

Your Journey Home

Through the Boyhood that Wasn't

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Transgender - adjective. Describes someone whose designated gender at birth does not fit their actual gender. To be someone who is trans* is to be a person who experiences dysphoria, where the brain refuses to acknowledge and accept the parts of the body that are actually there. The sense of what should and should not be there is flawed.

Trans*ness is bigger than myself.
Bigger than myself because it goes beyond
Me
Connects me to so many people.
On an intimate level of understanding
These people who I
Haven't met
Will never meet
And might not like
Are my siblings, because
Whether I hate them or
Don't always understand them
These people are my
Brothers
Sisters
In between
United in dysphoria
Whether from a boyhood that wasn't
A girlhood that will never be
Or there are more than two genders fuckhead
We are all united because
We deal with many of the same things
And this is magic, a wonder.
Because I can use my words, my story
To create something that my siblings
United in dysphoria
Will be able to relate to

But here is where it gets tricky
Because my story is not their story
And every time I open my mouth
The people who are not my people
Take that story as capital G
Gospel
I have a trans* friend
I know how it goes.
High stakes to speak for my
Tiny community, my tiny
Beaten down community with
An attempted suicide rate of

Forty percent
 What drives you my
 Brothers
 Sisters
 In between
 United in dysphoria
 To try to take your own life

I know, oh I know
 Dysphoria is a killer, deadly
 Almost impossible to learn to live with.
 And were that not enough
 Were that not enough
 The world fights you
 Every
 Single
 Step
 Through your journey to
 A body you call home
 And your comfortable place
 Social, physical, emotional
 Transition

Especially, especially for my
 Brothers,
 Sisters,
 In between,
 United in dysphoria
 Of color.
 Likely to end up
 Selling drugs or turning tricks
 So likely to live in poverty
 Because why hire a sibling
 When you can hire
 Someone that doesn't inspire
 Hate.
 Someone who doesn't come from
 A people whose holiday
 Is remembering those dead of
 Hate.
 When it is legal in
 Forty states
 Four zero, eight of ten states, eighty percent
 To fire my siblings
 United in dysphoria

For having the courage
 To be who they are
 For fighting deadly killer
 Dysphoria
 And even deadlier
 Hate.

I know,
 Brothers
 Sisters
 In between
 Why you try to take your own lives in such numbers
 Because I once tried to take mine
 One of the forty percent who does
 I feel your pain
 My pain
 Our pain
 And I hope I can speak it.
 Can bring this pain into the light
 Through this light bring change
 Bring relief to this beaten down
 Community whose whole lives are
 Not about changing themselves
 But shifting the world
 To let everyone see who they are.

These are my people
 From the land of the boyhood that wasn't
 The girlhood that will never be
 And the borderlands in between
 I speak for them but not over them (i hope)
 I speak, I sing, I yell
 In hopes that you people
 Who are not my people
 Will understand our private, silent killer
 And the louder, angry killer
 Of society's hate.
 I sing for you my story
 Not capital G gospel
 But capital P personal
 My journey home through
 The boyhood that wasn't
 Come with me
 And make this your journey.

Today is the day you are born. Happy birthday, little one. You are cut out of your mother's uterus, the doctors following the lines left by the birth of your brother and your sister. You emerge the same way they did, lifted out into the world squalling and covered in strange red fluids. A quick check by the doctor confirms what the ultrasounds predicted and you are wrapped in a pink blanket. Your father sent your mother flowers, and the card hidden in the fragrant petals reads "Congratulations on baby Amy/Harry." You are named Amy, to go with your pink blanket and this is the start of a lie you will deal with for the next two decades.

Today, you are six and do not believe you are all that different. No one expects you to conform to gender roles, so you don't. It is the only time in your life that your relationship to your gender is entirely uncomplicated. You play with dolls with your next door neighbor because you enjoy making up imaginary lives for them. You're equally thrilled to wrestle with your friend's younger brother, not especially caring about mud or grass. Your parents, especially your mother, support this freedom. She buys you dresses and jeans, comic book t-shirts and princess gowns in equal measure. The dresses start to feel wrong after a while. You enjoy the attention you get when you wear them, especially from your father, but they feel wrong somehow, like they just aren't for you. You tell yourself and everyone else that you don't feel like you can be as active when you're worried about showing of your underwear or getting your nice skirts caught in tree branches. This is certainly true, but it isn't the whole truth. The dresses make you feel unsettled in a way you don't have the words for yet. For now, you discard your becoming too small dresses and take pride in being a less traditionally feminine girl like your mother and your sister. You don't like being terribly feminine but you like the idea of feminism and connect with many of the historical figures your mom tells you about. Gender roles are a bit of a nebulous concept for a six year old to grasp, so for right now you follow in the footsteps of tomboys who have come before you and figure that feminine things will make more sense when you're older. It is just something you need to grow in to.

