

Enacting a Queer Ethic of Writing: Sometimes Y

by

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A Note on Fictionalization

The short stories contained in *Sometimes Y* are comprised of both fiction and nonfiction writing and I have given no explicit delineation between my fiction and nonfiction pieces. The nonfiction sections drew on experiences and interviews with real people from my life. Some names have been altered for the sake of anonymity, while others remain the same.

Introduction

"The memory of our histories is often constructed to work as our conscience as well as to configure our secret desires. We wander through our own minds endlessly, figuring and reconfiguring our stories, our memories, our realities, so that they will line up with the choices we are making, the dreams we are desperately fashioning, the stories we hope will explain us, the lovers we desire, the world as we wish it to be. Yet more often than not the space between what we know and how we understand it remains cloudy, opaque, and disconnected."

— Amber Hollibaugh, *My Dangerous Desires*

Storytelling is an essential part of how we come to understand ourselves and the world around us. For example, we learn cultural values and norms through fairy tales from a young age: we can learn to be wary of gifts from strangers through *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* or that it is acceptable but not common for people of different classes to marry from *Aladdin*. The stories we encounter give us models for narrative construction and provide knowledge of how we relate to the world around us. These in turn shape how we construct our own narratives. Indeed, “memory [itself] is a narrative” construction, “rather than a replica of an experience.”¹ Our own life narratives are constructed through a process of selection of moments to be remembered or forgotten. While not necessarily conscious, this selection is directed by “a desire for coherence and continuity” and “desire for narrative closure.”² I believe that these desires are, at least in part, created through exposure to narrative structures which prioritize them.

¹ Sturken, Marita. “Introduction” *Tangled Memories*. Berkeley: University of California, 1997. 7.

² *Ibid*, 8.

Peter Brooks asserts that as young as age 3 “a child begins to show the ability to put together a narrative in a coherent fashion” and insists “upon any storyteller’s observation of the ‘rules,’ upon proper beginnings, middles, and particularly ends.”³ This is not how I recall my own childhood relationship to stories. My parents’ home is full of audio cassettes of me as a little girl telling meandering, nonsensical stories. My stories shunned endings and my parents would hardly call my ramblings “coherent.” Perhaps I lacked this “ability” or had not yet learned to value coherence over telling the story in my preferred way.

Of course, one cannot avoid indoctrination into convention for long. When you read, you learn how stories “work,” or how they have worked. It is an essential social practice one must hone from a young age: a good personal story will have peers responding empathetically or laughing raucously. A badly told story may elicit the clichéd sardonic response “Cool story bro- you should tell it at parties.” This phrase, common in recent popular culture, illustrates the derision and rejection which accompanies failure to tell an adequately interesting and well-structured story. For those of us who, by virtue of gender identity or sexual identity are ill-fitted to mesh with traditional life narratives and whose very existence is unfathomable in the current paradigms, rendering oneself intelligible through narrative can be essential to one’s survival. However, I believe the indoctrination into normative practices of writing and narrative does a disservice to queer lives. It further marginalizes those who are unable or unwilling to conform to pre-existing narratives and alienates us from our own experiences and desires.

³ Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot*. New York: Vintage Books, 1984. 3.

In the acronym “LGBTQ,” Q is often made to stand for Queer and Questioning. These are understood to be two different identities: in the context of the acronym labels, Queer is taken to mean “not straight and cisgender” and Questioning to mean “currently processing whether one is queer; not feeling certain of one’s straight/cisgender status.”⁴ However, what if we take the coincidence of these terms in the acronym not as discrete identities but as intertwining values? What if we understood queerness as questioning and always in question, and the act of questioning in turn as queer itself? Could we forge from this coincidence an ethic of queer identity which grounds itself in uncertainty? And how might we work towards writing from this mindset?

The trouble with explaining what queerness is (to your parents, to straight cis people, to your friends, to yourself) is that as soon as you define queerness as this or that, you have lost it. Once you pin down queerness and establish boundaries of what queer is and means, whatever that is isn’t queer anymore. It’s a solidified identity, which is precisely what queer isn’t. And so you have to go in search of the queer again. As Jose Muñoz puts it, “queerness is not quite here; it is...a potentiality.”⁵ Every time you try to pin it down, it escapes you: that is queerness’ power. I won’t go

⁴ These definitions are based on my own understandings and exposure to LGBTQ people and organizations. I have avoided the redundancy of the commonly given definition of questioning (“someone who is questioning their sexuality/gender”). I define Queer in this context as simply “not straight and cisgender” to acknowledge and draw out the fact that it is often taken up by LGBTQ organizations as merely an umbrella term without its political or academic connotations. For example, Wesleyan University’s QueerWes student group explicitly defines itself as a place for queer-identified people without any political or academic understanding of queerness, free from language they feel is too politically charged or consider academic jargon. However, from here on out I am interested in reinvesting “queer” with its political and academic connotations and bridging the gap between “queer” as in “not straight and cisgender” and “queer” as a political, cultural endeavor.

⁵ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009. 21.

so far as to say queerness is the search for the queer, but it is perpetually in motion. This makes people uncomfortable. Being queer can feel a bit like being out at sea without your sea legs. Some people may even doubt the existence of the queer, given this notion of queer as horizon.⁶

However, I would argue that unlike saying “Queer is...” saying “I am queer” does not limit queerness in a way that eliminates it. Instead, it enacts the notion of queer as horizon: it opens queer up to the infinite possibilities of your future. It understands your present as one of the possibilities of your past. To say “I am queer” is not to say that queer is only what you are, but that you are an iteration that can and will expand queerness. You are a queerness which has never heretofore occurred, and all your potential is the realm of queer horizon of being. So the academic understanding of queerness does not destroy queer in lived experience. Queer continues to exist in the potentiality of queer-identified bodies. That is what, or where, queer is. Through this knowledge, we need not feel that writing about our lives and identities is in conflict with the political and theoretical implications of queerness so long as we render them with all their complexity and potential.

In my writing as a queer person, what I am invested in is being as true to the social and conceptual location of queerness as possible. I think queer writing has an obligation to render visible the relationality of identity, to avoid essentialist, atemporal notions of identity categories, and to be committed to writing for queer people and lives, not just about them. That is not to say that the writing should represent queer people—in fact, exactly the opposite. It should not aim to explain or

⁶ Ibid, 19-32.

justify or resolve queer lives or identities to the mainstream audience of heterosexual cisgender people. However, this lack of resolution, lack of identity consolidation and stability in queer writing may be incredibly engaging for non-queer people. After all, queerness is merely a lens through which to view the fluidity, contradiction, and interdependence of all human existence. Queers do not have a monopoly on uncertainty or seeking solace in instability.

In writing this thesis I have focused on exploring how we come to understand ourselves through the stories we tell about ourselves and those we hear about others. I am interested in how memory, communication, and intimacy all inflect our senses of self. I do not wish to pretend that people do not seek to solidify their identities— that we are all constantly “*reconfiguring our stories, our memories, our realities, so that they will line up with the choices we are making, the dreams we are desperately fashioning.*” However, I hope to make visible the instability inherent in the very process of shoring up our selves: these acts would not be necessary if we were not in flux. To hide these practices, these fluctuations, these trans(*)itions, is to deny the depth and range of queer experience.

Working Definitions of Terms

There is an argument to be made that stories need not be verbal. However, for my purposes, I am interested in stories as written or spoken means of conveying an experience or series of experiences, including imagined experiences (i.e. fiction). Historically, a “narrative” was a legal document containing an alleged statement of facts; people were told not to give false narrative, just as today we would be told not

to give false testimony⁷. The *Oxford English Dictionary* also suggests that at least one definition of narrative requires linearity: “an account of a series of events given in order and with the establishing of connections between them.”⁸ Yet the *OED* also acknowledges that in post-structuralist theory, this linearity is understood as “constructed...in accordance with a particular ideology.”⁹ I am inclined to agree with the post-structuralist interpretation, developed by theorists such as Michel Foucault,¹⁰ that typical linear progressive narratives are constructed to fit pre-existing models and to support certain ideologies. While post-structuralism is often more interested in large-scale narratives (such as those constructed by American history to substantiate its claims to being a nation constantly advancing towards greater freedom and equality), it is important to consider how people map their own narratives in everyday life onto the models and structures for narrative they find available.

Of course, the structured and constructed nature of narrative leads us into a debate about whether the term “narrative” conveys this structured nature in itself; that is, it begs the question: what is the difference between plot and narrative? Peter Brooks defines plot as “the design and intention of the narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning.”¹¹ Although he makes several broad strokes at defining narrative, he argues that to define narrative is an “impossibly speculative task,” whereas plot is defined as “the kinds of ordering

⁷ “narrative, n.” *OED Third Edition*. June, 2003. Oxford University Press. 11 November 2013. <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>. 1.

⁸ *Ibid*, 2a.

⁹ *Ibid*, 2c.

¹⁰ As an example, in his book *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault posits that the narrative of a sexually repressive past from which we continually must “liberate” sex is fallacious and informed by particular ideologies of historical progression and sexuality.

¹¹ Brooks, xi.

[narrative] uses and creates, about the figures of design it makes.”¹² This understanding suggests a pre-existing narrative which is told *through* plot. It asserts narrative as the amorphous essence of a story and plot as the structuring elements we actually observe. Yet it is clear from Brooks’ definitions of plot that one cannot have plot without narrative or narrative without plot: narrative does *not* pre-exist its structuring elements, but rather is called into being through them, exists only in them. Although useful analytically, this distinction obscures the nature of narrative. The distinction suggests a narrative which pre-exists its structural elements and also gives narrative the agential power to “use” kinds of ordering and “make” its design. I do not consider narrative an amorphous essence able to reveal itself through various plot structures. On the contrary, differences in structure inherently alter the narrative itself. A story’s meaning and content do not exist independently from their structuring elements.

My understanding of narrative for the purposes of this thesis is that the notion of composing a narrative of events necessarily constructs a story through particular ideologies and makes truth claims in accordance with them. In fiction, these may be self-referential truth claims or essentialized ones, as in the assertion that something is “true” in the narrative because it is written into the world of the story. This parallels the truth claims Joan Scott sees being made in the field of history that ground themselves in the unquestionability of “experience.”¹³ Scott argues that narrative is often grounded in the assumption that “writing is reproduction, transmission—the

¹² Ibid, 4.

¹³ Scott, Joan W. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry* 17.4 (1991): 773-97. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Sept. 2013.

communication of knowledge gained through (visual, visceral) experience.”¹⁴ Of course, this assumption hides the productive capacity of writing and invests itself in the “truth” of a person’s perception of their experience, even if such a perception were able to be simply “transmitted.” This notion of the truth of experience elides the constructed nature of memory mentioned earlier, by which “all memories are ‘created’ in tandem with forgetting,”¹⁵ chosen and interpreted through ideologies, as all narratives are. “The project of making experience visible,” which Scott sees in contemporary efforts to make history more inclusive, and I see in the practice of memoir and LGBT fiction more generally, “precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white *as fixed immutable identities*).”¹⁶ The effect of this, according to Scott, “is to constitute subjects as fixed and autonomous, and who are considered reliable sources of a knowledge that comes from access to the real by means of their experience.”¹⁷ Although it is my aim to question the notion of “fixed and autonomous” identity, I do not wish to disrespect people’s desire to constitute themselves this way. I believe that stable identity terms can be incredibly beneficial and comforting to people. Still, it is important to understand these identities as effects of, rather than foundations for, narrative.

This use of narrativizing experience brings us to the second term I wish to explore: identity. Returning to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the paradox of the meaning of “identity” is immediately evident. On the one hand, identity is “a

¹⁴ Ibid, 775-776.

¹⁵ Sturken, 7.

¹⁶ Scott, 778. My emphasis.

¹⁷ Ibid, 782.

description which *distinguishes* a person...*from others*,”¹⁸ on the other, it means “absolute or essential sameness.”¹⁹ It appears that the primary meaning of identity was initially that of comparative similarity, as in the related term “identical.” It was not until later that a sense of “individuality” is brought to identity. Even when difference rather than similarity is stressed in the meaning of identity, it remains a highly relational term, as seen in the definition, “a distinct impression of a single person or thing *presented to or perceived by others*.”²⁰ It is important to keep these two facets of identity in mind when discussing or writing about identity. Although we may have personal identities that distinguish us from others, this is always achieved through feelings of both difference and sameness. To claim an identity term is to perceive a similitude between one’s self-understanding and one’s understanding of that term, or one’s perception of others who claim that term.

In queer sexual or gendered identification, it is particularly common for people to describe a sensation of being “different” or counter-identifying with the norms within which they were raised. They might not find a sense of sexual or gender identity based in sameness until encountering certain terms or learning more about other people’s experience of these terms. It is through identifying with the narratives that surround certain identity terms and mapping one’s own personal narrative onto these larger narratives that we can understand ourselves as the “same” as others.

¹⁸ “identity, n.” OED Third Edition. November, 2010. Oxford University Press. 11 November 2013. <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>. 2b. My emphasis.

¹⁹ Ibid. 1.

²⁰ Ibid. 2b. My emphasis.

Another illuminating definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes identity as “the sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances.”²¹ This reveals the presumption that identity is inherently stable— that to be an individual is to be, on some basic level, the same “at all times” and/or “in all circumstances.” This leaves little room for fluid identity, nor does it give the role of relationality in identity the weight it deserves. It suggests that identity is something inherent within oneself that perseveres intact and uninfluenced through time and contact with new people, situations, and understandings. On the contrary, my understanding of identity is that it exists only in relation to others and thus is contingent *on* others. Sexuality as a concept cannot exist without desired others, nor gender without a system of gender signification.

The myths of identity— that it is autonomous, that it necessitates homogeneity with others, that it necessitates homogeneity within the self over time and context— create a complex and contradictory system within which people whose sense(s) of self and identity diverge from cultural norms must navigate to forge a coherent narrative of self: to be intelligible to themselves and others. Although problematic and challenging, identity has been a major mode of mobilization, politicization, and communalization of and for people who experience non-normative gender and/or sexuality. Identity cannot be wholly abandoned without throwing the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak. I take up this term to acknowledge the role that identity has played in our creation of narratives that allowed a queer community to be conceivable and to acknowledge its personal, emotional import in people’s lives. By

²¹ Ibid. 2a.

calling these aspects of definitions of the term identity “myths,” I mean to suggest that we can reconceive identity, inasmuch as we appeal to it in our narratives, in ways that recognize and subvert its limits and normativizing impulses.

Coming Out and Transitioning Narratives: The New Bildungsroman

Franco Moretti describes the emergence of the Bildungsroman as a “new paradigm” at the end of the eighteenth century which “sees *youth* as the most meaningful part of life.”²² This shift in values arrives with a synthesis of the images of “modernity” and “youth.” The “‘youthful’ attributes” that parallel the conception of “Modernity as—in Marx’s words—a ‘permanent revolution’” are “mobility and inner restlessness.”²³ The progressive values of modernity create a culture that, like youth, “seeks its meaning in the *future* rather than in the past.”²⁴

In his essay “Turning Back: Adolescence, Narrative, and Queer Theory,” Angus Gordon asserts that “turning back to adolescence is a seemingly mandatory gesture in any narrative of gay or lesbian identity,” and identifies the “‘coming out’ narrative”²⁵ as the classic form of such narrative. The “standard coming out story...depicts a gradual progress towards self-awareness and public declaration,”²⁶ depicting the uncertainty of “adolescent” sexuality through the lens of “perpetually foreshadowed fixity of adult sexual identity.”²⁷ Indeed, the project of a coming out story—which by definition depicts a time prior to open, fixed sexual or gender

²² Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. Thetford, Norfolk: Thetford Press, 1987. 3-4.

²³ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁵ Gordon, Angus. "Turning Back: Adolescence, Narrative, and Queer Theory." *GLQ* (1999): 1.

²⁶ Saxey, Esther. *Homoplot: The Coming-out Story and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. 80.

²⁷ Gordon, 6.

identity— must be oriented towards the resolution even in retrospection since “closetedness can be represented only from the retrospective position of outness.”²⁸ While in *Homoplot*, Esther Saxey suggests that the retrospective, re-interpretive nature of coming out stories disturbs traditional linear narrative, this format actually reifies linear trajectory, seeking to shape continuity out of an experience of identificatory disjuncture, giving authenticity and understandability to its subjects’ lives.

