NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

https://www.nyctransoralhistory.org/
http://oralhistory.nypl.org/neighborhoods/trans-history

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

CERAH ROWLEY

Interviewer: Tyler M.

Date of Interview: March 23, 2018

Location of Interview: Tyler's Apartment, Sunset Park, Brooklyn

Interview Recording URL:
http://oralhistory.nypl.org/interviews/cerah-rowley-qz99ms

Transcript URL:
https://s3.amazonaws.com/oral-history/transcripts/NYC+TOHP+Transcript+o8o+Cerah+Rowley.pdf

Transcribed by Noreen Lai (volunteer)

NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #o8o

RIGHTS STATEMENT
The New York Public Library has dedicated this work to the public domain under the terms of a Creative Commons CCo Dedication by waiving all of its rights to the work worldwide under copyright law, including all related and neighboring rights, to the extent allowed by law. Though not required, if you want to credit us as the source, please use the following statement, "From The New York Public Library and the New York City Trans Oral History Project." Doing so helps us track how the work is used and helps justify freely releasing even more content in the future.
Tyler M: Hello, my name is Tyler M, and I will be having a conversation with Cerah Rowley for the New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Library’s Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is March 23, 2018, and this is being recorded at my apartment in Sunset Park. So, Cerah, why don’t you tell us a little about yourself, including your age, your gender pronouns. How would you describe your gender?

Cerah Rowley: Um—elusive and expensive. My pronouns are she/hers. Uh, what I know about myself is that I am non-binary. It started out just being aware that there were certain ways in which I was never going to pass—my height and my voice and kind of an unwillingness to go too hard into vocal training—and eventually I realized that this is more of an identity thing rather than simply I am binary and I just don’t pass in these ways. It’s actually, no, these are part of my identity and I am—I’m able to embrace them and, um… So I say—when I go into detail, I say both that I am a non-binary trans femme queer and I’m also a woman. And it makes—it’s fortunate that I don’t have any dysphoria surrounding any of that, so that when I tell the cis, “Oh, well, I’m a woman,” that I’m not just like, “Ugh,” you know. Um, so I’m she/hers, non-binary, and I’m 34 years old. I’m an ’83 model. Came out the same year as Yes’s 90125...

Tyler M: [chuckles]

Rowley: …and Jedi—or, and Star Wars: Return of the Jedi, so...

Tyler M: Very cool.

Rowley: Mm, kind of. It’s a mediocre movie and trying to have not a mediocre life here, so, you know, some things work for me, and some things work against.

Tyler M: Fair enough.

Rowley: [chuckles]

Tyler M: So tell me about the earliest memory or one of your earlier memories that you can remember.

Rowley: Connected to my gender?

Tyler M: Your childhood.

Rowley: Oh.

Tyler M: No, just your—just a general memory.

Rowley: [exhales] Earliest. I want to say I was three and I was in someone’s bedroom. I remember we lived in a duplex, and I think I was in, like, my parents’ bedroom. Someone was in the adjoining bathroom having a shower, and I remember, like, I think—I like, everyone was—I
was just, like, waking up. I remember sleeping in bed with my parents a lot back then. Um, and I remember imitating the sound of the shower to my brother, just like: [mimics shower spraying]. Like, I just—just, like, walking up to him being like, “You have to experience this thing,” you know. That’s one of my earliest memories.

**Tyler M:** So you grew up with a brother...

**Rowley:** Yes.

**Tyler M:** Um, what was your childhood like?

**Rowley:** Pro—uh, prone to profound change without warning. Um, my dad, I would find out later—all I knew was that he would, like, show up and be very, like, blustery and very angry and very shouty, and that was profoundly unsettling for me as a kid. He, um—he was a meth user. And my mother was not, so it was this kind of like Jekyll and Hyde, my parents' marriage. My dad would do the breadwinning thing. He would play biker bars by night, and by day he would be a carpet cleaner. Now, with meth, this meant that he was basically pushing himself too hard constantly, so I grew up thinking that hernias were just something that fathers got. At age four, he became connected with some pretty, like, committed, heavily devoted Christian people. Not necessarily religious-conservatives types, but some people who were very serious about what they did. And with them he had some kind of experience that took him away from the meth. At the same time, this was the late ’80s, and a devoted, you know, scholarly spirituality was something that was not going to be able to retain his attention, so he ended up drifting into the religious conservatism that was kind of in the air supply at the time. So suddenly our family was Christian.

**Tyler M:** Hmm.

**Rowley:** And, um, [sighs] my dad has always been a very well-read person, so he speaks—whether or not he really intends to, he speaks with what people perceive as authority, and certainly my brother and I went along with it, um, not knowing any better. It was like, “Well, this guy seems to know what he’s talking about now, so...” So there would be... It’s funny, his religiosity and his rigidity were very—it was a very consistent theme up until I was 17, but the consequences of that would vary so wildly from month to month. I remember there was one year that was actually—that actually felt okay, and that was when I was six.

**Tyler M:** [clears throat]

**Rowley:** I had already had a couple experiences which showed me that I wasn’t masculine. At the same time, the reaction that I got when I would let it out was so painful to me that what I took away from it was that “This thing is so not right that it doesn’t even merit a sermon from my dad,” you know. I would fuck up in one way or another, and in addition to getting grounded or spanked or whatever, I’d get what felt like a three-hour diatribe on why this is a thing that you don’t do, and you know, based on these verses and “This is important for you to know.” And when it came to gender non-conformance, what I got was a smack across the head and a
dirty look like, “This thing is so profoundly not right that there are no words to describe it. Just never do it.” Um, so, I took—what I took from that was that this thing must be hidden, and everything associated with it must be hidden, and everything associated with everything associated with it must be hidden, so... And that process kind of started around when I was six, but I wasn't really aware of it until maybe eight years old, when I just realized, “Why does it seem like there's only like 5 percent of me?” Like, I didn't have the vocabulary to describe that back then, but that was the impression that I had of myself, and it didn't really start to go away until around I think 27, 28, when I first really started to explore my own femininity.

Tyler M: So you were six years old when you first started showing signs of gender non-conformity?

Rowley: When I started intentionally acting it out. We'd be having a conversation, I'd say—not necessarily to, like, make a joke or anything, but just, I'd say—I'd do something very feminine, and that would provoke that reaction. There were times before. I remember there was a memory from age four. My mom—my brother and I both had these stuffed animals. I had Winnie the Pooh and he had a baby Mickey Mouse, and those were like our favorites. And our mom staged a little tea party for the four of us. And she took a picture of us, and like, my brother's sitting there with his Mickey Mouse, and I'm sitting there with my Winnie the Pooh. I'm not just sitting there. I'm like extra, like...

Tyler M: Mm-hmm.

Rowley: And I look at that picture now, and that's like one of the—like, that's the only picture of myself from before, oh, maybe my late 20s where I don't feel dysphoric looking at it.

Tyler M: Mm-hmm.

Rowley: And my parents had no idea until I told them. Um—trying to think of what that was in answer to.

Tyler M: Well, it was—I was just interested in the—you mentioned that you had instances of gender non-conformity.

Rowley: Yeah, those—yeah.

Tyler M: And I'm interested in what that meant to your father, what that meant to your family, because it seems like—

Rowley: That's where I was going to go next.

Tyler M: Yeah.

Rowley: Um, my dad, like I mentioned, he was a meth addict, and throughout my childhood—well, when he converted, one of the things he did was got out of both of those lines of work
and went into being a pharmacy tech. He was an addict, and he was a very good worker, which meant there were a few years there where he was like sober, although he did sneak a lot of alcohol, but then he started just taking extra pain meds and stuff like that, and that escalated. He eventually got into recovery in 2000. I was 17. And he took his—there is a lot of internal work that you do. It's one of the lesser-toxic aspects of that culture. And one of the things—we didn't know what we were talking about at the time, what he was talking about, and I didn't know the importance of it then. I was still very heavily compartmentalized myself. I am a pretty intelligent kid, and the elegance of those barriers and their thickness and power still floors me to this day. But, um, what he had to say was that he would see me behave these ways, and what he felt was fear of what would happen to me, and he saw it as his—because he was always kind of a geeky kid himself.

**Tyler M:** Mm.

**Rowley:** I suspect he may have some gender non-conformance, but he hasn't said it yet, so I don't make any more of a call than that. But he did behave in ways that were different, and he got his ass kicked for it, by his brothers, by his fathers, by his dad, by his school friends, by teachers. And he grew up in a Catholic school, so, you know, it was very—you know, the nuns and all that kind of shit. So he saw that, you know, kind of persecution as something to protect me from, and he didn't know that there was anything to unpack about what I was expressing. All he knew was that it was a magnet for trouble, that he saw it as being his responsibility to protect me from. And his—the work he was doing in recovery at that point was thorough to such a degree that he was able to recognize that as harmful before I even had any thought of like, you know, “Hey, why did you do that? Because that kind of fucked me up a little bit.”

**Tyler M:** Wow.

**Rowley:** I mean, there was—that was one small thing in a whole context of both abuse and neglect that I'm still working on [chuckles] unpacking enough to be able to have close relationships that last a long time without my projecting that shit onto them. Um—thanks, Dad. But no, uh...

**Tyler M:** [chuckles]

**Rowley:** My mom didn't see my brother and I for anything we were. She, um, had been raped and didn't seek any help for it. She got drunk immediately after and, um, kind of walked away from the situations with these latent PTSD triggers sitting around inside her. And it was around when I was like eight or nine when that started to become a thing between my parents, and I didn't know it at the time, but that's what was going on. And she's not a very sexual person herself even outside the existence of that trauma. My dad, on the other hand, was, you know—had a very strong sexual appetite, and so that would create a lot of conflict between the two of them. My mom soaked up a lot of what I would now term “white feminism” that was prevalent in the '90s. And she also—she had picked up some sort of—I don't know how it got to her, but basically the second-wave feminism that was very much in the ambient noise in the 1970s. So she took this thing that masculine people are automatically rapists and there is no way for them
to seek their satisfaction without putting women in danger. Now, there's a lot of truth to that, and I was prepared to understand consent culture when it started to really hit the ground, once I realized that, wait a second, there was a reason that my mom behaved this way, and it wasn't just because she needed help she didn't get; it's because there's this whole wider context. And that would become even more and more salient to me as I transitioned. But, um—so my dad was afraid for me because he knew I would be persecuted for it. My mom was afraid of, like, everything [chuckles]. Um, so basically, it was these two people who saw this thing, barely recognized it for what it was but saw it as profoundly radioactive. And in addition to the other ways that they really tried to make our childhood whatever it was that they thought it needed to be, there was this sense that I needed to have this—that I needed to somehow become something that would not leave room for this to metastasize.

**Tyler M:** Mm-hmm.

**Rowley:** Um, and of course, I never made any progress in that direction. I managed to kind of wall everything off, and then the bit of me that was left over just really had no interest in doing anything else than just, you know, digesting geek content and, uh [laughter], and being obsessed with spaceships and shit.

