
cactus
juice:
a magical
love letter to
the American
Southwest



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24 Hour Zine 2023

I call myself a witch even though I don't do what most people call witchcraft. I don't cast spells, at least not what I think of as spells. I totally respect witches that do sigils and energy work and herbs and cast spells in cauldrons and all that. And I also know not all witchcraft looks like that, I can do witchcraft however it looks for me. I guess I still have a hard time thin king of what I do as witchcraft, probably because my skeptical brain doesn't like to accept it. So why call myself a witch then?

I guess I feel like being a witch has nothing xx to do with practicing witchcraft. It x has nothing to do with beliefs or disbeliefs either, at least I hope it doesn't because I haven't settled on a darn thing metaphysically (blame my philosophy undergrad--it affirmed my position as a perpetual skeptic). Being a witch, I mean, it's just a word and identity that you can claim at any time. If you identify with transness, you are trans. If you identify with witchness, you are a witch. I know it's a recursive definition of sorts, but what are you gonna do? Anything else leaves too much out. So I guess that is my... justification for feeling like I'm "allowed" to call myself a witch, but still, why do I?

I don't believe in magic as an energy... I also don't not believe it. Is magic art? Is magic physical? Is magic imaginary? Is the imaginary real? Am I real? Am I a witch?

I suppose I call myself a witch because there are certain things that make me feel magical. There are certain things that get me into that Flow State, and that flow state is my witch-craft. There are certain things and places that feel magical, and honestly I still kinda hate saying that because it makes me feel like a Christian who tries to force their God by telling you to look at a damn sunset as proof he exists and wants us all to burn in hell unless you repent. But some places just are magical, you know, and there's not a damn thing I can do about it.

The southwest is a magical place. Magic just lives there, existing like air or xx sand. I grew up not quite there but close enough that I would know, because every time I went down to x the desert I could feel it all over again. My times in the petrified forest and Mesa Verde and the Colorado river and the places Georgia O'Keeffe sat to paint and capture that magic remain some of the most special times of my life.

And my witchcraft, if you can call it that, is looking straight on at that magic, and trying to capture its essence as best I can. Maybe to even try and "capture" it is the wrong word, it's impossible. Magic, like art, is free by it's very nature.

So I guess all that is to say that this zine is my little piece of southwest witchcraft. It's acknowledging the magic in the southwest and trying to capture just enough that I can re-member and re*experience it, even far out here in the Northeast.

Hope to be back there soon.

I think the natural place for me to start is with some memories of the southwest.

I've been feeling very homesick for it lately, and it's driving me crazy because I don't want to feel an intense longing all the time, especially since I've worked so hard to get to a place and community and apartment I actually like trying to make a home in, you know? I don't want to feel like my home is somewhere else. So maybe by giving my southwest memories a place of honor in this zine, I can finally put them to rest.

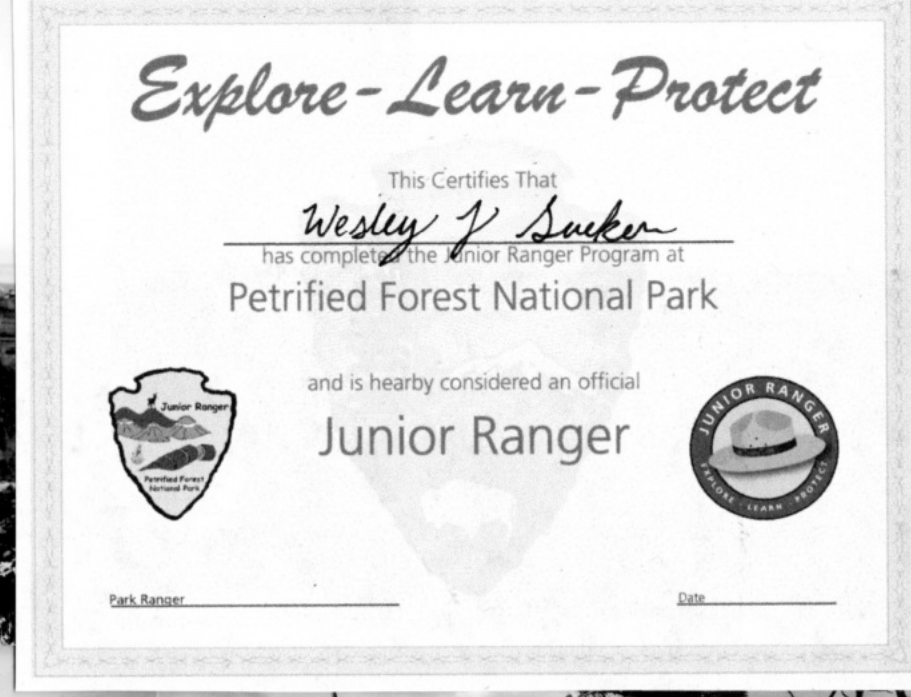
My first excursion to the southwest (that I remember) from my home in Colorado was on a road trip to my grandma's in the California bay area. You can get there in two days driving across I-70 through Utah and Nevada, but we took the long way through New Mexico and Arizona so we could see things on the way.

