

EXIST OTHERWISE



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- Featuring -

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NEUTER IS THE
ONLY GENDER
THAT SUITS ME



Cover Image, Claude Cahun, by Marcel Moore

Claude Cahun and her partner, Marcel Moore, were imprisoned and sentenced to death by the Nazis for their anti-fascist activism. They escaped that fate when the war ended.

Eyes widen until the lids begin to tear.
A soft-skinned finger penetrates your lips,
thrusting straight through your flaccid teeth.

Scratch at your scalp till it exposes those worms.
Those worms that whisper tantalizing thoughts
into your loins beyond the lakes of blood.

Because darling, you're a woman! Isn't it beauty?
Isn't womanhood just cosmic repugnance?
Oh, illustrious divine, won't you steal away my dysphoria?

Beat my head with my fists until it's nothing but gore.
Hands over my ears to prevent me from hearing
the shrieks and howls and cries and wails and screams.

And the hate, oh, the hate that drives those around me
to madness as sumptuous as Nyarlathotep itself.
Those who shout are yet to see distant enough ahead.

Not feminine, or masculine, or androgynous,
or childish, or mature, or lovely, or ugly;
simply a being in a flesh suit with crystals for eyes.



Elaine (they/them) is a young, queer poet looking to find their way in the world. They grew up in the Midwest and have been writing since they were 12; their work ranges from concrete to abstract in style.

The boys sat on the edge of the Brahmaputra river and kept glancing back at me, giggling in a language I could not understand.

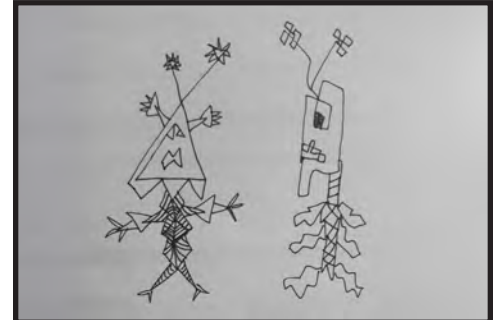
I was caught between feelings I usually can't name. That day, I could. To be fair, therapy has helped.

On one hand, I felt wonder watching the fishermen gather water hyacinth and silt, pushing the green to one side with their oar-like arms. In a single breath, they dove deep to gouge out silt. I imagined their wives transforming them into sturdy clay pots. At the same time, I felt aware of my body, which isn't malleable.

What were the boys laughing about? My gaze flicked between the fishermen, the boys, and my own body. I observed their actions to my detriment. Every little twitch, stare, or whisper made me conscious of my body — a female-assigned at birth. Was the way my legs bent, and thighs parted as I sat on the ground, unfeminine? Or was it the shape of my genitals that disclosed my femininity even more? Was the way I dressed too masculine? Maybe it was never too deep, and they were simply envious of my sports shoes.

For a minute, I forgot that they were clad in jerseys and slippers, playing football with a semi-deflated ball. For a minute, my gender dysphoria clouded my diaspora privilege. My perfect English, my paler

cont'd



Palipuff (she/they) considers themselves an emerging writer. As a migrant of color, they explore themes at the intersection of queerness, racism, and belonging through poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction.

skin, and my western clothes made them call me a 'foreigner'. For a minute, I believed I was a 'foreigner' — an alien in my own body.

I rode a bicycle on the dusty roads of Majuli island, the largest riverine island in the world, located in the northeastern Indian state of Assam. It is also home to the Mishing tribe, a Sino-Tibetan ethnic group. I reached their side of the shore on a makeshift raft that transported me and my bicycle across the river. The ingenuity of tribal people can put any urban dweller to shame, from their houses raised on stilts to their intricately crafted bamboo bridges.

During the 15 kilometres I rode around the village, I didn't see a single woman (with an Asterix, like me and others who don't fit the binary) on a bicycle. Perhaps that was the reason they looked at me with amazement. I blame many things on my move to Europe — my much paler skin and the words to describe the discomfort I feel in my body. Gender dysphoria wasn't so jarringly evident to me before I knew how to name it.

As I sat in one of their homes at a later point, I could feel their gaze upon me. The Mishing women smiled at me and let out a familiar giggle among themselves, as if they knew my secrets.

Did they sense that I do not always feel like a woman?