**Tyler M:** [clears throat]

**Rowley:** I was a humongous *Trek* and *Star Wars* fan growing up.

**Tyler M:** Cool.

**Rowley:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Tyler M:** So tell me a little bit more about your brother. [clears throat]

**Rowley:** Ohh [sighs]. Very normative. Um, he was two—yeah, he was a year and a half younger than me. I'm a June baby; he was January the following year. So he's 18 months away from me. And between the two of us, he was actually the one with the spine. He was the shot-caller. He was—people would assume, you know—or they'd—we'd never looked anything alike anyways, but people were always surprised that not only were we siblings but also that he was the younger one. Because I was just kind of sitting there waiting for instructions, whereas he was just like, “Okay, here's what needs to happen. [claps] This and this and this.” Um, I depend—I lived dependent on him and his fiancée for some years in my adulthood, and it was actually after moving out on my own, or after having moved out on my own for a few years, that I started to actually make some coherent contact with my gender. And the life that I have and the life that I cultivate now is very separated from his entire world. And we have yet to really have an opportunity to try to, like, get any substantial bond kind of formed over that separation. Um, having come out and having faced some of my family's cluelessness has made me very distrusting of all but like a handful of people. I have two socially aware cousins. One of them lives in Portland, of all places. The other one lives in Utah. And then I have an aunt who has always, like, made it a point to be kind of there for me. My immediate family cares, but
everyone's kind of doing their own thing and nobody's quite aware of the effect of their behavior, including myself sometimes. Although, like, my mom's been in a position to help me and all that kind of stuff, so—but when it came to my brother, he's very privileged. He's very privileged socially because he has that kind of [snaps fingers] automatic backbone, that kind of thing that makes people be like, “Oh, well, he knows what to do.” And he is kind of—he's kind of the person to feather his own nest and create this environment around him where there's really not going to be anything happening that he didn't see coming and be able to plan for and be able to expect. And when you get into a conversation with him, there's just not going to be any conversation in an area where he doesn't have full expertise. Um, it just—it's just not—the conversation just can't get pulled any direction other than what he's prepared to be like, “Yup, this is exactly what that is.” So here I am, this testament to human mystery, and I don't know if he knows it or not, but I would have to see a display from him of some significant open-minded-and open-heartedness before I tried to tell him anything, because all I know to brace myself for is “Oh, well, actually, that's not true, because blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” And it's like, “Okay, James, tell me about my gender,” you know? “Tell me about—you know, tell me about the lack of an actual gender binary. Tell me about privilege and persecution and, you know, a lifetime of psychological warfare and how—and intersectional realities that you don't even fucking face in your life,” you know. Um...

Tyler M: Yeah.

Rowley: I'm still working on parsing out where my distrust of my families are from my own vendettas against them as a child who was abused...

Tyler M: Mm-hmm.

Rowley: And my parents—nobody got out of that situation unscathed [chuckles]. But, um, how much of it is just that “Oh, you abused me, so I don't like you on that basis,” and how much of it is “Okay, you knew what you were doing, or you knew you had an opportunity to do something decent and you chose not to,” you know? Um—so that's a little bit about that. [laughter]

Tyler M: Yeah. So outside of your family, um, who would you say [clears throat] are people that have had an impact on your life? Most important people? Positive impacts?

Rowley: Let me think here. I didn't really have someone who, like, I consciously kind of was inclined to latch on to until much after my childhood. In my childhood, there were a couple people. There was—we had this neighbor across the street. Her name was Joan Sanford, and she—um, I guess I would describe her as a liberal now, but at the time she was like—like, our fundie household, you know—I mentioned I was a huge Trek fan. Well, I got so enthused by it that my—and, you know, geeks back then were not a thing people were allowed to be. And my dad thought it might be some, like, demonic thing.

Tyler M: Hmm.
Rowley: And so, he got—you know, he was like, “Oh, yeah,” you know, “Gene Roddenberry’s just, like, this evil person,” and all this kind of stuff, and just basically got me going on this whole line of like, okay, why this thing must be discredited, you know, as a religious person. And I remember talking with my neighbor about this thing my dad was trying to do with me, and she was like, “So how’s he bad?” you know. “Because I mean, there are these ways that, you know, this material is flawed and everything like that, but like, bad?” And she helped to cultivate a chink in that armor that let me know that as frustrating as it was—because I wanted so much to be what my parents seemed to need me to be, including, you know, subservient to all these things. And here she was, giving me this glance at this wider reality outside of everything that I thought my world needed to be made of. And it seemed bewildering, and it seemed, you know, distinctly if unclearly threatening to me. Um, but that it was there, and it was something that a mature, well-rounded person will be expected to have some dealing with.

Tyler M: And how old were you when you had this experience?

Rowley: Uh, when I—um, she was around mostly in my early junior-high years. That’s another thing, though. My brother and I were homeschooled for most of our childhoods.

Tyler M: Okay.

Rowley: I was in grade school from kindergarten until fifth grade, and before Christmas break of fifth grade, my parents pulled my brother and I both out of school. Part of it was fundie stuff. Part of it—the major part of it, though, was just that neither of us got along with other kids. I wanted so much to be liked that I was easily taken advantage of, both by people who wanted me—wanted to, like, get me to do stuff that would get them in trouble, and others who just enjoyed kicking someone around. Um, I, uh—like a lot of ’90s kids, I got into South Park pretty heavily. Butters is a hard character to watch for me because that was my—that was my thing. So in junior high, in lieu of dealing with junior-high shit, which, I don’t know what I would have turned into had I had to deal with that environment back then... But yeah, it was mostly isolation and getting into—getting into being a geek, really. It was after I was homeschooling that I was able to actually have any clarity of just what I seemed to find interesting and what seemed to be compelling to me, that I could be like, “Actually, I’m interested—let’s watch this movie.”

Tyler M: Mm-hmm.

Rowley: “Ooh, I like this about this thing and this thing and this thing.” Um—she was—it was around that time she would take my brother and I to go see movies. I remember, I think the first one we saw was, uh—if it was Men In Black or Air Force One. But my parents were—at that point were just like, “Okay, well, they’re—you know, they’re early teenagers or whatever, and meanwhile, here’s this responsible adult that will, like, take them out and do stuff, so why not?” At the same time, I don’t know if they knew of her influence as a person who encouraged us to question these things, or if they did and just didn’t see it as harmful because she wasn’t out there to be one of them liberals, but she totally fucking was, and it was a very... As much as I trash liberalism now, she was an extraordinarily positive influence, and [chuckles] I wish I could
find her these days just to be like, “By the way, [chuckles] those couple of conversations that I'm sure you walked away from being like, ‘I did not get through to them,’ you did and...” Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I learned to chase that from this universe of apparent certainty that was just going to be what my life was about. Well, actually, there's this little bit here that we can't quite figure out at all. Like, try to quantify it and you've gone out to infinite decimal places and... Yeah, yeah. So she was an enormous influence. I had a youth pastor who was, um... It was funny, my dad was, like, all right-wing and everything, and my—and the chu—the religious community we had around us was at least compatible with that and certainly had anti-queer bigotry sitting around. And goddamn, the prevalence of sexual abuse in Christian homes was something that, like, it was right there, but it seemed coated in what Douglas Adams refers to as “the Somebody Else's Problem field,” like a cloaking device but it just tells your brain, “Oh, well, someone else is going to take care of this.”

**Tyler M:** Hmm.

**Rowley:** We’d go to, like, these, you know, church camps over the summer, and they’d have their big altar-call night where everybody kind of spills their guts. So you—and you have like just this long procession of girls, all of whom were being molested by their fathers, who they were about to go home to.

**Tyler M:** Wow.

**Rowley:** Uh, interviewee is gesticulating wildly towards her face. [laughter]

**Tyler M:** [laughter]

**Rowley:** An explosive shrug. Anyways, um—I remember in the middle—in the midst of all this stuff, he provided a very stable just person to be around, to talk to about stuff. And yeah, he was, like, kind of in on the Christian, you know, over-religious, you know, kind of stuff, but only to a certain degree. He wanted people to kind of not get too pulled apart by all the stuff going on, and I’d be—another person I’d very eager to kind of seek out and be like, “So tell me about this and this and this and this, um, because I'm part of what came out of this,” and so, yeah. Yeah. In Citrus—in 1990s Citrus Heights... I keep thinking back, I mean, how different my life would have been if I had actually tried to claim this back then. I probably would've wound up homeless. I probably would've wound up being one of those kids who the family just knows him as “oh, the angry one.” And they certainly know me as that now, but, uh, yeah. Anyways, that's another influence. I didn't really have any people that I consciously saw as like, “Wow, that person really impresses me, and I want to be more like them or find out whatever that is and explore that more,” until I was like 19.

**Tyler M:** Hmm.

**Rowley:** Yeah.

**Tyler M:** So tell me a little bit more about your late teens, early 20s.
Rowley: Oh.

Tyler M: Who you hung out with, if you partied with anyone...

Rowley: Nope.

Tyler M: [laughter]

Rowley: Nope. Not at all. My mom was a pig up in Redding for like a couple months back in the late '70s. She was a dispatcher, and then this thing came through where you had to have so many women on your force, so she was offered the job and was just like, “Sure, I'll take it.” Up in Redding there wasn’t exactly a whole lot of, you know, legitimate piggy work. Um, just, you know, some rapist would, you know, serially kidnap a bunch of kids, and then the police were the ones that had to deal with it. So that was the fucked-up shit she saw, and of course, after a couple months of it, she was like, “I can't do this anymore.”

Tyler M: Mm-hmm.

Rowley: Um, and that was her impression of the outside—the world outside our mobile home. So we would want to go hang out with, you know, our buddy who just learned—in youth group who just learned to drive, and like, he was like the kind of guy who liked to go rocking at the river for most of the day. I'd be like, “Oh, yeah, let’s do that,” and she’d be like, “Oh, well, someone’s going to catch you, and your body’s not going to be found for a couple weeks. You know what happens to a person’s body when it isn’t found for a couple weeks?” You know. Yeah, so that basically takes care of my hanging out and partying thing. At the same time, I'm glad I didn't find drugs back then [laughter] because they totally would have turned into what they turn into for a lot of us. But, um, I did—let me see. Another early memory from age four—this has relevance later on—was finding my death-porn stash, and that was—I—that led me straight to my own eroticism. And I kept trying to, like, explore that, but it seemed to want to go somewhere it didn’t seem to know how. And I got the sex-ed lecture from my parents in two doses. The first one was the mechanics: “This goes into this, makes a baby.” And then the second part was “Okay, fluids. Lots of fluids. Fluids coming from everywhere. Fluids coming from you at some point because you got this thing and this thing, and you're going to wake up one day and be stuck to your mattress, you're not going to know why. This is why. And don't worry, it’s—what’s—it's not broken.” And, um, that was when I was 13. And then, yeah, one night when I was 14, I was tucking, actually, and that took me over the edge. And of course, because that wasn't how it had been described to me, I was just like, “Okay, surely I've broken it.” And then after a couple days of, like, not saying anything to anyone and being scared, I was just like, “Let's see if we can make it happen again.” [laughter]

Tyler M: [laughter]
Rowley: Lo and behold, I found—and that was... And as much as I still see a lot of my life through a recovery lens, I'm just like, “That was definitely my first drug,” because holy shit, here was some way to not be in these shitty fucking moments at least for a little while.