Today you are eight. It is your first day of second grade and the other children make fun of you for the clothes that you wear. Fashion is a bit of a new concept for you because you have been wearing a uniform for two years and no one in

daycare cares if you wear ratty sweats. Here though, the children are richer and mock you for your hand-me-down t-shirts. Beyond that, the other girls call you a tomboy and for the first time that is a negative label. They see you as different, some kind of interloper and they tease you for it, so you try to act more like them. These attempts don't go very well because you are too busy reading to want to style your hair and too impatient to play outside to wait for your nails to dry. Mom also takes you shopping for new clothes and you try to pick out more feminine ones. Awkwardly, you are trying to play the role of “girl,” attempting to change who you are to avoid ridicule. The role is one you don't understand and the more feminine your clothing the more uncomfortable you feel. The more uncomfortable you feel, the more comfortable everyone else seems to be with the way you present. You see your sister starting to become more feminine and figure it is a genetic thing. Someday, it won't feel so uncomfortable to be feminine and it is one of those things that only grown-ups understand and you are a later bloomer than your classmates. Someday, you will blossom into a woman and it will all make sense. In the meantime, you get to be yourself and you try to not let your impending blossoming feel like a jail sentence. Right now you decide to be who you are and deal with the ridicule.

Today, Mom is taking you shopping for your first bra. This is the start of the blossoming you have felt hanging over you for the past four years. Your body has decided it is a time for you to become a woman and it makes you uncomfortable. Your chest has been growing and developing for some time but you didn't want to suggest going bra shopping in case Mom said it wasn't time yet. She finally mentioned your burgeoning chest and while you aren't certain if you want your chest yet, you are relieved to be bra shopping because other people have started to notice your chest as well. Mom takes you to Target and you try on what feels like every sports bra in the store before you find one that doesn't itch and that your mother says fits. You dislike having her in the fitting room but you don't know the first thing about bras or how they are supposed to fit and you need her help. This shame is a recent thing, coming with your budding breasts. That done, you make her carry your bras to the checkout counter even though she rolls her eyes at you, saying no one will believe that they are hers. While you were in the fitting room, Mom noticed your growing arm pit hair and she takes you to Wal-Mart to shop for

razors. While you are looking at razors you bump into a friend from one of your old schools. You both avoid eye contact while your moms talk, because puberty feels like an awkward secret you are not supposed to share and you both know what you are shopping for. There is a massive amount of shame around your developing bodies, awash with hormones and drowning in a sea of misinformation. Conversation over, Mom stops to get some pads for the period that hasn't started yet and you are tempted to ask if she is shopping by a puberty supplies check list in an attempt to buy all of the awkward stuff at the same time. Despite all of the awkwardness, you are glad for the sports bra that protects your sensitive chest even though the thick straps make it difficult to hide under your t-shirts. Because you are the last in your class to start wearing a bra the girls in your class coo over the occasionally peeking straps. Every time one of them subtly rehides your bra strap under your shirt you wonder if this is your welcome to the feminine community. It is, at the very least, the end of your ability to wear boy's pants without bullying. You can't stop wearing them altogether because they are the only pants you can find that fit. More than that, you don't want to stop because you love them. Your best friend shields you from the taunting as much as she can and you are grateful. More than that, she encourages you to be exactly who you are. She allows you to experiment with feminine things without them forcing them on you, letting you try to figure out exactly who you are. She is so comfortable in her skin and you do not understand it because so much of what happens in your life is defined by being uncomfortable, balancing being comfortable with yourself and being comfortable around your peers. You envy her comfort and how everyone seems to know better than to bully her and you wish you had that same easy grace.