That I usually hide my gender identity when I come home?

That I am scared of my family's judgments if I tell them my pronouns?

That I travel to escape home?

That my breasts often feel like unnecessary appendages I wish I could detach?

Did they know the dysphoria gnawed tiny nibbles of my anxiety to feed itself?

"God made me so *gora* (fair-skinned) and them so *kaala-maala* (slang for Black), but their hearts are *safed* (white), and that's all that matters", the patriarch of the house proclaimed. I wanted to go off on a tangent about colorism, but I simply nodded in agreement with their generosity and impeccable hospitality. My jittery legs, after half a day of cycling, momentarily found a place to rest. How does one feel out of place, and yet have a sense of belonging at the same time, at the same place?

I sat on the bamboo floor contemplating, as the patriarch expressed his immense gratitude for my company. My body let its guard down, melting onto the floor as it relaxed. I tamed my dysphoria as I *cont'd*

realized I was a 'foreigner' in my own country before I was a woman.
And I'm not ashamed to admit I prefer it this way.

The bamboo was woven in a pattern so that one could see what lay beneath. Mostly plastic ruins of cups in which they drank *Apong*. Rice beer, or *Apong*, as they call it locally, is their cultural pride. Every family has their recipe for concocting it, they explained as I observed women work their hands into a rice and herb mixture to prepare a new batch. I was offered countless cups of *Apong* as a symbolic gesture as I passed through different nooks and corners of Majuli. *Apong* brought men and women together in celebration. All genders made merry at the same table.

The children of Majuli greeted me gleefully as I passed their beautiful bamboo homes on my way further. Were they also fascinated to see a girl on a bicycle? Or maybe they were just curious to see an unfamiliar face cruising in their village on a scorching day. Children can hardly differentiate between genders and the identities associated with them. They ran after me barefoot, excitement palpable with every step they sprang. Their faces were remnants of innocence that do not come easily in the daunting streets of Delhi, the city I grew up in.

My childhood was unlike theirs — luxurious, yet devoid of warmth. How easily they welcomed me into their homes! Would I ever invite a stranger off the street into my house? As a child, I was always apprehensive of unfamiliar faces walking through our doors. Years have only added to my skepticism. It's a small miracle that I travel alone, after growing up in a body too often sexualized.

Yet, here I am, still existing.

Here I am, juggling my dysphoria as a diaspora.

Here I am, sitting among strangers, sharing a moment of quiet intoxication.

Here I am, confronting the hollow opacity of my concrete life.

Here I am, striking the bamboo tenderly as it reverberates with a sweet, familiar symphony.

in the shower I stood
with my leg up
balanced against the lip

quivering with effort not to
slip through the soap
wondering if I could

delete the growth? and then
immediate hatred and then
wanting it back

a blade scrape and suddenly
I was eleven again
arms and legs tucked in

chick in a membrane
waiting to crack
through to the wider world

washing smooth skin
down my whole body
holding my every breath

who was this for? not I
having done so much to stretch
this skin to fit inside



Golda (she/her) is a writer and artist from Chicago. Her works of prose and poetry have been previously published in *After Hours*, *Bi Women Quarterly*, *B O D Y*, and *The New York Times*, among others. [Website](#)

your forehead a smokescreen of curiosity / vermillion full of
questions / this poem a manual / making up my own religion /
stringnzm / cherry blossoms lose their flowers / in the tender dance
of growing / from a distance heaven / butterflies flutter & watch
me play like string orchestra / my mother perches on a subatomic
chair / with her òfii fabrics / her eyes / multicolor of orisons / her
smile / areola of things meant to blossom / a woman perambulates /
a child clinging on her back / as hope to her vertebral column / she
asks for a seat / dad will not farm dissatisfaction this time / some
little boys in their teen / vault over fences & blame a conductor
for holding their change / sun sets like bruise fading into night / we
watch grandmas stroll with their àpótí & àtùpà / dust settles an eye
level away / like unspoken prayers in believer's chest waiting for amin
/ police wallet the song darting over the lawn / wave their hands &
/ pretend to have left / a couple sit / so close that it's hard for ant
to butt in / meek everywhere / sign of angels among us / i perform
ablution / inwardly / i weave constellation into my hairs / braiding
stories incognito / grievances are first shapes i could mold with just
a string / the left curve of the string / a memory held against the
sky of concealment / the horizontal line in the left corner / a garden