Like the notion of coming out, which requires a particular narrative format, “transsexuality is always narrative work, a transformation of the body that requires remolding of the life into a particular narrative shape.”²⁹ Indeed, since medical transitioning requires doctors’ approval, the ability to “tell a coherent story of transsexual experience” is a necessary pre-requisite to any sexual construction “through technology.”³⁰ Jay Prosser takes issue with how trans-ness is often taken up by queer theory as a means of disrupting or revealing the superficiality of gender, with little agential power given to people who transition and insufficient focus put on their narratives. In fact, Jay Prosser’s readings of sexual transition narratives reveals that “transition may be the very route to identity and bodily integrity,”³¹ rather than their detractors as queer theory had often asserted.³² Whether a result of the

²⁸ Ibid, 2.

²⁹ Prosser, Jay. *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. 4.

³⁰ Ibid, 9.

³¹ Ibid, 6.

³² Prosser makes reference to several examples, such as Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub’s *BodyGuards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker’s *The Last Sex: Feminism and Outlaw Bodies*, and Judith Halberstam’s “F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity”

compulsion of the medical complex or “a way of making sense of transition,”³³ traditional transitioning narratives have followed similar structural impulses to coming out stories: they locate evidence for a fixed gender identity in the past and allocate confusion and instability to transition, eventually coming to narrative resolution through “bodily integrity.”³⁴

Coming out narratives and transitioning narratives are often understood as a “second adolescence” in which the “discovery” and coming to terms with one’s identity may take place later than traditional adolescence. Specifically, transitioning narratives often appeal to images of puberty as a time of (awkward) bodily transition and emergence of secondary sex characteristics. Narratives of coming out as gay or lesbian tend to illicit the notion of puberty as the time of sexual awakening. The compilation of non-fiction, later-in-life coming out stories, *Dear John, I Love Jane* explicitly refers to its stories as describing “another round of adolescence.”³⁵ In one story, “A Door Opening Out,” the 50-year-old narrator describes feeling “like a giddy teen” and says she later “learned that a second adolescence is often brought on by the self-discovery of coming out to oneself.”³⁶ This creates the belief that questioning who one is occurs only in youth: one is not fully an adult until one has come into an identity that will then remain stable. Adolescence is a time for turbulence, change,

³³ Ibid, 9.

³⁴ By “transitioning” I mean to include shifts in gender presentation as well as medical transitioning such as HRT (hormone replacement therapy) and SRS (sex-reassignment surgery). It is important to note that not all transgender individuals undergo any medical transitioning; still, the typical transitioning narrative concerns itself with transsexuals who do so. Jay Prosser sees potential for trans narratives to depart from the binary gender/sex transition tropes (and argues that Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* does so), but such narratives continue to be the exception rather than standard.

³⁵ Walsh, Candace, and Laura Andre. *Dear John, I Love Jane: Women Write about Leaving Men for Women*. Berkeley, CA: Seal, 2010. 14.

³⁶ Ibid, 209.

and experimentation; adulthood is supposedly a time of consistency and certainty. Thus, inconsistency in adulthood is figured as a second adolescence, through which one can and will grow into “true” adulthood.

Indeed, Moretti says of the “classical Bildungsroman [that] narrative transformations have meaning in so far as they lead to a particularly marked ending: one that establishes a classification different from the initial one but nonetheless perfectly clear and stable.”³⁷ That is, characters may experience instability and change only inasmuch as this leads to a definitive resolution: “a stable and ‘final’ identity.”³⁸ Moretti describes two kinds of inversely proportional organizing principles in Bildungsroman that lead to two main types, one of which focuses on transformation and leaves room for ambiguity, frustrating narrative desires for resolution. Yet the majority of coming out and transitioning narratives take the form of the more traditional Bildungsroman.

The turmoil of questioning one’s sexuality or transitioning from one gender/sex to another is frequently given meaning in narrative through the dominant trope of the Bildungsroman, that is, through the ultimate resolution of a new identity. Jay Prosser describes this trope of transitioning narratives: “gender is not so much undone...as redone...there is a plot to be traced.”³⁹ They are “narrative[s] of becoming,”⁴⁰ of coming into one’s body and/or desire. The Bildungsroman notion of “coming to terms” with who one is and what one’s place in the world is takes on a

³⁷ Moretti, 7.

³⁸ Ibid, 8.

³⁹ Prosser, Jay. "No Place Like Home: The Transgendered Narrative of Leslie Feinberg's Stone Butch Blues." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 41.3 (1995): 483-514. *Project MUSE*. Web. 11 Sept. 2013. <http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.wesleyan.edu/journals/modern_fiction_studies/v041/41.3-4prosser.html>. 488.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 487.

new meaning in the context of these queer stories. Characters are at once hypothetically becoming who they were “meant to be,” and literally taking on identity terms. The coming to these new terms of self-description is in itself taken to be narrative resolution.

This thesis seeks to challenge this formulaic and reductionist understanding of how identity functions in queer people’s lives. As a young teen, I consumed every queer young adult novel I could get my hands on: *Annie on my Mind* and *Good Moon Rising* by Nancy Garden, *Dare, Truth, or Promise* by Paula Boock, *Empress of the World* by Sara Ryan, *Kissing Kate* by Lauren Myracle, *The God Box* and the *Rainbow Boys* series by Alex Sanchez, *Far from Xanadu* by Julie Anne Peters. I eventually had a whole shelf devoted to my gay book section, though it all started with *Keeping You a Secret* by Julie Anne Peters—a book I quite fittingly kept a secret, reading it hidden within my Latin class binder. These stories hold an important place in my heart, in the formation of my identity: they gave me narratives onto which to map my life, narratives previously unavailable to me, narratives which made me feel less alone during the stereotypical turmoil of adolescence and promised me resolution and stability. Yet there are only so many times one can read the coming out story in its limited variation, see the inevitable conclusion unfold, and still feel satisfied.

The classical model of the Bildungsroman outlined by Moretti, which concludes in a stable identity, is fittingly classified as “the novel of marriage.”⁴¹ This normative plot structure reinforces normative heterosexuality. The act of marriage becomes exemplary of the kind of definitive classificatory resolution, extrapolated

⁴¹ Moretti, 7.

and “disembodied into an abstract principle,” in which the protagonist “marrie[s] not so much a woman, as a rigidly normative culture.”⁴² In Moretti’s view, “the *Bildungsroman* attempts to *build* the Ego...it has accustomed us to looking at normality *from within* rather than from the stance of its exceptions; and it has produced a phenomenology that makes normality interesting and meaningful *as* normality” rather than in opposition to “pathology, emargination, repression.”⁴³

The narrative form of the *Bildungsroman* is thus inextricable from its normative impulses. The use of this form makes perfect sense if one’s goal is to feel or appear normal, to buy into a “rigidly normative culture” and attempt to render one’s experience as “normality *from within*.” The queer community should perhaps be debating the use of this model of narrative with as much fervor as we debate whether our community should be prioritizing a fight for access to and inclusion in the institution of marriage. Our media, the stories we tell, and the stories through which our youth come to know themselves are often as assimilationist as the agendas of our mainstream politics. Both have high stakes, and both risk excluding and obscuring the lived desires and divergent impulses of many within queer communities.

How many of us “come out,” and find that this isn’t really the end of the story? That our identities have not become stable and resolved? That we still experience internal and social mobility, the “youthful attribute” of inner restlessness? If the queer never settles into a stable sense of identity, we never achieve the adulthood and “maturity” promised by the *Bildungsroman*. We are challenged as

⁴² Ibid, 7-8.

⁴³ Ibid, 11.

youth that we are “too young to know” our identities and to identify as queer, because coming to terms with one’s sexuality and identity is the realm of adults. Yet if we acknowledge being confused, questioning, or simply comfortably (or uncomfortably) fluid in our identities as adults, this challenges normative assumptions about adulthood: that there is a time for confusion, restlessness, and change and a time to know who one is and have one’s place in the world settled. Queerness in all its variation disrupts this myth, gives the lie to it. Adulthood is not the resolution of the chaos of youth. If anything, it is the rock we hide our confusion under.

Morality and Motivation in Storytelling

On November 19th 2013, I attended a reading at Wesleyan University given by Mattilda Berstein Sycamore, a queer trans* writer, editor, and activist. While her memoir *The End of San Francisco* contains anecdotes that explore how she came to identify with queer terms and communities, the effect of this writing is not to substantiate her claim to those terms nor does her memoir find resolution in a stable, realized sense of self. Instead, the focus is on how she understands these terms or practices (such as using feminine pronouns in reference to herself) in relation to those around her.

At this reading, she discussed her commitment to non-linear narrative. “Maybe when I’m dead someone can plot out the events of my life A to B to C all the way to Z,” she conceded, but until then she would write stories “going in all directions.” “If one thing could be taken out of most books to make them better,” she quipped, “it would be the plot.”

By this, I do not believe she meant to deny that her writing had any structural elements or intentionality. Although she views the notion of “plot structure” as limiting and oppressive to her queer sensibilities, she would not condemn the use of any structured action or dynamism in writing, nor does her writing adhere to a free-form method. Instead, it is the conventions of plot structure and their normative compulsions with which she took issue. Her narrative reads as if it were stream of consciousness, filled with uncertainty and re-remembering in conversational and/or frenzied tones. Even in the first, most linearly and normatively structured chapter, her writing has this quality, saying in one moment “I don’t know if I start crying right then or if it’s later, but really everything is crying...*Elemental* is the word I’m thinking of—crying is elemental” and a page later “Is this when I start sobbing? It makes more sense here, if here is about sense. This is the moment made for the movies, I can feel my chest arching forward, head back—this is the fight-or-flight reflex, I mean the fight part.”⁴⁴ In these narrative uncertainties she draws our attention to normative plot structure as seen in the “movies,” but undermines it with questioning, reconsidering the order of events, and gives the semblance of thinking out loud. It is not an *absence* of structure which her repetitions, questions, temporal fluctuations, and other rhetorical devices demonstrate, but a purposefully queered structure.

Indeed, she revealed that these effects are achieved only after vigorous editing, sometimes creating chapters of only 20 pages from hundreds of pages of raw material. The process of editing is itself a (re)structuring force on narrative. One

⁴⁴ Sycamore, Mattilda Berstein. *The End of San Francisco*. San Francisco: City Lights, 2013. 11, 12.

cannot imagine that this level of editing occurs without intention as to its effects— however, unlike traditional coming out or transitioning narratives, the effect is not a “narrative of gradual emergence,”⁴⁵ but one of disorientation and waves of hope and disillusionment. Sycamore’s memoir grapples with how identification is a communal, rather than autonomous, process—“expression and discovery of identity is something that happens in relation with, in the company of, in solidarity with other...folk.”⁴⁶ Her narrative work in some ways mirrors the conflict that, as I have previously described, identity must straddle: it struggles between its roles as self-expression and communication, between being self-directed and relational.

The way we tell stories, whether through speech or writing, has high stakes and is deeply morally coded. How we structure our experiences into words and plots that are intelligible to ourselves and others is informed first by what we attend to during these experiences: this shapes what and how we remember. It is further shaped by what words are available to us and how we understand these words. Within these constraints there is still room for creativity, for non-conformity. The moral imperative of adhering to certain conventions of writing and the judgment received for failing to do so is not imaginary. William Foster-Harris in his instructional book *The Basic Patterns of Plot* (1959) uses such value-loaded phrases as “all proper stories” and “a correct fictional plot”⁴⁷ and makes frequent injunctions to readers that if they have any hope of writing a decent story, they must follow his prescribed rules. “The ultimate message you may have for your readers is yours alone,” he contends, “but-just as with

⁴⁵ Saxey, 87.

⁴⁶ Salamon, Gayle. “Transfeminism and the Future of Gender” *Assuming a Body*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 120.

⁴⁷ Foster-Harris, William. *The Basic Patterns of Plot*. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1959. 5, 12.

using the modern dial telephone- the technique for getting in touch with your customer, the ritual of dialing, you may neither ignore nor appreciably alter.”⁴⁸ His implication here is that content in writing may change, but form and method must follow convention. For example, he asserts that “the map of the story” i.e. the plot, “must contain a problem, the solution, and the answer. The answer is always the reverse of the problem.”⁴⁹ It is evident from this assertion that he considers clear resolution an essential part of any story. He substantiates his claims with appeals to Christianity and science, often metaphorically or by transposing Christian or scientific values onto writing.

Peter Brooks, in his discussion of plot, certainly uses less judgmental and rigid language than Foster-Harris, and is more inclined to embrace ambiguity. Yet he too discusses the ordering structures of plot which become “the organizing line, demarcating and diagramming that which was previously undifferentiated” and are also “intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving,” something readers “desire and need.”⁵⁰ As we have seen, this “goal” in the traditional Bildungsroman is moving toward a stable sense of identity. Although for some queer people, creating this intelligibility and coherence has been a survival tactic, a way of legitimizing claims to identity and community, for others, such as Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, a compulsory plot structure is as good as a grave plot.

Indeed, the two meanings of the word are connected. Outlining the various definitions of the word “plot,” Brooks points out that “common to the original sense

⁴⁸ Ibid, v.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 12.

⁵⁰ Brooks, 12, xi.

of the word is the idea of boundedness, demarcation, the drawing of lines to mark off and order.”⁵¹ Although he discusses narrative as constant, present in our “virtually uninterrupted monologue” and in our “situating ourselves” in “several stories not yet completed” at any given time, he also says when we tell stories we shift our modes of communication, “enclosing and setting off the narrative.”⁵² Narrative appears amorphous, omnipresent, and expansive in our lives and yet “narrative demarcates, encloses, establishes limits, orders.”⁵³ Whether this is a contradiction or merely a tension in the nature of narrative, it is essential for queer writers and readers to consider what limits are being placed on our stories and what political implications this might have in a culture that already seeks to silence, marginalize, and define us. If we attempt to claim agency through storytelling, we must do so conscientiously.

Toward a Queer Ethic of Writing⁵⁴

The stories queer people create and how we come to understand our identities is complex: often the terms and life trajectories available to us do not describe us or our desires, or when we are first introduced to terms we will one day feel affinity with, they are abject and we do not think to claim them as our own.

That being said, queerness allows us to question the conventions within which we are raised. We can choose to recreate the conventions on our own terms, or we can question them altogether. It is similar to the debate surrounding same-sex or same-

⁵¹ Ibid, 11-12.

⁵² Ibid, 3-4.

⁵³ Ibid, 4.

⁵⁴ I would like to clarify a point on form. Although the Bildungsroman is typically a novel, and I have written short stories, it should be clear from the rhetoric of *Dear John, I Love Jane* earlier described that short stories can be implicated in the normative impulses and structures of the Bildungsroman. It should also be surmised from *The End of San Francisco* that a queer ethic of writing can be sustained for longer projects than my own.

gender marriage in various queer communities: do we want the same familial structure, simply with different gender relations? Some of us do. It is hard to say whether this is because we have been banished from it: it is the home and promise that was taken away from us. We have been told it is safety and legitimacy and love—that that is what love looks like. But we have been told a lot of things about love that turned out not to be true for us. It is foolish to pretend not to be informed by these societal values and the stories we have been told of what a good life looks like. But we can question these stories and try to figure out what *we* desire. We can reject the idea that to choose different desires or a different trajectory is to be alone.

In this same vein, I want to question what we desire in narrative. Do we need the goal-oriented narrative? Do we need temporal boundedness, do we believe “plot must be ‘of a length to be taken in by memory’”⁵⁵? Alternatively, in his reading of *Stone Butch Blues*, Jay Prosser suggests we can render the desires for narrative coherence in our lives without reifying or adhering to them.⁵⁶ I must contend with the fact that however I write, and however I structure my writing, I am of course bound by language. I have written *Sometimes Y* nonlinearly—the stories were written and edited in an order of no relation to their placement in the text as a whole. But I can neither force you to nor keep you from reading this word by word, left to right, page by page in order, and imagining that just as you read it the words came sequentially out of my head through my hands and onto the page. The imagining of sequential writing is a great myth of reading—one we know to be false (such a belief would require an absence of editing) but cannot fully shake off.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 11.

⁵⁶ Prosser, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*. 490.