Tyler M: Mm-hmm.

Rowley: But, um, there was that. There was, uh—there was—my first real subversive act was getting the password to my parents' computer and then learning how to counteract the parental controls.

Tyler M: Ooh.

Rowley: Oh, yeah, because, yeah, we had the dial—we had that dial-up shit going on. I remember the first time I typed in “nude” into a search engine and got something, I'm just like... Because, yeah, all you had to do is type “sex” in Notepad, and then Net Nanny—that was the software my parents had—would lock on to that and then—like, I don't know why they didn't expect that the kid would just, okay, alt-tab back to the browser and then would just do whatever, so not only, you know—not only was the thing locked on to the Notepad, which wasn't doing anything, but that was the only thing it was recording from, so now here I am looking at basically a bunch of shit... Oh my God.

Tyler M: Trying so hard not to laugh.

Rowley: Oh. We lived in this mobile home, and the family room, where the computer was, was kind of in the middle of everything. Bedrooms went down one way, living room, kitchen were down the other side. And my parents were down at the far end. My brother and I were right close to the family room. So, um, when someone was stirring or about to come out, the floor would creak, so those sounds—like, I'd been staying at my mom's for the last couple weeks off and on as I was preparing to move up here to New York, and so when she'd move around, it was just like, oh my God, I remember trying to turn the computer off and trying to, like—you know, if I'd printed out anything, send it—you know, put it away or whatever. Um, because not only could they not know that we were looking at porn but also that we had cracked their password. Someone—I don't know how “Ruth”—no, we extrapolated that afterwards. We knew it was a four-letter word that started with B. And we were like, “Boat? Boat? Maybe boat.” Now, my parents were two, you know, of course, Christian Bible geeks, so, um—and they had dropped a hint that it was related to my dad's work password. And so I'm just like, “Boaz?” Because we did little Bible-study things too, and we knew that Boaz was Ruth's guy. And once we realized that Boaz was the thing, it was like, “Oh, well, if we ever need to get into Dad's computer at work, obviously it's Ruth,” so... But I remember when we found that, and I didn't know that that was like what... [sighs] For what little it meant at—no, it meant the fucking world at the time. It meant I could explore my geekdom without—you know, not only when they said it was okay. I don't know what kind of discipline I kind of like screwed myself out of at that point, but I depend on my passion to keep me going, and I'm—at that point I was passionate about modded, you know, “Star Wars: Dark Forces” levels. That was a—that was a Star Wars game where it was like a sprite shooter, kind of like “Doom” but just Star Wars, and people modded the fuck out of it.
It was brilliant. But, um, that was—that was one of the—that all kind of happened the same year, when I was 14. And also, I allowed myself to explore a sexual attraction to my brother’s best friend, Sean. At the time, I thought that was gay, of course, and you’re not supposed to be gay. At the same time, I’d think about doing this, I’d think about doing that when I was playing with myself, and that was hot. So eventually we started doing Truth or Dare, which is basically sexual exploration with complete deniability, because, you know, “What—fuck it, whatever,” but actually, like, we’re doing this very sexual stuff in the living room, and oh, it was... Yeah. So Christmas came round that year, and I remember that being the first time that Christmas ever came around and I did not feel that childlike joy, and I remember feeling—like, I’m pretty sure it was just because due to puberty, my emotional range had expanded beyond what that childhood sense was like, um, and I didn’t know how to invest in it any further. All I knew was that, okay, here’s Christmas, and here’s, like, this whole reality around this thing that kind of renders this thing a little bit paltry, and I didn’t know what to make of it, but of course, the moralizing—the internalized moralism and everything kind of told me, “Oh, well, it’s because you’re doing this and this and this and this wrong that you can’t enjoy this anymore. So this is what it means to be a bad person.”

**Tyler M:** And were you still religious at this time? Did you...

**Rowley:** I tried so hard to be.

**Tyler M:** Mm-hmm.

**Rowley:** Because it was obviously part of what was expected of me. But I could never get into the Bible the way I was into *The Search for Spock*. I could never get into it the way, you know—God, it never became more pronounced than when *Episode I* came out. And of course, the nature of religious abuse totally spoke to that too, because the prequels are at least as badly put together as the Bible, so...

**Tyler M:** [laughter]

**Rowley:** But you’re supposed to believe it’s just, you know, the thing, you know, it’s the thing that’s, you know, just at the top of everything. Um—I tried to be. I remember one time when I was 16 and my dad’s addiction was really taking off, because at this point, he had been—he had gotten, like, really deep into, like, pharmaceutical opioids, as they’d call them now. Um, and—and there was, like, this constant undercurrent of conflict just waiting to explode into something. And for me, the authoritarian child that I was, if my dad yelled at me or if I was in trouble, it never occurred to me to assume that they want stupid things from me, as parents to child.

**Tyler M:** Mm-hmm.

**Rowley:** They couldn’t be—what I saw was that they couldn’t possibly be wrong about any of stuff, so obviously if they’re angry with me, if they’re displeased with me, whatever problem they had was totally legitimate. Not just that, you know, they’re—they only know how to train
me to be a—as little burdensome a charge and chattel as possible, um... I didn't see any of that. I just saw that, you know... So anyways, all of that stuff was happening way too much around when I was 16. And I remember going to church camp that summer, and I really, really, really, really tried to have a religious experience, because that's the thing that turns it all around, right? And, yeah, it lasted a couple weeks, and then I was masturbating again, and, yeah. My dad, he understood what we understand now as patriarchal rape culture. He didn't understand it as such back then. He just knew that you could be way too sexually interested in the world around you and that would cause problems for people. He backed that up entirely, biblically. And I'm pretty sure Paul was both homoromantic and asexual [laughter], um, because he hated gayness, and sex was like this evil thing that the world would try to push on you, which is totally an ace thing to see. But at the same time, it turned into, like, the pattern for religion, and if you've controlled a per—if you got a person to hand over control of their sexuality to another person, you literally have them. Um—and so there—we'd keep having these things happen over and over again where like, you know, some evidence of the fact that I was having a sex life with myself would—like, you know, my mom's Victoria Secrets get found under the bed, or someone would look at the internet history and our—we wouldn't have covered our tracks all that well, so it'd be like this thing with lots of prayer and lots of like, you know, policing, honestly. And I want—and again, this was all stuff that I, like, wanted to try to do right by my parents, because obviously they knew what was best, not “No, I'm queer, and sex positivity is a thing that's important,” and nobody in Citrus Heights in 1997 was going to know this. Um, that was very much most of my childhood, this sense that “Here are these things that I know I need, but I can't validate that need, because my parents get to say what's valid and what's not. And because of my pursuing what I need, I am constantly waiting for the hammer to come down. And get everything grounded away or whatever.”

**Tyler M:** And you mentioned having a sexual attraction or allowing yourself to have a sexual attraction...

**Rowley:** Yes. Um, I've always been primarily femme-attracted, and I don't know what it was about Sean, but, uh, yeah, we started doing the truth-or-dare thing. Neither of us really knew about oral sex. Neither of us knew about butt-fucking. We knew that peop—that gay dudes did butt-fuck, so we, like, dared the other to do it. And, like, there was no prep or anything. He tried to—he tried to fuck me, and—he stopped, of course, and I just remember sitting there for like a good like ten minutes after being like, “Can it stop hurting?”

**Tyler M:** Ohh.

**Rowley:** Right. Um, then eventually—this was, like, leading up to New Year's 2000—we were doing another overnight, and we'd gotten—started doing—we'd started, like, you know, playing with this idea of a contest, basically, where we both masturbate in front of each other, and whoever comes first wins or something. But the pers—not really that important other than just that it happens, obviously. Um, finally we got around to it and were not interrupted, and he—I think I came first, but I was on the floor. I was like a—I was this belly-lying presser at the time, and of course, he was standing up and stroking. And I came all over myself, he came on me, and for some reason that, like, made it so, like, real and freaky and like it was—of course,
you know, in a testicular body after orgasm, you get this wash of prolactin, which basically turns all of the sexual-interest stuff off. And so literally, this hot shit that just happened is just—now just this weird sticky stuff on your hand, and “Oh, what—what—is this right? Is this wro—this is wrong, of course, so okay, yeah. After that point—we used to, like, even, like, you know, talk shit to each other about whatever happened last at Truth or Dare or something like that. After this experience, nothing. And I remember running into him some years later, and we were just kind of talking—we were just talking about everything, “Smash Bros.” and all this shit we used to do. And I remember, like, kind of—like, kind of, like, nudging it a little towards that way, and he acted like he had no memory of it at all. I'm just like, “Okay, I'll respect that,” but still, I think...

Tyler M: [laughter]

Rowley: I wonder what I—I often think back now and be like, “Wonder what it'd be like if he knew he was doing this for a girl that entire time.”

Tyler M: So, you know what, I'm actually going to let silence happen...

Rowley: Mm-hmm.

Tyler M: ...because Michelle told me I'm allowed to do that and she's allowed to cut this out, so... [laughter]

Rowley: Okay.

Tyler M: Um—but, you're doing—you're doing so well.

Rowley: Thank you.

Tyler M: Um—so how did you first learn about or encounter other trans or gender-non-conforming people?

Rowley: It was... Aside from a little—like, my mom, of course, had daytime TV all the time. So you had Ricki Lake, you had Maury Povich, you had Jerry Springer; you had this place where transgender people would be, but it would be for the purpose of caricaturization. “Look at these freaks. Don't be like this.” Um—so that was just a complete nonstarter. And also, the first PG-rated movie I ever saw was Mrs. Doubtfire. And then the next one I saw was Ace Ventura: Pet Detective. [laughter] And it sucks, because the humor in these movies are spectacular, and the transphobia is so deeply baked into them. And I'm sure that Robin Williams would probably be hip to it. I'm damn sure Jim Carrey would be like, “Yeah, that was a very different time, and we did not know what we were saying.” But, um, again, it went into that area that people like Joan Sanford had kind of carved out this chink in the armor, where it's like, okay, here's what you're supposed to see, here's what you're supposed to want to be, and then here's this whole other reality out there that, on one hand, you're not supposed to accept because no one knows how to deal with it and you're going to be punished for it; at the same time, you've got to have some
answer for it. Um, and for the longest time, my answer was cis-normative, you know, speculation from the outside. “Well, you know, if a person is transgender, then they must—this must be true about them or whatever.” [sighs] They say don’t look down when you’re, like, on a high thing. And I always have this sense now, being openly trans, that I’m on this really high ladder, and then looking back at, like, these prejudices I used to have that were just commonplace to me is—just water from a faucet. And looking at it, I see like this enormous distance between where I am now and where I am back then. Part of me is just like—you know, wants to go back and pop in through, like, a time portal and be like, “It’s okay, you’re going to get so farking far the fuck away from all of this. Everything around you is wrong, and it’s okay that you have doubt about it,” and, yeah. “I can’t stay much longer. I’m risking a rift just by appearing here in the first place. Shhoooh.” Anyways, um...

