Let us know if we can help you work on it, that is if you’re still down to join our little group here.”

“Oh, um. Yes, absolutely!” I enthusiastically reacted.

“Great! Well, we’re leaving from here tomorrow morning at sunrise, and it’ll be about a week of roughing it out there in the outback. Sound okay to you?” I could tell I had made a good impression on Alex, and the rest of the group looked at me with smiles on their faces.

“Sounds amazing,” I said with my grin almost mirroring theirs. I was excited to have the prospect of a brief week where I wouldn’t be alone, but I was still the old me.

The next morning I was at the meetup site nice and early. Alex was there preparing the van. They were the only one there when I arrived.

“Good morning,” I said, trying not to surprise them. They turned from the van towards me.

“Hey! Morning, glad you’re here! It’s *deadname*, right?”

“Uh, yeah,” I shyly said, turning away from them.

“You know, if there’s something else you’d rather go by, we can try it out here, see how it fits ya? This is a pretty good group of folks,” they said proudly, filled with love.

“I don’t know, Alex.” I truly had never even thought about it. Who was I? I guess that was the entire point of this trip.

“Okay, you just let us know, yeah?”

“Yeah, okay, thank you.”

“Of course, mate,” they said warmly as they patted my shoulder and walked towards some others approaching the meetup spot. I smiled at the familiar gesture and climbed into the van with the group. As the sun rose and the

crescent moon moved just beyond our sight, we drove for a few hours over the boundless red desert, deeper and deeper toward the Center.

We arrived at our destination, a national park in the heart of Oz. Alex and crew were nothing but the warmest people, something that I never really had back home. Similarly, I never had anything this wild back home. A city kid like myself was never really up for “roughing it,” as it were. And yet, for some reason, it’s exactly what I signed up for. We started the expedition with some icebreakers and some stretches under the blazing Oz sun, and then we began our first hike. Just a short three-mile loop around a large rock formation. I have to be honest: to say I was unprepared would be an understatement. Hiking was never really my thing, but now to be part of the group, I would make it my thing. And before I knew it, we were off. I started the walk with Alex, near the front of the group. I listened intently as they shouted to the group about some of the incredible and lengthy histories of the rock formation we were hiking near the base of. How important of a site it was—and still is—for Aboriginal people. With every step, my old sneakers kicked up a small cloud of red dust; it felt like I was walking on another planet. The intricacies of weathering on this millennia-old rock spoke to me in a language I couldn’t read or hear, but instead, felt in my soul. As my mind drifted and my pace slowed, I didn’t even notice as Alex and the group moved past me.

“Hey C, we’ll catch you at the end of the loop!” Alex shouted. If they were any further, I wouldn’t have been able to hear them. I put my arm in the air with my hand giving a thumbs up in acknowledgment.

“Wait,” I said aloud to myself. They called me “C.” All they did was shorten my name to one simple letter, and I was fully taken aback. I was wholly unprepared for the impact something as small as one letter would have on me. As I reflected on this, I continued to kick up the Martian moon dust sand beneath my feet. I continued to shuffle around the massive rock formation, looking up now and then to observe this beautiful and ancient natural wonder until I saw my group.

When I finally caught up with Alex and company, I pulled them aside to ask them why they called me “C.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” they sighed and responded. “I just know you seemed uncomfortable, and I didn’t want to—”

“It’s okay,” I said with a smile still out of breath from this hike and a single tear streaming down my face, cutting through the dust that had settled onto it during our hike. “I appreciate you for thinking of me.” I wanted to add

how no one, not even myself, had ever really noticed my discomfort with this specifically. How I never had someone—anyone, let alone someone who I had known for less than a day—could care about me so deeply. How this small glance into a supportive gang of beautiful people was the first time anyone ever encouraged me to be anything other than what I was told to be. How my heart felt larger because of the genuine love and human connection we had shared, even briefly. But I didn’t say any of that. I needed to sit with these feelings, and I knew I had the week and then my remaining time in Oz to do so. Plus, what a weird string of things to say to essentially a stranger.