Today is another ordinary day of eighth grade. You don't shave your legs and because you inherited your father's dark, thick body hair it is somewhat obvious. You want to shave them and you brought the subject up with your mother but she said you should put it off as long as possible because your hair will only get thicker with time. You don't have the courage to tell her that you are only asking because the girls pick on you for your hair. Riding the bus is always an obstacle course of taunts and jeers and this morning is no different. You get on and sit down quickly, trying to get your ear buds in

before anyone has the chance to bother you. It doesn't work. The same girl who didn't want to let you sit in the front of the bus when you sprained your ankle actually pulls your ear buds out of your ears to ask you why you don't shave your legs, surely you know that body hair is unattractive and don't you ever want to date anyone. Your face burns with humiliation and you want to yell but you know from experience that yelling will only make it worse. You bury your nose in a book to try and drown out the world around you. With all your heart you hate these pampered girly girls with their expensive haircuts and made up faces. The girls here don't understand why you don't want to conform to their standards, don't want coifed hair, manicured nails, and clothes that cling to your body. Already they want to look good for boys and call you unattractive for being who you are. You like short hair, and keep what little you have out of your face with a baseball cap. You wear baggy t-shirts both because they are cheaper and because you are uncomfortable with your body. You don't feel like a girl, you feel like someone who attempts to play dress up and look like a girl and while your attempts get you fussed over, that is the only reason you make an attempt at all. The only time you enjoy being a girl is at the comic book store, chatting with the small group of female nerds, admitted to their order because of your gender. You love the community here, how you are allowed to be who you are and still be a girl. If this was all "girl" meant, belonging to this community of women who are open, honest, caring, and more than a little kick ass, "girl" was a label you would take pretty gladly. But it is more complicated than that. "Girl" means having breasts, following rules about shaving body hair, wearing make-up, clothes that show your still developing figure. To be a girl, to have breasts and other parts meant doing all of those arbitrary tasks that designate you as someone feminine or risk being ridiculed. Being feminine is expensive, and more than that it takes time that you could spend doing other things. Instead, you learn how to tolerate the insults and seek refuge in the comic book store. Your skin thickens, and while it confuses you that you receive so much taunting for being who you are, you start to tune it out. It hurts, but it hurts distantly. There is a wall between you and the rest of the world and it is this wall that allows your internal world to blossom. First you learn how to fantasize and through those fantasies

you learn how to masturbate. Already involved in fan fiction through your various nerd habits, you start to explore the more erotic stories. No one has talked to you about sex, so this is how you learn, through the tales and stories of fictional characters. One story in particular is so well written that you begin to imagine you have a penis. As you imagine your clit grows hard and you can feel the erection you are supposed to have, feel how hard you are and you think about touching your erection. You come harder and faster than you ever have before and this makes you feel like a freak. You bury your grief for the penis you don't have under the panicked thought of it isn't supposed to be like this and you try to put it out of your mind. Your subconscious has other ideas, and you begin to dream you have a male body. The first dream, you are frantic to get yourself alone because you want to know what it is like to masturbate with a penis, crave feeling the touch of your hand or your own hardness and at last it happens and you lock yourself in the bathroom. You barely pull down your pants before you are stroking yourself and try somewhat futilely to move your clothes out of the way before you come. You do come, and as you orgasm you wake up, somehow in pain from too hard of a touch and dripping wet. You are unsatisfied, still feeling the lingering ghost of a hard-on that you cannot touch because it isn't there. That thought makes you cry because it isn't fair that you have a wrong body and that you have this erection you don't know how to take care of. You cry until you have no more tears and then you get up and go to school. Beyond the sorrow you are confused about what this means and frantic to know that this happens to other people too, that you aren't alone and that this is normal. You tell an online friend you dreamed you were a boy and are so ashamed you simply say you gave yourself an erection. She assumes that you found your boy self so attractive that you ended up with a boner and you are mortified at her misunderstanding and don't correct her. The frantic panic of I am a total freak kicks in and you bury the dream and your urges and wants in the back of your mind. Despite this, you will still dream that you are a boy, usually every other night or so and you will start to have more and more sex dreams, though only when you dream you are male bodied. Some small part of you wonders if you feel this way because you have been told so many times that your girl self is unattractive, but even butch lesbians don't dream about having a penis, at least from what you understand. It is

a mystery that plagues and shames you so you do your best to hide it, bury it under a girly facade, terrified that someone will discover your secret.