Tyler M: [laughter] Ohh.

Rowley: Kink scene. I got involved in the kink scene in, uh, 2010. 2010, that’s right. I’d been introduced to it in 2005 by a woman I was involved with for a couple of years. But that was like her thing, all that—you know, the whips and chains and shit. Um...I had—and I was exposed to it and I accepted it and I welcomed it, and something, like—I remember saying—telling people at the time, this was like, I felt—you know, if anything can be the presence of God, I felt it more at the sex club than I ever did at any church. But at the same time, it was like this big hard-to-understand world that I knew would be work that I wasn’t ready to start doing yet. And it was when I started dating in earnest in 2010 that I realized, um... It started out as a “I’m going to find the wife. I’m going to find the wife, I’m going to have the kid, and I’m going to be normal. And it’s going to be so good, I’m not going to want to go to any of this weird shit.” And then the first person I really made a connection with, she was sexually non-monogamous. She wouldn’t—she was—she was able to make a sexually monogamous commitment when she entered a monogamous relationship, but until then, she had her appetite, and these were the ways that she met it, here’s how she takes care of her—that she takes care of her sexual health, this is where consent is, and everything like that. And to me, that was just like—like half of me wants to see you as like “a witch!” and the other part wants to be like, “It does fly. It does leave the ground and then stay there. And then when it’s time to come back down, it comes back down. Wow!” Um—six months later, when we got involved, I had been around the kink scene enough that I was like, “I want to be poly. I want to do this, I want to do this.” But yeah, one of the things that I was exposed to was very openly and very non-binary-presenting trans people. And I learned—initially was that they were very scary, and I didn’t know what to say, and I didn’t know, like—I didn’t know that it’s only a small portion of trans people who become dysphoric when you ask them what their pronouns are. They do exist, but I used to think that because those people exist, then obviously there’s—it’s just this impossible-to-approach thing, and I don’t know how these people ever expect to have rights or anything. Yeah. Um—that was 2010. A year later in 2011, I, with a group of friends—I’d made a best friend within that year and a half, and he and I had become super close by the—over the course of that year, between 2010 and 2011. End of 2011, we’re going to this goth club, this goth thing back in San Francisco called Death Guild at the DNA Lounge. And they basically play really good music, and it’s a very dance-centric space. Sacramento had some, like, goth/industrial things, but it was like, okay, here’s the floor and then here’s where all the people are going to be hanging around drinking,
smoking, and talking about how shitty people there are. Go up to San Francisco, it's the exact opposite. Everyone is out there to explore and make space with something inside themselves and inside each other, and it's more hippie than heavy, while being dark and black and too shiny and too abrasive and, you know, “the emptiness inside,” you know. And it was one of the most safe spaces I'd ever been in in my life. So the first time I go there, right, I'm expecting good music, I'm expecting some dancing, all that kind of stuff. And there was a whole thing with dancing, and its enormous importance in my life leading up to this, but we won't—that'll have to be another interview, I guess. But, um, I went there, and I was wearing black slacks, I was wearing this oversize Serenity T-shirt, and I was wearing a trilby. It was 2010—or it was 2011; I didn't know what a—everyone calls it a fedora. It's the one with the short brim, you know? It's the one that edgelords wear. It didn't really mean that back then; it was certainly not how I meant it. But I remember, it was just like, yeah, it's like there I was wearing a fricking—“Hey, check me out. Milady.” Um [laughter], so that's what I was wearing, and I go in, and I'm just like, “Okay, cool, yeah, nice music and everything.” Then maybe about 15 minutes, I was just like, “Yeah, you know.” I hadn't really had that much stamina for years at that point. So, like, we step out, and like, the people I'm with, they've all got their booze and their bongs in the back of the cars. At that point, I was—I had been in recovery for a while, so I was completely abstinent, but like, “Yeah, that's fine, do your thing.” And I had this idea while we were out there and was just like, “What if I, like, had my shirt up so that, like, I was showing a bunch of midriff?” and—as though I was concealing breasts. So I'm like—so I had a friend do one of those, like, '90s midriff knots where the whole thing kind of knots up on one side of you, and then I rolled up the slacks so they turned into kind of like baggy militaristic capris, and I just threw the fucking hat away, and I went back in. And I don't know what possessed me to be—her, but that's what happened then and there. I want to find the date for it. Um, it was a weekend. I had worked an eight-hour shift right before going out, and I was going to work another one the next day, and it was in the middle of all this exhaustion and overcaffeination and sleep deprivation that I found this for the first time. And it was like I found the other 90 percent of myself. And I knew it was humongous, and I knew it was going to shape my life whether I wanted it to or not. But at that point, I still felt like I had some control of it, so what I did was that—I never went to that—I went to that dance floor repeatedly, over and over and over again, and I never once presented masculine there [laughter], even long before I came out as trans, even to myself. Um—and it was the combination of people who were very—who wanted to be as woke as they possibly could, given the rapidly emerging insight—I mean, Tumblr was just really starting to turn into the thing that it was turning into, at least as far as, you know, Citrus Heights and Sacramento were concerned. Mills U, who fucking knew. They were probably ten years ahead of us, but that's Mills U. Um—here was this place where I knew while people might not know what to do with it, they would know to not make fun of it, and they would know to avoid what we now would know as exploitative behavior, be like, “Oh, come here, baby,” you know. This is, no, not like that at all. This something else, and this is something worth letting this person explore, and... I called myself gender-fluid. And gender fluidity is a, you know, is another valid trans identity, and it was very not what I was doing. What I was doing was very much controlling my expressing my femininity and then using this gender-fluid man identity as like some kind of, like, tie back to normalcy. Although at the time, I remember thinking—I was like, “God, who knows, in six months I might be going on hormones or something like that.” This was years before, but, any case, um, that was how that—that was how I first really
discovered it. There had been times every now and then before where, like, there would be some kind of femininity and I would kind of wake up in it, but I'd always kind of put it back down until then.

**Tyler M:** Okay.

**Rowley:** Yep. [laughter]

**Tyler M:** Well, I think, uh, we're going to take our break right about now, and we'll be back. So we're back from our break. Um, Cerah, you mentioned recovery. So why don't you tell me a little bit about that?

**Rowley:** Okay. Well, as I'd mentioned, my dad had his history of chemical dependency. I never really had a chance to have one myself, because I wasn't in school in the ages when death starts to become commonplace. I was never going to, like, look for it, because I certainly got all the whole “drugs are bad” speech from every direction, including my dad. Um, but yeah, he—when I was four, he entered the church, and in a couple—within a couple years after that, it changed from doing, you know, carpet cleaning and playing biker bars, he got into pharmacy technician work. And he got a very steady job, and it was well-paying by those kind of—by their kind of standards for kind of our lower-class home. But, um, he, uh—he stayed—he wasn't using for a couple of years as far as, like, illegal drugs were concerned. He was sneaking alcohol every now and then, and I guess that went up or down, but any case, he eventually had a back injury and then a kidney stone, and between all the prescriptions there, he was connected with opioids, which he hadn't been into before. He didn't know it was a thing. Well, suddenly this was like a thing, and here he was working in this place. So he became his own hookup. He did it in very large amounts, and he just kept escalating and escalating and escalating. Now, when a few Vicodin would disappear back in those days, if you were good enough at your job, they wouldn't do anything about it as long as you, you know, kind of stayed in your lane with it, or at least didn't get so—it was easy for them to write off, even though it was against the rules. Well, what happened was that he started getting into things like Dilaudid, which are, like, highly federally controlled, so when some of it goes missing, like, it doesn't go into the waste thing. Like, even the stuff you throw away gets accounted for, and like, there it is. Well, suddenly when that stuff starts disappearing, they immediately got inquiries and, um, randomly invited him to take two weeks' vacation, which was what they needed so that the private investigator could get his, you know, equipment mounted and everything like that so they could continue their investigation. Well, he comes back from vacation, and of course he's out, so he's got to, like, resupply, so he's like filling up his little pill bottle full of random things here and there and then stuffing it in his left sock. Knock, knock, knock, it's this person, the private investigator. “Matt Rowley, what's in your left sock?” It was over. Um—he—so they arrested him, and he had been in recovery once before. He'd gone to a couple of NA meetings—Narcotics Anonymous meetings—to appease my mom, and made this whole show of “Oh, I'm getting better” or whatever. And he wasn't fooling anybody in there, but we didn't—there wasn't really any—we didn't, like, know any of his recovery friends, so... Any case, now he was in trouble.
Tyler M: Sorry, I just [clears throat] think that, um, you might be picking up your hands just a little bit.

Rowley: Oh, right. Right.

Tyler M: That’s all.