I was maybe 6 years old at the time, and I have a few distinct memories. One is visiting the Grand Canyon, which I was afraid of and I did NOT go up to the edge of the viewing platform. Another was when mom thought she'd left her wallet at a restaurant we'd stopped at. We made a 2-hour backtrack only to find it wasn't there. Mom was panicking and searching the car, when suddenly I spotted her wallet on top of the car, stuck in the ski rack. I seriously wondered if the desert itself had granted us that luck, because it felt like something that could never have happened back home.



Petrified Forest

A rich and colorful desert with large deposits of petrified wood along with many fossils of dinosaurs and other creatures can be found in the Petrified Forest National Park.



Explore - Learn - Protect

This Certifies That

Wesley J Sucker

has completed the Junior Ranger Program at

Petrified Forest National Park

and is hearby considered an official

Junior Ranger

Park Ranger _____ Date _____

But the real adventure was the Petrified Forest. It's a national park in Arizona, filled with giant petrified logs--fossilized trees that have been turned into stone. They are the remaining forms of trees from a forest millions of years ago. You can count the rings and see the bark forms and root systems of these ancient, prehistoric trees. It's like a giant natural gravesite, with beautiful quartz trees acting as their own headstones from silicification. I was never particularly interested in dinosaurs as a kid, but these tree fossils felt so real, perfectly preserved in all but life.

The national park service had an educational activity packet that I tore through, eager to learn about them. (And to earn the Junior Ranger certification in the back.)

The next big trip I remember was when grandma took us to Mesa Verde in Colorado near the 4 Corners. They are these incredible old buildings built into caves, made and inhabited by ancestral Anasazi and Pueblo peoples. They are so cool and cozy, a genius respite from the desert heat. I remember it being one of the first times I realized that the "Thanksgiving narrative"-- the kindly Europeams "rescuing" the foolish natives--was utter bullshit. There was one room with a bunch of marks on the wall near the ground, and a guide explained that white historians thought they were some sort of timekeeping or religious thing, until a Hopi native and historian said ~~x~~ "no dipshits, those are chicken scratches. This is where they kept chickens."

Another instance of the exotification and infantilization of Native Americans!

And another strong memory I have was visiting Taos, New Mexico on a school trip. Our school did a lot of camping/exploration trips (we all fundraised all year for the school Trip Fund).

The trips were lead by certain classes, and this one was for the Watercolor class (I had a very strange but in many ways awesome school). I wasn't in the class, but the teacher invited me anyway. We drove down and stayed in a youth hostel with a big lizard mural on the side. We woke up at sunrise to go paint, and we were always stopping at the side of the road whenever we saw something pretty to paint. We stopped where Georgia O'Keefe lived and lots of museums in between. The O'Keefe spot was really special because we had a big poster of her California Poppy in our stairwell at home. I always loved it.

