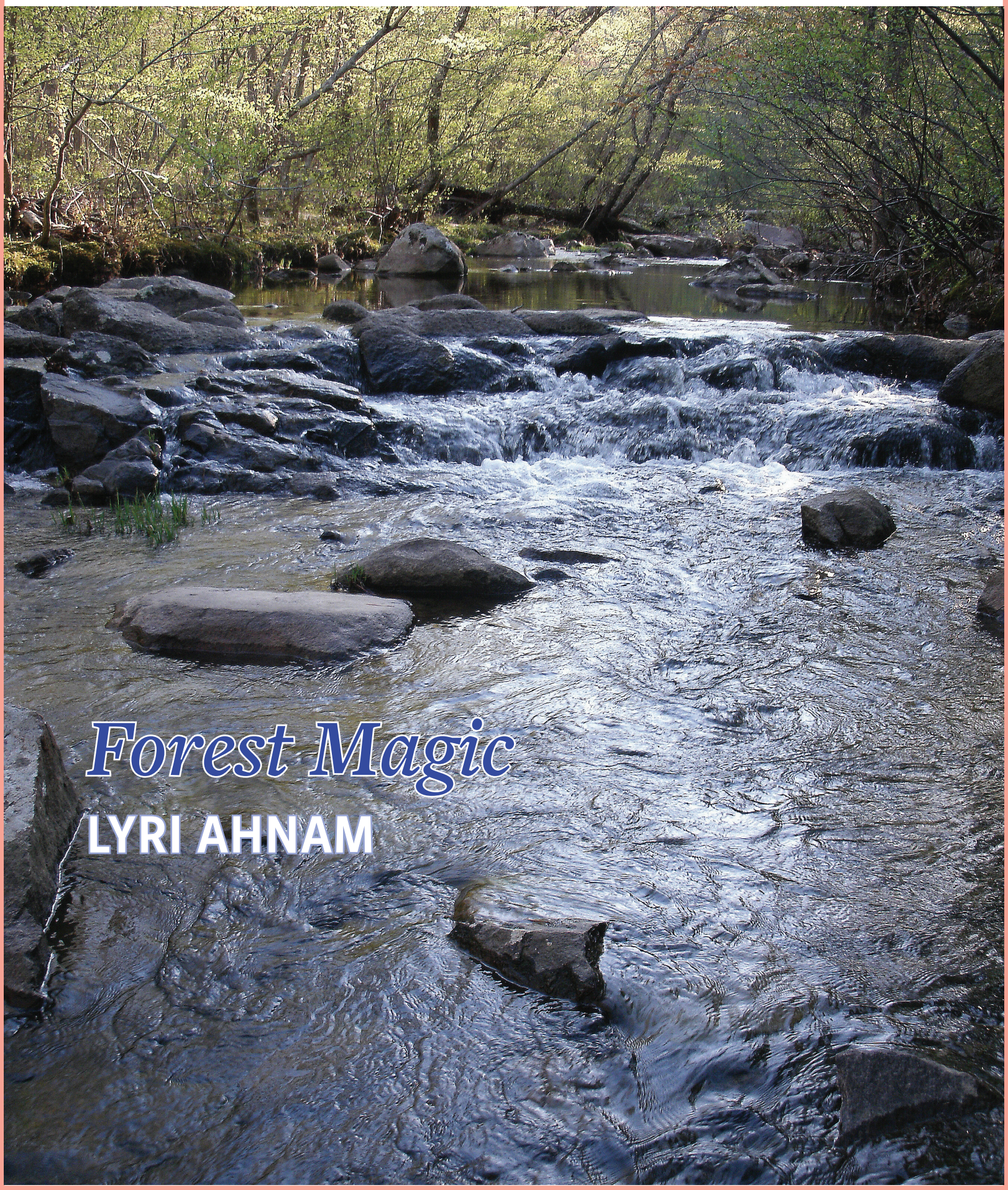
LGBTQIA+ EXPERIENCES IN THE OUTDOORS AND IN CONSERVATION

BRIAN FORIST, SANDY HEATH & FORREST KING-CORTES, GUEST EDITORS



Forest Magic

LYRI AHNAM

The gritty path squeezes us through a narrow slot between sandstone slabs. As my new girlfriend and I emerge, the surrounding hardwood forest offers a gentle welcome. My habitual tension melts away. Something special about this place.

Outside the annual Pride celebration and a handful of gay bars and queer-friendly restaurants, there are few places in St. Louis where two lesbian women can feel completely safe. Pickle Springs Natural Area offers us a rare opportunity to be outside and unleashed from society's constraints.