Rowley: Yeah. Um—yeah. So this time he got arrested, like actually got in some shit, and they were stacking up a pretty large case against him due to the amounts he was stealing. It wouldn’t be until some time later, when they got the toxicology report back, they just realized he was profoundly fucked up. So they, um—they gave him a wrist band, or ankle—the ankle monitor, and necessitated recovery and certain therapy and all that kind of stuff. He took—he took to it right away, as far as what I could see. He himself would say that he didn't really get serious about it until some months in, but like, as far as I knew, I started to know my father starting in September of 2000. Um—and so something, some community, some social force, something that could turn my dad from basically Darth Vader just not as impressive into this person who I could know, who I could understand, and about whom my understanding could illuminate things about myself, you know. Um, just this whole dimension to existing as a human I just had no reason to even really be into before, even though that's apparently what, like, movies and shit were about aside from, you know, spaceships and battles. Um—[laughter] I didn't know why I cared about them, but it was all that. But anyways, um—that was my introduction to recovery, was that impact, and within the first month, I started going to meetings along with him, and I was just really impressed by this authenticity, because here were these things that for all intents and purposes would be like some church get-together, but I didn't feel in church what I felt in these spaces. Now, they were very white, they were very neurotypical-normative, and they were super hetero- and cis-normative. Um, like there was one gay guy and it was like, “Oh, see how enlightened we are. We have a gay guy.” This group is 90 people fucking thick, and there’s that [whispers] fag.” But we don't say that, that we say that word, but anyways... To say nothing of the couple people that, like—some very care-intensive neurodivergent people who didn’t have care and, like, part of us expected they would become normal as they whatever. Yeah, um, but still, it was miles above anything I had been involved with before, and it seemed to give some narrative stability to my understanding of my life in this environment. I wanted to belong, and... So my dad got into it in 2000. 2002, I'm still living with my parents; I have no direction in life. Although I'm starting to get into music, but I'm barely, like, acknowledging that to myself, even. So important I can't even look at it directly. One of those first people who I really recognized as a positive influence had been into and then out of my life... I was going to school, and I met—I was going to college, and I met this girl. She was a manager in the theater department, and I was taking this audio-recording class. Well, there, the professor for it was the engineer for the school as well. So they'd do a thing, and he would be like, “Hey, if you want to make extra-credit assignment, come here and hand microphones around in a live gig. You know, it's going to be a packed house, and there's going to be a lot of pressure and a lot of responsibility. You know, come in here and do this thing.” And I had just such a fucking wonderful time. It was some Broadway review. And there are parts of me that still feel allergic to musical theater, and then, like, the rest of me is just waiting until that time when it's time for me to just dive in headfirst. There's so much there. But anyways, it was a great experience,
and I met this girl and she was also a homeschooler. I'm just like, “Wow.” So we started talking about that, you know, kind of the weirdness of parents and the isolation, and then, like, the communities within homeschooling. And I didn't—wouldn't realize until long after, but she had a very different experience homeschooling. Her parents were legitimately supportive, minimally abusive and neglectful, and she actually got a very good preparation for the life that she was moving into. And she was like self-actualized to a degree that I didn't know people were. They seemed to be in movies and stuff. I thought they just did that because that's the easier person to, like, paint a story about, you know. No, here's, like, this person, and I—once I realized the enormous difference between us, I froze. Like, at any point, she was going to realize how pathetic I was and how terrible my background is and how dammingly not cool I am, and she was going to leave me and I was going to deserve it. So I froze, and after like a couple weeks of, like, seeing this interesting person just kind of disappear in front of her even though they were there, she was just like, “This isn't working for me. I'm sorry,” and I was just devastated, because I, like, had no idea. I knew I was—there was no way I had of keeping this person around the way I had intended by dating her, but—Yeah. I was devastated by the loss because I didn't run into people like this. These weren't—this wasn't who you found in, you know, one-and-a-half-story-tall Citrus Heights and Carmichael, these areas of Sacramento where I was from that were—the mentality of which was just ubiquitous to me. That's why I'm attracted to cities. I mean, even if someone's just kind of doing their little life, it's all surrounded by enormity, and it's so dramatic and it's so vibrant. It's almost traumatizing how vibrant it is, and... She was a window into that, and I wanted more of that, and I knew that I was going to have to leave my comfort zone, and the closest way I knew of at the time that seemed—the thing that seemed to be knocking down my door was smoking some pot, you know? Um, now, you didn't have dispensaries or anything like that. You had somebody who kind of knew somebody, and you were going to try to act like you weren't feeling guilty about it even though you totally fucking were. And this was like, you know, the edgy—because that was apparently my crowd, you know, working at Carl's Jr. and shit. Um, yeah. So I didn't really experience much of anything that I valued about the pot. At the same time, there I was going off reiz for the very first time in my life. Really, like, here's this thing, like “Drugs are bad.” And, like, that was the one thing that my dad's involvement with recovery did, was “Drugs are fucking bad.” And here I am just doing it. I was still living with my parents, and I had no means or plans to leave anytime soon, and I was doing this thing that I wasn't supposed to. Well, I stopped and I came clean about it and I went into recovery, and most of this was an effort to try to imbue my life with some structure. And it didn't work. But I did manage to move out of my parents' house, in with my brother. And, um, I had no coping skills.

Tyler M: And how old were you at the time?

Rowley: Nineteen. Oh. I was 20 when I moved out. That's right. Nineteen when I met Meghan—that was her name. Meghan Leeman. I'm pretty sure she's married now. But, um—I, uh, yeah, moved out when I was 20, started driving, and I got my own car. It was because my grandma had one that she gave me for like $500. But I started going on road trips and finding how much I loved travel and finding how much I loved the Bay. Well, here was this opportunity to live a little bit closer to downtown Sacramento, and I took it, and it was, um... I had no time for anything. The job barely paid good enough to cover expenses, and at this point I can look back
at that and be like, “This is what it's like to walk into the millennial economy.” Even though this was back in 2003, it would already—[clears throat] it was going to this point where, yeah, any entry-level job, you're not going to be able to afford to live. Um... [microphone rustles]

**Tyler M:** Let me just pause really quick.

**Rowley:** Oop.

**Tyler M:** Or take some time. Um, I think... [microphone rustles] There we go. Just that way. We can make sure...

**Rowley:** Ah. [microphone rustles]

**Tyler M:** Perfect.

**Rowley:** Cool.

**Tyler M:** All right, Cerah, please continue.

**Rowley:** Um, I had no coping skills, and I tried to get into a relationship with this one girl, I tried to do these other things, and, um, basically I got a bunch of emotional crap all over myself. And nothing really washed that off until—I had decided to leave recovery. And this was like me really going off rez. Here I was, no safety net. I'm not living with my parents, none of that shit. It's just me and whoever I'm around at the time, whoever—whatever friends I have at that point. And here I was leaving recovery, this place that was so—that was the stand-in for safety and stability. I had some pretty valuable experiences in that phase. I took hallucinogens, I took shrooms, which brought me out of a depression and showed me that happiness was a thing to kind of strip down for rather than dress up for, in terms of my intellectual involvement. It wants to take things apart and it wants to understand things, and at that point, especially from a very colonialist, very ableist perspective, so of course it's a gigantic fucking buzzkill. Come to find out that, you know, happiness and fun are a thing, yeah, you're vulnerable for, and I was able to start to—I had insights from it I think I couldn't put into words, but it was definitely what led to that whole exploration. Also, I got into Robitussin and had my first overdose on any drugs ever. It was on Robitussin, and that was intense. And I went back to it the next weekend because it was fun. It was—anything better than living as a person with CPTSD and no treatment and no understanding of why everything is just fucking hard for you all the time. Um, that was in 2004. I was 21. And I remember right before Christmas my roommate and I did ecstasy for the first and so far in my time—in my life the only time. I may do it again, but it'll be, like, with babysitting and a lot of, like, microdosing and shit. But I took it, and at that time, it completely won me over, because here was the sense... You know, what I needed so much of in my life was some authentic connection. And it happened only by accident back then, like once or twice a year, not even close to enough for me. And I knew that maybe I could get to a place where I could seek it out actively and experience it more often and be able to do whatever it is people do with that kind of connection. And this is just, like, friends and relationships and colleagues and—it could happen fucking anywhere. Well, here was this drug that could make
me feel like it was happening no matter wherever I was at or whatever I was doing. When I was on Robitussin, you have to navigate that high. You could fall into a black hole and then suddenly you're having this terrible fucking trip. With ecstasy, you sit there and you feel good. And whoever you're talking to—it could be someone that you've known your whole life, it could be someone that you just met an hour ago—you would feel like you knew them your whole life, and you two just had so much history and so much to relate to and... I wanted to feel that and I wanted to have that again, and I knew that if I kept ecstasy on the table, that was all I was going to do. So I went back into recovery, and I really made it—I had experienced some darkness and some light in that—in those months between leaving recovery and coming back to it. And somehow I was able to keep some kind of hold on myself and what I wanted. Because what always happened before is that I'd get around someone who seemed to know what they were talking about and, you know, get sponsored and mentored, basically, by them, and whatever it was they would have me do or try to have me become, it just never—it never felt good. And it was always boring, and it was always—there was just nothing there for me, emotionally, internally, spiritually. And I was able to keep a sense of integrity about myself, while at the same time still continuing to hide some of the most important things from myself, as I always had and just not knowing that I had. [chuckles] Spending most of your life as 5 percent of a person and not knowing why. And you're the one who put that—put the brick walls in place. Um, so that was when I got back into recovery, and actually, I did a bunch of work in there, and I made a lot of, like, moves over the years, and that was where I've had most of my adult life so far, until about a year or so ago. It was about a year now when I decided I'm not going to go to meetings and I'm going to start, like, not just consid—counting myself among this community. I got into a place where I just couldn't not see the ableism. I couldn't not see the normalized capitalistic abuse and how, like, oh, you're supposed to be honest and genuine and authentic with yourself in these ways, but not in these ways, not in that I know that, okay, here is this society and this culture and this economy that literally eats people, and it comes on a—in this long and bloody, disgusting context of human—you know, we refer to, like, “savage”—“the savages,” quotes, unquotes, “the cannibals,” and it's like, actually, no, we're—we do and we have been eating people alive this entire fucking time. And we celebrate ourselves for it, and there was no... I remember finding a Facebook group, Leftists in Recovery. No one seemed to know what the hell to do. And there were only a couple who would, like, in the clear admit that, yeah, that's a hell of a reconciliation to try to perform. This awareness that you have about the world around you that you can't hide yourself from, at your own peril. And then this other thing that says, well, this and this and this and this and this to be okay, otherwise you don't get to do the whole contributing-member-to-society thing, you fucking freeloader, you know, looking for a handout. Um—I can't tell if that's the most that I'd ever made that kind of going-off-reservation move, but it's definitely up there. And I fin—I sealed the deal by starting smoking pot this last summer. And at that point, for years I had been accepting of other people's pot use. Initially, I was just like, “Well, let's see if they're, you know, showing addict behavior.” And come to find out that a person who uses drugs of any kind and an addict are two very different things. Now, if I'm going to hang around the heroin users, probably going to see a lot more of that kind of behavior around there. But when it comes to pot, especially in this society, where it's understood as a medication even when it's used recreationally, it's a medicinal use. Um—I had a lot of people—I had a lot of other people in recovery who felt that way about pot as well. They wouldn't count—we wouldn't count it for ourselves, but it was—
for other people, yeah, actually, we should take away all that stigma, because there's a lot of hypocrisy hiding inside it. But even then, that wasn't nearly far enough. But one thing I knew by that summer was that most queers I knew smoked pot, and the couple that didn't, and the handful even inside that number who, um—who were also in recovery, had nothing that I wanted. These were assimilationists. These were people talking shit about the protesters like everybody else. These were the people who, you know—there were—that they were what I would eventually learn was true scrum. They were—you know, there were valid ways of being trans and invalid ways of being trans—that really just—really hold things up for rest of us. And I didn't fucking want any of that, and I was going to—at that point, I had stopped requiring myself to be the one to bridge that gap. I was actually like, “You know what? Yeah, I could spend a whole life trying to reconcile that kind of problematics with the kind of recovery that I need to continue to justify my showing up here still and contributing to this community.” Um, but yeah, at that point, I'd really become aware of how persecuting society is, beyond just the little kind of microaggressions you get. There's something you can expect from just about everybody who's cis. And there are contexts in which it's going to be menacing and you have to deal with that somehow, and there are going to be times when it's just, you know, innocent but frustrating infinitely and you have to deal with that somehow. And this community through which I had come to take a lot of my emotional processing through were suddenly no longer a facility I had. You know, at the same time, I had—I had cultivated strong, close personal friendships, but none of them was what they would have considered a legitimate sponsor. But at the same time, I was learning, I was growing, and I tried it and I loved it, and I loved the fact that it kind of changes the tempo, emotionally, of whatever it is I'm going through. It's been indispensable with that DoorDash—with the DoorDash work that I've been doing, the last job that I've done regularly. Still, it gets to be too much and overwhelming, so I have a couple puffs off a joint, and if I needed to have feelings, I would have my feelings, and the rest of the time I'd put on some music that makes me happy and I would be able to inhabit that happiness and not constantly have “Oh, yeah, but life is still shit for you” playing on in the background. I don't understand the assumed ethics of depriving a person of that escape. And I've never seen any of the excesses that are—that are—that people try to be like, “Oh, well, if you're going to do pot, then this is what—this is what it's going to come to.” And it's like, actually, not really. It isn't laziness, and it certainly isn't, you know, yippies, you know? So it's kind of my hope that it expresses in some ways the essence of my involvement—of recovery's role in my life. It's been very important, and at this point, it's another—just another panel in this humongous wall of shit that I'm rocketing away from at top speed.

