

# An Interview with Sophia Tonnessen

Compiled by Brynn H.

## Abstract

This excerpt from *Our Voices Heard Vol. 1: A Youth Led Zine* by Stand with Trans contains an interview conducted over email in the Fall of 2022 with author Sophia Tonnessen (she/they) compiled by Brynn H. Bryn H. is a trans woman currently in her junior year of high school. She enjoys writing and playing music in her free time.

Founded in 2015 by a passionate mom, Stand With Trans helps trans youth between the ages of 12 and 22 in Michigan build resilience, gain confidence, and find hope in a future filled with joy. This zine was created by youth affiliated with the organization and its programming.

**Keywords:** transgender youth, zine, creative expression, joy, resilience, hope



Portrait of Sophia Tonnesson, Originally published in *Our Voices Heard: A Youth Led Zine* By Stand with Trans

## Q: How does your work have connections with current events?

**A:** Both my first book, *Ecologia*, and my upcoming second book, *Choke*, engage with different political issues. *Ecologia* was written during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic – which was also the same year I came out as transgender and started HRT. That book explores the difficulty of examining yourself under the kind of conditions they pandemic created: mostly isolation, separation from loved ones, the end of normal routines. I had a lot of time to myself walking around neighborhoods as I knocked on doors for the upcoming election – a lot of time alone in my apartment afterward.

I could think about my past relationships, the way I had used art and media to build a sense of self before I recognized my identity. Those things really shaped the book. I think there are a lot of small, material moments, a lot of quotations or misquotations from songs or from people who are no longer in my life. And that sense of fragmentation was really shaped by the isolation from the early pandemic.

On the other hand, *Choke* is a book rooted in the current moment of transphobia and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in the US. How do you come to terms with the fact that your identity is a target of hate for not only conservatives, but people like J.K. Rowling who consider themselves relatively liberal and feminists? What does it mean to be both trans, and therefore marginalized and in danger, and white, considerably safer from police violence and discrimination than transgender people of color? I think a lot about the way violence can be both devastating – as in the laws and police violence I mentioned – and, in another context, healing, as in gender affirming surgeries or kink.

It's important to differentiate between and negotiate our individual desires as trans people in a world that wants to impose a very narrow idea of transness on us, an idea that, when it's even allowed, serves white supremacy and capitalism rather than our collective liberation. All of that is really wrapped up together in the book.

## Q: What special connections with your work do you feel?

**A:** I think a lot of myself goes into the poetry I write. I pride myself on my distinctive voice, even though it can come across as messy or overwrought or whatever. It represents the way I think: I'm trans, I'm Autistic, I like to ramble and talk about things that I love and crack jokes and do wordplay.

Some specific poems also connect to events in my life, or my connections with other people. One poem that comes to mind is “Layaway,” which won second place in last year’s Sappho Prize contest. That poem is an exploration of my complex feeling on Gender Reassignment Surgery, but it was born of a joke my coworker and I had made on a shift about healthcare costs being so bad that I’d have to put my p\*ssy on layaway. I never really thought that poem would turn out to win a prize. But it means so much that something that a lot of people get to see was born of such a joyful and intimate moment. It feels real to have poetry like that do well out in the world.

**Q: How does your work comment on social and political events?**

A: I don’t know that I comment on individual events that fit my poems into the sociopolitical context of this current moment, my life, and my academic and cultural interests. A lot of my thinking around *Choke* came from a class I took in graduate school on posthuman theory. I got to read Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Jane Bennet, Anna Tsing...so beyond thinking about this current political moment of transphobia and violence, I wanted to think about human-nonhuman relationships, our relationship with matter and objects, and things like that. I would say there’s kind of a feedback loop between the present moment culturally and politically and what I’m reading. N.K. Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth* trilogy also played a big part in my thinking. And that’s also influencing another big writing project that I’ve just started.

**Q: What role do you think your work and others play in society?**

A: I think that isn’t necessarily up to me. I’d love to say, my work is doing X and Y and saving lives and whatever, but I think that the impact is ultimately determined by the people who read it. Like, if you read *Ecologia* and it’s not your thing, or if you read it and it changes your life, neither of those extremes has anything to do with me necessarily, beyond the responsibility I hold for any harm that gets done by the book. I honestly prefer to think of the book as opening a door to all the things I care about, and for thinking about the world. That’s how I feel about a lot that I read: books are tools for framing a new perspective on the world, and tools are only useful if you put them to the task they’re meant for. Like, I just read *Under the Skin*, by Linda Villarosa, about the impact of racism on the physical and mental well-being of Black people in the U.S. That book is a really effective tool for talking to other white people who don’t know about the specific things she writes about, and for making more conscientious decisions about who I’m voting for, and where to direct energy in organizing and collective action. I guess poetry is a tool, too, but a different kind. It’s not necessarily about educating people.

It’s not even necessarily about building empathy, because I think empathy has a lot of limitations — if you only give others the benefit of the doubt when you see yourself in them, what happens when you meet someone with whom you can’t empathize? — but maybe a tool for recognition. Like, this is what my trans experience looks like, this is what I feel, this is how I interact with the world. And maybe you can’t recognize it as something you yourself have felt, but in reading about it, you’ve built a new tool for looking at the world and others.

**Q: What is your message to society through your work?**

A: I definitely know if I would describe the themes and ideas in my work as a message, because ‘message’ implies I’m telling other people something and they’re either going to disagree or agree and that’s that. The ideas that I want to present are: what would it mean if the self wasn’t a distinct, separate thing from the world and matter and other people, but deeply enmeshed? how would that change our relationships to others? How can we navigate our desires for art and creativity in a capitalist world? How do we build relationships and connections with others that are reflective of our values, rather than the values of the society we live in? What would a future that is safe for marginalized people look like? I don’t have any answers to those questions, and I don’t think there are concrete answers. What’s more important to me than certainty is the ability to speculate, collaborate, and explore. And truth or answers that we arrive at will inevitably get questioned and revised in turn by people after us.



Digital Rendering by Brynn H., Originally published in *Our Voices Heard: A Youth Led Zine*  
By Stand with Trans

### Q: What connection does your work have with your life?

**A:** *Ecologia* is a strange book for me to look back on. In many ways, I kind of had an intuition that if I ever got a book published, it would be this one. It was so different, so direct and silly and serious in ways I hadn't allowed myself to be before. But it was really surprising to hear that I would be getting published, and not just published, but working alongside someone like Alex Cheves, whose memoir *Love is a Beast* got published at the same time, at a press that was just getting started. My book was one of the first ones to be published by Unbound Edition Press. And now people like Janet Hardy, who wrote *The Ethical Slut*, and some other really remarkable queer writers, are being published there too.

It's incredibly scary and validating at the same time to be working alongside people I kind of think of as larger-than-life. Getting the book published completely changed my life in that sense. But in a lot of ways, nothing [has] changed. I haven't made any substantial profit off the book. I'm still in the same graduate program I was before. I still work at a restaurant waiting tables in the summer. I still live in the same apartment and eat a fair amount of ramen at the end of the month. Sometimes it'll just hit me: I wrote a book. And to have a second book coming out next fall — that still hasn't sunk in...

My work grounds me though. Because it's always very practical, very real, compared to the abstraction of a book in the future. Day to day, my life looks the same: spend time with my partner; play Elden Ring; read; write and edit poems; do the best I can to take care of myself; call my mom.

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By Alexander Doe, Originally published in *Our Voices Heard: A Youth Led Zine* By Stand with Trans