Today, you are a freshman. You have a group of friends and it is a new and pleasant feeling. Unlike your sister's high school friends, however, they are not the type to hold your hand while you blossom so you go about trying to blossom on your own. You find some girly jeans on sale and are astonished to discover that they fit minus a small gap in the back. Your body has been changing while you haven't been looking. You get some girly t-shirts to go with your girly jeans and now you own clothes that actually show off your body and its small but still shapely curves. At first your friends fuss over you in your girly clothing and you enjoy the attention, basking in it. Later on they will only shrug or occasionally give you pointers. Pouting that no one fusses any more, you will go back to your masculine clothes. You wear a sports bra to constrict your chest and baggy t-shirts to hide it. You start to slump your shoulders to hide your chest and frequently curl up even more when you are nervous. Your baggy guy's jeans conceal the rest of your curves and this is how you are happiest. It isn't that you dislike your body because you don't. It is a beautiful body with nice breasts and a feminine shape. Your body just doesn't really feel like yours. You get startled by the presence of your breasts, forgetting that they are there as you go about your day. You will be minding your own business and then they will bounce and you will be unhappy they are there. To go with this inability of your brain to recognize that you are female, this physical dysphoria, you start to experience social dysphoria. It confuses you when people refer to you with female pronouns. It devastates you and you don't understand why no one can see you as the boy you really are. You tell your friend Shane about the way that you feel and he listens patiently. He asks you to describe the way that you feel like you are supposed to look and you tell him, describing the body that your brain actually has mapped. It helps a little bit that he listens to you, even though you are ashamed of the way you feel. You don't ask your friends to change pronouns for you because you don't think it is a possibility and you don't think they would accept you. You cannot imagine that everyone in your life would be willing to change the way that they refer to you without a fight and right now you cannot fight because you are already so fragile from dysphoria. Eventually, you start to become

suicidal. You need to be seen as the person you are, you need to be yourself but it is an impossible need. You are despondent, and the thing that eventually shocks you out of this despondency is a comment from your friend Amelia. She tells you that if she had your body she wouldn't waste it. That makes you want to laugh. Your body is a waste. You have this conventionally attractive skinny body with damn near perfect curves, and you don't want it. You would literally give up your breasts to have a body that suited your outside. Alright, you think, I might as well not waste it. With that, you begin to bury all of your thoughts of boyhood. You close off that part of yourself, attempting to make it wither and die through becoming more feminine. Your dress becomes more girly again, much to the delight of your father. That is another thing that makes you want to laugh your bitter laugh. A part of you died for this and it is making him happy. Whether in defiance of his happiness or because you have always wanted to do it, you cut your hair much shorter than your usual chin length into a cute and somewhat feminine bob. He is shocked and horrified but you love how easy it is to care for and the way it looks on you. Shaving your legs, on the other hand, becomes too much effort and takes too much time. If you don't shave every day it quickly becomes unmanageable, so you don't. Besides, no one cares anymore if you have leg hair or not. You wear more girly shirts to compensate, shirts that show off your breasts and highlight your figure, even as your jeans are baggier. It isn't ideal, but you learn to be comfortable with being girly. This is the compromise you try to make so that you can try to be true to yourself while burying the part of you that wants to be a boy. Around this time, you and Jane start dating because you and she are both gay ladies and you are somewhat interested in each other. You will become more and more feminine to please Jane, assuming that being feminine means that you are more attractive and a better girlfriend. It doesn't work. There is a deeper unhappiness to her that you don't understand, though being with Jane at least helps you to bury the thoughts of being a boy. Shane will bring it up every so often but the thought makes you sad and ashamed. You always tell him to shut up, even though you are starting to have times where you will cry for no reason and it won't stop. The boy inside you that you thought was dead, that you tried to kill, isn't dead he has just been sleeping. You

hide him as much as you can but his crying, your crying, absolutely breaks your heart. You are stuck and desperate for a solution, something that will make it all better.