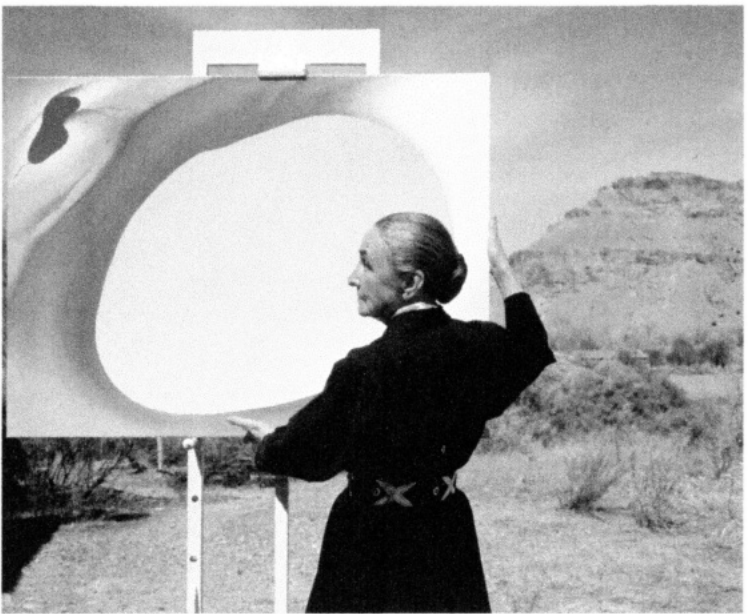
I've made many more trips since then, mostly just passing through on my many trips between Colorado and California. I had to move back and forth a lot. I always tried to go through the southwest when I could. I have a lot of good memories of sweating my way through the desert with my partner, the heat so intense that our car's A/C literally just couldn't do anything. I miss the crappy motel we always stayed at in Kingsman, and the big skies full of sunset, and spotting shapes in the desert rocks and Mesas, and ever getting lost in the dark on a dirt road with no phone battery. I miss the whole thing, whether visiting or just passing through.







Georgia Totto O'Keeffe (November 15, 1887 – March 6, 1986) was an American modernist artist. She was known for her paintings of enlarged flowers, New York skyscrapers, and New Mexico landscapes. O'Keeffe has been called the "Mother of American modernism".



O'Keeffe then spent part of nearly every year working in New Mexico. She collected rocks and bones from the desert floor and made them and the distinctive architectural and landscape forms of the area subjects in her work. Known as a loner, O'Keeffe often explored the land she loved in her Ford Model A, which she purchased and learned to drive in 1929. She often talked about her fondness for Ghost Ranch and Northern New Mexico, as in 1943, when she explained, "Such a beautiful, untouched lonely feeling place, such a fine part of what I call the 'Faraway'. It is a place I have painted before ... even now I must do it again."

O'Keeffe and Stieglitz lived together in New York until 1929, when O'Keeffe began spending part of the year in the Southwest, which served as inspiration for her paintings of New Mexico landscapes and images of animal skulls, such as *Cow's Skull: Red, White, and Blue* and *Ram's Head White Hollyhock and Little Hills*. After Stieglitz's death, she lived in New Mexico at Georgia O'Keeffe Home and Studio in Abiquiú until the last years of her life, when she lived in Santa Fe.

During O'Keeffe's marriage to Stieglitz, both had several affairs, O'Keeffe's with women and men, for she was bisexual. Though the nature of their relationship is unconfirmed, there is substantial evidence that O'Keeffe had an affair with the famous painter Frida Kahlo sometime during her marriage to Diego Rivera. The two met in December 1931 in New York City at the opening of Rivera's solo exhibition at the MOMA. Lucienne Bloch, a friend and assistant of Frida and Diego, claimed that Rivera bragged later that his wife had been flirting with O'Keeffe. From here, a friendship and potential relationship began.