Brooks further describes plot as that which “makes us read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative a line of intention and a portent of design that holds the promise of progress toward meaning.”⁵⁷ It is this promise of progress toward meaning that gives endings their ultimate power to determine what the “true” message of a story is. According to Brooks, we read in “anticipation of retrospection” and “in a spirit of confidence, and also a state of dependence, that what remains to be read will restructure the provisional meanings of the already read.”⁵⁸

This creates a hierarchy of meanings. Do the meanings we derive later mean more? Were our past truths less true? The way we read our lives, seeing our “mistakes” and seeing significance in them that we couldn’t know at the time parallels this process, and also makes us aware that someday our current truths may be revealed to be falsehoods. Especially in youth, we are told that we don’t know ourselves. That understanding our desires comes later. Our paranoid reading of our lives leaves us in a constant state of doubt and unease, for we think only at the ending will the meaning be revealed. Yet, insomuch as at the end we will be dead, we won’t get to appreciate that meaning at all. We cannot escape this method of knowing, but perhaps we can doubt our doubt, and doubt our rereading. We make endings of our present to create a sense of stability, but we are always in motion.

In writing, this temporality is troubled. We are in motion in the process of reading, but the words remain still. The thesis you are reading “is literally a spatial form, an object,” but “its realization depends on its being gone through in sequence and succession, and that it thus metonymically ‘borrows’ a temporality from the time

⁵⁷ Brooks, xiii.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 23.

of its reading.”⁵⁹ The temporality of a book is very similar to a concept of time I was introduced to at a young age: all time happens all at once, and we simply perceive it one moment at a time, in succession. We perceive it that way because that is the only way we know how. However, it is all always happening. In a text, one can flip forward or back: the words are still there. Yet to make sense of a piece of writing we typically read linearly.

It is true that “one cannot tell a story without indications of the time of telling in relation to the told: the use of verb tenses, and their relation to one another, necessarily gives us a certain temporal place in relation to the story.”⁶⁰ However, like Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, it is not my intention to enable you to sort out the “true narrative sequence” of events that underlies my plotting. As part of a queer project of writing, I want the reader to feel free to get a bit lost. I don’t experience my memories as a timeline through which I can walk, and I try not to devalue my current sense of self by imagining a greater understanding located in the future. Do not wait for the ending to tell you what it all means, or expect an ultimate judgment of the characters and their beliefs to be revealed. Queerness is not so reducible. Neither is life, and neither should writing be. If you are looking for meaning in my stories, I hope you find it the way we always do: in bits and pieces as we go along, at times validated, at others lost or undermined. In my writing, I am not attempting a linear descent into ever-increasing queerness. In my experience, being queer/becoming queer/retreating from queerness— none of this is linear, nor is it descent, nor is it incessant.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 20.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 21.

Writing is as relational as identity. Language cannot exist without a common understanding, and yet it is unlikely that any two people have exactly the same conception of a given sentence. Just as queer is broadened and given new breath by the potentiality of each queer-identified person who embodies it, I am excited for your reading to expand and queer my writing with new meaning.

Do You Know

The light outside was starting to fade, giving the thin layer of frost on the field outside that dull glow that sunsets on gray days bestow on everything. It doesn't really feel like things get darker, they just become slowly seeped of color.

My head was the static between radio stations, my lymph nodes swollen into two large spheres like I'd swallowed a colon whole: by accident. Sickness always feels transitional, the time between being and being when I'm not quite present in my actions. Right now I am the misty drizzle that can't decide if it wants to be rain, the cold autumn air that's not sure if it is ready to be winter. In these silent moments I don't have thoughts, I just hear cars on the road and swallow painfully and think "when can I sleep" every few moments until it is night and I have finished all I can do.

I am not trying to go anywhere but the places I said I'd be last week.

If I can be just enough myself that people read the semblance, that is success. If I can convince everyone I am in the room with them, they won't wonder where else I am, how my head is orbiting the moon and my eyes are seeing the dream I had about you last night like re-watching my favorite movie but I am nodding at what the professor is saying. Yes. That. It makes sense, the thing he is saying. Say "Hmm" because I am thinking

thoughts about the thing he is saying and I have written down some of the words here on a sheet maybe I can figure out what he is talking about later by reading them.

I wish I was taking notes on my words. They will be harder to remember but I always feel like they will be there forever I could never forget them because they are so true they are right here in my mind already stored there but they aren't. I wish I remembered what my thoughts were like when I was young. They feel as complex as now, like I never knew any less, but I must have known less, right? I must have had simpler thoughts once.

But it feels like my mind was always my mind and I just used to be in a different body, this body but different I mean. Of course when I am stoned I think everything I ever did was very stoned, and when I'm drunk I think back to the morning and it seems I must have been intoxicated, what was I saying, I must have been drunk to say that out loud, and when I am sleepy I think I have always been sleepy and every action was motivated thus.

My mind does not have a good sense of having been other ways than it is. When I am sober I think all my drunk actions were not so drunk, they were pretty rational, you know I'm always like this I always feel this way sometimes I just experience that feeling differently.

I'm always me except when I'm between me and me but I'm still on my way back to me and I can still pretend in the meantime.

A=A≠B

That's how I know who I am.



17 Thoughts on Being Agender

1. Is being agender a gender?
2. There is no such thing as genderless clothing. Androgyny has always been about balance and both. It's not a secret. That is the word.
3. It is impossible to avoid being misgendered by strangers.
4. People read my body as one gender. If I dress as another will they cancel out?
5. I grow my body large into obscurity. When my boobs could be "man boobs" but are actually just person boobs, I win.
6. I shrink wrap my skin but grow tiger stripes of flesh because I am animal. Also: my body wants to accommodate me but can't figure out how.
7. People call me "ma'am" and I forget this is perhaps a reasonable impulse when I have a female-assigned body and feminine presentation. It used to just bother me that this makes me sound old.

8. I don't hate my body or want it to change. I just don't get it either.
9. It's hard to claim a lack.
10. I do it anyway.
11. Everything feels like drag. Every gender I can wear. Only some of them read cis to others. None of them feel cis to me.
12. How did you all convince yourselves so thoroughly that you have a gender? Do you have something I don't?
13. Some days I feel dysphoric but have nowhere my gender expression can go that feels quite right.
14. Other days I don't mind so much. People can read what they want on me. I'll still know what I feel.
15. I'm still figuring out how to be desirable without a gender to desire.
16. Do you think they mean it when pansexuals say they are attracted to all genders? Does this include me?
17. Why 17? Because 17 is an agender number. I claim it. I make it so.



Looking around the mess hall for a free table, Kaitlin stood on her tiptoes and squinted. Not that it made much difference in her vision. Spotting one, she headed for it.

“Hey, so, you’re gay, right?” Kaitlin twisted her head to the right. Next to her stood a tall, heavyset girl with light brown skin, holding her plastic lunch tray squarely against her blue paisley-patterned sundress. A wrinkle between her eyebrows, a frown not willing to commit, her lips pulled back tight against her teeth as if preparing for a quick excuse and an exit – Jade – Kaitlin was pretty sure her name was Jade.

“Er, yup. Last time I checked. Why?”

Her tray jostled a bit as she shifted her weight, one thick hip jutting out.

“Well, how do you know?”

Kaitlin did not quite hide her snort by continuing towards the free table, not looking to see if Jade was following. Milling through the hordes of shouting teenagers, the so-familiar din sounding nothing like comfort or home, Kaitlin tried to keep her soup from sloshing out of her bowl with each stride. She arrived at the empty tan table and carefully placed her heavily-laden tray down. Only after reaching her desert island did she turn to see Jade had of course tailed her, nervous confusion at Kaitlin’s wordless departure still staining her face, but she boldly placed down her own food and sat down opposite Kaitlin’s tray.

Kaitlin sighed, rolled her eyes, sat. Jade was sitting up very straight, her dark eyes wide. Kaitlin exhaled something between a cough and a laugh and lowered her gaze to her food and began chewing into her grilled cheese.

“So...how do you know?” Jade had evidently gathered that Kaitlin had no intention of answering her question.

“Oh, you know. I just checked for the tell-tale L-shaped birthmark on my left thigh. All lesbians have ‘em. Although I have heard for some weirdos it’s on their right thigh.”

Kaitlin met Jade’s eyes – Jade crossed her arms and her eyes sharpened for a second. They were defiant eyes that seemed to say “I’ve dealt with worse bitches than you in my life. Just try something.” But something like a wave seemed to wash over her, a thought descending like cloud onto a mountain top, and soon she looked like she’d fall over if you flicked her forehead, all the strength and certainty leaked out of her face. She clenched the edges of her tray and swung a leg around the back of the bench, making to leave.

“Fine. It was just a question.” Jade intoned, her sentence almost lost under the guffaw of a guy two tables over.

“No, no hold up. Look, sit back down.” Kaitlin took a slurp of her tomato soup. “The thing is, you don’t want to know how I know I’m gay. It’s the wrong question, and you know it. You want some sort of instruction manual? A recipe with steps you can follow to figure your shit out? You don’t want to know how I know I’m gay, you want to know how you can figure out if *you* are and I can’t answer that.”

“I didn’t say –”

“No, but you don’t have to.”

“What are you saying? I look...you know?” Was she offended or hopeful? Maybe both.

Kaitlin rolled her tongue back onto itself against her front teeth and shook her head. “No, it’s not my magical gaydar. It’s not an answer. It’s not that I’m a seer of homosexual inclination, I just have been in this game for a while now. You’re not the first person to ask me how I know I’m gay in that tone. That’s the thing about being out – questioning chicks seem to think you have it all sorted. That you know some secret they haven’t figured out yet. And it’s exhausting being the go-to girl, okay? I can’t help you.”

Jade looked quietly down at her tray, picked up a spoon and poked at her vanilla pudding. Kaitlin felt the air between them swell, a frog’s chest about to expel a croak.

“It’s just a feeling, okay? And maybe you can’t feel it because you’ve been brainwashed from birth to think you’re gonna end up with a prince and live happily ever after with 2.5 kids.”

Jade’s defiant eyes were back. “I don’t think that. I was raised by a single mother, and I wasn’t raised with those Eurocentric fairy tales.”

“Okay maybe not that exactly... But it was still assumed you’d be with guys, right? Your mom tell you what kind of guy to like and which to stay away from? Talk about her future grandkids like they are inevitable and hers by right?” Jade looked away but gave a small nod.

There was a prolonged silence as the tension slowly dissipated into the general chaos of the mess hall. Jade met Kaitlin's gaze and held it.

"I mean it seems contradictory. We're all brainwashed but you *just know*? You're so on top of things, so strong that some inner sense just *overpowered* that?" Kaitlin looked down at her food. She stirred the tomato soup thoughtlessly, making a tiny calming whirlpool.

Although they are

only breath, words

which I command

are immortal

"Maybe a crush isn't what you think a crush is, for other people. That's the trick. You have to figure out what words work, or... how?" Kaitlin was still staring deeply into her churning soup. "But a rose by any other name, you know?"

Kaitlin lifted her gaze to see Jade with an eyebrow raised, a smile like she had bitten a laugh between her teeth to hold it in.

"Mmm." Jade nodded slowly.

"It's just a word. Don't stress it."

"Just a word."

“They can’t be threatening if you know how to claim them, make them into something. Armor, if you like. Or blood.” Kaitlin leaned with her right arm onto the table, fist against her ear. Jade laughed.

“That’s morbid. You’re getting pretty metaphoric on me.” Jade absentmindedly twisted a ring on her left thumb and smiled.

“Jacqueline! Whatchu eating over here for?” A curvaceous dark-skinned girl came up to their table.

“Ah, just ‘cause. I can come join you guys, though. I’ll see you around, Kaitlin.” She stood up, hunched over and picked up her tray, looking for all the world like a comma.

Kaitlin watched her turn away, the skirt of her blue paisley dress giving a slight twirl.

“You know what?”

“What?”



“Just be yourself” can be reassuring, but is rarely good advice. Not because, as you fear, yourself is insufficient. I mean, maybe you are insufficient, I don’t know the situation. For example, if I was struggling to play basketball well and you said “Just be yourself” I would not be better

equipped to aim a large heavy ball at a hoop high in the air I would probably just remember that I hate sports and stop trying.

See? Bad advice. Maybe I could have enjoyed basketball, gotten really good, but you told me to be myself so I stuck with what I already think is me instead of growing in new ways. *Thanks, you.*

See, the problem is, which you to be? Who is so limited that just be yourself is instruction at all? You are expansive, you are many moods and modes, you are bounded flesh but always shifting composition, size, shade, shape. I like some of my selves more than others, but I try not to play favorites. I don't want me to get jealous.



Death always came on the wind, it wasn't something sitting in the room with you. Maybe, Lynn thought, it was just like a rumor. All these people swearing they'd seen it first hand, they'd been there when the lights went out, saw a soul exit a body, how they were sure that person had just emigrated to heaven like a permanent vacation. But they also taught her the scientific method. To rely on observation, only observation, inferences are just hypotheses, nothing is true until you've seen it with your own eyes, quantified it, written it down, repeated, same results, large sample size. So maybe all this talk of "death" was just hot air.

“Kids always think they’re invincible.” Linnie’s mom would say.

“That’s why they’re so reckless!” As if Mom had never texted while driving, never walked home alone at night, never had unprotected sex with a less than upright man, never had too much too drink.

Jalal al-Din al-Rumi :

Love,

everywhere blessed by fair name and good repute,

last night I christened you anew:

Pain Incurable

“I’m not saying I’m invincible. I’m just saying you can’t prove I’m *not* invincible.”

“I sure as hell can!” Linnie’s mom lifted a knife from the bleached white countertop on which she was chopping onions. Their matching dare-me eyes met across the kitchen for a couple silent breaths. “But I’m not going to. Jesus, Lynn, I don’t want you to learn this the hard way! This time it was just a busted headlight, but the way you’ve been acting, who knows what’s next. You’ve got to stop *flirting* with death.”

But what better way to learn its secrets?

And why should Death be the rock unturned, when flirting is what keeps life intriguing? And how should she know enjoyment without investigation? The slight bump on her forehead throbbed a dark eggplant, in shape and color. But it’s only by hitting that you can learn the edges of your

body, decide if there's a real difference between the substance of you and the substance of the dashboard, like aren't the great mystics always saying it's all one? But the steering wheel pushed back on her skull like it wasn't her and didn't want to meld and it hurt like something unfriendly and foreign.

So she thought maybe she should stick to flirting with things she was attracted to, things that weren't air in and out, things she could see with her own two eyes. Things with bodies softer than lamp posts, gentler than stomach acid as it burns your throat and paints spin art designs on the front lawn. Somewhere her edges could blend like the colors of clouds at sunset.



Wyatt came to a pause at the crosswalk. He pushed the large round crossing button and alternated lifting his antsy heels back and forth. He pulled his mobile out of his pocket, clicking the button front and center so the screen revealed the time and the laughing face of his boyfriend.

Perhaps it would have looked silly to passersby, how Wyatt beamed a grin at his phone and winked at the picture. None of them looked though.

He was not running late. He was not running anywhere. As the screen flash told him, as he already knew, it was Saturday. Wyatt crossed the street to the sound of steady "Cross Now" beeps. He continued on his way, sometimes glancing at his wristwatch. Handier than a phone, he needn't take

his hands out of his pockets to see it, analog, something of an affectation these days, very handsome though, a gift from his father once upon a time, even had the date in tiny numbers in the center – his wristwatch.

“I wish you wouldn’t count time like that.” His boyfriend’s voice echoed in his head.

“If you don’t count time, you leave how you experience time up to chance.” Wyatt grumbled back at his memory.

He looked again at the wristwatch. The hands began to spin faster and faster, so Wyatt spun too. Faster and faster Wyatt followed the wristwatch turning in Circles

until Boyfriend grabs his shoulders, holds him still.

“You can’t let yourself be defined by time, Wyatt.”

“If not time, then what will define me?”

Boyfriend pulls him to his chest, wraps his arms around him, one hand on Wyatt’s back, one supporting his head, fingers gliding through hair.

“I will.”

Their bodies blend together. Not becoming one, just becoming a unit, people walking by would register not a couple of people just a couple. Wyatt’s torso didn’t know what shape to make except against another torso it learned how to be torso shaped and his hands knew how to be hand shaped from hand holding, this is where the fingers go between the other fingers they are hands because of how they hold the way eyes are eyes because you shut them when you sleep. Or when you’re held just like this, the eyelids slide down for protection so you won’t see anything but whatever is on the back of your eyelids, it’s blackness it’s redness it’s bright bright yellow it’s purple splashes it’s too thin.

Boyfriend and Wyatt are a tangle held together with their own limbs, heads together growing out of each other’s shoulders their clothing one swath of dark cloth their chests breathing in in one breath each breath pushing the chests closer together warmth against warmth until there is no sense of his warmth and his warmth just their warmth, it’s shared when they are sharing their bodies together.