Today there will be light at the end of the tunnel. You will meet your first love Tate. Jane will introduce the two of you and you will hit it off. You don't know it yet, but she will be the first person you tell about your inner boy. She is the first person you have the courage to tell that you want to be called James. You are dating Jane and Tate is dating another girl, so it takes you a while to get together but when you do it is pure magic. You feel safe with her in a way you never have felt safe before, and while she isn't the first person you tell about James, she asks about what your heart wants, what you dream about instead of just what you feel your body should be. She shows you how to bind, how to squeeze your breasts down with an ace bandages and for the first time since you grew breasts you can look in the mirror and recognize who you are. Binding, you feel at home in your body for the first time in a long time. Your reflection is you and you can run your hands down your chest without any unpleasant jolts of THOSE AREN'T SUPPOSED TO BE THERE. What you have with Tate goes beyond just learning how to bind, although that helps. She finds your flat chest sexy, running her hands down it whenever she gets a chance. She will kiss you when you bind, kiss your chest and have sex with you without asking you to take your shirt off. She can see and feel the erection that you know is there and this is the greatest medicine for your dysphoria. Even though you cannot touch your dick because your hands will tell your brain that it is not there, when she touches you and describes what is going on, it takes care of the hard on that your brain sees but your body can't feel. The same thing happens when you talk on the phone with her and she tells you how good your dick feels inside her. Through her eyes, you can see who you are supposed to be, and the way she sees you and treats you as male is a small glimpse of how it will feel when you come out. Your manhood feels like a delicious romantic secret, but it is one that cannot last. All of the frustration of not being male around everyone else, of wanting people to see you as male, of wanting your father to treat you the way that he treats a son instead of trying to get you to be girly, all of that becomes pain. It all builds up and starts crushing you from inside out and once again you end up suicidal. Because of your desperate need to survive, you slowly dismantle your

manhood and begin to pack away all of the happiness that being seen as male brings. You take all of the dysphoric feelings, all of the discomfort and put it in the back of your mind. It is most of your self, and the mask left out front is an unhappy one. This how your relationship with Tate will end, in the unhappy fire of the death of part of yourself. You have a few more months of adventure before that will be a problem, and she will come back into your life even though you won't talk for many months. You will miss your anchor and the person who never saw you as anything but male. You have a few more months to go, so enjoy it while it lasts little one. The time afterwards will not be happy.

Today, Tate has asked you to the Valentine's dance at her school. Even though you know Tate sees you as attractive when you are dressed in a more masculine manner, you want to give her a special treat so you go dress shopping and grow your hair out a bit more than usual. You find a beautiful dress for only fourteen dollars and you figure if you only wear it once or twice it is to great loss on the part of your mother. You love the color, a silvery blue and the way the satin drifts around you makes you feel like a princess. You don't mind the dress itself but the social implications make you uncomfortable. Mom buys the dress for you and you are looking forward to and dreading the dance in about equal measures. Going whole hog, you allow your friend Amelia to pluck your eyebrows. It's a bit of a pain but you are rather amazed at how beautiful and shapely your eyebrows look. Next are your legs, and while you made peace with your leg hair it has grown and grown. After the second disposable razor bites the dust you give up and break out your buzz cutters. The cutters work rather well and after there is nothing but stubble on your legs you go over it with a razor. You have very smooth legs for the first time in a long time and a pile of hair that you think would equal the pile of hair if you shaved your head. You shower to get rid of the last of the stray hairs and to get your head hair to be less creative in its rebellion. You towel yourself off and carefully blow-dry your hair into place. You slide into your dress, suddenly grateful you never stopped shaving your armpits and carefully apply a feminine scented deodorant. You rather enjoy the smell, even though it is feminine. It's comforting and goes well with the body wash you got for Christmas. Dress on, you slide your bangs across your forehead and clip them