**Tyler M:** [laughter] It's interesting, you mentioned, um, the—that you started to notice more people leaning on drugs as coping mechanisms within the trans and queer community.

**Rowley:** Yes. Um, it was exclusively so, in fact. I mean, if I hadn't changed my attitude on pot use, I don't know if I would have felt as safe initially around the trans community because of it.

**Tyler M:** Wow.

**Rowley:** Um—I've seen people that are kind of stuck, but there are a lot of reasons for that. And again, that's one of the things they say about pot, is just, well, you know, if you smoke pot
all the time, you'll lose all direction in your life and wind up nowhere. And it's like, actually, there's a million fucking reasons we wind up nowhere. Even if we're cis, even if we're fucking straight and neurotypical, there are things that get us stuck in life, and you know what? This isn't the cause; this is something that helps you get through that shit without losing your mind, without becoming so emotionally voracious that you just gobble people up around you left and right. And not to say that pot prevents that necessarily, but believe me, getting through that minefield without becoming a more problematic person, this is something that helps with that. And yeah. And when it comes to dealing with the pressures that we experience as queer people, as non—and certainly in my case, non-passing queer person, it's indispensable. Yeah.

**Tyler M:** So why don't we talk about...

**Rowley:** Hmm.

**Tyler M:** ...New York City...

**Rowley:** Yeah.

**Tyler M:** ...and your relation to it? Um, let's start with what made you choose New York City?

**Rowley:** Um, it was a city, and there was a—and I had a friend here with a place I could be. It could've just as easily have been Las Vegas or Los Angeles or Miami or, uh, [inaudible] Houston or Dallas is the better place than New York for people who aren't bigots, but whatever place. It could have been any of one of these places, and I would have gone. If—I would have preferred if it had been San Francisco, of course. I have my whole life back in California. At the same time, New York was floated in front of me. And I—I could think offhand of like literally every 34-year-old woman I know who would have absolutely no reason to pick up and leap across a continent and try to start a life somewhere else. I'm not one of those women. I have every fucking reason to try and do that. Between the Internet and if I do okay financially, I'll be able to fly back every now and then and see people, but... I need to survive, and I was like barely treading water out there. And if I'm going to be barely treading water in a place, I'd rather be stuck in a place as alive as New York. And, you know, what I've seen here in the, what, eight and a half days that I've been here so far has not disappointed, and I know that I've just barely encountered the city so far.

**Tyler M:** So what are some of the differences that you've noticed?

**Rowley:** It's hilly. It snows. Um, although I'm told, like, this last blizzard was kind of like a freak thing and probably this is going to be the last bit of snow I see until the year's over, half over. Which is sad because, oh, it doesn't snow in Citrus Heights. I got to live in Germany for a little while. It was a light snow year then, but I remember one night I was out when it suddenly started, and it's—it's its own intoxication. And then the street's all brown and shit like that for the next couple days. That's always interesting. But anyways, that's just the snow. [sighs] I think I mentioned before, it's big, and it's a big world in a way that doesn't let you forget it. And where I come from, everything is built kind of shortened. There's of course exceptions to that, but
just, there was always this sense that there's no bigger world outside than the end of the next intersection. And the enormity of lives and what all that means for what's possible seems something that like literally is so—people are so unaware of it back where I come from that it may as well not be true. And that's part of the sense I had to push back against living there and living close to there, was that like, everything my life was about, everything my life was about, exploring and encountering and discovering and experiencing, is actually just kind of like, eh whatever, you know? You know, are you working? Are you able to make enough money to live on? Like that is somehow where life begins and ends. I just... This is so not that. And while at the same time, yeah, you'd better have some fucking money if you're going to go—get from anywhere to anywhere and do anything, but it's not small, and it's not still and quiet. And I don't know if I want that because that's how my personality is or I want that because of trauma, but I want that, and it's here, and I have to really try hard to be, um, deadened by it. I can be discouraged by it. I've experienced some of that the last couple days with an uptick in my depression, but [sighs] it's breathtaking, as life is. And as life is—it gets kind of censored out of life in smaller places. That's part of what I like about it. Ask me again in six months, I imagine that won't have changed, but it's equally possible that it does. I know how young I am in some ways.

Tyler M: So have there been any negative differences?

Rowley: Um—I don't know if it'd be different than Sacramento. Um, like I had this guy kiss me last week. He was—it was at one of those falafel stands. And I don't know—he was saying something—I couldn't understand it, and—but he seemed very, like, complimentary to me, so I'm like, “Oh, thanks.” And then, yeah, right before I go, he plants three fucking, like, serious kisses on my lips, and I was just like, “Oh, okay...” whatever. And then initially I was just like, “Oh, well, whatever. I'm going to eat my food now.” By the time I got home an hour later, I couldn't even finish eating the food, I was that pissed off. And it was less about his behavior than it was the fact that I just had such a non-reaction to it. Online—it's possible that I compensate for my passiveness in person online. But I don't know that that wouldn't have happened in Sacramento. Probably in San Francisco. But I know that I probably wouldn't have—I would have been a lot more standoffish. But I'm out here and I kind of know that I need to be seen for whatever, um... Or at least my default is a place of “You know what? I should probably let myself be seen for who I am and what I am, and involved.” And I'm learning through—and I'm going to continue to learn through experiences like that where not to and why. So I really hope I learn to navigate the frustration better, but, um—shit like that. I think I mentioned before, the stare is different, and I didn't explain what I meant to you, but I get a lot of stares from cisgender people. They look me—they look at me in the face, and then they look down at my groin usually, then back up, usually dipping past my breasts, and here they lock eyes. They're just like... And on one hand, yeah, that's like, wow, there's some transphobia right there. At the same time, I'm glad that that's there rather than next moment they seem to have gone on with their day, which is what you get out on the West Coast constantly. No one wants to be caught appearing queerphobic, even though they are. Whereas out here, that layer of subterfuge seems to be pretty gone, or at least I'm reading it differently. But it's a welcome change. I have less trouble dealing with that than I have dealing with the other thing.
Tyler M: Why do you think that is?

Rowley: I hate having to fight the sense that I'm imagining it. Most—literally most of my life and most of what I struggle with has to do with me insisting that “No, this thing is real. This thing is happening. I'm seeing what I'm seeing.” And that in resistance to this force of “Oh, well, that's just totally normal.” Or, you know, you’re just supposed to kind of get by with that. You're not supposed to, like, really worry about it or let yourself be affected by it. Don't let yourself be affected by these—don’t let yourself be affected by these things. Because people choose to be depressed and traumatized. People choose to be anxious, and they choose to need to tap their feet or fidget with something with their hands. And if you just choose to be more normal, you'll have an easier time of it in the world, because you'll deserve it because you've tried to be more normal. This is progress for me. I used to have this kind of level of distress when dealing with, like, a Jesus freak. Because I know that circular logic and I know how impenetrable it is. I remember—I had a cousin who got in—who's been into that shit for most of his adult life. And I hadn't seen him since he went off to college and all that kind of stuff. Well, he comes back this fucking brainwashed Jesus freak, and I'm trying to have this conversation with him as someone who understands a little bit of my emotion—my religious abuse growing up and everything, and finding that there's no communicating any of this to him, because he's in the circle. And I remember I didn't sleep that night. I didn't expect that I was troubled by it, but I didn't sleep that night, and all I could think about was “There must be some way in,” and there isn't. And—because this thing’s been refining itself for 2000 years. But yeah, transphobia and ableism go at least deeper than that, if not further back in history. And the ways that we're cultivated to invalidate ourselves to get by was one of those things that I—completely consumed the core of me and have been gradually picking apart. You know, kind of reaching all the way through the esophagus and into the stomach where this thing sits and has sat for over a decade, and just kind of go, “Okay, oh, that piece is off, and now, great. Reach back out without breaking anything with it, and okay.” Meanwhile, at the same time, it was like, “Oh yeah, but also, you know, submit to the pressures of working full-time, and if you don't you're a bum.” It's... That was all in response to something. Like a question that you asked and I can't remember what it was. [laughter]

Tyler M: [laughter] Well, we were speaking about—

Rowley: New York...

Tyler M: Yeah.

Rowley: ...and what was different and what was dis—some of the nature of the distress I face as a queer and a neurodivergent, yeah.

Tyler M: Yeah.

Rowley: Cool.

Tyler M: And actually, you have br—you've brought up, um, neurodivergency in general...
Rowley: Yes.

Tyler M: ...um, or neurodivergence, I think, in general.

Rowley: Right, right, right.

Tyler M: But I don't think we've asked—I've asked you directly about...

Rowley: Status or identification.

Tyler M: ...being neurodivergent or how you feel about that...

Rowley: Right.

Tyler M: ...and how you feel about your intersection with being a queer trans person.