How your body knows how to be a body by example or by practice.

How you can only be a friend by having one.

This is called family I think. Or community? Or school. It's an education. A full-time job.

"But what if you leave?" Wyatt's voice emanates from somewhere in the mass. They are not one blended being. They are a boy and a boy, holding each other.

Bad Lesbian

This begins early on. This begins when I wear a rainbow necklace every day. This begins when I've never had sex with a girl. This begins before that. This begins in denial. This begins in my anxious re-remembering. This begins in my agoraphobia, my desire to seek out a new hiding place having left the closet. I decorate my room to look spacious to visitors. I decorate my body to look gregarious to visitors.

8 years after my friend's mother told my mother told my father I was gay, his tennis buddies console him it may be just a phase. Over lunch on my week-long visit home he tells me how he proudly responded, "Oh no. She's a *dedicated* lesbian!" I poke holes in an olive on my salad. He tells me how glad he is, that he'd much rather I be a solid lesbian than confused. "Well, I'm not confused."

I believe this. I am 21 and as such have learned to speak in certainties. Years of writing essays beat "I think" and "Perhaps" out of me. "You just undermine your own point. It's you writing. Of course it's what you think!" Girls are known in classrooms for prefacing their statements with "I could be totally off-base" or "I'm not sure, but—" or "Maybe this makes no sense, but—" I trained myself out of girlhood. We don't trust our own authority. I go back through writing and delete uncertainty, clarify confusion. This is how to speak with strength, like a man. I learned in high school to walk with a

butch swagger by observing my ex. To lean on walls, to be disinterested. I disdained wearing skirts, and proudly owned zero dresses. I disdained my ex's disdain for dresses, how she got attention through the novelty of her own femininity as it re-emerged as part act, part pretend act. As the only out queer women in our class, I fought to be queerer. It helped that I was the lesbian, while she dated men. I laughed derisively at how she called herself lesbian when single, bisexual when dating (always men, always too old, always too wild). I became the president of our school's Alliance, she fell into obscurity. I felt vindicated, having proved the superior queer woman. I wouldn't stand for her to be the class queer figurehead. If the class wanted a token queer, I would prove myself better qualified for the position.

I am a dedicated lesbian. But I know it takes dedication.

I *adore* t.A.T.u. This is not so much factually true, anymore, as it is transcendently true. The dissonance created by their role in the story of my coming out still resonates. They feature in several scenes of that saga: one earbud in my ear, the other in my best friend, ex-to-be's ear on a bus. Leaning on her shoulder as the pseudo-lesbian Russian pop stars crooned into my ear *30 minutes to alter our lives, 30 minutes to finally decide*. The look she gave me as I pretended to be half-asleep. The one I remember churning my stomach with the thought *she knows*, strangely preceding my own self-admission of the queerness I took her to recognize. Later, there are many scenes. Crying and

watching the music video to All the Things She Said, the popstars dressed as school girls kissing and crying in the rain, stared at by clown-like strangers through a chain-link fence. Listening to my ex's copy of their CD on my Walkman on my bunkbed at summer camp after our breakup. These Russian women I was somewhat aware had been faking a relationship for publicity sang songs of isolation, fear, judgment, desire.

I wrote their lyrics in Cyrillic on my tennis shoes, began teaching myself Russian. The Russian songs were so beautiful to me. I knew they were speaking to me, even though I couldn't understand them. I do not like to admit how influential t.A.T.u was in inspiring me to learn Russian. To like t.A.T.u. is to endorse exploitation of queer desire, I told myself. To embrace fetishizing lesbianism. To be a bad lesbian.

So I set about separating my desire for Russian from my queer desires, lest by their association each appear less purely motivated. Fake.

When I met Ilya the summer after my freshman year of college and he asked me why I was studying Russian, I did not mention t.A.T.u. "Prosta krasivoy yazyk!" I insisted.

NPR has a program called StoryCorps— tagline "Sharing and Preserving the Stories of Our Lives." I don't often listen to NPR. Or really I never listen to NPR, but I sometimes am in the car with my mother when she is listening to NPR and sometimes read or listen to articles posted on their

website if other people are talking about them. So I'm not sure, are all the stories so heartwarming? Are they all about love and triumph over adversity? What stories do they preserve?

This segment is titled "A Mom Becomes A Man, And A Family Sticks Together" with the "A"s capitalized and everything so you know it's exciting and it was posted on March 7th in 2012 which was 2 years ago now which is either a surprisingly long or short time ago. I can't decide. Very surprising the time ago it was, though.

The article has phrases that irk me, like "**her** need to live **her** life as a man," but I guess some people like to use feminine pronouns for describing all pre-transition time, carve lives in half linguistically but I'm not sure when the "he" starts in this article. Not at the coming out. Later. It's there in the interview – it switches in some place that made sense to the writer and the subjects approved.

It's all about how this family stayed together because love is this amazingly strong force and I think it's so beautiful on the first read and when I try not to let my skepticism of the consolidation of the nuclear family get in the way. It's easy because I know the story because I know the people and it's hard because I know the story and I know the people and it all feels very essentializing like taking such a time of turmoil and reducing it to a few minutes a handful of sentences but I guess that's what storytelling is anyway

and I'd rather have marketable support for families of trans people than marketable contempt.

"People need to hear stories that validate their experiences and introduce them to unimagined possibilities that may fit them better than the commonly held ones." Scott says in a comment on the NPR website.

People need to hear stories.

It helps us explain us.

Stories that validate their experiences.

Will StoryCorps preserve me?

My mother believes in reincarnation. I am not sure how fledged out her theories on the matter are, only that she firmly believes in past lives and gets very emotional when discussing some of the specifics she feels or has otherwise been informed of. She believes in my past lives I have been related to both of my parents before. If I am remembering correctly, I was once her mother and now it is her turn to take care of me. In a similar "lesson still to be learned" vein, my father has fathered me before. However, he was an absent, uncaring father, and so he has returned to raise me again, this time with more attention and caring. These things sound silly to me, and yet I can make sense of them easily. Perhaps that is why I often feel the urge to mother my mother. I nag her like a mother, reminding her to clean up her dishes, not to forget

about this chore or that one. Perhaps it is why my father is indeed a better father...though better than what I am at a loss to say.

She also believes she was killed in the Holocaust. She cannot stand to hear about it, starts tearing up at the mere mention. She is not Jewish (in this life), though she almost converted when she was younger, maybe hoped to marry her Jewish boyfriend. While her personal refusal to even discuss the Holocaust reeks of cultural appropriation to me, in her mind it seems it could not be appropriation since she died there. I am sympathetic to this kind of self-understanding. She is creating an explanation for an affinity she cannot explain. She tells me these stories growing up. They are in my realm of possibility. Available to me when I need to explain my own indescribable affinity.

My family is not Russian. My mother grew up in the Cold War Era in the United States and finds my love of the Slavic language inconceivable if not almost distasteful. I did not know any Russians growing up, although I did love the animated movie Anastasia. If the origins of my love for Russian were queer, I queered that love until the queerness obscured itself. The pseudo-lesbians who brought me to the Russian language left me there, still singing their songs, but in love with the sound of words over any play at lesbianism they held.

As with most unfortold desires, I am inclined to locate my fervent desire to possess the Russian language in my past. I understand the powerful

tug I feel towards Russian on a political level as an affinity, on an emotional level as tied to my sexuality, on a spiritual level as a parallel to my mother's past life as a European Jew. As inclined to disbelieve the notion of past lives as I am, I am also enamored of the idea that my soul was once a heterosexual Russian woman.

My previous life as a straight Russian woman is the cause for my imperfect interpellation into lesbianism by a couple straight Russian women pretending to be in love. They called me to queerness, to Russian, in the same voice. I'm not always sure which call I have been answering. In my one voice I am trying to speak both languages.

I am drunk enough at my Russian party sophomore year of college to blast "Нас не догонят" from my laptop. I have a limited repertoire of Russian music I know, and it makes a nice break from the husky hoarse voices of the more traditional singers Ilya plays. I sing along to the lyrics I half-understand now, expecting to be judged for playing t.A.T.u. but most of the people are busy talking and drinking and aren't paying attention to the music anyway. Or I don't look at them maybe. I keep watching the music video and bobbing on the balls of my feet to the impassioned high screechy song and want just as deeply as I did at 13 to escape somewhere where no one will judge me by who I'm with. I'm probably not thinking about this, but

it is dramatic music and demands to be felt deeply whoever you are when you listen to it.

Ilya leans over, or maybe just turns. I'm standing by my desk, I know, but he's either sitting on my really tall bed or else standing by my really tall bed, he's diagonally to my left so he either leans down from the bed or he just looks at me and it feels like we get closer. Or he looks at the computer which is in front of me. One of those things. And he asks if this is the music video with...oh if he asks if this is the music video with the train then I was playing "Я сошла с ума" because I say, "No, that's 'Нас не догонят'." So maybe I switch the music videos when he asks that. Anyway, he recognizes t.A.T.u. and is familiar with it and is laughing but not in a mean way, and not in a way which makes me feel like a lesbian for liking the music or a bad lesbian for liking the music. Also I am not an American for having heard the music. Maybe I am for liking it. We are laughing about t.A.T.u. and my love for t.A.T.u. and no one else is paying any attention to us and it's the most comfortable I've felt with him in weeks. So maybe this is why at the end of the party I expect him to stick around, think maybe when everyone leaves he is waiting for me in my room no one has seen him for a while. I mean, of course I actually think this because Yasha says it. Says "Maybe he's waiting in your room." But possibly I believe it because of that moment when I played t.A.T.u.

Did he call me “Лесбиянка” that night? That was a new way of being a lesbian, too. I mean, I couldn’t spell it correctly at the time, I think I spelled it “лезбянка” because that’s how it sounded to me. “Lezbyanka.” There’s a photo of me from that year with “лезбианка” written on my back by Misha, and the caption is that he has horribly misspelt the Russian word for lesbian. It’s not so horrible – I just wanted to pretend I knew more about the word lesbian than he did.

Ilya isn’t in my room when I go back so I call him and ask “Gdye tiy?” and he doesn’t actually answer but I say “Ya hochu gavarit s taboy” so he says something to the effect of “Ладно” and comes back to my room to lie to me until he understands I’m not angry and then to argue between kisses because he says he’s too drunk to talk things out now and I’m not really into patience. We keep collapsing into and away from each other like we’re magnets but one of us keeps changing polarity.

My mother is a second-wave feminist. Maybe it would be nicer to just say she’s a feminist and has been since she was young but I can’t help but qualify it because she is almost word-for-word what my readings on second-wave feminism describe. I think she takes it as an insult because mostly that’s how I mean it – well, more criticism than insult but a lot of the time third-wave feminists feel behind the times to me so still being on second-wave feels negligent.

But actually what I mean to say is that she raised me as a girl to believe in myself and my intelligence and my strength and to have many more opportunities than she was told she could have when she was a little girl because she is a feminist. I was convinced I could be the first woman president and my mom said I definitely could be so I'm a little disappointed there will probably be a woman president *before* I turn 35 and also I haven't taken even a single government class so it doesn't seem likely at this point.

My grandmother was a school teacher until she was a mother and my mother is a lawyer and she told me little girls can grow up to be anything little boys can grow up to be –

“Except Daddies.”

I'm not entirely sure if I was annoyed by the caveat to my potential and freedom from the get-go. I do remember feeling drawn to the depiction of fathers on television in birthing scenes. Taking care of the pregnant wife and holding her hand as she screamed abuse and handing the child to the exhausted new mother. Well it's easy to see why that role is more appealing than being in labor, I think.

She told me over and over, to validate me. “Girls can be anything boys can be – except daddies!” It was a punchline. I guess for her it was funny that little boys might want to grow up to be moms or vice versa. Was it funny to me? Did I laugh?

I was in 9th grade when I met Amanda and Thea at church camp. I'm not sure how early it came up that their mother was a man. It wasn't news to me that men could be moms and women could be fathers. When was it news? It must have been at some point. I don't remember it ever feeling new.

He kept the words "mother" and "mom" when he transitioned. Kept the words that felt so central to life that he considered giving up "he" rather than lose "mom," rather than lose "family." It says this in the NPR article it says if his family had not accepted him he wouldn't have transitioned he would have just stayed. That would be a sadder story, this is not that story thank goodness this is a story with a mostly happy middle. Or a happier middle. I imagine.

Amanda laughs when she tells me about times when she cried. She told me how she had cried when her mom told her what was happening and how she had wished her mother would transition to become a cat instead of a man – if he was going to transition you may as well make it to something good.

Her father Scott believes it strengthened his relationship with her mother Les, all the processing and self-searching and questioning what Les' gender meant for him. Wondering whether the friendship they'd maintained since college, their marriage, was still for the best. Questioning is the boss battle of being: the challenge you play the game for, the best way to get experience. I think Amanda was strengthened by it too. She knew her family

was in it for the long-haul. With her whoever she is. She grew into tested waters.

Scott transitioned from an unquestioned default to self-aware straight. Les kept the word “mom” with him and Scott kept some words of self too. Or found them.

“But with Les I would now appear to be gay because I am, in fact, in a same-gender relationship.”

You can't give people your eyes to see you.

And then one night there's Peter and he thinks it's his job to decide my words for me and he goes with “really bisexual” and I turn around and say “What?” And we argue for a while about my identity and it doesn't matter how articulate I am it won't convince him, which is lucky because I have had a lot vodka and am not being eloquent tonight.

I end the conversation by soaking my friend's shoulder in my tears and incoherently sobbing things she maybe responds to but probably doesn't hear and she takes me over to her dorm room to skype with her boyfriend, I guess because she doesn't know what to do, and he asks all the wrong questions like *are you upset because you think he's right?* and I say I'm upset because Ilya wouldn't understand. I throw my drink towards Peter's face splashing mostly the poster behind him and slap him, with lots of angry words in between the drink throwing and the slap. The slap comes right after

the words “before you become a bitch about it” and right before a moment of silence across the whole room that spans exactly the amount of time it takes for me to go from furious to bawling.

Ilya hears about this later I hear weeks later that he laughs. He laughs at most things so I don't know what this means but I decide it means he doesn't get that I was right all along and this is my evidence. Maybe he laughs because he agrees with Peter or because he wishes he'd seen it because he loves when I'm angry but also is terrified of me. I don't ask him about it when we reconcile over a year later.

I am lying in bed with my computer on my chest, and I start watching the president's state of the union address, searching the transcript under the video for what President Obama had said that made Ilya happy. Foreign policy is not my forte. There's a bit on making it easier for foreign students to stay in America, maybe that's it? Or...

My phone buzzes to my right. Ilya texting again, inviting me to watch the state of the union address with him. It's 10:30 pm so I know it's just a line, but I decide to take it literally, like I need a good alibi to walk across campus I text him “I'm watching it now” he responds “Fine Haley do what you want” and I jump out of bed and pace in the dark, what do I want? A few minutes pass as I debate whether to go. We had said we would talk when we got back to campus, I just wasn't expecting to see him before classes even

started and what would it mean? Another text from him “so u rn’t coming” and I respond “give me a second to think!” and I shake my new roommate Sarah awake and I spew all my thoughts at her and she mumbles something and I apologize for waking her and I throw on jeans and a tank top and spray apple pomegranate body spray on myself and I text Ilya “I’m on my way.”

I slip into my off-white peacoat (more off-white than I bought it at, since I’ve let it slowly get dirtier unimpeded), tuck my headphones into my ears, blast something to get pumped and text my friend Emma frantically. The music is definitely working and I don’t think about what everyone will think, I don’t care don’t care don’t care, don’t care that I won’t get to joke, no, brag about being a Gold Star Lesbian anymore (does anyone care about that apart from Gold Stars?), don’t care that people will insist I’m bi, don’t think about it at all, the jump from Gold Star Lesbian to “you’re not really lesbian” don’t think about it everything is just footsteps matching time to the music.

Sometimes when I remember this part I think I took a couple shots of the emergency vodka I kept in my ottoman before leaving. But no. I remember later feeling so daring for going sober, or happy that we had successfully hooked up sober definitely not a drunken mistake.

I said “This is the first time we’ve hooked up sober” and he looked bashful and admitted he had been drinking before texting me but assured me

he was basically sober now, so it was only the first time *I* hooked up with him sober but that's the important part anyway.