cont'd



S. Abdulwasi'h is a Nigerian introverted poet, essayist, and graphics designer. He's a member of Oyongo Collective. He writes from Ilorin, a city he fondly describes as "a breath from heaven." A monotheist, he serves as Poetry Editor at *Words-Empire Magazine*. He authored the shortlisted chapbook *Life, An Objet D'art* and won the 2024 Prose Purple Writing Competition (Poetry category). His works have appeared or are forthcoming in *Bare Hill Review*, *Pictura Journal*, *Carolina Muse*, & others.

[Website](#)

/ big enough to bivouac a little girl / & her oversized griefs / the
horizontal line of the right corner / depicts / her mother's prayers
open up like delicate flowers / searching for the first rays of dawn /
the right curve of the string / are open wounds that do not paint a
man of pride / from the upper tooth of the first string / the samaras
in the mountain of sanctuary / like gardens harboring hidden blades
/ towards her mother in the mouth of war / the lower tooth of the
string / returns her to her mother's bequest / as though to say /
child / never be cowered / eventually dawn arrives / follows winter's
breath / follows flowers that sprout her mother's bequest / from her
chest / & make them a survival wing that reaches for starlight/

The Sacrifice of Iphigeneia

Cleomé Morra



overstimulation of an empire's fall

kayla nichols

each day a new act of war
headlines my breaking news
notifications so i marry *do not disturb*
because i feel myself becoming numb

calluses grow over raw flesh
as i perceive each tragedy

i try to weave
the ribbons of myself
back into a wholeness
that can still hold empathy

cupped hands sip water
i know is polluted, but it is better
than dying of thirst
flesh wasn't made to witness
abject horror day after day

but i lose track of pieces of me
my frayed edges fly off
like wispy dandelion seeds
on the wind—they float away

take my softness with them
and leave me plucked, emptied, desiccated
in dry earth

i keep wondering if the romans
felt overstimulated as their empire fell

did the dust of the tower's collapse
scar their lungs? did their skin feel
too tight? and when it became
too much, did they flay
themselves open or cleave
themselves in two?



Kayla (she/her) is a queer autistic writer with deep roots in Appalachia's central highlands. In her poetry, Kayla explores those things which make and unmake us in an unabashed and visceral way. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Tennessee Voices*, *Writerly Magazine*, and the *Stories of the Seasons Zine*, and her debut collection, *The Stuff of Stars*, will be published in 2026. [Website](#)

Pretty Little Shades of Gray

Leyelle M.G.

I lo...

I didn't reject you because I doubted

Because I doubted you felt rejected

On my soul, I swear I've loved you for as long as I can remember

I just didn't want to let that define me.

You are skin and bones and nails

And hair

And when you weren't it was an odd kind of liberty you couldn't wrap your head around

You loved your body but you didn't want to let them call you names.

Maybe there's a sort of freedom in broken language

The ambiguities

That invite conversation instead of assumptions

I redefine myself

By putting identity on the shelf and allowing 'me' to be more than an idea

I am woman

But that does not define me

It was never a rejection of you or your perfection

But of words too limited to express it

If 'her' means silence and passivity, I defy her

To mean victim, submission, weakness and frailty

I refused to believe that a pair of chromosomes could break me

I need a new word for this double kind of beauty

Black radiance

cont'd



Leyelle (she/her) is a queer African American and Dominican author and artist from Maryland, USA, raised in part in her ancestral home of the Dominican Republic. Author of the Turnill prize-winning short story *Rain Dance* and the novel *Damsel in the Red Dress*, her works often dig into the depths of cultural and familial influence on who and what we become. *Pretty Little Shades of Gray* was written about her struggle between transitioning or accepting herself as a different *kind* of woman.

[Website](#)

Pretty Little Shades of Gray cont'd

Leyelle M.G.

Dual, sensual, instrumental

ornamental

Sea of life – of breaths and nests and womb

I'm more than enraptured by the glory of you

I just need them to know there's so much more to this. than that –

Masculine light and feminine black

Blend together to conceive pretty little shades of gray

I was never more

“Her” than when I adorned myself in “manhood”

and revelled

Everyone became a little ugly as they made love, it was simply that by that time it no longer mattered. Only the remarkably vain cared about such things, so long as the groin continued to send its happy messages to the brain.