with a barrette. On it, there is a silver blue bow that goes with your dress. Having found out some time ago that you are allergic to most make up you don't bother with much, just some lip gloss. This feminine ritual of getting ready is soothing, almost meditative. It allows you to gather who you are and hide all of the important parts of yourself away. Steeling yourself, you look in the mirror and think, this is who I was born to be. The thought isn't a happy one, so you brush it off and finish getting ready. You slide your feet into the adorable heels your mother found you and this is when your father comes over. He tells you that he is proud of you for the first time in your entire life and all you did was put on a dress. He hugs you and it is suffocating. Your rage builds until you are almost shaking. The dress is not to please him it is something you did as a treat for Tate. It was not to blossom, not to conform to his ideas of femininity it is something that you did to experiment with your comfort levels. This mask is not you; it is something you are performing. The boy you are inside, the person you are, is not a dress wearer and the fact that this, THIS is what he decides to take pride in starts the end of your relationship with your father. You are a person who has achieved so much, a Sophomore in high school who is pulling straight As in even college courses, busting your butt to get those grades and tutoring students in your off times and he is proud not of your volunteering or your grades, not proud of what you have accomplished but proud of the fourteen dollar dress that you put on and you hate. You leave, steaming, but you calm down when Tate kisses you and tells you that you look beautiful. She is no more or less attracted to you in the dress and you aren't sure how you feel about that. Either way, sex in the teacher's bathroom makes you feel much better. The dance is a rather sad affair and you spend a lot of time cuddling in the hallway with Tate. The anger with your father doesn't go away and the fantasies you had about your parents getting divorced in eighth grade start to get more and more detailed. You will feign tolerance and avoid him as much as you can, but you are too old to be bought off with ice cream and have no plans to forgive him for his irredeemable sin of pride.

Today is the day that Jane will tell you that he is really Eric. You have managed to stay friends through your breakup and even though his coming out makes you question your sexual orientation, even though it will take you a while to come all the way around,

you will support him because he is your best friend. You respond to his coming out by immediately switching name and pronouns and in the time honored tradition of your family, checking out all of the novels and books the local library has on trans* men. You and he read these books together, learning about what it means to be trans* and reading the stories of his (and later to be your) people. He comes out to your family before he comes out to his parents. Your mom simply tells him that he will have to remind her if she uses the wrong name and pronoun. She also helps him order his first binder, the safer alternative to ace bandages for boob squashing, because they are only sold online and he does not yet have a credit card. Mom reads many of the same novels and books that you and Eric did, reshaping her view of the world to accommodate your best friend and a person she rather likes. Your father struggles much more, not ever managing the correct pronouns completely and one time committing the sin of calling Eric an "it."

Unsurprisingly, this doesn't improve the already strained relationship you have with your father. With Eric's coming out and Tate's support of your budding masculinity, you shave your hair down to a convenient inch long, shorter than even your feminine bob. It's amazing to maintain and it feels perfect on your head. Your father tuts and tells you that you have such beautiful hair and you could be so beautiful if you grew it out. Tate tells you that you are beautiful even with short hair and that your father can do unmentionable things to himself and you are rather inclined to agree. You also find yourself drooling over nice watches, men's dress watches. You think they are elegant and beautiful and save your money for months to be able to afford one. You find the watch of your dreams on sale and with the help of a coupon, your hard earned money is just enough to afford it. This is one of the first adult purchases you have made, one of the first useful and beautiful things that you've bought yourself with your very own money. You are very proud of your watch and you run home to your father, excited to show it off. He derides it, calling it manly, and you are hurt. Your large wrists make women's watches impractical and you are incredibly annoyed at your father's refusal to see you as who you are. Mom talks to you about the way your father feels and this is the first time you see a crack in the mask of your mother's support and you realize that Mom doesn't understand you or why you are the way you are or what you want. What she does understand is how

happy you are with your manly watch and the suit you bought while you were passing as male. She is almost always willing to tell you how sharp you look in your suit and loves sneaking colorful ties into your Christmas stocking or just adding them on top of shopping trips for more practical things. She enjoys seeing how these more masculine things make you happy, she enjoys seeing you happy at all. She doesn't understand why you want these things but she sees how happy you are and this is something she wants for you. You are grateful for her support and amazed that she will bend her reality to accommodate you because she wants to see you happy, a remarkably contrast from you father who wants you to bend to his reality.