Rowley: I don’t know why it’s ubiquitous, but it seems I don't really know any trans people who are not neurodivergent. Whether it's a chronic mental illness or whether it is some kind of autism—or usually for everyone I know, it's like a mixture of the two, and the mental illness isn't necessarily caused by anything other than just either neurochemistry or our abuse, um... I like the idea of a future with a bunch of neurodivergent queers just kind of rolling around all over the place being our weird selves and not paying for it with, you know, having all these things that we have to do to take care of ourselves, and all these things that we can't do, and all these connections we can't show up for because it requires us to do something that—where wounded emotional tissue is. But no, me, I am autistic, I am ADH—I have ADHD, I have depression. It might—some other kind of disorder may exist in there. I have very—I get very inconsistent care, and my last thing was to do hormones and to get onto Wellbutrin, which I have since gone off because I couldn't afford it and I couldn't keep getting the prescriptions from the doctor I was no longer seeing. Um—oh, there's so much to talk about there. When I got into recovery this last time, where I stayed clean for like over a decade, in my first year I also went in for psychiatric care. And at the time, I thought I was bipolar or had some kind of depression going on. And what I was diagnosed with was actually ADHD. And he came to the diagnosis after like five minutes of talking with me [chuckles]. I was—I had a lot of, of course, prejudice about ADD at that point. And I thought that he—that, like, he was clinically calling me stupid or something. And, well, he had me do some reading on it and, you know, “Check this out and check this out. See how these insights feel. Does this line up with your experience?” And I ended up concluding that, yeah, it does, actually. And so we went on Ritalin, and I learned how to think taking that drug. I didn’t know how to, like, start a thought and then cultivate and insulate it and then kind of gradually let it grow legs and move around on its own and then finish, until I started taking that medication. And I got good—I started getting seriously good at music. I was seriously getting good at graphics. I was able to concentrate on things and keep an agenda going and...

Tyler M: And how old were you when this happened?
Rowley: That was 22 when I was in recovery that first year. I took it for a few years, and somehow it just became more of a hyper-focusing agent. And I didn’t know it at the time, but I was able to function intellectually without it. And that same year where I did—where I started dating and got into the kink scene and all that kind of stuff, also that year was opened with me going—weaning off of Ritalin and actually going through it with very little unpleasantness. And of course, I knew—noticed all the ADHD feelings and everything being around again, but I was able to still function in the middle of it. Part of me was like, “Oh yeah, I got away from Big Pharma and all that, whatever,” and the other part of me was like, “Well, this drug actually isn’t doing the stuff I need it to anymore.” And I was glad—I was pleased that I just—you know, there was no one who had to have the big “come to Jesus” talk of “Well, you should do this thing because of these reasons.” It was me who arrived at that decision. It was me who conducted all the action on it. And that’s something that at that point in my life I didn’t have much of a history of doing. Um, as far as autism goes, where that and my ADHD separate themselves, especially as a kid, I can’t tell. I just noticed that it’s a lot of work for me to navigate social situations, and it isn’t from an anxiety thing. It’s just there are some ways in which I fail to receive information that’s sitting right in front of me. And if I take certain measures, if I allow myself—if I give myself room for these limits, I actually function pretty darn good. Um—these were all things that I kept expecting would change about me, even up to the time when I started to transition. And as I—as that continued to go forward and these things did not change about me, there were one of two ways to look at it. One was “Well, despite everything I’ve done for the past 34 years, I still need to find a way to become normal.” Or “What all these SJWs have been talking about is true, on this thing as well as gender, as well as rape culture, as well as blackness and color in America, as well as with capitalism, that a lot of us have a lot more different about us than we’re encouraged to even explore. And I have that myself, and I need to start finding out what those things are kind of concretely, rather than just simply knowing on a habitual level what seems to work for me and what doesn’t.” It’s been revolutionary. And at the same time, part of me has still got the finger—the hand over the, you know, self-destruct button on this whole process because basically what I’m doing is—by old standards, is not requiring enough of myself. And this is how a life comes to a screeching halt. And you know what? The evidence for that is not [chuckles] insubstantial. That case has exhibits to trot out in front of a jury and make its whole fucking diatribe about, and that’s going on in my head constantly. And at the same time, I’ve still been on this planet for 34.5 years, and these are things about me that have not changed. And I have weakly tried to do something about it; I’ve tried to change it with every bit of strength that I could muster. And it has not moved. And you know what, I have other things I want to do with my life. Um, but yeah, it’s very openly and very proudly that I’m like, “I’m autistic. I have ADHD. I have depression.” And there are as-yet-undiagnosed things about me. And, like, I haven’t even received an official diagnosis for autism, particularly. But I don’t trust them, and—and they will have to earn my trust when it comes to trying to cope with these aspects of my existence, medically. You know, our society—like right now there’s the whole autism-awareness thing, and people are having to be like, “Okay, so, you know”—now, like, progress is everybody who knows speaking out about Autism Speaks and being like, “These people don’t represent us. They’re about fixing us; they’re about training us to fit in with neurotypicals at any cost, no matter how much it mangles us for life. Don’t support these people.” Whereas like a year ago, this would have seemed like too much to advocate this loudly
for, you know? I like that I get to be a part of that, and I like that I, um—I like that more and more of the morality and expectation of people that I was raised with is not just wrong, but I'm able to walk away from it.

**Tyler M:** That's wonderful.

**Rowley:** Thank you.

**Tyler M:** So you mentioned that, um, getting your ADHD diagnosis and treatment actually helped you focus more on your music.

**Rowley:** Yes. Um, up to that point, just like connection, music happened accidentally. It—I'd made enough time for it so that it happened accidentally fairly frequently. And as I went through a few different phases in life—phases where there was just no activity, phases where there was a lot of change, and phases where there was a lot of like, you know—where it's a little bit of success, and then phases where there's like depression and loneliness and heartbreak. And watching how my relationship to music creation changed throughout all those different things, and how on one hand, yeah, it's cathartic to do; on the other hand, if I need to like—if I need to beat the ground with something and scream at the top of my lungs, sitting down in a DAW is not going to accomplish that [laughter]. Um, Ritalin. There's a track on my SoundCloud—there's actually a whole album on my SoundCloud—it's the earliest one—called *Learning to Greeble*, which is a reference to my graphics work at the time. I've always been about sci-fi stuff, and greeble is how they add, like, indistinct or nondistinct detail to the surface of something. A Star Destroyer—all that chunky shit along the sides, like obviously it's not an engine, it's not where they're going to roto scope the lasers coming out of, but it's just there and it looks—makes it look legit. That's greeble. Laborious to do in 3-D, but at the same time super rewarding when you get good at it, and I got myself good at it over the course of that year. There's a track in there near the end called “Taskmaster,” and it was the first track I ever made when I was on Ritalin. And literally, I had a couple ideas of “Oh, I could, like, program this sequence in and do it with this sound and do it with this melody and then kind of get that going. That'd be fun.” So I go in and I sit down and I do it, and just that first hours of activity—of get everything set up and get everything running and playing the sequences properly—that was with a clarity that I had never experienced before. I'm like, “And I'm still enjoying this. I'm still on the same emotional wavelength that I was on when I had the idea. This is cool. Okay.” So I sat down and I did the whole thing that I do with tracks, which is set up a few different iterations of maybe four or eight bars, and set up a couple things to do in various lengths, sophisticate the percussion a little bit, and then once I have—once I'm getting into a thing where I'm not adding anything or programming anything, I'm just kind of cutting things in and out, that's when I know I have it, and that's when I know to start sequencing, actually, the order of the song and how everything kind of comes in, does what it does, goes out, animates and all that kind of stuff. And I think it was like three hours later, I've got this track, and I can literally draw a straight line through both my thoughts and my feelings back to when I had the idea three hours ago. And I was just like, “Is this what it's like to just function?” you know? And of course, I have pieces of music since then, and it's like literally some I'm still writing that I started back in 2007, but, um... Music was always that language and that magic that I always wanted to learn
how to wield. The first piece of music I ever understood, at age four, was “The Gates of Delirium” by Yes. It’s a 21-minute rock symphony about—it’s inspired by Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, which I’ve never read. I tried to and it was impenetrable, but... The story in the music was, there's this troubled peace which erupts into war. The war is won by one side and lost by the other, and no matter where you stand afterwards, there's just all this destruction afterwards. And it's necessary and it's never going to not be what it is, and at the same time, it is still so sad, and there's still so much grief to experience with it. And all of this whole fucking gamut was expressed in that, and I understood that at age four. I couldn't get ex—I was never the kid who could get excited about MC Hammer and New Kids on the Block, because of these experiences that I had with a lot of stuff like this. I didn't have a band, I couldn't play guitar, and I wasn't a keyboardist. And I'd done drums, I'd done a little bit of keyboard playing when I was younger in my church and everything, but I never got, like, skilled the way Keith Emerson or Rick Wakeman is skilled. But I did center in on keyboards because that seemed to be where you write the music from, if you were going to write, you know, “the music” and not just have words and then kind of a jam to make it kind of interesting in the background while the words happen. And then there's the synthesizer itself. When I grew up in the '80s and '90s, synthesizers and electronic music at a consumer level were polysynths and sampling drum machines, which basically meant you had a very limited palette of sound. And everybody wanted to use brass when it was time to be, like, excited, and electric piano, that clinkily—that clinky digital electric piano sound when it was time to be emotional. And of course, in church, this, you know, “hammer on the fucking nailhead” emotional vocabulary was literally how everything happened, so I hated it. And growing up with all this prog rock, I mean, that was driven by the synthesizer, but that kind of synthesizer was a totally different beast that just didn't exist in the mid-'80s. The market had moved miles past it by that point. They were making up new versions of—new ways to synthesize stuff at that point. Whereas back in the '70s, a synthesizer meant a keyboard—a short keyboard, maybe like three octaves, maybe four, tops—and then a panel with a bunch of knobs and switches with buttons on them. And I was always compelled by just—it was part of what got me into *Star Trek*, was all the control panels everywhere. It's like everywhere you look, there's a different one. They all look totally different from each other, and there's like an aesthetic about it. And some would look more approachable, and some look more foreboding, and some just look like crap—you don't want to try to use that in a crisis—and other ones are just like, wow, it like glides into your hand almost. And suddenly here was like this whole reality, this whole musical reality, with this type of device, here. And I remember—and I didn't know it until my dad showed me. I was 14 at that point, and my dad showed me a concert video of Yes playing *Close to the Edge* back in 1972. So of course, Wakeman's up there. He's got his gigantic fucking Mellotron. That's how you got strings back in the day. And then you had—he had a few different Minimoogs set to different sounds, because they didn't have presets back then. You just had what you did on the board, and if you couldn't—and if, like, you know, a couple flick switches away—if it took more than that to make a different sound, you just didn't have a different sound for the gig. And if you were rich like Wakeman, you had like three or four of them. Monstrous fucking solos and big huge filter sweeps and bass fit to just shake the ground apart and everything, and I was just like, “That's incredible.” And of course, by this point the market for analog synthesis had gotten back off the ground, so—a Minimoog back in 1978—or in 1987 or something like that would’ve been like, you know, 40 bucks. Usually just like, “Come down here and pick it up. I'm throwing
it in the trash by the end of the day." By the time the mid-'90s came around, everybody wanted one, so these things were like whew. It was never going to darken the doorsteps of my house growing up. So when soft synths and DAWs and especially freeware DAWs started to become de rigueur in the early aughts, this was like my way to get into this world and to slowly, kind of patiently learn how to navigate it. By the time I started working on the stuff with the Ritalin, I had gotten to a place where I had at least enough command of what I was trying to do. I could hear a sound in my head. I probably wasn’t going to be able to create that sound. I was going to be able to get the melody right and the timing and the chords and bass and whatever kind of percussive stuff, kind of, but like, I—you know, people would be like, “Oh, well, the synthesizer, you can like make any sound you can think of.” It doesn’t quite work that way. It doesn’t need to, on the other hand, but still. Um... [laughter]