Perhaps because she did not consider herself beautiful, Vero never cared how she appeared once she started making love. If she had already made it that far, then further attempts at attraction were irrelevant. For her, Fornication always had the effect of shrinking her personal view of the world down to her pelvis, and it excluded all else.



Zacheriah Tucker (any/all) is a hobbyist historian and writer. He holds degrees in psychology and sociology from Oregon State University, and still lives in the Pacific Northwest where he enjoys hiking and exploring the outdoors. His work focuses on bringing new and unique perspectives to classic subjects. His stories take place across many different locations and time periods, trying to discover the human elements that unite everyone everywhere. [Website](#)

Breaking through barriers, wading through mud, I grew up exploring abandoned or under-construction buildings. The foundations, the half-framed skeletons of walls, the gaps left for the plumbing and electricity, frayed ends of cables, the temporary steps—all beckoned. If forbidden or dangerous, then more alluring. These became building elements of imagination. When I was twelve, I sketched plans for my own dome-shaped dreamhouse, its long canning kitchen, the wood-floored ballroom with its band stage, a greenhouse along the south side. Absence of women role models deconstructed these childhood dreams, but buildings remain fascinating.

Years later, at a suburban nightclub, two young men appealed to aesthetics and adventure.

“Want to see the abandoned VA hospital with us?” asked Kenny.

I thought of another hospital, St. Joseph’s, my latest architectural exploration. It was scheduled for demolition, but curious about where I’d been born, I’d snuck in, strolling the spookily empty long halls and small rooms. Cobwebbed windows faced west, the sinking sun bouncing off the tenement roofs below and streaming onto dusty, once polished floors. Picture-perfect for my Nikon. What would the VA hospital look like? It had been raining; it was night; this would be a different experience.

cont’d



Deborah (she/her) is a hybrid resident between Barcelona and Asheville. After working as a Senate aide, teacher, cemetery manager, TV editor and ghostwriter of memoir, she is emerging as a short story writer, published in *Bright Flash*, *Asymptote*, *Dead Mule School of Southern Literature* and more. She received the Spring 2025 Writers Residency at Can Serrat, Spain, completing her forthcoming collection of short stories set in the second wave of feminism. Deborah is a singer-songwriter who melds the Middle Ages with a life set to fast forward from birth. [Website](#)

Yes, let's see. On the road, Kenny offered us a dose of LSD, and I was eager for its extra insight. Cars on the interstate sparkled their star-lights, red, white and yellow, changing to bright pops and particle streaks before we pulled onto a black-top highway, then into the hospital drive.

Chicken-wire fencing surrounded the compound, but its gate was easy enough to crawl under. Dirt ground under my belly; I inhaled its released smell before rising. A single pole light glared, casting more shadow than illumination, here and there lighting water, pooled on the uneven asphalt. Boxy grey buildings receded before us, lining the street like stage sets waiting to be pushed and pulled into place, more metal than marble. Soon we stood in front of a concrete wall, an unassailable façade. The tin sign attached to the corner read *Morgue*.

"C'mon," said my skinny guide, his mustache lifting, "Let's go!"

His resounding footsteps led to a huge arched doorway of wooden panels, painted a peeling Army green. Cavernous and closed. He kicked the door, but it only swallowed the sound, the way a sandbar swallows a wave. The darkness was a bandage leaking light. Here was where the ambulances had passed; here was where the hearses had parked. We were at the abandoned VA hospital, somewhere near Atlanta, and we were tripping. Senses were dialed high, inseparable

into their components of taste, smell, sight, sound, touch, and extrasensory perception—for ghosts were watching us. They shifted in the shadows; they had no feet. This was not my first ghost rodeo, but the acid added another dimension.

It merged my body with the surroundings; one with all. Yet my body was individual, for it nudged me. I shifted onto the dirt outside of the paved area and squatted to piss away the disco's drinks. Kenny decided to join me. No inhibitions were in play at the moment; I felt nothing at the fact of us peeing near each other, focused on the warm release. Nothing, until he swung around and continued pissing, on me, to the point of inundation.