This small glance into a supportive gang of beautiful people was the first time anyone ever encouraged me to be anything other than what I was told to be.

“Good on ya, C,” Alex said as they noticed my head was full of thoughts. They again brought up their hand to pat me on the shoulder, before turning to the group and continuing to guide us.

And so I was “C” for the rest of the week. We journeyed through countless areas and camped in wide expanses of land. Looking up from my rucksack at night, I had never seen so many stars in my entire life. Not only that, I had never even camped in my life, and now here I was camping under the Milky Way in the most dangerous desert. Snakes, spiders, wild dogs, dinosaurs—who knew what was out there? But it was okay, I was safe and I was happy.



It felt like the week with Alex's group went by quicker than it really did. I was off on my own again. And for the first time, I wasn't scared about it. It was refreshing to have the chance to sit with my time from the Red Center. I was off and continued to follow the rust-colored sandy road, out of the desert and into a rainforest—which is, I would later learn, one of the oldest on the planet, filled to the absolute brim with ancient plants and endless wildlife, the likes of which I had never seen before. I decided I wanted to try to explore this new world in the same way I did with Alex and their group.

I boarded a train to take me deeper into the rainforest; I had planned to explore from the center outward, making my way back to the road that was guiding me to the Emerald City. I watched out the train window as we wound up mountains, passing by waterfalls, rivers, and massive trees. I noticed a man from the back of the train car staring at me, but not the curious and hopeful stare I had given Alex just a week or so back. This was different, yet I couldn't quite place his intentions. I chose to ignore him and continued thinking about the fascinating wildlife I was sure to see while hiking in the rainforest. I exited the train car when we arrived at the station at the top of a mountain, the trail through the forest just down the way. I could see the man who was staring at me on the train, and his glare had only become more intense. The confrontation wasn't something I needed right now—I just didn't have the courage—so I turned away and headed towards my path down the mountain.

As I hiked on the wooden path into the rainforest, stared at the massive fern-like leaves and watched as small streams fed into a large river. The wooden planks beneath my feet turned into stairs as I was led to a canopy catwalk over the rainforest. Looking down over the railings, I could see walking on the ground some of the largest birds I'd ever seen. I sure wasn't in Chicago anymore. One bird

The minutes felt like seconds and the hours felt lost while I was in this timeless corner of Oz.

had a blue-and-red head; long, almost fur-like feathers; and claws longer than my fingers. This dinosaur looked up from the forest floor at me and we walked almost in sync, not breaking eye contact. We walked this way until my trail broke away from the tree canopy and went out to a platform over the river. The dinosaur/bird seemed to know something I didn't know about the water, as I watched it turn and march back to where we came from.

I stood on the edge of the wooden platform, my toes in my red-dust-covered sneakers creeping over the edge while my body rested on the railing. Looking down at the water I could see something was in the river. That shouldn't have been much of a surprise; I knew I'd see some weird and wacky wildlife out here in the rainforest. My eyes followed the strange wave patterns to the shore, and a massive reptile practically slithered out, water beading off its large yellow-green scales. I could have watched this ancient reptile bask on the river's edge for hours, and to be honest, I might have done just that. The minutes felt like seconds and the hours felt lost while I was in this timeless corner of Oz. I read the interpretive sign about the saltie below me, how they were ambush predators, how they wait endlessly for their prey and tear them up while they are least expecting it.

The river lookout was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. The waterfall upstream pushed the water towards the ocean, the water that was somehow crystal-clear but also murky and mysterious. These prehistoric plants surrounding me were remnants from the age of creatures now fossils. The two dinosaur-like creatures I had been observing reminded me just how ancient this forest truly was. How they both had unique places in their ecosystem; how they must have clearly understood their roles. It reminded me just how small I was in the entirety of the universe. How seemingly insignificant my identity journey was in the wide, expansive world. But that wasn't going to stop my journey. I stood reflecting on my time in Oz thus far, that I'd faced so many of my greatest fears, and even begun to learn about who I truly was. It couldn't have been more obvious that I wasn't in Chicago anymore. I was so deep in reflection that I didn't notice that I was the only person still out on the lookout—that is, until the same man from the train started strutting up the path, eyes locked onto me. Completely oblivious, I took out my metal water bottle covered in stickers and had a sip of cool water. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, loving every second of exactly who I was at this moment. Unfortunately, that joy was about to stop.