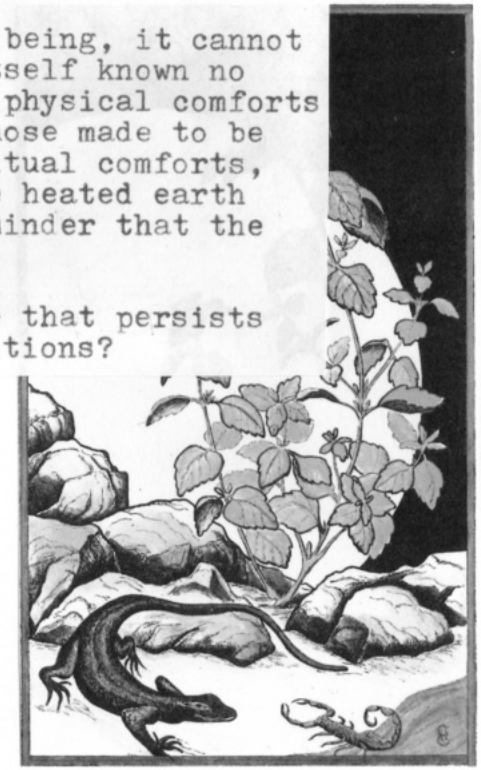
if you're going to be here in the desert, you need to acknowledge the land. you're forced to. you need to interact with it on its own terms.

you need to put on protections just for your body to survive long enough to carry your soul through the desert. the desert turns everyone into a witch, because you need both that power and respect for the earth. sunscreen sigils spelled on skin, summoning storms and shade, this is what it is for anyone to live here.

human assertions of dominance always fail in one way or another. monocultured lawns ~~inevia~~ inevitably die baking in the sun, air conditioners die of exhaustion from fighting against the heat. even water must be rationed, something temperate people up and downstream must be reminded of, but here? how could you ever forget?

no, the desert is its own being, it cannot be controlled. it makes itself known no matter what. it offers no physical comforts for any creature except those made to be here. it offers only spiritual comforts, the shimmer and hum of the heated earth beneath you a constant reminder that the desert is full of spirits.

what is spirit except life that persists through the harshest conditions?






HI
THERE !