A glance at the trail guide tells us we'll hike a two-mile loop through the 256-acre park. We discover sculpted sandstone arches, fantastical rock towers, and narrow keyholes between massive stone wedges. Nimble and light-footed, my girlfriend clambers over the rough round of sandstone boulders, evoking my own childlike exuberance. We cavort among the stone formations—uninhibited, free.

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Taking a rest atop a giant boulder encrusted with lichen, I press my hand on the granular surface. The trail guide says this sandstone solidified 500 million years ago, then uplifted through younger limestone layers when the Earth's crust shifted. Over millions of years, wind and water sculpted it into a fairyland.

The sandy track leads to a wooden footbridge across Pickle Creek. The forest is softer in this deep valley, the vegetation lush, the air earthy and moist. Sugar maples, slippery elm, and hackberry trees march beside lanky oaks. An understory of spicebush, sassafras, and paw paw adorn the serpentine path. Remnants of the last ice age also flourish in the acidic soil and cool, moist air: hay-scented and cinnamon ferns, partridge berry, northern white violets, club mosses, adder's mouth, and rattlesnake orchids. They cradle Pickle Creek, here and in Hawn State Park, our next stop later in the day. Like the sandstone formations, they exist nowhere else in Missouri.

We walk hand-in-hand on the wide pathway, our conversation punctuated by stretches of silence. Today, we have the forest to ourselves. Its sacred energy invites contemplation—and lingering kisses.

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A pale bluff, furred with dark green ferns and silver spider webs, rises above a narrow box canyon. We squat underneath the overhang. The sandstone has crumbled into silken chunks at the base. I'm spellbound, caught out of time. I imagine humans sheltering here over thousands of years, reveling in the same beauty, feeling the same magic.

There is evidence of Indigenous people honoring the sacred forests nearby. Forty miles to the northwest, in Washington State Park, and roughly the same distance due east, at Piney Creek Ravine Nature Preserve in Illinois, Indigenous people chiseled petroglyphs in the limestone bedrock a thousand years ago: thunderbirds, snakes, and human figures. Archaeologists link the two ceremonial settings to the extensive urban center that flourished around the 12th century in what is now Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site (also designated a World Heritage Site), ten miles east of St. Louis.[1] If that ancient city's citizens carved art into the soft sandstone cliff we huddle under, it disintegrated long ago.

Lyri Ahnam writes poetry and prose from the forests of southern Illinois. Learn more at LyriAhnam.com.

◀ OVERLEAF **Pickle Creek in Hahn State Park, Missouri.** KBH3RD / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

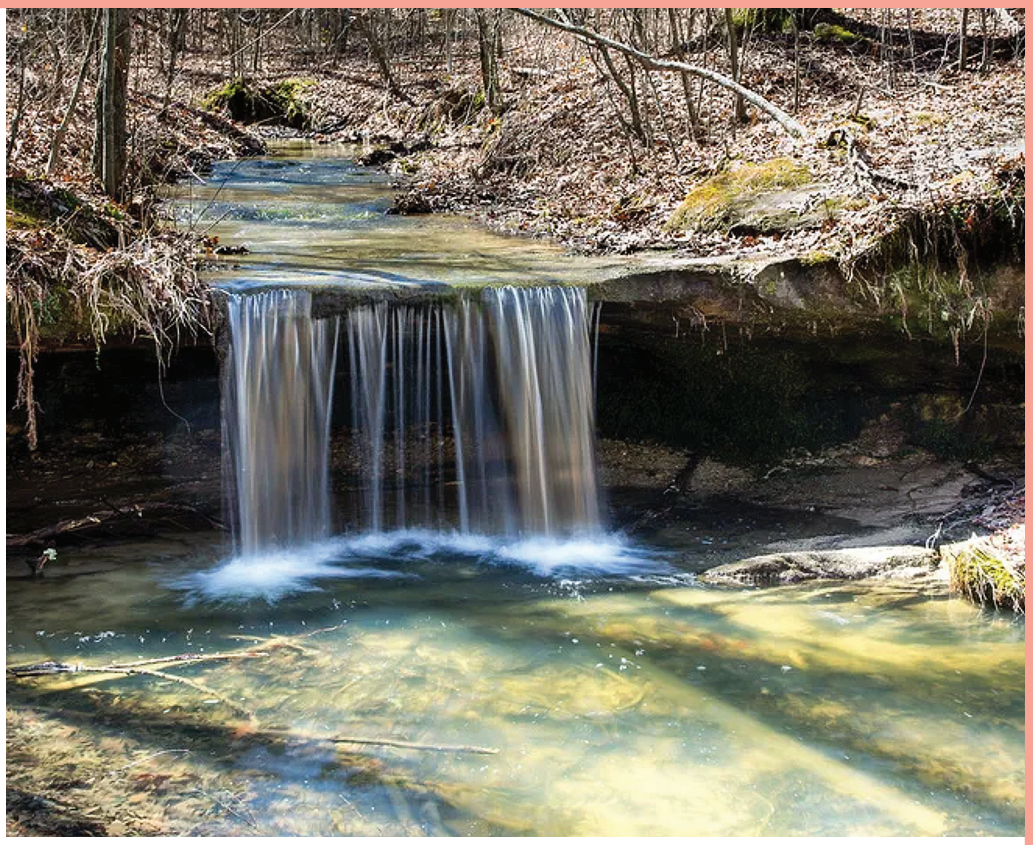
We climb the rocky trail to a domed overlook. Around us, blackjack oaks and twisted shortleaf pine trees cling to the stone, gnarled roots jammed into narrow fissures. We sprawl on the bare expanse beneath a pale blue sky.