What the hell! I was confused, but Kenny laughed and called to his friend to watch. Too high to object, I observed and thought, while I finished my pee. I rose, shook myself off, and soon the three of us had crawled back under the fence.

In the car's closeness, we all knew I was in need of a hot shower, but no one spoke. Kenny put the radio on. The FM deejay was spinning Led Zeppelin and "The Rain Song" had never sounded sweeter. It created thinking space as we returned to the club, where my car was parked. Home, I stripped my clothes into the trash; I wouldn't let a

cont'd

thrift store rack hold that shame. Washing the smell away, I purged the disco, the hospital and the young men from my future. The memory was carved in cortex.

Watching the “golden shower” with dispassionate acidic eyes revealed to me the power of the penis—how irrelevant it was, and yet so easy to wield. That man was not as smart as I was, I thought, nor as pretty, inside or out. Pissing on me was his way of establishing superiority. Pissing on me in front of his friend was a way to establish pecking, or pissing, order.

Freud might have noted a case of penis envy, but I didn't want a penis. I sought my own power. Surely a simple fact of biology did not establish a man's precedence over any and every female. Yet, it was undeniable that standing up while peeing gave freedoms: to run, to fight, to act and react much faster! My horse sometimes peed when walking. The male dog communicated easily with his markings. Squatting put one at a disadvantage.

I began training, and before long I could stand and aim a stream of urine away from my feet. Then I could hit the center of the toilet, albeit uncomfortably straddled, facing the back like the boys and men I had seen. Sometimes I pulled this trick when with a man as a show

of power and for its shock value. Like smoking a cigar in public, it had its uses (usually distancing the observer).

But after a few months of this I resumed sitting and squatting. It was easier: clothes got in the way. Standing up to pee makes sense on outdoor days in the cold, when you're wearing a skirt and nothing underneath. And that's—well—for me, that's never. But I learned and practiced the politics of pee.

Now I may be pissed off, but never pissed on.

Let Me Be Everything

Emma Goldman-Sherman

“As far as I’m concerned, being any gender is a drag.”

~ Patti Smith

wind moving leaves	the sound of shimmer	like far off applause
more than two lanes	the Chinese menu	of existence
beyond the blur	a fast-moving car	to make a forest sing

once they said—again they say—“there is no such thing”—yet here we are

what is a kiss between two who don’t need to understand mentally how to fit themselves together what is a kiss when lips are lips bodies bodies and hands do as lips and pilgrims travel vast spaces to love who we love need not conquer for love freely given built from pheromones and cellular recognitions a kiss insists on itself in its fruiting body as lipped tongued flesh a proof we never had to name but naming come to a decision not necessarily an incision concisely brief slash panty any antsy body anybody loves loves



Emma’s (they/them) poetry and flash appears in *Gigantic Sequins*, *Ghost City Press*, *Eckleburg*, *Toyon*, *The Nature of Our Times* and *Best Microfiction* 2025. [Website](#)

“vous avez brûlé une sainte”

Cleomé Morra



The Friedmann Equations

Joshua St. Claire

You have always been walking down this endless office hallway. Lub-dub, lub-dub, fluorescent (with emphasis on the scent) lights begin and end in an infinite succession. You have been walking here long before the Big Bang and will go on long after the Heat Death of the Universe. Doors line the hallway from horizon to horizon. Most of the doors slam shut and label themselves things like *heart* and *soul* before you can even see inside. Occasionally, you catch a glimpse before each door shuts. What's there? The Peacock Throne of Shah Jahan, the Amber Room, the Mauve Egg, *The Concert*, the Scepter of Dagobert, the Great Bell of Dhammazedi, a pair of red shoes, two cannons, and a beat up old hard drive—forever beyond reach.

all your base
are belong to us
Parma violets



Joshua (he/him) is an accountant from a small town in Pennsylvania. His poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *Notre Dame Review*, *Blithe Spirit*, *Presence*, *Two Thirds North*, and *Blue Unicorn*, among others. His haiku have in several annual anthologies. He is the winner of *Rattle: Poets Respond*, the *Gerald Brady Memorial Senryu Award* and the *Trailblazer Award*. [Website](#)

I'm at the casino and I want to

Shivani Gupta

be the kind of woman who forgets her place
and wears the skin of the 3 bulls
in the slot machine screaming torro torro, wild cowboy edition

be a lucky fuckers dream
piss soaked and cocaine dusted
thrustled like a coin tossed with faith,
not hope
to be the sure thing that never shows up

she asks how I'm enjoying my time in vegas
I say I'm here for work
for the work
I am doing *the* work I say
I only wanted to see what the rules are
Standing in the playroom for adults, trying to convince myself I mean
something by my stance on
men and women, and where I stand on anima-animus. How to tell colleague 3 this
is not about femininity but will always be about the masculine
Bull

pig
lizard
- headed I say the origins of me are (reminder to look this up).

do you have cash? I've decided I'm going
to be that kind of girl who stays and pays to play.