I mean that I didn't need to be drunk to want him. Which I should have known from the way I teased him in TA sessions and the way I checked his facebook incessantly and that time I held onto the sleeve of his plaid button-up in the rain to retrieve my umbrella and he didn't invite me inside because Peter (did I know he'd be a problem? Or was the aversion to anyone from my Russian class knowing?) was there but we snuck a kiss on the porch anyway and I walked home thinking *I may actually like this guy* and a million other sober activities but somehow it was this night that proved I didn't need to be drunk to want him.

So I wasn't tipsy, it was just the way he called me "дорогая" as if I really was dear to him, but so casually. We sat on the cold porch of the soft-yellow Russian House while he finished his cigarette as we had before and it all felt routine.

I sit far away because I still hate the scent of Marlboro Reds – it doesn't smell nostalgic yet. Does he offer me a cigarette or a drag or does he remember I don't smoke by then? We talk about our winter breaks and what classes we are taking until it is clear I am struggling with vocab and my sentences are 50% "нуууууу."

"Хэйли, you don't have to speak in Russian." He laughs.

"Я знаю! Но...I mean it's fine."

We speak briefly about President Obama, but not once all night do we mention watching the address. I suppose there's a time for pretense and a time to be genuine. Were we genuine?

I am detail-oriented (or as my mother would say, nit-picky). All sophomore year I try to let go, be okay with error, loosen my fast-hold on "lesbian," but I am fastidious. Ilya and I argue in circles on evenings that blend together, ripples that become less defined as they echo out until they are indistinguishable from the general chaos of us. Two years later our conversations still get lost under new waves of old arguments. Maybe riptide is more accurate than ripple—or a whirlpool, sucking us back and hurling us around, dizzy and drowning.

He thought I was a goldfish. It took me a moment to realize when he called me goldfish it wasn't some foreign term of endearment. He meant Gold Star. I had explained to him the title he was taking away from me. We are wrapped around each other in his bed when I say "You mean Gold Star and I'm not one anymore. Don't call me that." He is probably teasing me, driving home what I have just lost, gasped out into his open mouth it's just a label it's just a couple words he can't even remember.

“I didn’t really have to mentally or emotionally *claim* being straight until Les came out as trans. I didn’t have to think about it or question it. It wasn’t until after Les came out that I had to ask myself,

‘What does that make me?’”

When I walk by that soft-yellow house in the center of campus, I always greet it out loud.

“Здравствуй, Русский Дом!” My friends think I’m crazy, how I treat it as an old friend – the kind you run into and swear you’ll get lunch and catch up sometime, but never seem to follow up with. I’ve spent time in most of its rooms, but I know new people are making their own memories there now.

In 2013, a boy who lived there committed suicide. They didn’t fill the vacancy.

I wonder if it was the room I lived in for 3 weeks that summer when everything tasted of warm rain, room 7 or 9, in the back corner of the second floor which smelled so strongly of cigarettes. Or one of the rooms Ilya’s and my mutual friend Brian lived in, across the hall from each other. The large room downstairs where we watched *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* the night I told Ilya I was a lesbian because I didn’t want to give him the wrong impression going off with him alone? I didn’t know the boy who died, but I know we shared a home. I can see all the rooms in my mind, but new students have probably shifted the furniture by now.

I hope they fixed the radiator in room 5. I burnt my inner thigh on it climbing out Ilya's window onto the roof that faces High Street. It overheated his room all winter, so we were always extra sweaty. I remember the night of my birthday how he told me it was my fault for being too hot. I argued that it was the radiator, worried that any moment now he would kick me out, resentful towards my body's heat in his tiny bed.

"No, it's definitely you. Let me cool you down." He laughed low and poured the jug of water he was drinking from over me, soaking his bed sheets around my exposed torso.

It took 2 years of going over the memory before I realized the joke was meant to be a compliment. I was so prepared for rejection, I sought it out.

Someone else sleeps in that bed now. Someone else looks out the window I turned toward for the cold wind at 7 am when I couldn't sleep or wake him up— the one that had such a good view into the kitchen next door. Do they sneak onto the roof to smoke like he did? They don't leave the light on as often or as late as he did.

Sometimes, before I remember he's studying in Finland, I still wonder if he's inside, sitting at his desk and gchatting with his mother. If I squint my heart at night, I can see us sitting on the roof. His skin is dark against the soft-yellow walls and his thick black curls jut out at angles. What did I look like then? It doesn't matter. I'm always there when I look. A white blur of skin and hair, but I'm smiling.

Contingent Out/In

A left hand twists a cup of ice water from above. In tandem, a long, thin finger gently pushes against the wet glass, tracing lines— | ♥ U —the finger collects moisture, droplets absorbing into beige skin giving the soft pad of the top digit a slight pucker.

Lida thought of cold rainy days sitting in the back of hir father's car, writing messages, smiley faces, suns, stars, stick figures in the fogged up window. Ze thought of racing raindrops, of counting down, holding breath until a droplet grew large enough to roll down with its wet trail marking its path, being enraptured in race after race. Ze would bet with himself about the outcomes. It made the rain a toy ze controlled, it made the cold a canvass, it made transparency a darkness, it made hir arbiter, it made hir artist.

Lida picked up hir glass and took a gulp. Hir hand print obscured hir work, 4 thick lines crossing through the letter U. Ze rubbed hir palm against the glass, erasing the remaining lines.

“So, are you ladies ready to order?”

Chromofluidity, n.:

Pronunciation: /'krəʊməflu:'ɪdɪtɪ/

Etymology: < German *chromosome*, + < French *fluide*, < Latin *fluidus*, < *fluĕre* to flow>

1. a) *Biol*, The property or condition of being genetically chromofluid.

Opposed to CHROMOSTABILITY, n.

- b) *spec*. A congenital medical condition involving shifting, unstable sex chromosomes; possession of these and the expression of resulting primary and secondary sex characteristics.

Aaron felt the rushing tickle flow from her crotch, centered on her stomach, slipping up to her head as she slipped off the cement roof and began to fall. The air felt like nothing as the seconds ticked by.

How far was the fall?

Where was the ground?

Too late to do anything about it but fall...Aaron was almost certain this fall would kill her.

You can't fall for this long and survive at the bottom, can you?

She resigned herself to the crunch that awaited her on the pavement that must be quite close by now. Throat full of anticipation, she tried to take one last swallow, become as comfortable as she could.

When Aaron was certain of the painful death that awaited – the bed was solid beneath Aaron though the plummeting sensation in body persisted. Aaron turned over, pulling legs in toward belly and pulled arms in close to torso, wrists bent down and fingernails digging into palms. Aaron squeezed along the flesh: more pliable than yesterday. Mm, an XX day then.

Aaron looked down at this chest. For a moment, considered putting these breasts into the bra Aaron's girlfriend Tanya had left, going to school in one of the dresses hidden in the back of the drawers.

Aaron clenched teeth. Best to stay well clear of that whole mess. Presenting masculine and chromostable was safest any day. Stretching out an arm to clutch at glasses, Aaron flopped over and squinted at the alarm clock on the bedside table. 6:23. It would go off in 17 minutes.

Lida twirled, head tilted up eyes to the sky blue so thick you could dig your hands into it. Ze felt hir skirt brushing against hir legs. The warm air blew hir short frizzy hair into hir eyes and out. Ze threw hir arms out and rose them up, jumping turning to music vibrating through the grass the air. Lida's tongue tasted Spring mingled with sweat, other people jumping

shouting in the heat how they perspired they leaked water onto their skin a thin layer of salty condensation coating them like warm pulsing cans of beer.

It was this space, the one where we didn't talk. It was this breath, the one we let go of without using. It was here Lida didn't need to be excess or recess. It was the loud where we could tuck our quiet inconspicuous. It was this song, the one ze slipped into on long walks. It was this ground that gave when we landed that let us push it down didn't insist on being the bottom told us there was lower still we could find it if we went higher.

Lida threw hir arms around me and laughed into my neck. Ze loved it here ze loved. Hir voice sounded different filtered through the music, shook vigorously like a wet dog not like giving up but getting out like hoarse like hir like only here like pushing through a crowd. Lida spoke onto my ear, "I'm gonna dye all my body hair green like the earth does," and I think ze'll look good like that. "She'll recognize me then." Hir lips brush together back and forth, tickling but I don't pull away I wrap my arm around hir broad torso.

"Recognize you as what?"

Family.

"You're up early..." Aaron's mom raised an eyebrow. "I didn't even have to come wake you up. You in a rush to get to school today, sweetie?"

"Nah." Aaron bit into a slice of toast toast, spilling crumbs over his lap and the table. "Jus' was up."

“Don’t speak with your mouth full.”

Aaron swallowed and rolled his eyes, wiping crumbs from his face.

“Yes, Mom.”

“Don’t you ‘Yes, Mom’ me. You know how to behave at the table. I don’t want people to think my son was raised by savages!”

Aaron looked down at his plate and quietly scraped his eggs together and scooped them up while his Mom prattled on about the current drama with some of the other ladies at church.

“And Helen *never* returned my phone call even though she signed on to chair this month’s food drive *ages* ago, so of course Monica is looking to me even though all I said was that I would check in with Helen. It’s not my job to wrangle volunteers and force them to do their jobs but of course if no one does, nothing will ever get done. People simply do not know how to stick to their promises, I tell you. Completely inconsiderate, though I’m sure Helen is overwhelmed with Richard away visiting his parents this week, bless her heart.”

Occasionally Aaron nodded or mumbled “yeah” at his mother between bites.

Aaron’s mother paused and looked intently at Aaron’s face. Reaching over and brushing hair out of Aaron’s eyes affectionately, she said softly “I’m lucky you don’t give me so much trouble as Helen’s young ones. Piece of cake taking care of you on my own in comparison I’m sure.” She smiled at Aaron

and touched his cheek. "Shame there's nothing to do about the lips...they look too full for a boy your age."

Aaron flinched.

"Still, ladies like a sensitive looking man I suppose. You shouldn't worry about it." Pulling her hand away, she stood up and started packing her phone and keys into her purse. "Get your shoes on and brush your teeth, we're leaving in 5 minutes."

Lida didn't miss me stuck in traffic or waiting in line at the grocery store, but ze wanted me on days that were wider than they were long. Ze craved me with lips stained by pomegranate seeds and toenails painted periwinkle. Only when there was time.

And I want to believe ze is more himself when I want hir and ze wants me. Lida sings while ze cooks, stirring stir-fry, and I want to write poems to "you," an ode to hir body, hir hair, hir eyes, hir...soft skin or rough? Stubble or smooth? Lipstick smacks and the gentle "O" hir mouth makes in the mirror when ze puts on mascara. Firm arms, hands on my throat, and sliding inside out of me.

I'm not hungry anymore.

Lida doesn't miss me on days I stay on hir couch all day and drink a whole pot of coffee, cup after cup until I'm awake and it's time to go to bed.

Lida doesn't look so tall when ze's remembering what ze has to do before the new week begins. Lida doesn't ask me to go or stay, but I do.

Tanya's straight black hair looked slippery. She pulled it back into a ponytail and shook her head back and forth swishing it into a comfortable tightness.

"By the way, Aaron," other people started filing into the classroom, "did you happen to find the bra I left at yours?"

"Oh, um, no. But...I forgot to look." Aaron felt the heat rising up his neck.

"Okay. No worries. Just try and find it before your mom, yeah? I don't want her to think of me as some harlot who's stolen your innocence or anything." Tanya's eyes squinted in a silent, teasing laugh.

"Hah. Yeah..." Aaron wondered what his mom's first concern would be if she found a bra in Aaron's room. Sex or gender?

Mr. Worhoff entered the room brusquely as the bell tolling the end of passing period rang out over the loudspeakers.

"Can we please just not? I'm in no mood." And so we don't argue, don't resolve; Lida lies across the divan with hir laptop on hir chest and face hidden behind the silver rectangle a blinder blocking me and I sit on the

lounge chair and puff up my frustrations like throw pillows and scatter them around hir living room. Ze tries to sink into the internet, become flat and insubstantial, disintegrate into puppies and memes and porn.

Ze clicks refresh.

Aaron slunk down in his seat as much as was possible on a wooden stool, which is to say not very far or comfortably at all. Tanya whipped out her laptop and opened a document. Aaron pulled out a red three-ring binder and began doodling on loose-leaf paper. Students left and right behind in front diagonal pulled books and computers out of backpacks. Crossing the front of the room to a computer, Mr. Worhoff pushed the remote turning on the projector.

“Today we’ll be learning the basics of the water cycle. Water is, of course, essential to the health of our planet and circulates continually through three main processes. These processes transform the water particles, shifting their molecular bonds. Can anyone tell me what the three processes of the water cycle are? Mx. Jackson?”

Aaron slouched forward on the table and slowly filled a page with overlapping spiral designs. A chromofluid student with a dyed-burgundy afro in a daisy-patterned dress had raised hir hand. “Precipitation, evaporation, and condensation.”

Aaron lay her head on the table and imagined doctors looking at her infant body. Did they take measurements, determine, observe? How had her mom responded to hearing that the daughter she had given birth to 3 days prior had sprouted a “micropenis” and labia blended into scrotum? Had she asked them if there was anything they could do? Surgery? Couldn’t we fix her? Aaron could see the stern, sympathetic, authoritative head shakes. She imagined her mother carefully reading and rereading pamphlets, “So Your Child is Chromofluid!” and “How to Provide for Your Multi-Sexed Offspring!” Searching for ways to love, to care for, to give her child everything she dreamed of, happiness, safety. Freedom? She imagined her mother desperate but demure, thanking the doctors for their support.

Aaron imagined those same white coats examining her corpse, taking new measurements for comparison. Slicing her open to look inside, as they had only just resisted on her softest skin. What would they find would they find her inside there or would she have left or never been by then? Aaron closed her eyes imagined eyes above her dripping mother’s tears onto her face, sliding down her stony cheeks slipping into her gaping mouth filling her mouth and unable to choke.

“Mr. Kirwood! Am I boring you with a basic understanding of how our ecosystems survive? Do you perhaps have somewhere more important to be? My classroom is not a bedroom.”

Aaron jerked his head up. “No, Mr. Worhoff. I...I’m just not feeling well?” Fuck. Wrong answer.

Ze breathes in peace. Ze breathes out love. Ze breathes in peace. Ze breathes out love.

Lida sits cross-legged under a tree, eyes closed. Feels the grass dampening hir leggings. Feels hir knees beneath hir palms. Feels hir back tight, rolls head right left loose. Ze clenches hir shoulders to hir ears ze breathes in, in peace, and releases shoulders exhale, huhh, out love.

Ze breathes in peace. Ze breathes out love. Ze breathes in peace. Ze breathes out love.

Ze smells the dirt, the grass, hears distant children’s laughter creaking metal fixtures two dogs barking wind singing birds hir breath whistle through nostrils to the back of hir head chest expands stomach expands shoulders broaden. Feels the shade the cool the wind on hir arms hir neck. Ze releases. Expands. Breathes in peace. Breathes out love. Exposed.

I am vulnerable because I am connected.

Isolation is not the answer.

I am vulnerable because I care.

Detachment is not the answer.

I am vulnerable because I can’t control everything.

Resentment is not the answer.

Vulnerability is not pain but risk.

I can surrender in safety, in trust, in strength.

Ze breathes out love. Ze breathes in peace. Ze breathes out love.

Lida shifts hir legs, soles of feet kissing, hands move to grasp feet. Ze bends down, flat back, down until hir forehead rests on the grass, thighs stretch expand motionless they acclimate flexing hir heart beats to the ground hir elbows push against hir knees, ze opens ze is opened.

Ze breathes in peace.

Ze breathes out love.

Ze breathes in peace.

Ze breathes out love.

When Aaron got home, his chest was tight, aches, his stomach was clenched muscles knotted in a mild building pain. He mumbled “good” to his Mom’s question of “How was your day?” and closed the door behind him. Sluggishly pulling off his shirt and unhooking his binder he frees himself.

He collapsed onto his bed arms stretching up and out.

California Queer

Never sure what those small complexes that Los Angeles is full of should be called. They are always one or two stories tall and L-shaped, staring down at the puny parking lot, just a collection of shops. The bastard child of an outlet mall, a runt of the litter. Usually at least one massage or nail parlor, maybe a Baja Fresh or some other pricy fast food chain. Not like a full-grown mall – they always feel a little barren and you'd never want to stop by more than one place. You're there with a purpose.