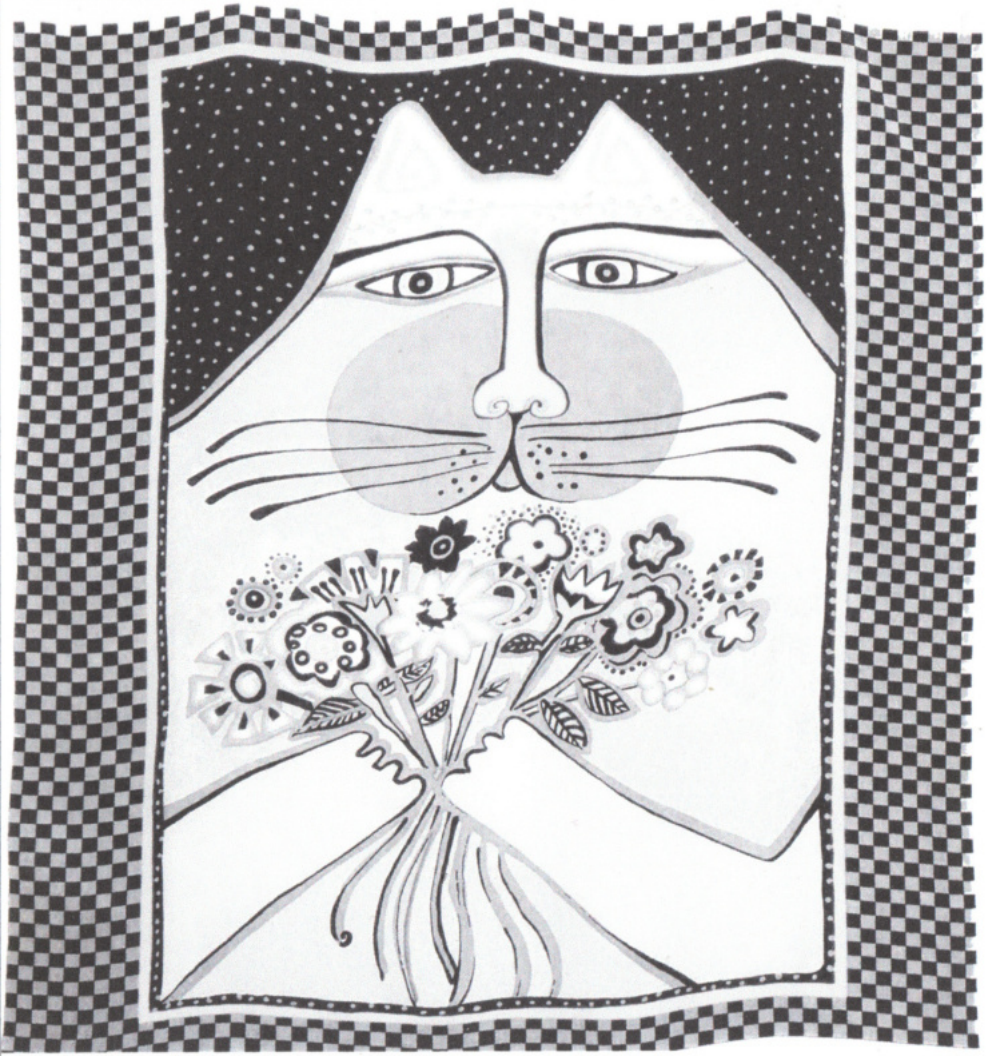


dear laurel birch
i love your work
i miss your cats
and all their quirks

i didn't get it
as a child
but now your art
just makes me smile

it helps to mend
my gothic heart
by mending all
the hippie parts

so thank you laurel
hope you're fine
and thanks for leaving
art behind



THE MAGICAL LESSONS OF CACTI

Let's talk about photosynthesis.

For those who need a quick refresher (I certainly did), photosynthesis is the process of plants converting sunlight energy, carbon dioxide, and water into glucose (sugar, meaning energy) and releasing oxygen as a byproduct.

Cacti do this too (all plants do in one way or another, as far as I know), but in a unique way—they hold their breath during the day.

That's perhaps a little misleading (but doesn't it sound cool?), because if we're gonna say that, we'd also have to say most plants "hold their breath" at night. Plants have little openings on their epidermis (skin, usually a layer on the underside of their leaves, but it's on the green stem of a cactus) called stomata, which let carbon dioxide in and oxygen out. But this also lets some water escape through evaporation—it's a delicate balance for the plant juggling light, gas release and water levels. Most plants open the stomata during the day so they can use the energy from sunlight immediately in the photosynthesis process.

But in the desert, opening the stomata during the intense heat of the day would let too much water escape, and water is an infinitely precious resource for the desert plant. So to limit evaporation, cacti have evolved to open their stomata at night instead. (This also means that cacti and other succulents release oxygen at night—so if you're a night owl, a cactus can be a breath of fresh air).

It's not as simple as it sounds for our friend the cactus. Since they also need light to photosynthesize, they need to figure out a way to have all three things—sunlight, carbon dioxide, and water—at the same time. They can't change when they get sunlight, so instead they have to store the carbon dioxide and water for use during the day. Cacti and other succulents (and pineapple plants!) store carbon dioxide via crassulacean acid metabolism, or CAM. They take in carbon dioxide and convert it into malic acid, which they can store for use during the day.

I only recently learned about this aspect of cacti. I adopted a cactus to try and have a little piece of back-home here in my new-home, and I thought the responsible thing would be to learn a bit about her so I could make her feel comfortable. It turns out she's actually native to Bolivia, not the Sonora or Mojave deserts in the American Southwest, but I love her all the same.

She's a *Vactriana guentheri,* also known as *Esposota guentheri* (I couldn't tell you why; scientific classification is really weird stuff). But you can just call them a Red Tail Cactus. They apparently bloom with little white flowers and have edible fruit, but I think she's just a baby and probably won't do that for a long while yet.



I think cacti are particularly magical plants. As I've said before, anything that can survive in the desert has to be magical.

So I want to explore a little more about what the cactus has to teach us, what magic it contains that it might share with us (as long as we don't get too close).

If you cast spells, perhaps these will be of some use or inspiration to you. And if you don't, I think you'll still enjoy learning about my dear friends the cacti.

Protection

You'd be hard-pressed to mention cacti without mentioning their spines. Some spines have hooked ends, some look loose and soft but sting like hell. Spines do keep cacti safe, but the emphasis on their ability to protect from predators definitely comes from the perspective of humans—we have soft, easily pricked skin, while many desert animals are much less bothered by cactus spines and may even eat and digest them quite comfortably.