Shivani (she/her) works as a Behavioral Scientist in an AI-analytics company - writing poems with surprising syntax is her gentle fight against the robots. Her work has featured globally in BBC, Forbes, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Mumbai Poetry Slam, Loyola University Chicago, Baby Teeth Journal, Ranger Magazine, The Well & more. She is a current In-Surreal-Life fellow & serves as the Development Committee Chair for the Chicago Poetry Center. She loves sauces, baked goods & all round silliness.

I am a writer
I know how to fill
gaps
with narrative.

My history hums
persistently.
A palm to my ear-
guttural crackles.

I never felt like a man
until I knew I was a woman.

I used to wear
conceptual
dresses,

prefrontal frill,
chromosomal lace.

I am 20
I wear tartan skirts, a second
skin truer
than the first.
To an ex,

I am a writer
I know when to leave
gaps
.

My history:

palm to ear
guttural crackles.

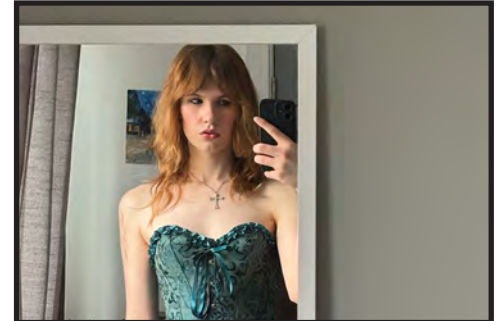
I never felt like a man-
knew I was a woman.

I used to wear

dresses

p e tal frill,
ro s al lace.

I will be 21
I wa n t a second
skin-
the first:
an ex.



Lyra Button (she/her) is a member of Durham University's Slam team, where she studies liberal arts. Her poetry centres around the trans body, and how its relationships with language, the world, and other persons are both affirmative and strained. Her poetry has been featured in *Rundelania*, *Cicada*, *For the Lighthouse*, and the *Owls Rant*. [Instagram](#)

My life/

I said love
is difficult, it includes my
-self.

I want to love

in an altered body.

At the first hormone appointment
I tell another history.

/My life for The Canon:

I said love
is

an altered body.

At the first hormone appointment.
I write my story:

medical
scraps, a narrative
checkbox fit
for the
Canon.

Lyra Button

Lactation/Laceration

Aimee Lowenstern

Originally published in Little Patuxent Review

Breasts like dumplings. Breasts like
cauliflower bunches,
breasts like ravioli.

Breasts like puddings or tepid
oatmeal,

breasts felt for ripeness,
breasts bursting in hands
like cherries, or
zits, or
naked mole rats

Cut off my breasts and boil them in milk,
watch the post-pubescent fat
melt into shining grease. A thin disk of skin
clots the surface of the pot,
my nipples watching with tiny snail eyes.

Breasts like escargot.

Blood makes the steam go pink,
papillas erect.

cont'd



Aimee (she/her) is a twenty-seven year old poet living in Nevada. She has cerebral palsy, a pulse, and a pen. Her work can be found in several literary journals, including *Fifth Wheel Press* and *Daikaju Zine*.

Stannic saliva drips
from gore-bubbled mouths.

I spoon-feed my wounds breast-soup
so their teeth will grow in strong.
I smell my heart-beat on their breath,
 lips wet and red
 lips wet and red

I lean down
to french-kiss my lungs

(wet, red) (wet, red)

Instead, I start to sing.

For most of my life, winter was the only season I felt truly at home in my body. When the snow would layer the landscape outside, I would layer on clothing. Neither would fully transform what was underneath, but both would obscure the shape of things.