Hungry for more, we descend the path to Pickle Spring. Tea-colored water, tinted by leaf tannin, cascades over a ledge into a shallow pool. According to the trail guide, the spring and creek were named for William Pickles, a European settler who owned the land in the mid-1800s. Prior to European appropriation, members of the Osage Nation roamed this forest. They were forced off their ancestral homelands by a treaty imposed in 1808 by the superintendent of Indian affairs, William Clark, the former Corps of Discovery explorer.[2]

We lean on the wooden rail of the footbridge, staring into the water. Enraptured. Relaxed. Rejuvenated. In love with this place and each other. Reluctant to leave, but having more to see, we trudge the pine glade leading back to the entrance.

My girlfriend and I drive ten miles to Hawn State Park, named after Helen Coffer Hawn, a public school teacher in rural Sainte Genevieve County. She dreamed of creating a park to protect the pristine landscape around Pickle Creek, and between 1932 and 1941 acquired twelve land tracts. Upon her death in 1952, she willed 1,500 acres to the state, which became the core of today's 4,950-acre park.[3]

The cars throng the paved parking lot at Hawn, but we locate an empty picnic table and eat our lunch. As soon as we finish our meal—still exhilarated from our adventure at Pickle Springs—we head for the hiking trail.



Pickle Spring. MIDWEST NOMAD FAMILY | BY PERMISSION

Hawn State Park. KBH3RD / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The Hawn State Park trail guide says the Ozark Chapter of the Sierra Club helped construct Whispering Pine Trail in the 1970s. It loops through the 2,880-acre Whispering Pine Wild Area and 58-acre Pickle Creek Natural Area (twin to Pickle Springs Natural Area).

We amble through a pine savanna to the trailhead. Delicate grasses carpet the forest floor. A breeze whispers through the wide-spaced shortleaf pines piercing the sky. The sandy pine-needled pathway cushions our footsteps.

Shortleaf pines at Hawn State Park.
KBH3RD / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

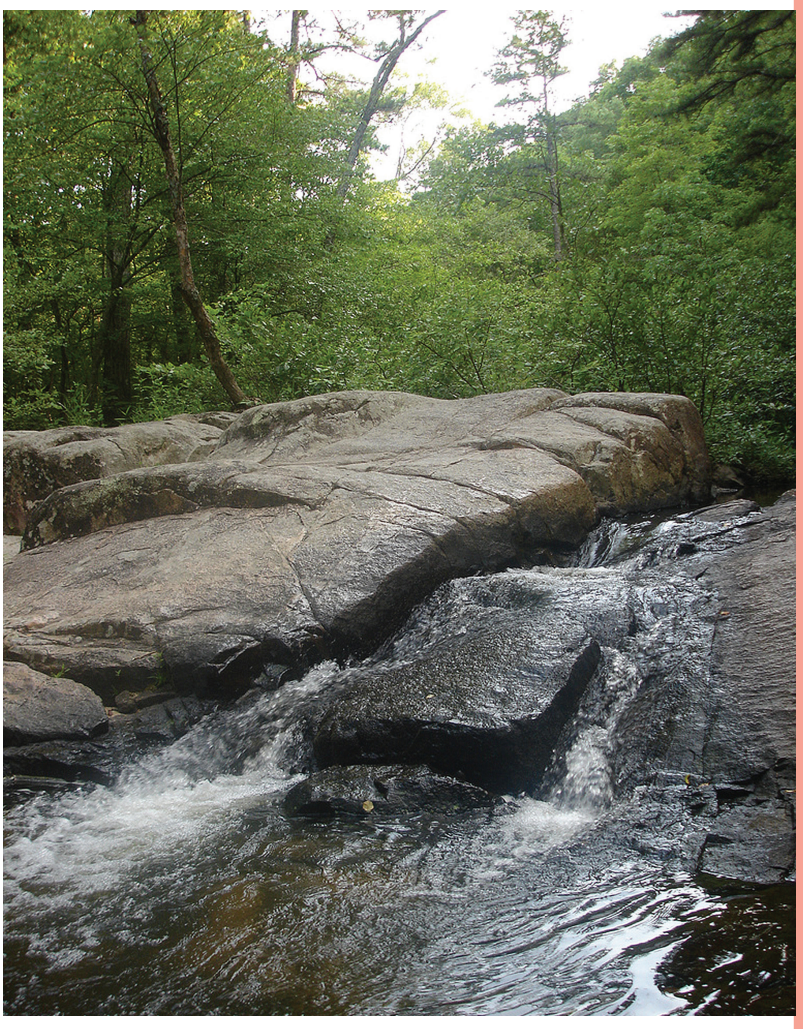
This protected savanna is a rare treasure. The Missouri Department of Conservation indicates pine–oak woodlands once covered 6.6 million acres, or 65%, of the Ozark Highlands. Extensive logging from 1880 to 1920, and aggressive burns by European settlers, reduced the pine–oak forest to a mere 550,000 acres today.[4]