The real protective power of cactus spines is in their ability to reduce air flow around the stem, which reduces water evaporation from the stomata, and in providing shade for the stem. While the fewer, broader leaves used by most plants certainly produce more visible shade, a multitude of tiny spines ultimately gives the same effect. Every little bit of protection adds up to a strong and happy plant.



Resilience

Anything that survives in the desert is an excellent model of resilience. They are perennials, perpetually reblooming. They survive in extreme temperatures—from below freezing to over 160 degrees Fahrenheit. And cacti are not only protected by spines keeping things out, but when something does come in, they can handle it. They have thick skins, and they're filled with a sticky substance that holds water, so even when the skin does get severed, they retain the desert-precious water so essential for their life.

Although we typically associate deep roots with strength and resilience, the strength of cacti is in their broad, shallow root system. When it rains, cacti grow auxiliary root systems further outward and close to the surface so they can absorb as much water as possible, and during dry spots, these roots shrivel and die. Cacti's resilience isn't in maintaining the ideal, but adapting to the environment, growing when there is plenty and conserving when there is not.

Fat and body positivity

Cacti are thick plants. Their stems almost look like tree trunks, and they serve a similar purpose in stabilizing and anchoring the plant. But unlike other trunks, they are fleshy, squishy and filled with goo, just like humans. Their stems swell to retain water and turn a more intense green. This swelling is sort of a reminder of human body fat—expanding to store the materials for energy in times of plenty. Like rain in the desert, fat is something to be grateful for.

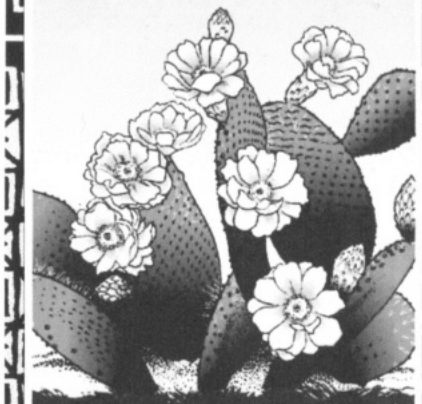
Cacti take up space unapologetically. The Saguaro cactus, beloved symbol of the American Southwest, will normally reach ~40ft tall and 1.5 tons. They're hard to miss. And small cacti are not afraid to make themselves known in the sole of your foot. Cacti are a reminder that everyone deserves space.

Death and rebirth

Cacti and other desert plants are known for their "explosions" of color after rainstorms. Flowers can't survive long in desert conditions because petals and leaves lose a lot of moisture due to evaporation in the extreme heat. When rain hits, they have to attract pollinators quickly, so cacti have bright, colorful, insect-attractive flowers that seem to bloom almost instantly. And just as quickly, the signs of life that we tend to see—flowers, greenery, expansiveness—wither and die again, waiting for the next rainstorm at a chance of rebirth.

No matter how long it might be until the next chance at life—months, even years in some deserts—the cacti come back from the dead. Like us, they are perpetually reborn.

Advice from a CACTUS



Get Plenty of Sunshine

Accentuate Your Strong Points

Be Patient Through the Dry Spells

Conserve Your Resources

Don't Desert Your Friends

Wait for Your Time to Bloom

Stay Sharp!

Your True Nature

desert cards

There is one notoriously witchy thing I do, and that's card reading. These decks all seem like they'd be well-suited for Sonoran witchcraft.

No, I don't have all of these decks myself... but if you've got any of them lying around I wouldn't mind sharing my address *hint hint*

some runners-up: moon power tarot, tattoo tarot, bonfire tarot, moon baby tarot



The Untamed Elemental (Oracle)

This whole deck is like if you took 80s New Wave and made it into a southwest quilt. Or maybe I just want to make everything seem New Wave because it's my favorite music. But yeah, it's colorful, dynamic, graphic, and striking just like the desert and everything in it. Animals and nature told with shapes, just like finding faces and figures in the mesas and sandstone.