“Hey, poofter!” the man said as he continued to walk toward me. I turned from my reflection to notice him, moving steadily toward me. If the depths of the desert and reaches of the rainforest didn’t spark fear in my soul, this certainly did. The man continued to shout derogatory words at me as he moved closer. While I backed up, scared, I didn’t break eye contact with this aggressive stranger. I began to feel the same helplessness I felt when I tried to end my life just a few months prior. A few months prior to the incredible joys I’d felt so far in Oz. A few months before now—now, on this lookout, feeling the most scared I’d ever felt.

“Are you talking to me?” I said, pretending to be tough, knowing that he was indeed talking to me.

“Yeah, cunt, I am.” I was backed into the corner of the lookout. As he moved closer and closer to me, I could feel my heart rate skyrocket. I was initially so confused as to this man’s anger towards me. I hadn’t done anything except exist. But I suppose that’s enough, too much even, for some people. I could feel his hatred exuding into the air from just a few meters away. He stopped marching toward me just short of where I was standing; I watched as he pulled a small knife off of his belt, and then his march resumed. He took a swing at me with the knife, and I reactively swung my metal water bottle and hit him on the side of the head. I moved around him quickly as he attempted to recover. I sprinted as fast as I’d ever run down the path out of the rainforest. “Fucking faggot!” I heard him scream as I fled. My backpack swayed side to side as I rapidly moved down the wooden-planked path out of the rainforest.

I didn’t stop running until I was on a bus at the base of the mountain, a bus taking me to the Emerald City. As I boarded the bus, I had my head on a swivel keeping an eye out for the agro attacker I thought to be in pursuit.

“You okay, mate?” asked the bus driver, out of concern for what I thought was from my continued, yet justified, paranoia.

“Um, sure, why?” I asked in response. She looked down at my abdomen, at a slash in my shirt, at the dried blood I was just noticing for the first time since the wicked man of the forest tried to hurt me. I put my hand to the wound and noticed it was just skin deep. Relieved, I said, “Yeah, I’m okay.” The driver nodded and I took my seat. Still scared, I watched as the bus filled with people. I thought about how, if I am to find myself, I am going to have to be courageous and proud in ways I had never been before. I would have never thought I’d have that in me, but I didn’t think I’d ever get this far. Remembering how far I’ve come since I landed in Oz made me begin to relax. I closed my eyes, finally feeling safe, and we shortly took off towards the Emerald City.

I thought about how, if I am to find myself, I am going to have to be courageous and proud in ways I had never been before.



The bus let me off just outside of the Emerald City, at the Blue Mountains. Just a quick hike through the mountains and I would be at the destination of my journey. I was incredibly hesitant to hike again after what happened just before in the rainforest, but this was my only way home. I moved my hand toward my abdomen to feel my now-wrapped-and-cleaned flesh wound. At least I wasn’t alone, I was surrounded by many others finding their way to the Emerald City.

I moved slowly through the mountains, again keeping my eyes on everything except the natural beauties I was surrounded by. Cliffs overlooking endless gumtrees, streams leading to small waterfalls, and rock formations celebrated by people for thousands of years. As I hiked towards the City, I thought back to my first real adventure here in Oz with Alex and their group. I thought about what made that trip different and meaningful for me. It was the collective of people who shared their joy while in the outdoors. We all brought kindness into a space that can be horrifying and scary. I thought back to my recent encounter with someone who tried to seriously hurt me just for trying to live my life. The emotional whiplash from the drastically different outdoor experiences I had in Oz made my head hurt. My mind was racing, when I suddenly felt the brisk wind on my face as I approached a clearing. In the

clearing, many people had stopped and were watching something happening in the bush. I peered between the crowd and saw them: a small mob of medium-sized mammals with milk-chocolate fur, grazing on the grass around this gathered group of people. Every new place in Oz was filled with strange creatures. Creatures that I had read about but never really thought I'd see in real life. It was as if being in the presence of a cryptid or magical monster; simply mystifying. I stood watching these marsupials until they eventually hopped around us, moving on deeper into the gumtree forest.