Our purpose is Yogurtland. Some skinny rich teens may prefer Pinkberry, with its flavors limited to plain and tart and its charge-by-the-topping policy. But it can only be popularity itself that makes it popular, in my mind. Yogurtland is a haven for the indecisive. You pay by weight rather than by the number of things you get – it's self-serve. I choose 3 different flavors at a minimum. Usually something strawberry, something chocolate, maybe cheesecake or red velvet as well. So many toppings the flavors cease to make sense together. This is Yogurtland: land of the free.

It's an unusually cold day for LA in the summer, somewhere in the high 60s which is essentially winter weather but we sit outside anyway because Emma wants to smoke. She says "Do you mind?" and I don't mind. It's so windy it takes her a couple of tries to light her cigarette, I think.

Actually, she might be using matches. There was a time when she was using matches because she didn't have a lighter, I think that was her.

To be honest, I wouldn't remember the cigarette thing at all except that it was pretty cold so it would be weird that we were outside otherwise and when I told her I was writing about this day she laughed about how she had put out her cigarette in her leftover yogurt. She doesn't smoke much in LA, but that summer she was. One night that summer we stood outside the Westside Pavillion on Pico so she could smoke a cigarette and she said it was because she was hanging out with someone from high school a lot and she was smoking with them. Or she was preparing to study abroad in France that Fall so she needed to smoke more, she didn't say.

I'm not sure I even knew there was a door to go out onto Pico. I doubt I'd ever used it before. It was a summer for unexpected things like that to happen, like Ilya attempting to apologize to me and the almost-threesome in a laundry closet with Erica and a Ukrainian chick I'd met that evening who complimented my Russian.

Emma had already told her high school lesbian friend Sophie, but I flatter myself I had a better reaction. Sometimes Emma and I talk about "Los Angeles lesbians" and we're talking about girls like Sophie and not us. Not me, even though I am a lesbian from Los Angeles. We're talking about them because they aren't queer. They don't get it. They just like women.

LA, it's true that it's superficial, I think.

For us, we understand *queer* to be a sexual identity and a political identity and like a view on the world.

Queerness has definitely played into how I think about other things like politics and "society." Haha. Stuff like that. So it's not just about who I'm attracted to.

She doesn't tell me she's gay. Or queer. Or bi. Or lesbian. Or pan. This isn't her coming out story. Steven — the dick she's been lusting and longing after since freshman year, the jerk she has hooked up with and is hoping she'll hook up with again once they're both studying in Paris — is a trans woman. She wants to start transitioning.

"Do you think you'll still be attracted to her?"

"I don't know..."

Next March, I come home to Emma in the dark, face down in her bed. I flip on the kitchen light and can see through her bedroom doorway. I don't have to ask but —

"She didn't come over?"

We nicknamed our apartment the Queer Queendom. It's small and cozy and incredibly clean on Wednesdays, when Emma hopes Steven will visit. I don't think she's made it over once yet, but I appreciate the way it

inspires Emma to blast upbeat 90s pop in the afternoon before I head out to Psych class.

I sit on Emma's bed by her pillow. I try to sound reassuring or consoling and somehow stay honest. Eventually she just asks me to leave and I tell her if she needs anything to shout. I'm here.

How did you come to identify as pan/queer?

Well, I guess I should tell the story of Lily/Steven from the beginning, which includes part of the heteroflexible time.



The fall colors have never been more beautiful everything is flowing and bright it's not even that it's moving it's not a hallucination everything is just so overwhelming because it **is**. Although of course everything is moving

and a hallucination I want to see where the clouds are going they are so gorgeous but they are leaving they are going past the trees and buildings where I can't see them and I want to know what they look like now. There are more clouds though, those are just the ones I was following, it's okay I'm a little sad I can't see them anymore but there is so much here and everything is so beautiful so I still have plenty to enjoy. Emma and I stand on the porch looking out at the world and it's so big the whole world is past this porch we stand there exclaiming about how amazing it is for maybe an hour or a few minutes and then one of us points out that we can go **into** that world beyond the porch we can step off the porch and be **in** it.

We take off our socks and run onto the grass oh my god behind the house past my house there are MORE clouds to see. We keep pointing out different things for each other to look at but we're very taken up with the things we have found but we agree it's all so beautiful it's overwhelming so beautiful so beautiful oh my god so beautiful. WOW. Wow. There are some trees in a sort of grassy field between my house and the house next door and we run to them. I mean I run to one tree and she runs to another my tree is so curvy and beautiful it still has so many leaves hers sticks straight out of the ground and has spikey leafless branches she stares straight up sticking her chin to its trunk we are both very enamored of our trees.

Standing by the trees there isn't much grass though and lots of sticks and sharp things but we feel so drawn to these trees we don't want to leave.

Emma says It hurts.

I say I know.

We're both very reassured by this.

Emma says, you have to come over here you have to try this I go over and I look up her straight spikey tree and it is overwhelming but I laugh and say no no this is too hetero for me it's so phallic. Her tree is so barren and spiky and the floor by her tree is less grassy I think so I run back over to my tree. She says What? I am laughing my tree is so curvy and beautiful and nice I am so glad I get to be with my tree and not hers.

Haha you're so straight Emma.

Emma is laughing. She thinks I'm being silly. She is also with me in the place where everything has metaphorical significance: she texts this to our friend Karen. She texts "Everything has metaphorical significance!!!!!!!!!" and also "jaskldkfjjglskskalalffsd" because we were playing with how pretty and fun it was to type on her iPhone how all the letters pop up a bit when you push them. But she can't see how everything she's doing is so straight.

I was the odd one out because I was the straight one? Or like the more straight one? And now I'm the odd one out because I'm way on the other side.

I am very reassured. I was worried what it meant, that I'd hooked up with Ilya that I wanted him did it change who I was but Emma is drawn to the straight tree and I am put off by it. I don't need to worry anymore my

mind keeps telling me I know it's projection I'm reading Emma's projection
and my projection it's so nice to be able to read it in the world and not have to
search our own minds for the answers they are out here and we just have to
look around and we'll get it.

Um you know,

You know?

you know

because obviously, you know

like you know

you know

You know?

you know

you know

...you know. Just, yeah.

you know

You know?

like you know

you know

you know?

It's someone's birthday party, or just Saturday. We're casually
dressed up and other people are pouring Sprite and liquor into blue plastic
cups – it feels very classy to have the blue ones instead of red. I'm pretty

snobby about mixed drinks though—I know it’s snobby but I’d rather be snobby than the sort of wuss who needs soda to drink alcohol. My cup is just a third full and straight rum.

Have you always been a queer cis woman?

It’s a corner room in Clark on the second or fourth floor probably. Emma and I live on those floors, respectively. Maybe it is just a party because I can’t remember whose birthday it is.

Well, 2 out of 3. Haha. But, um no.

The corner rooms are the only rooms in Clark you can really throw parties in. There’s hardly room for 2 people to stand side-by-side in my room. In the corner rooms there’s enough space for a few people to dance, maybe 20 people can fit in the room if you’re economical about space and aren’t dancing. Emma is dancing. Or we’re standing in a circle with music playing and kinda moving. Emma is joking to Karen and a couple other friends that they should make out wouldn’t it be funny if we kissed? Wouldn’t that be funny?

We’re laughing but not because anyone agrees. It’s decidedly *not* funny to me when straight chicks kiss because they think it’s “funny.” Everyone’s just laughing at Emma I say “Emma you always say that when you’re drunk!” It’s her all-girls’ school roots.

I mean, I guess I have always been queer?

Deep down on the inside? But, but I didn't always identify that way.

Not like my all-girls' school roots; we didn't do that or maybe just I was too gay for anyone to play the kind of games she and her friends played. *This is also so, like, Archer, they decided we were gonna play a game where we would blindfold each other and then one of us would kiss the blindfolded one and the blindfolded one would have to guess which one it was.*

I wonder if Emma's other friends know the sort of things the Archer girls did. I wonder if Emma just thinks it's normal. I mean I guess she just did it because that's what girls there did.

*Um, I identified as straight,
and then I identified as bi to like a select few*

Does she realize she's making these other freshmen girls uncomfortable? I don't think so, she doesn't see that these straight girls don't come from worlds where this stuff is normal. Their laughs are uncomfortable but no one wants to make it a thing.

embarrassed

*Hence the next, me **trying to reinvent myself** at college
as like **more hetero** than I was in high school.*

Um, which did not work out.

I know Emma slept with a girl — Daisy — in high school, but she's straight or heteroflexible she says later *when I came to college I identified as, like,*

"heteroflexible" which I thought was so, so cool. As far as I could tell

"heteroflexible" meant "pretty much straight."

Daisy would kind of make a joke out of it? But we never really talked about it? Yeah it was kind of like a joke, and Hannah would kind of participate in this which is funny cause she's now queer, but they would make jokes like, "Oooh, Emma, like-likes that girl." And I would be like, "Nooo." And I usually didn't, too, it would just be some random person, but those kind of things. So it like, yeah it made it seem like a bad thing.

Or like a weakness or something.

I remember that teasing. For me, it was behind my back, only after I switched schools I learned what had made me a pariah. It's what teaches us to keep our hands to ourselves. Emma isn't fond of physical affection with friends. It took years before I learned it was okay to hug again. Some days I still coat myself in unthreateningly gay and keep a distance from straight friends. We need other people who have been on affection diets, to learn how to feast in queerness, unabashed, unashamed.

*So in the beginning when I was straight, or when I was "straight," I would have these, I don't want to say like obsessions, but... sort of this **strong** desire to be friends with these certain girls and be close to them?*

Emma went back through her journals to find them, the evidence. I remember Sophie, the dancer I would watch for ages, stare at her in the ensemble pieces because I "looked up to her." Maybe I did. Maybe that's all it

was. But if I look I can find the crushes. Now that I know they should have been there, I can find them.

I was still so ashamed of it and so embarrassed and I didn't like really want to tell anybody, but I felt like I needed to like follow the coming out narrative? And so I was like "I guess I should like tell somebody about this?"

Junior year of high school Daisy and I had sex and that was, what I guess I consider losing my virginity.

Winter break sophomore year of college, I am in San Diego. I'm staying with my friend Erica, and we're snuggled up in her bed watching Torchwood – she's only on the first season. We've been flirting online all semester and saying what a shame it is there's a country between us ;p and I'm still not sure if she's joking. On the internet sometimes "Oh my god please have sex with me" just means "that's a nice dress" so I'm not sure how to act now. Should I make a move? Or was she just being friendly and joking?

My head is on her shoulder and the laptop is on her stomach and then my phone buzzes loudly. I get up to grab it and read a text from Emma:

I just lost my virginity.

She's visiting San Diego, too. We were gonna try to get together, maybe tomorrow? But she's busy with Steven, I know. I text her back congratulations. She's been hooking up with Steven for a while but I am not

surprised she doesn't think anything she's done so far is "real" sex. Straight standards are so specific.

but like it was weird because we were both pretending to be something that we weren't? Like I was pretending to be straighter than I was and she was pretending to be a man and so our sex was...

I climb back into bed with Erica, but I get another text. And another. Emma's freaking out. I try to reassure her, it's all okay it's all going to be okay don't judge yourself.

I have like a lot of, um, hatred for cis het men and that like gets in the way of me wanting to include them in my identity at all

Erica asks what's up and I say "I'm just worried about my friend. She just lost her virginity and she's kinda freaking out." It's the middle of the night. I feel torn. Do I put away my phone? I can't focus, I don't know what to say, and there's Erica changing into pajamas pulling off her shirt but is Emma okay? How can I help?

She's fucked up, who knows what on. Do I ask her? Probably not, no she tells me the next day the cocktail of drugs and alcohol she was on but she seems much calmer in the morning. She says it's fine, she was overreacting. I'm still worried.

I, I'm tempted to include kind of my, like my sexual assault history in the reason I hate cis het men, even though the person who assaulted me was not a man? But at the time, I thought they were a man?

Emma is sitting on my bed, my phone recording audio between us. I'm supposed to be taking notes, but I forget to for minutes on end. Some stories I've heard before, some I haven't, but I've never heard them told like this. These are the stories I love: stories of feeling an outsider even in your own bed with a girl who makes you giddy. In the days when you remember every kiss.

I used to tell my story this way too. It took 3 hours sometimes, because it was an hour before you got to the first kiss: every detail is essential. Anything I remember, I remember for a reason. It seems incidental to the listener, but it is everything to me. Everything: how at a Saturday tech rehearsal Rose said she needed to talk to me and took me to stand in the hallway by the gym in pitch black, how I thought she was angry even after she kissed me, how dizzy I felt until we heard a noise and broke apart.

I used to remember the dates, too. My first kiss was on March 31st, I still know that one. Under the rainbow quilt my mother made in college, the one I am sitting under right now. I don't tell my story this way anymore, but it's somehow cathartic to hear someone else lay out their life this way. There's time to hear about every time.

I didn't think Emma's story would sound so much like mine to me. It isn't mine, just like all of the coming out stories I consumed when I was 13, 14, 15 until they broke tasteless like dry toast in my mouth. There is

something so beautiful and tempting in being able to say “*yes, this*” when you hear how people knew they were like you. In finding and believing there are people like you.

Emma and I... we were in such different places when we met. I never hoped for our queer comradeship. When we said “Hi” at some posh house in Los Angeles at a meet-up for students heading to Wesleyan University, all I knew we had in common was a city and a favorite television show. Now as we laugh and she shares the parts of her I hadn’t even guessed at, it feels so comfortable to hear a coming out story. Like mine, it is full of false starts. Sometimes I make mine look like a trajectory towards ever increasing queerness. Emma’s a little more straightforward with how not-straightforward hers is. Maybe it’s because we know there’s no shame in having a queer coming out story.

Or, if there’s shame, there’s shame. We can’t always be pride parades. We don’t always want to be. Sometimes we just need to wallow and not as a preface to anything.

I Don't Show This to Strangers

"You're a beauty...you got a name?"

"Depends...who wants to know?"



I knew before I turned that it was Tamesis. No one says my name quite as he does. It sounds sweeter from contact with his tongue, sharper for sliding through his teeth.

"Hey, you!"

From here in front of the discount grocery store it was clear he had picked out a purple dress that was about 4 shades off from coordinating with his long curly purple hair. He clashed majestically. Lime green boots smashed on the sidewalk as he ran towards me. He would blend in nicely on the kind of planet I see in my dreams – all colored swirls and Seussian plantlife.

As he gets closer I can see his arms and legs jiggling, flesh bouncing up and down. His body is all flow and rolls. This is what I admire about him: his refusal to stick to the outline laid out by his skeleton. His bones asked for rigidity and order. He bent himself bowlegged and grew out a rebellion. Maybe he didn't see it this way before me. Maybe he doesn't see it this way

now. But some days in my hands he feels his strength, I think. Feels it in his softness, his pliability. Or I do.

“Hey you.” This time exhaled as an out of breath greeting. He stomps the last few steps in exaggerated slow motion, ending with his face smooshed into my cheek for a kiss.

“Yeah.” My voice meek to meet his bold. I am all business, errands, man about town, person with a place to be. Tam is always in the place he is, I think. He pulls me into the present and it itches uncomfortably on my skin.

Tonight, he holds my face within an inch of his, our noses in wary proximity like leaders of armies discussing treaty terms. They edge closer, brush each other in circles, push together our cartilage bending but resistant when we kiss, not so giving like the rest of our bodies. Our noses are our ambassadors, and are not so ready to yield as our lips, bellies, hearts, hands. Not so willing to make space for intrusion, but they do. I hide my brown hand in his purple hair so it won't be illuminated by his glow-in-the-dark skin. I know the features of my face are sharpened by the light reflecting off of his, but only he can see this.

He whispers to me that he used to feel like negative space which people stared through and never saw his shape. He says people still don't see his shape, but they do seem to think he has one. He doesn't ask me what I see, see if we see the same shape of him.

He grabs a bony wrist of mine and pulls it from his hair and tells me all our excesses and recesses make sense to him, even if they don't fit. He traces his own face with my hand. Tamesis only is visible through our contrast, he says. He needs a dark outline, he needs to be the space in between me, wants to be the space in between me. I'm not so sure I'm defined enough to make sense of him or us. He pulls my lips to his and whispers *Hey you.*

A year ago I sit in a chair in the living room of some friend of a friend, hiding from the ear bleedingly loud hip hop blasting from the kitchen where the drinks are and wondering how early I can leave without being rude to the chick for inviting me at all. I stare down at my mug still half-full of cheap rum and coke and swirl it. I shift my legs uncomfortably. The air is too hot and thick.