some favorite cards: crystal, thunderbolt, star



Desert Illuminations Tarot

This one's real wild-western, if you're into that sorta thing. The whole cowboy thing never appealed to me, mostly because it felt like glorified slaughter of Native Americans. A lot of queer people are into cowboys and I didn't really get it until skimming Billy the Kid's Wikipedia page. Did you know he was orphaned, arrested for stealing food, ended up branded a murderer for accidentally/self-defense killing a blacksmith who had attacked him in a struggle for his gun, and after that only shot cops? And yet he's like an infamous outlaw. Meanwhile Buffalo Bill the circus owner was known as an 'Indian killer' and his grave is like a damn holy site in my hometown, which hosted a whole festival named for him every year.

some favorite cards: ace of chiles, nine of jugs, seven of daggers

Brady Tarot

When I was a kid I had two Magic School Bus books, and one was 'The Magic School Bus Gets All Dried Up'. It featured Phoebe trying to protect desert animals from heat and thirst, only to learn that they have adaptations built for just that. I feel like this deck is like that book, except that it also shows the more morbid aspects of animal life. This deck captures things in a way that doesn't put on airs. I think all animal kids are witches by nature, whether they realize or not. You don't need special effects to feel the magic of animals, you know?

some favorite cards: two of feathers, daughter of horns, ten of arrows



Tarot by the Neon Lights

I haven't mentioned it yet but I have a strong association between neon lights and the southwest. I don't know how much of that comes from the movie Cars tbh but still. Showy, bright colors just like the desert flowers that come after a rainstorm - it's almost like sympathetic magic calling the abundance of colors forth.

some favorite cards: the high priestess, the devil, ten of swords



Tarot Cats (the one by Bunny Dee)

The creator of this deck has two cats named Saguaro and Taos and that's probably all you need to know! It's all the little details that really make this deck - the blue rock striations, the painted trim, the camping mug - all those little observations and pieces of life that make you *know* the artist is southwestern. It's a comfort, this deck. A warm cat in your lap. I do have this one, I just had to, it stirs such good memories.

some favorite cards: the magician, three of pentacles, king of cups



I have a few different witch selves within me. I've got a werewolf in there too, probably a catboy for good measure. I think having these helps me understand myself better, to both look at things objectively and allow myself to live out multiple lives within the limits of one body. They're not "personas", exactly, because they're not put on for anyone else, and they're all just as real as the other.

the end

I don't know if I experience headmates/multi-system...ness (and if you don't know what that is, make sure you look for info in supportive groups because there's a ton of blatant hostility in even a quick Google search). It's more like being in two places at once in everything but body. I dunno if it's just an overactive imagination or my brain blowing a fuse from trying to understand itself, or if it's really something metaphysical and cool (I have some theories about timelessness/eternalism, but they may not ever be ready for print).

Doesn't matter, the point is that I think one of my witch selves is living in Taos, working at an art gallery (I have a very clear picture, it's hard to describe), mixing Gatorade flavors as though they're potions (I mean, they are, right?) and having bonfires in a firepit outside her trailer (I use he/him just roll with me a sec) mostly by herself because she doesn't have a lot of friends in town but she likes to talk on the phone, and she thinks that she shouldn't be scared to escort the wild lizard that somehow made its way into her kitchen back outside because she loves lizards and she's a big tough witch but she is still too afraid to actually do it so she leaves the little window open and takes the screen out and hopes it takes the hint. And sometimes she's lonely and sad for my life in the way I'm sad for hers.

I'm a little embarrassed writing all this, to be honest, because stated so plainly like that it definitely reads like a story I tell myself to feel better. But then I remember that stories are powerful in themselves and they are often more powerful ~~than~~ than reality so who gives a shit? She's out there one way or another, and I am she, so I am out there too.



It's a comforting thing, knowing I can summon another self whenever I wish.

Maybe this is an opportunity for a spell of sorts. To say hello to mySelf in the desert.



To my best desert friend:



Hope I'm well, here's $20 for some nice-smelling sunscreen. Just a little something from me to me! I know I'm missing the south west, aren't I lucky that I have me down there. Live it up for the both of me. Will cross all 20 fingers for rain soon! Say hi to the Petrified Forest spirits for me.

Much love,
-You


MADE FOR THE 24 HOUR ZINE WEEKEND, 2023! Thank you Nina for hosting and to everyone who created along with me.

Dedicated to that one rock my partner and I saw that looked like Hank Hill

by Wesley James Sueker
twentytwozines.com