The footpath skirts a muscular Pickle Creek, morphed from the tender rivulet at Pickle Springs to a boisterous surge thrashing in its rocky bed. According to our trail guide, the creek joins the River aux Vases beyond the sandstone barrens east of here, flowing into the Mississippi River 30 miles farther east.

In some parts of the creek, erosion exposed igneous rock. This solidified magma creates shut-ins: narrow troughs with chiming rivulets, rapids, and plunge pools. We sit, sunning ourselves on a slab of reptile-warm stone beside the rambunctious water. Hikers troop past: an elderly trio using trekking poles, male–female pairs holding hands, families with excited children. No other lesbian couples.

We continue along the root-clogged pathway, passing boulder outcrops, cliffs, and sandstone shelves among the lofty trees. I'm enthralled by this graceful forest. Oak, red maple, and shagbark hickory trees mix with the pines. Wild azaleas, farkleberry, and lowbush blueberry compose the understory, per the trail guide. The moist, acidic soil cradling Pickle Creek hosts the same Ice Age remnants of mosses, ferns, and orchids as at Pickle Springs.

Pickle Creek at Hawn State Park. KEVIN SAFF



The magic, however, is not the same.

We meet a family rambling along the footpath. The chattering children ignore us, the mother smiles and we exchange polite hellos. The silent father nods, flicking his gaze between my girlfriend and I, trying to categorize us. I smile at him, mimicking the defensive grin our primate cousins give to signal subordinate status. My girlfriend and I draw apart, feigning casual friendship. We continue single-file, even where the track is wide enough for two, even in the quiet stretches we traverse alone.

No one we encounter at Hawn emanates violence, but I've internalized a lifetime of conditioning, both overt and subtle, that reinforces my female vulnerability. A vulnerability both doubled and halved in my girlfriend's company. Logically, two women striding confidently along a footpath make a less tempting target than a solitary female. But two lesbian women are potential prey for homophobic hostility, more likely to be attacked than a pair of heterosexual female friends sharing a stroll in the same forest. LGBT individuals, females in particular, are more than twice as likely as their straight, cisgendered counterparts to be victims of violence.[5]

The trail climbs to an overlook atop a bare knob enclosed by scraggly pines and lowbush blueberries. Beneath the ledge, shattered boulders form a jumbled escarpment to the forest below. We perch together, waiting out the hikers filing past. Again, no other same-sex pairs.

I'm flooded with a mixture of sadness and relief when we return to our car, reluctant to leave this lovely forestland, but ready for a respite from strangers' curious scrutiny.

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My girlfriend and I often returned to Hawn and Pickle Springs to relish their unique beauty. Pickle Springs Natural Area, in particular, casts a spell on us every visit. There are more spectacular rock formations in the region: the colossal granite boulders of Elephant Rocks State Park in Missouri, or giant sandstone cliffs of Giant City State Park in adjacent Illinois. Rocky Falls in the Ozark National Scenic Riverways and Johnson's Shut-Ins State Park in Missouri have more impressive waterfalls. But the intimacy of Pickle Springs bewitches. I've never felt unsafe within its hallowed embrace. Every time I visit, the forest works its magic on me, inviting me to open my heart and play.

ENDNOTES

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