A haze of purple appears in my peripheral vision.

"Hey, you. What's your name?"



Mike was having what he called a gender-neutral day but was more genderful than genderless. She picked out a tight little spaghetti strap top which would show off his muscles. He slicked up her hair with gel until it was James Dean tousled sexy smooth and spread deep maroon lip gloss over

hir lip-venom plumped lips. He picked out a couple clip on earrings and snapped them onto her fleshy ear lobes. Pulling on slacks and a pair of high-heeled combat-style boots, ze left his apartment and went to meet up with her girlfriend.

Dreams of Lilly in which she was perfectly normal apart from her breasts having turned into armadillos or her shoes being potted plants her feet grew out of were common these days. Lilly considered herself to be dating a pretty eccentric man, which was true on some days, and she considered this really the best and most proper preoccupation for a 24-year-old woman anyway. Ze knew the right kind of masculinity to play at just the right times. He would tower over Lilly, arms caging her to the wall as she leaned in to kiss her, which Lilly appreciated. She was glad ze knew to do this even on feminine days. Lilly loved to feel small, to feel docile, meek. As long as she could get that from him, she didn't care what Mike wore. Mike cared, but that is hir business.

The DNA through which the meat of their relationship is transcribed, backwards and rightways round again takes an expert to decipher. There are no experts to speak of. So Mike tried to let go of needing answers for his questions, and Lilly tried to let go of needing questions for her answers. Clinging together at night, Mike shifted her head to a cooler patch of pillow out of the choking softness of Lilly's hair so hir breath wouldn't be warm and

used. Lilly pulled the covers up to her chin. They could both hear the sounds of sirens outside and knew it was an emergency, elsewhere.



Those days when lifelong commitment is made by the slide, sometimes 3 times during one recess — these lay the grounds for the spin the bottle games to come, days when we leave our love up to chance. When marriage is a game and we know it and practice makes perfect and we're waiting for perfect it's a numbers game maybe and we don't let on that we all know it's a game it's a game because our mothers think it's very cute and so do the teachers.

Fates decided first kisses that were everyone's business. You could mark them in charts, and sometimes we did sometimes we kept track in diaries with locks and keys. The pages weren't secrets, the feelings we whispered during truth or dare, they were just delicate, they just needed to be protected you had to take care of them or everyone would toss them around like a pink rubber handball and they would deflate. It was hard sometimes to remember which feelings were yours and which were given to you and which were communal which you just put on for dress up for drama for something to do during recess besides trying to skip bars on the monkey bars or watching the tether ball try to escape its tethered orbit. We'd seen enough

movies to know that kisses come at the climax, played house enough to know where this was all heading, we could shout “eww” all we wanted, because it was still coming it was still fast approaching.

Me? Well, I kissed Jeremy Patrick at Tina Maclay’s party and everyone said we were dating for 3 weeks after that, even us. Then Chris Wolf at Victor Ivanovich’s party, which was gross and let’s not talk about that okay? And obviously you kissed me after that at Rachel Eckstein’s, but that was before...you know. No, I just mean...nevermind. Forget it.



You curl into his compliments like a snail retreating into its shell. His words feel safe, although they are not different words than those spat at you from mouths that grin Cheshire cat smiles. Their words cut at your limbs, slicing pieces of you off, a trail of human prosciutto on the sidewalk behind you till you’re raw at every inch, painful to touch. But his words you think you could live up to. You could fill them, fit them, believe them. It wouldn’t take too much stretching either. It won’t have taken any stretching at all by the time you’ve filled them, probably. You were these words all along, his desires, all the words they’ve scratched into your palms in your own fingernails as you passed by.

And you are one better – all the words he doesn't say but you know are hiding behind his teeth. You can be those things and he'll never have to ask, and that's how he'll know you're a good one. And his knowing it will make you a good one. You can feel the future in how warm his words are on your ear. How the air from his mouth fills you and doesn't feel intrusive this time. You see how the air between you will always be shared, back and forth, and the space you are in will always belong to both of you. He'll go to the gym so he can lift boxes for you, you'll start wearing lipstick to see his lips pink with the trace of your kiss. This is how you'll love him best, the imprint of your lips on his, pushing his mouth into the realm of the feminine, but he'll always wipe it off like this part of him is shameful or private.

You will become Give in a different way from before. Less valiant. More gentle. You will wear nothing but his shirts in private and advise him what to wear in public. In public you will wear lipstick but be careful not to mark him. You will grow into a good girl, a gorgeous woman with nice legs, bright eyes, a charming laugh. You will be sweet and caring and sensitive and you will have great tits.

All those words he gave you will be, are, have always been sitting in your stomach waiting to sprout outwards. He whispers in your ear more compliments. They are repetitive but not dull and you feel something stirring inside you, ready to ripen.



“Are you unhappy with me?”

“I’m unhappy, but not with you.”

“But you **are** with me.”



Tristan’s heels clapped down on the cement as she turned the corner onto Christopher St. She felt the strain of her thighs working to keep her upright and stable, knew this effort made her legs look fierce, and tried to imagine the click-clacking sound she made as applause rather than horse-hooves on asphalt around Central Park. She had no interest in being a tourist attraction, despite how some whistling men may interpret her tight leopard print dress.

The smacking of her pumps reverberated loudly enough to embarrass her. Would she ever get used to walking in heels? Tristan strode gingerly forward, not daring to stop because to stop would be to admit that she was struggling, to admit that her legs were stomp stomp stomp and she didn’t have the headspace to think about hip swagger about being in command of her body her legs were step step step straight out and her body trying to keep up with them and she couldn’t admit this didn’t come naturally that she wasn’t born in heels and fake it till you make it keep making little heel hops

with straight legs to catch up to the pace she should walk with don't look down at your feet head forward because heels are about power and knowing where you are going and avoiding the little grates in the sidewalk. Her feet already pinched and the balls of her feet felt raw. How do women do this all day?

Shoulders poised and eyes straight ahead, Tristan's legs were stride stride stride but smack smack smack so she stopped to tug at her dress which wasn't the problem but was riding up. A car horn honked at nothing in particular or Tristan. She wasn't sure how to take it, but frowned. A couple blocks away Kelly was leaving lipstick marks on beer bottles and hopefully nothing else. Tristan shifted her weight from foot to foot, trying to give each a momentary break. Tristan wondered who was paying for the beers she knew Kelly was already slugging back. 55 bar was just a couple blocks away. One foot in front of the other; Tristan would get the hip swagger down by then.



I am looking up flights to cities I could never afford to travel to, again. I wish I had the same adventurous spirit as you do, instead of just pretending in the night. Wish I was looking for a new place to be, always finding my bearings not so busy missing where I've been. I used to think I was the one

who worked to create home wherever I was, and you were the one who was perpetually homeless. I think it's the other way around.

My body is not the home I want it to be. Still, I like playing hostess. Come visit sometime. I'll invite you in, say "I'm sorry for the mess," and you will tell me my place looks as nice as ever and I will secretly believe you.



My gender wakes up in the morning like an old man, all aches and exhaustion these days. It doesn't feel solid, not fluid either, too stiff to be called flexible. My masculinity is worn thin to a shawl I only drape over my femininity – which has always felt a drag act to begin with. If I use enough makeup remover pads will I find a white wall? The one I covered in glue as a child – did they have those purple glue sticks where you grew up? They faded to clear when you used them. I scribbled the wall in clear but the wall is rubble now anyway so don't worry about the vandalism.

No, my gender is oobleck. Did they make oobleck where you were a kid? It's just cornstarch and water; you'd never guess how easy it is to make magic. It's a non-Newtonian fluid, but as a kid they made you try to figure out if it was solid or liquid. I never realized how lucky I was to live in a world that was trying so hard to teach me that either/or questions are tricks.

Oobleck doesn't have to be green, you can put any color dye in it you want but it was usually green. Sometimes at camp it was pink or blue, which was prettier but I always thought green fit oobleck better. It was alien.

So my gender stiffens when smacked. I crumble in your hands until you loosen your grip and I ooze back into my container. Sink your hand into me slowly; I'm sticky only when you want me to be; I will fill the space around you; I will make a mess and you still won't know what to call me. Are you as solid as you feel when you hold me? I don't think I have a shape without your hands.

Give me a container to fill.



"So, what's your story?"

"Um, you mean like, my family, where I'm from? That stuff?"

He shrugs. "If that's your story."



There is a cold stone in my stomach. It is hard and it is hunger. It feels like strength in my core but my limbs around it are flapping useless shaking. It is infection that they are too tired to pry out of me. I think about my flesh

rotting away until all that is left is this stone in my center. I could just lie here. Would it be so hard to wait? Everything but this stone feels immaterial: the room shaking with my arms as I lose my balance trying to walk to my bed stumble into the wall press into it feel it press back.

In the night, my girlfriend hears the dull clunk of my teeth chattering against my mouth guard and hushes me to rest and be still. My mouth is never still. It grinds and clatters painfully. I dream I bite straight through the guard and shatter my front teeth. I breathe more peacefully through the hole in my smile. Now that the cage of my tongue has a window, I push my tongue through the gap till it jams. I make whistling noises that sting me like brain freeze. I worry at the edges. My mouth is never still. Sometimes I stick my tongue out until I feel its leashes tug. What a strange creature I keep.

I don't show this to strangers.

On days I would like to be solid, I keep to myself. Curl up into a ball and wrap my arms around me as if I could contain me if I hold hard enough.

My speech matches yours I can do my own version so you won't catch on but I have seen me around others and I know what I'm feeding back to you this is why you like me/this is why you despise me. I say the words that make sense to you sometimes they don't make sense to me sometimes they don't make sense to you whoops I mistook you for someone on my level get on my level I'm not good at explanations except when I am.

I'm hiding so much skin and dirt under my fingernail tips. That's why they're painted opaque and sparkling it's a cover it's a distraction. I can't tell you whose skin it was but it's definitely all mine now. This is how we rub off on each other. This is how they become me and mine and we become we. Sometimes I get dizzy.

This is a secret. You can't imagine what they'd do if they knew. If they knew how truly strange they are. You know it's never made much sense to me they think they are like puzzle pieces but they don't look like they fit to me. They are just smashing together, convinced because nothing else fits it must be this one it must. How do they walk in this world aren't they shaken don't they shiver? Is that rude? I am occasionally rude. This could be such an occasion, I wouldn't mind.

My head buzzes. It is tired or hungry or thinking too many things at once or thirsty it needs so many things to survive. I am supposed to spend a lot of time taking care of it. I can't always be bothered. It's just a head. Is it more important than the rest of me? I'm not sure how important any of me is.

All of me is angry. I have told it that is okay. There's a fine line between loathing and self-loathing or there isn't a line at all. I don't feel any difference and I get confused which is which. Anger feels productive though. It motivates. Happiness is lying around with my girlfriend doing absolutely nothing. Anger is protest and resilience. I don't need to feel guilty about it and I rarely do. It's okay to be angry. It's okay to be complacent sometimes

too. No one has energy for anger all the time. My head buzzes. It is tired. I don't speak all day but I think so many words I can't keep track and I'm not tracking.

Memory is a muscle like use it or lose it. I would like a pedometer for thought to keep my brain in shape, gotta stay healthy you know? I am supposed to spend a lot of time taking care of it. Fastest way to lose yourself. I haven't lost my mind, it's still in my head I can feel it buzzing. I still remember sea salt caramel and stuffed giraffes. But there are so many things I don't think about until I do. It's like forgetting.



Ricky raised his bottle in the air and winked at the night sky by way of toast. Taking a sip, he walked down the sidewalk, his combat boots thick enough to catch him in the first step towards a stumble and set him right again. By the curb there was a square into which, instead of a slab of cement, the city planners had placed a tree, its trunk confined to a circle of dirt around which a layer of little cobblestones had been placed. The city was covered in a smattering of designated areas for nature, but the buildings were much more impressive so hardly anyone noticed the sidewalk trees growing up and out, their branches expanding well beyond their allotted space.

Ricky poured the rest of his drink on the ground by this tree, darkening dirt and cobblestone alike. "One drink for the city!" he shouted as he tossed the bottle in the general direction of a nearby trash can. Even as his sequined top scratched uncomfortably, Ricky felt himself at ease in his body, settling in to his dizzy head and feeling his breath expanding his chest, pulling his shoulders back slightly. He made his way to the bus stop, beaming at nothing in particular.

He loved nights like these. Nights when you could compliment strangers, pull bodies to yours in rooms so loud it's pointless to try having a conversation – when talking is pointless anyway.

Did it matter? Did it matter so much who anyone was when you could just be in love with the night? When your body is so present and yet the love vibrating out from you blends you into everything, wall, floor, music, bodies, beautiful bodies all of them. And in that moment it didn't matter what your arms looked like or whose makeup was smeared or who people thought you were at first glance because you could be anybody and were – you were anybody just like everyone else.

The bus pulled up to the bus stop, lurching as it always did as if being swung like a bat to the curb with a mechanical grumble ending in a high-pitched groan of discontent. The bus driver did not turn his head as Ricky stomped up and dropped his change into the fare machine, but Ricky gave a half-hearted smile at him anyway.

It was late enough that there were only a couple people on the bus. One appeared to be a young Latina woman in green scrubs with her hospital ID still clipped onto her pocket, rummaging through her large brown bag until she pulled out a book. Another was a very tired looking older white man in a large rumpled leather jacket. Ricky took a seat facing the aisle and got lost in the gray and rainbow patterned seats across from him.

Head lolling back, he tried to recapture the expansive feeling of the night, but the jerking of the florescent-lighted bus was giving him distracting nausea. He closed his eyes and saw colors spinning, sketches of tornadoes turning his mind and felt about to fall sideways into blackness.

Ricky's hand gripped onto the yellow rubber line and pulled, causing a *DING* followed by the pleasantly feminine yet robotic "Stop Requested" voice recording to sound. Opening his eyes guiltily to the brightly lit solid world, Ricky sat quietly as the bus pulled over and the other passengers looked over to him. The nurse rolled her eyes and returned to her book.

An awkward pause filled with silence and static-muffled information cracking on the speakers later, the bus heaved itself off the curb and continued on its route.

Exploring the Forrest

I am sitting on the couch-bed (a full-size bed that is functioning as an especially comfortable couch in the living room, rather than some sort of couch that doubles as a bed by spitting one out of its insides) uploading a picture of Forrest to tumblr. Forrest is to my left and leans over to look at the post— “Can you use ‘he’ pronouns? Thanks.”

I don’t think the caption was going to include pronouns. But I think I may as well include them for good measure. In case it was important to have it specified, so no one misinterprets the picture and thinks there’s a girl in it. “Forrest looking mighty fine, sassing it up with that face towards his cute ass boyfriend Riley :p”

I wonder if this means Forrest wants just “he” today. It seems like “they” is a good all-occasions pronoun for Forrest, but maybe I just prefer “they” because masculinity makes me uncomfortable and I’d rather understand Forrest as genderqueer, anything but 100% boy.

Would I have sex with him today? With ‘he’ pronouns?

It doesn’t come up.

We’re in my bedroom 2 years earlier and I’m sitting on the floor messaging Erica’s boyfriend Riley on Facebook and he’s saying how she’s always shy about making the first move but we should totally bump clams or

knock potatoes or some other weird euphemism that just makes me squeamish but I'm glad he's on board with me hooking up with his girlfriend. Later I am texting him and we are bonding about being what he calls "cock cousins" and I amend to "boob bros" because we've hooked up with the same girl and somehow that makes us closer. I'm still reveling in how drama-free sex is possible, how we don't have to be possessive we can all just have the kind of intimacy we want with who we want and not worry about fallout.

Erica and I are cuddling in my bed and tracing lines on each other's backs and arms and necks with our fingers for who knows how long before Erica asks "Can I kiss you?" and I smile and say "Yes" and then we don't have to pretend we're just cuddling anymore.

And it's such a relief.

I mean, it's a relief for sex to just be fun. To not be tied up with deep heartfelt emotions to not be something that can rip you apart to not be part and whole with crying and fighting and loving. Or there is loving but it is friendship love it's just trust. It's just wow you're gorgeous and I trust you with me.

I mean, it's a relief to have a cheat sheet. To know what to do because I know her turn-ons, she's already told me so much.

I mean, it's a relief to us both to be with a girl again, we keep saying it— "You're so soft" and "I missed this," after months with Ilya it is so good to get back to what I know, and "your boobs are so great" Erica and I agree.