The extended year of lockdown would change that. The virus was a silent but harsh wind that swept through spring. I only underwent a week of muted senses of smell and taste, but a worry that my condition would worsen lasted for weeks until I was able to dismiss it. The experience unsettled my understanding of my body. It was a humbling reminder that there was no separation of mind and body; it's all and only me.

In the following winter, I moved into a studio apartment with only the expectation that I would have more time to myself than before. I treated the place as another layer around me and watched the snow fall outside.

I saw myself as a pilot of a flesh contraption. I would treat my body like a lazy pet, one that I was begrudgingly taking care of. Easier to disassociate than to deal with my frustration with my physical reality.

cont'd



Alex (he/him) is a writer in New York. His writing has been published in *Lambda Literary Review*, *The Rumpus*, *Complete Sentence*, *The Inquisitive Eater* and *Unwinnable*. He is an editor for *Pine Hills Review*.

[Website](#)

While I understood that I was generally healthy and able-bodied, in my mind's library was a catalog of my unappealing features to shame myself with. I ignored minor sight and hearing issues, instead focusing on my physical attributes: how my toes look like an evolutionary chart or how my body hair grows like an ill-tended garden. My body was both too much and not enough.

Most frustrating was my stomach. It was emblematic of my ongoing weight issues and what I presumed everyone focused on. Any excuse to cover it up, typically with a sweater to add some structure, I would take. Not a real change, but the illusion of a less round body would suffice.

My preoccupation with how I'm seen stems from having very little time and space exclusively my own throughout my life. While childhood only affords you so much privacy, my adulthood has been spent in college residence halls, shared apartments, and houses with family members where I had not much but a bedroom as a truly private place. In these places, often the only real solitude I got was when I slept. When you live with and amongst other people, sometimes it feels like the only place you are alone is in your mind.

But that winter, outside the occasional visitor, I was alone. It took me a few weeks of in the apartment to grasp what that meant.

Initially, I filled rooms with the sound of music, TV shows and YouTube videos. When I didn't have music or other people's voices, I talked to myself. Sometimes, it was about a current chore or a reminder of the week's plans and other times it was simply random phrases or minor nonsense. In the beginning, I would ask myself, Am I trying to keep myself company? I would catch myself, thinking it was silly. But I eventually concluded: Who else is here to judge that besides me? As sole authority, I have decided not to care. My noises can reside here along with me.

The isolation also gave me room to reckon with what I have covered up with clothes all these years. After the perplexing fits and spurts of puberty, I find myself feeling like I'm on the outskirts of manhood. Somewhere at the intersection of society's perceptions of gay men, its understanding of masculinity, and its thoughts on people's shape and weight, I am lost. Is it an outside expectation or something internal? Am I describing something other cis-gendered people feel and just don't talk about? Is this something specific to me?

cont'd

It's a feeling hard to describe. Is it too pithy to say that I'm gender mostly conforming? I feel most comfortable in a box marked male, but it's a box I'm spilling out of. All I have are rough metaphors and loose labels. Words can only get so close, so the frustration remains.

Spending more time alone, I have realized the core of my anxiety is not having a coherent explanation for my body and for who I am. What the babbling around my place has taught me, however, is that words are sometimes just for other people. I am not an equation to be solved.

When arrived at this thought, it felt too simple: that I was dodging and retreating from the issue. I was also uncomfortable with my ability and privilege to do so. Over time, however, I have given myself permission to withdraw, to grant myself a reprieve. Having carried the stress of dealing with other's observations of me on my body and in my mind for the past three decades, unburdening myself from them for however long I can get is a freedom I am granting myself. At home, I let the question of definition hang like one of my coats on a hook.

Not needing to always justify my figure has freed up some space in my mind. In its place, I'm trying to pay more attention to my

body instead of just uncritically sticking to routines. I'm shifting my focus from preparing an appealing package for the outside world to comprehensively caring for myself.

I did not emerge from the other side of that winter with a new fully formed sense of self, instead I gained a few pounds and some more peace of mind. Yes, there is still a comfort found in how my body looks in a sweater. I will still venture out into the world prepared with a brief, easy answer of who I am. And I know I'll never be fully at home in my body as, like the seasons, my body will change over time. But now, I'm prepared to learn not just to live with it, but in it and my potential new shapes, over and over again.



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