**Tyler M:** That didn’t happen.

**Rowley:** That did not happen.

**Tyler M:** [laughter]

**Rowley:** Um—I don’t know if it was the Ritalin or just the fact that I had reached a certain point in my development as an electronic music producer after a couple years at that point, is how long I’d been doing it, um, but I got bored with making music that way, and that was like the last album I made for like ten years. And yeah, that album came at the end of—a—one, two, three, four, five, six—think that’s like the seventh album I made in two years. And those other albums previous where it started with like, “Okay, I can string songs together” to “Oh my God, this thing has like an identity, like the whole thing. It isn’t just ‘Oh, here’s a cool track and then here’s a cool track,’ but like there’s a story throughout.” And then the last one I made before I made *Learning to Greeble*, and before I got into recovery basically, was one where I actually succeeded in creating like a proggy kind of sense of escalation and like... Sasha and Digweed seemed to kind of hint at it, but it takes a whole set to get there, whereas like within your—you know, within 30 minutes of my thing playing out, you’re taken on this fucking journey, and it’s all the same thing, and it sounds kind of, like, crappy, because it was obviously cheaply made electronic music, but at the same time, what it did with these limited tools, that was... Yeah. That was—that was one of the first times when I was like, “Here's this thing that nobody asked me to get good at, that nobody said, ‘Hey, you should do this thing. This will be good for you for this reason and this reason and this reason.'” It was the exact opposite of that. People were like, “Why are you giving time to this thing? You need to work more hours,” you know? And as soon as I hit that point, of course I wanted to go further. But yeah, that was—that was very much driven at the start by Ritalin and then kind of held in place as Ritalin created these artificial points of focus, particularly with creating a Rhodes Chroma. I went from doing electronic music in, like, a DAW with VST synthesizers to building my own VSTs. I still use that software to this day. The market has moved miles past it, but I can do fucking anything in there, even if ties down a pretty well-powered computer just to do simple things, relatively. That's the other thing with music. A lot of it has been looking at expanding into this new area of whether it’s artistically, performance-wise, or technologically. Initially I'll look at it and be like, I'll try that and be so disturbed—or be so like, yeah, disturbed by the change in—by the expansion in
scope of what I'm trying to do, that I'll just be like, “Oh, no, no, no, I'm not going to fuck around with that. That's impossible for me.” Couple years later I'd come back to it, and SynthEdit was one of those things. Around the time that I got into recovery, also, I wanted to try to see if I could roll up my sleeves and try to get good at the SynthEdit thing, and found it just impossible. Well, a couple years later when I was really sure I was done making music the way I had before, I was like, “Well, part of this would be being able to at least conceptualize what I want an instrument to do, rather than hoping the market produces it somewhere.” So I got into it, and my first projects were these outrageously stupid things. I was obsessed with old string synths. They have a strange way. The notes aren't quite separated from each other, even though you could literally hold down every note on the keyboard and have them sound. And the ways that they navigated these technological limitations created a certain character that people didn't want to emulate even up until about maybe ten years ago, when people were like, “You know what was cool? Those cheesy disco string-synth machines, you know? Those zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh-zhh, you know?” I was just obsessed with it, so I went into it, and I was able to get good at that, and then I was just like, “Well, if I'm able to get good at that, let's go for what the market really ended up going for in the late '70s: polysynths. The Prophet-5's. The Oberheims.” And then eventually, like, the shit that was like too well—too overdesigned for people to really afford, like the Rhodes Chroma or something like that—no one emulates a Rhodes Chroma. Well, I found out trying to build one that—in software—why no one really wanted to take this project on. It was like, you'll work a year getting this thing to work the way it's supposed to, and then at the end of it, what's used at the end—what you have at the end is still not exactly all that playable [laughter]. It was one of the first parameter-axis systems. Rather than like a button and a knob or a slider for every function, you had this row of buttons and then one slider. You want to change this aspect of the sound? Nnn, okay. Then change this other aspect? Nnn, all right. Laborious. And I never knew until years later after I'd had to scrap that project, and I was going to one of those studios where they have a bunch of synthesizers, and someone had a Rhodes Chroma, so I'm like, “Oh my God, there it is!” And I'm like, “This is impossible! Even me! I can’t—I can’t hold the entire structure in my head, and I need to, and you can’t look at everything at once, and—aah!” Yeah. Yeah.

Tyler M: That's great. Um, I wanted to ask you a little bit about, um... And of course, still don't know whether it's pronounced “tru-scum” or “trus-cum.”

Rowley: Truscum. I don't know either.

Tyler M: Truscum. Right?

Rowley: I think it's “tru-scum,” but...

Tyler M: Um, but as a non-binary trans woman, what have your experiences been?

Rowley: Surprisingly, I have not encountered much of that kind of attention to me personally. And usually that's not their way, to point at you and be like, “Your identity's invalid.” They'll do the sort of like, you know, “Oh, I believe this” thing, and if you question them on it... But again, I haven't had—I haven't experienced that very much. The one thing I did was a friend of mine,
himself a non-binary trans masc, who said, “I don't respect neopronouns.” And neopronouns being like beyond “they.” You've got the “xirs” and “xems” and all that kind of stuff. And me, at this point, I'm willing to validate otherkin. On one hand, who knows? There—if someone not trans tries to take my space as a trans person in terms of advocacy and political space, I'll fucking obliterate them. At the same time, I'm not going to be like, “Your shit's invalid,” because you know what, they said that the same thing—they said the same thing to me ten years ago. They said the same thing to me five fucking years ago. Um, in fact, they had said it so profoundly that no one had to say it at all. It just sat there on billboards, on TVs, and behind every fucking ad you ever saw, behind every fucking time you'd ever been marketed to. It was “Oh, by the way, you're not supposed to be this thing; you're supposed to be this other thing.” So seeing this person announce that was profoundly disturbing and—not disturbing. Definitely unsettling. Disappointing. You know, I felt—I felt betrayed. And it's like, we're all trying to get to this future, and the only way we’re getting there together, and this is what togetherness looks like, not, you know, people not addressing conflicts and shit like that, but this, where we don't gatekeep. We don't gatekeep. We get to defend our space, and we get to hold our space and be as militaristic about that as we fucking need to be. And I go pretty darn far along that axis myself, but a cheetahkin comes up, I'm not going to tell him he's not cheetahkin. If someone with neopronouns goes up, I'm going to fall over myself and I'm going to try my best to do what I've demanded that the cis get right, of “You know what? If you get the pronoun wrong, you say the right one and move the fuck along.” Um, and I haven’t been in those many situations yet, because I haven't been around really anybody who uses neopronouns. At the same time, I’m prepared for that. I want to be prepared for that. I want to do that well. I don’t want to just impress them with my wokeness or whatever. I want to—I want to respect them well, and I haven't been prepared for it. And yeah, here's this other person who himself relies upon other people's goodness, and in this way has said, “I am not going to, uh—I'm not going to provide that myself. I'm not going to work that hard, and people shouldn't ask me.” That's when I've encountered it, and of course, I—he was... I don't block people, but I always wind up—I always wind up being blocked by people. So yeah, I made it hell for him for about a good hour and... It sucked because I'm good at doing that, and at the same time, it's just, I don’t—especially in a comment thread. If it's in a mess—if it's in a private message, I'll take someone on and be like, “Okay, so what's going on here?” or be like, “That's really shitty and here's some of the ramifications about it. Fuck you. Block, block.” In a comment thread? That person has to be made an example of unless they mea culpa, and usually no one does it at that point. And at the same time, I don't do this for them; I do this for the person that they’re stepping on. I want them to see that someone's going to stand up for them, whether it's me or anybody fucking else, because I know I'm not alone in the kind of advocacy I do. But I know what it's like to be that person, to be like, “Someone bothers standing up for that? When they don't lose a thing from it? In fact, they kind of lose a little bit by standing up for it? Okay. That's something about humanity that I wasn’t, you know—I wasn't told existed ever.” So that's a little bit about my flight hours with truscum.

**Tyler M:** So if there's one thing that you'd like for people to hear from you or know about you, what would it be?
Rowley: Hmm. Jesus. I remember people asking me how I’d pray when I still tried to pray. It’s like I’d look at the enormity of the universe and be like, “I got nothing. Like, I want my car to not make a new noise, you know, but I got nothing. Um, you know, my relatives aren’t being shot by the police.” At the time, I had a trans friend who took her own life, and that didn’t happen back in those days. And by the time those—by the time that sort of thing was happening, I was in a totally different place. I feel the same way facing that question, and it might just be—there’s a bit of vanity or pretense somewhere in there, being like, oh, here I am talking to history; at the same time, I don’t know. I want people to be willing to think literally anything. And then just below that in priority, I want people to—what’s the word?—uncompromisingly respect the ethical reality that they’re around. Given that I’ve had to uproot my entire life and everything, I still don’t feel like I’ve received any like, you know, okay, well, here’s a real sacrifice. Here’s a real risk for you to undertake because this is what you believe about the world. And if someone believes this, so you believe, they should put this and this and this on the line. And I used to let that stop me from standing up for myself. I don’t anymore, because we are underprivileged. When dealing with—when—not dealing with, but when encountering a situation that involves someone less privileged than me, for example a trans person of color, that’s one area where I will give up. And of course, whenever there’s, you know—when it comes to these intersections, I can pass for neurotypical. I should cede space to someone who doesn’t when it—when their thing comes up. But at the same time, the rest of the time, you can’t shut me up. And I resent that I have to be this way in order to exist. I hope that anybody listening—you shouldn’t have to be remarkable in any way to survive. It’s one message that gets out right now, especially in capitalism, is “Well, look at this queer. They had this and this and this ability that, you know, is part skill and part talent. So of course, be like them and they’ll get ahead. Be as catty and as bitchy as RuPaul, and you’ll have a whole fucking life, you know? Be as good at maintaining the public’s interest and disgust at the same time, and you can be successful like Caitlyn Jenner.” We shouldn’t have to be remarkable. It’s not human to be remarkable; it’s human to have—to be—to regard things with wonder. But what we consider remarkable right now borders on superheroid and is invariably destructive to the person doing it. I hope whoever’s listening to this doesn’t live in that misconception about existence. I hope there’s nothing remarkable about them whatsoever, and I hope they’re fucking comfortable for it.

Tyler M: That’s wonderful.

Rowley: Turn to the side, sip from cup. [laughter]

Tyler M: [laughter] Thank you so much for joining, Cerah...

Rowley: Thank you for hav—

Tyler M: ...and thank you so much for sharing so much about your life.

Rowley: [chuckles] Thank you for having me.