I ask her to take her hair out of its ponytail so I can see her long red hair better. It's gorgeous. The lamp is still switched on, warm light through my red curtains so I can see her smile as we kiss.

My parents are next-door but I'm not sure we remember to be quiet.

She whimpers and shakes so beautifully beneath me when I feel inside her, as if she is about to cry. I love the feel of her tightening around my fingers, I move but don't take my eyes from her face, her eyes are clenched closed her mouth is open her bottom lip trembling her vocal chords trembling.

We stop when we hear my mother getting up to go to the bathroom in the night and quickly turn off the lamp. We are curled together. I hope we were being quiet...We pull our clothing back on.

She remembers to text her boyfriend a happy anniversary. He says he thinks she celebrated right.

It feels like a victory how we shift, restructure, reinvent our relationships but nothing gets lost, nothing destroyed.

"I came out to my mom when I was 13, as bisexual, and she kind of...responded in a way that made me feel like she was saying it was a phase? And you know I very much vehemently was positive that it was *not* a phase.

I don't remember,

you know,

sitting down with myself as a child and going like

“Ah, yes!”

but I **definitely** had crushes on girls, and...

although I don't know if I would **qualify** them as that at the time

that's what I **recognize** them as now.

then once I was old enough

then I started **realizing**, like very firmly **identifying** that way.”

“So was your mom the first person you came out to?”

“I mean I guess my group of friends? Cause I mean, what we did was we actually all made out at my 13th birthday party sleepover? Yeah. And then the next day a few of us were like ‘So, I’m a little gay.’”

“Haha, I don't think those things happen if you don't have at least a couple gay people at the party...”

“Haha, yeah I know.”

“I mean I guess I've never been to any parties with only straight people, but I imagine that that's *not* usually what they do?”

There was a day in the not too distant past when the queers drew a line in the sand. They began making the switch from “bisexual” to “pansexual.” Bisexual was defined as two genders, “both” genders, it was tied up in the gender binary and it was tainted.

No one made the same cry about gay or lesbian. But slowly we became aware that pansexual meant including nonbinary trans people – bisexual was a backwards, old-fashioned term. It meant you weren't queer – not in the political sense. In the name of trans solidarity we turned from bisexual. Those who stayed in this word they had found and crawled into like a hermit crab were not with *us*. *We* were growing, finding bigger, better shells to house us. We wanted a world we could keep expanding in, a word that fit our new shape. Exposed in transition we risked the vulnerability of movement without armor, risked being unrecognizable, all worth it to our emergent selves. They were hunched over, cramped, swearing their shells still fit still fit still fit still fit them.

Perhaps the battles raged around the meanings of bisexual/pansexual shouldn't get stuck in the roots of the words. If you've never actually been attracted to a transmasculine person, but you have been attracted to agender and bigender people, is that still pansexual? If "pan" means being attracted "regardless of gender," removing the "have you ever" game, does it edge into the lexicon of colorblindness, creating a smug supposedly gender-blind sexuality? The bisexuals stomp around like dinosaurs who didn't get the memo – evolve or go extinct. Now they're insisting that "bi" doesn't erase trans identities – is it about truly believing the word is inclusive? Or just fighting tooth and nail not to have to vacate a word you called home?

I can understand that. I have argued that lesbian is still mine, even though phonically it's not my favorite. I redefine it to fit my needs, tear down its walls, put in new tiling. Why do we insist on guarding identity terms as if they will be contaminated by anything Other? Where is our queerness when we fight contamination?

I don't go on tumblr all summer in 2013. I'm traveling with everything in a blue and gray backpack and I can't text people in the states. So I don't hear that Erica has announced that what was discomfort and experimentation with binding and masculine gender presentation has crystalized into an identity while I've been away until my girlfriend corrects me on Erica's pronouns.

I message Erica on skype— hey, did I miss an important gender post while I was away?

They don't explain, just link to the public announcement.

“Genderfluid”

Having a gender identity that is kind of more of a shifting, changeable experience and more um kind of harder to pin down?

From their posts on tumblr, I imagine them as trigendered.

3 names: Erica for girl days, Forrest for boy days, Sequoia for genderqueer days.

Pronouns:

she/her/hers/he/him/his/they/them/their/ze/zem/zeir/ze/hir/hir

What do I feel when I see this? Confused? Wary? Positive? Indifferent? Unnerved? Insecure? Proud? Worried? Nervous? Uncomfortable? Excited? Distant? I could paint you a picture, how I was challenged and learned to move past it. How I grew from their growth. But I don't remember. And I'm still not sure.

The first night of my visit, Sequoia is beautiful. They are in a dress, hair down, winged eyeliner sharpened into points you could cut yourself on. We go out with their partners Riley and West for drinks, and among these three romantic partners I don't have to explain the concept of "metamour" when talking about my girlfriend's boyfriend. It's so nice to not be questioned, to not have to defend myself. Some days that's all I need: space to be without armour and justification. I've never met West before, but already they feel safe, respectful, considerate.

Is it a girl day? Sequoia doesn't seem to use Erica except with people they aren't out to, even at their most femme. Girlness is too close to cisness, too close to assumed, too close to misgendered on any other day. There's no straight line to be drawn, no imaginary correlation of gender presentation and pronouns and names and gender. No line I can draw in their spectrum "these genders I'm attracted to, these ones I'm not" but I try, like I think I can

find where “boy” lies and avoid it. I’m not so attracted to them as Forrest, I think, I think Sequoia and femme and genderfucking and all that is great and sexy and fine, but I think boyness is not my cup of tea I think I’m not a fan of baseball caps and binders. I think I can separate them into 3 people I think I can like Erica and Sequoia and not Forrest but it turns out Erica isn’t here anymore and Sequoia and Forrest are not different people just different names I want to draw a curtain between them to protect my word “lesbian.”

The next morning Sequoia gets up and cooks french toast for Riley and West and me. West is telling a story about something Sequoia did – interrupts themselves –

“Babe, what’s your name and pronouns today?” they shout to the kitchen.

“Hmmm...Forrest and they,” said, walking over to the living room, spatula held aloft. Their hair is back in a messy ponytail, their face behind thick-rimmed black glasses, their boxer briefs visible beneath a loosely-tied blue dressing robe. It’s exactly the shade of blue my father’s dressing gown was, but less tattered.

“I thought so.” West continues the story with the amended name. I shrink, embarrassed I didn’t ask Forrest for name and pronouns earlier. Embarrassed it wasn’t clear to me. Wondering if the name Forrest means they are too masculine for us to have sex today. Or does “they” mean they are

nonbinary enough that I will be fine? My heart beats faster but I don't want it to show. Their gender is not about my sex life.

The word "boy" get thrown around a lot. And the word "gay." I don't mean in general, I mean right here in the apartment, I mean when Riley and West kiss, Forrest shouts "gaaaaay," or gushes about how cute their boys are. West and Forrest are both nonbinary assigned female at birth, but they both like the word "boy" I never hear "man" it's a younger masculinity they inhabit, I mean when they inhabit masculinity. It's hard for me to remember I'm staying with three masculinely identified people because I don't feel out of place.

I'm not sure if feeling at home is misgendering. But even in my nerves, it feels beautiful. To be immersed in everyday queerness, to remember how unfathomable this family is to some. It's funny. It's so routine, but feels so vibrant and alive. Riley helps West pick out clothing to get dressed, while Forrest bemoans finding clean boy clothes so close to laundry day.

"Are you going to the girl side on purpose?" West asks Riley as he rifles through their wardrobe.

Their apartment is filled with so much laughter and love it's exhausting. It's bustling, people flowing in and out of rooms, a shell that grows with us so our soft flesh needn't for space and safety. This polyamorous triad has found a balance: domestic without quiescent, home

without homonormative. There's a breath of freedom, of safe space to work through discomfort, to play with gender, to affirm identity with shouts of "gay" and compliments, Forrest calls "Riley, come see how hot Haley looks!" and Riley walks to the hallway and "Pshhhh giiiiirl, work it!" and the free flow of affection, kissing shifted from the realm of the sexual to the realm of loving, released to bounce around the walls and land on the comforters, and lust freed too to slither like their snake Calliope curling up around our necks.

How quiet monogamy must be.

When someone suggested genderfluid to me, for like the feelings I was experiencing, I went and like looked it up and read a bunch of people's stories and identities that identify as genderfluid and I went like

'Holy crap! This is a thing that happens to like a lot of people and I'm not like crazy and it is like a valid thing'

It just made it a lot more valid for me.

For a long time when I was initially having more genderfluid feelings I just kind of wrote them off for a really long time because um even though I'm dealing with a lot more trans issues these days in terms of pronouns and dysphoria and presentation and all that stuff,

I still don't have, you know

-I mean no one has the same experience-

but I still feel like

I'm not growing up with the trans experience as much?

What do you think 'growing up with the trans experience' is?

*I guess dealing with dysphoria and discomfort with gender and issues for like your whole life? Which I know not everyone does who identifies as trans... for like sexuality that's something that I've always been **aware of***

even when I didn't have a name for it.

"Gayness" was more visible and later on queerness and pansexualness and all that stuff was a lot more visible than nonbinary identities so for me...

it's hard for me to put into words

and think about how I grew up

with like trans experiences?

Because I feel like it wasn't at the forefront of my mind.

Forrest, Riley, and I take our laptops to a café in their neighborhood. It seems very edgy and hip, very Santa Cruz, so I'm surprised when the single-stall bathroom has a large emphatic WOMEN ONLY sign like I've forgotten that most of the public world still gender segregates their bathrooms.

Forrest becomes very somber, thinks people are staring at them. Riley and I try to insist that if anyone is staring it is certainly because Forrest looks so attractive, but Forrest shrugs off Riley's hand on their shoulder and frowns at the graduate school application essay they are working on.

I chop vegetables for the salad at dinner, starting in on the red wine as Forrest and I cook. The kitchen is a thin, narrow strip bordered by counters and cabinets, opening onto a dining table, turning left out onto the living room, all hard corners white and brown like a block spiral birth canal made from chopped trees. A combination of harsh and home. On the refrigerator is a dry erase board with a blue scribbled "Gender Forecast" box drawn in the corner for Forrest to update as needed. Cooking still feels like playing house and I wonder how long it will take me to realize I'm not playing anymore. Forrest calls Riley in to slice the baguette. Division of labor is what I love about cooking with others – it feels so collaborative.

Riley leaves to hang out with West while Forrest and I finish up dinner. When the toast is done, Forrest shouts to their partners that it's time for dinner, and I'm already light-headed pink-faced on my second glass of wine. Somehow Forrest and I have our arms around each other, my head buzzing as we start kissing, distracted by each other's bodies. And West comes in and laughs "Come on, you two!" and we laugh and apologize. "Is there making out happening?" Riley's voice calls from the living room and it's all very playful. In this space, polyamory feels like a logical extension of queerness – like once you move beyond a need for assuring paternity we should move beyond possessiveness, lean into communication, freedom, utopia.

After dinner, Forrest and I lean into utopia. We traipse to their bedroom to calls of "Have fun!" my nipple clamps dangling in one hand, the other hand interlocked with Forrest's. I ask if it will make them dysphoric if I touch their breasts, I say "breasts" because for some reason I think being clinical will be more acceptable but they respond that it's fine but say "chest" and I nod, nod, like I haven't already made a mistake but I'm glad that I asked I'm not going to need words much now anyway and we kiss and laugh and they say sheepishly "you could dominate me a bit if you like" and I smile down at them and I don't forget that I'm nervous I don't forget they aren't a girl but they are so meek as I take them down, watch them descend into subspace, bite at their neck, take control it feels so far from heterosexual and I'm not worried anymore because it isn't straight sex lesbian sex it's just queer. That's what I'm thinking as I trace my tongue down them, as I tighten the clamps on them and tug, they have this body and it's queer and attractive and I am outside of gender with our clothes tossed in different directions on the floor who knows where are genders are, have gone to, we're just bodies with soft skin and wet tongues and it feels like liberation to get lost in their rhythm, I mean my rhythm, or our rhythm, no this rhythm, the one that I set with my body the one timed to their gasping the one that mixes up cause and effect like pull and push are the same motion. I don't mean we're genderless I mean I can divorce their body from woman I mean we don't relate through our genders or we do in ways I don't expect and this has the same effect on

me of feeling right. Of feeling queer so queer I mean if I had to use one word to describe it Queer. Queerness as euphoria and pain and beauty and urgency and salt and soft and sharp until we crash.

And then Forrest is out of breath and their throat is dry. I'm not sure where all my clothes are so I wrap a blanket around me like a royal robe and drag it behind me through the living room. Riley and West are cuddling on the couch bed watching *Bill Nye the Science Guy*. I explain "Forrest needs water."

"I'll bet they do!" Riley laughs.

I imagine I blush then, but too much blood has already flowed to my face to tell.

When I return, we drink water and laugh and Forrest takes off the nipple clamps. I ask how they liked them, I know they'd been wanting to try them. We joke and talk and compliment each other for a breather. We talk about how different we are every time we have sex. I love it. It's been a year since the last time, and we're both such different people we're the familiar yet strange. We can laugh about the almost-threesome with her Ukrainian friend, the time she gave me head on the edge of a hot tub and I was worried I would fall backward into the pool, the time we were super drunk and I threw a wet vibrator at Riley because I couldn't figure out how to turn it off, the time we were watching my favorite episode of *Torchwood* but it was taking too long to load so we took a break to fuck then resumed watching, the time

we fell asleep after mid-day sex, not remembering that Riley was waiting in the living room to be told we could all hang out. It's all part of us.

It's sort of nice to have someone you only fuck every 6 months or so. Gives you time to change, to be new, to feel how differently you fit together like a check in.

yup I guess

we've grown I guess we're getting older and we're still

queer as fuck

may it ever be so, blessed be.

We don't cling and whisper love to each other or fake indifference. We laugh and reminisce like friends catching up until we decide to resume because honestly Forrest isn't going to miss a chance to go down on me.

And maybe it's that night West doesn't want to sleep alone, so Forrest goes to sleep in their bed, and I snuggle up with Riley in his and Forrest's bed. Riley is family to my heart. I fall asleep with my arms around him to the sound of rain.

"I kissed a girl and I liked it, hope my boyfriend don't mind it"

I normally need at least three drinks to tolerate Katy Perry's music, but back in early high school, the last night of church camp is about as close to drunk as I get. Erica is making it clear to all the girls on the dance floor that her boyfriend *don't* mind it, and so we are dancing back and forth hips

swaying jeaned legs grinding into denim crotch and our lips meet and our tongues dance along to the music too *It's not what good girls do* and instead of cringing offended by the music I just try it on like maybe I can inhabit that space, or maybe not, it feels ironic and fun and raw but in the world of this song it's sugary sweet and stiff like chewing bubble gum in the winter. Our shirts are somewhere else, thrown away in celebration of shirtless o' clock, a time-honored camp tradition that can be declared at any time but also is always declared at dances. This would be the last official shirtless o' clock, I guess in the end we looked too pornographic, this sea of topless teenagers making out, but I always take credit I always apologize because when Erica stopped dancing with me to find other girls to kiss I watched her go up to my crush, watched her from across the room, and then Ellie was in front of me and then we were kissing and not even pretending to dance we burst like a grape wet and flesh and sour.

I pinned Ellie against a chain-link fence to the sound of cheers and laughed into her neck we were restrained unrestrained all the energy of the uncontrollable like there was nothing but her. But I saw the flashes of Erica's camera, it was all background, egged on by the hollering, and trying to remember the camp rules, like no hickeys, it was such a high, and it timed itself to the music, fast and fervent no pretense.

The song ended, music switched to slow and we emerged from ourselves to find Erica and my crush Caitlin standing by us. Erica took

another shot of me with Ellie and laughed. "Damn!" Ellie and I moved to the middle of the dance floor, no longer a spectacle. We kissed like the music, softly, slowly. We said nothing, lips never untouched.

Before the song had quite ended, lights flooded the cabin lounge. The vast wood-paneled floors shone, reflecting light back up onto brightly colored shoes and dresses that looked garish in the sudden false-daylight. The green and white of the ping pong table was just visible in the corner under heaps of discarded tops as we blinked our eyes to acclimate to the return to color. The adults declared it time to go to bed. Ellie and I turned with the crowds to search for our shirts. Mine was never found.

The skin on my arms and belly scrunched into goosebumps as I walked into the night air, topless, but I've never much minded the cold.

This is not the conclusion. This is the last page so far.