There wasn't much more to hike before I found myself entering the Emerald City. The city I had heard so much about on my journey, the city that had my way home. I again had time to explore a city like when I landed in Melbourneland, except something felt different. I wasn't the same confused boy who traveled to a faraway land by cyclone with no plan. I wasn't the sad son who felt he couldn't fill the role his father wanted to take. I was something different, something new. I walked the streets of the Emerald City with such whimsy, objectively more whimsy than a person who had just been stabbed should be walking with. The freedom of knowing I could be myself was simply liberating. I didn't need a wizard to magically tell me the answers to who I truly was.

As I traversed the busy streets of the Emerald City, I found myself approaching a bustling pier with the city's jewel in full view. A castle dedicated solely to the musical and theatrical arts, masterfully representing the Emerald City's diverse residents. Its curving white peaks pierced the sky, contrasting with the deep-blue ocean it sat poised on. It somehow felt out of place, even though its structure so similarly resembled the sailboats surrounding it. As magnificent as it was and as perfectly it seemed to fit its home on the harbor, I couldn't help but feel as if this building just didn't fit. It was a structure of the sea but constrained to the shore. It resembled a pearl-colored wave crashing on the pier, only to have been domesticated by the citizens of the Emerald City. This house of opera was nothing more than a mere dramatic set piece in the city that everyone raved about. I stood mesmerized by the ocean pushing and pulling on the harbor, ships moving in and out almost in contrast. And in this struggle between natural and unnatural, I saw myself mirrored.

I did not need to hide behind a curtain. I had the knowledge of who I was the whole time, I just needed to open my heart and learn to love myself.

I did not need to hide behind a curtain. I had the knowledge of who I was the whole time, I just needed to open my heart and learn to love myself. After facing so many fears in Oz, I knew I had the courage to face any judgment—internal or otherwise. I adored every second of my time in Oz, even the life-threatening ones. The time spent journeying in the natural world was unbelievably restorative. I never thought that I could be so connected to myself, even when the entire purpose of this trip was to do just that. I wasn't the same person who got caught in that cyclone not so long ago. Who I was and who I am were in contrast to one another: a son, a boy, a shell of a person, now fully developed into a person of their own right, not defined by my role assigned to me, but instead what I decide for myself. The journey in Oz was something that can only be described as magical. I grew, I changed, and now it was time for me to return home.



Almost as if I had simply clicked my heels together three times, the 28-hour journey home happened nearly instantly. I returned to the gray and sad life I left, but now with a bright and colorful exuberance. Within a few months of returning, I came out as nonbinary and transgender. I was able to finally understand who I was and celebrate that person. I loved myself more than I thought possible. It was because of my time in Oz, the time spent exploring nature; in exploring nature, I was exploring myself. Through my exploration, I was able to understand and love who I truly am.





This article is published in Volume 39, Number 2 of *Parks Stewardship Forum*, 2023.

Parks Stewardship Forum explores innovative thinking and offers enduring perspectives on critical issues of place-based heritage management and stewardship. Interdisciplinary in nature, the journal gathers insights from all fields related to parks, protected/conserved areas, cultural sites, and other place-based forms of conservation. The scope of the journal is international. It is dedicated to the legacy of **George Meléndez Wright**, a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, and pioneer in conservation of national parks.

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The journal continues *The George Wright Forum*, published 1981–2018 by the George Wright Society.

PSF is designed by Laurie Frasier • lauriefrasier.com



On the cover of this issue

“Strength,” a Tarot illustration representing a radiation of power coupled with inner understanding and love. | [HENRY CRAWFORD ADAMS](#)