Today, you are lonely. Eric has found a new significant other and you and Tate haven't talked in months, not since your break up. You are not wearing your shirt and look yourself in the mirror. The little knife you bought from Target is in your hand. You take it everywhere, a tool. Right now it doesn't feel like a tool, it feels like a weapon. You stare your chest down hard in the mirror, despising your breasts and your isolation and your cowardice in not coming out. You are screaming on the inside and you want to be screaming on the outside. You hate yourself even more for your cowardice in wanting to cut, wanting to use your tool as a weapon. You pick it up and slide it lightly up your arm. It doesn't bleed, just weeps a little. In that moment, that one glorious moment, everything goes away and all you feel is a slight physical twinge. Angrier now, you take your weapon tool and slide it down one of your breasts. The wound cries, dripping a few drops of blood. The cut looks good and right there. This wound seems like a precursor to the top surgery you want so desperately. It cools your anger and you are more careful with the next cuts, making just a few more before you wash off your knife and disinfect everything. You're somewhat ashamed of them and you take care to hide your cuts from everyone else, but this is the first thing that you can do on your own that gets rid of your dysphoria. This weapon tool allows you to have a say against a body that doesn't fit and boobs that startle you every damn time you see them. The red lines say that these don't belong here, they aren't mine. They look good there and you renew them every so often. There is no one to see your chest or stop you so you continue. The cutting makes you feel less suicidal, helps you feel less hopeless in the face of despair. You know it is only a

temporary solution, but it is one that works. Cutting also allows you to sleep when you otherwise couldn't, releasing your feelings enough so that you can drift off. You try not to cut every night, so you haven't been getting very much sleep. Sometimes you crash, passing out because your exhausted body overcomes your brain's inability to relax. Being sleep deprived makes you cranky and rough with the world and your anger only adds to it. You are a ticking time bomb, anger, and despair.

Today, you meet Flower. She is attracted to you because you are butch and this is a new experience for you. You've spent the past few months having fleeting affairs with girls who usually decide that you are too masculine or too butch to date. Flower thinks neither of these things and is drawn to you because you bind and wear guy's jeans. She loves that you are strong, tough, androgynous or just plain masculine. It is a relief, and the start to debunking this idea in your head that you have to be feminine in order to be attractive. You tell yourself that feeling like you could never be attractive and masculine at the same time is the reason you want to be male, the reason you are dysphoric. It is a mantra you repeat in your head as she slowly unwraps the six inch ace bandage that you stole from Wal-Mart in desperation to have a flat chest. It is what you tell yourself when she sees your self injury marks and kisses them belter, whispering that you are beautiful. You tell yourself that you are content in your body as she fingers you and rubs your clit, as you orgasm around her fingers imaging the penis that you can feel but can't touch coming and making a mess. Surely all butch woman have the same pride, that same manly-feeling pride at your own prowess as she brags to all of the people who sit still long enough that you are fantastic in bed. You are so close to what you want to be but so far away at the same time, and it starts to show. Your heart aches for Tate, for the time when you were male and you start to spiral slowly into despair. One day you try to talk to Tate, try to put that despair into words and it doesn't work. She asks what is wrong and you reply everything. You are home alone and dissolve into a crying puddle on your bathroom floor. Even though Tate can't see you, she knows something has changed and you tell her you want to end it, you are done. She wants to know what you mean but you don't reply, instead throwing your phone against the wall when she tries to call you. It shatters spectacularly, plastic components bouncing everywhere. You howl, tears still

streaming down your face and you rip off your shirt and throw it across the room. You pull out your knife and you run it deeply down your arm, starting at the base of your wrist. You're bleeding rather a lot, but the sting is delicious. With your left hand, you do the same thing to your right wrist. Then the real work begins. You rip a waterfall down your stomach, lines of cuts dripping blood. Your back is next, what you can reach. You try to carve wings in your skin, wings to let you fly away from this whole mess. Your breasts now and you carve a careful grid all the way around them, turning them into graph paper, an equation against your dysphoria. Wearied, you rinse off your knife and put it away, falling on your bed. Numb and bleeding, you fall asleep even though your cuts don't leave much room for comfortable sleeping positions. You wake up to frantic feet on the stairs and you try to throw your shirt on to hide all of your cuts but you are too late. Mom has thrown open your door to the sight of your still bleeding cuts. She almost screams, never having been great around blood. Your shirt is on your arms and you put it on, horrified at being caught. The remains of your cell phone are scattered on the floor and the silence is heavy. Your heart pulls the seconds along, marking how long you stand there staring. First she tells you that Tate called her, she was worried. Then Mom asks you how long this has been going on and your heart races, lie or truth. You go with truth and your heart settles. You tell her that the cutting has been going on for almost a year. It started not too long after you and Tate broke up, when you stopped having a different outlet for your dysphoria. Mom looks stunned and you are wondering if you should reassure her that you were careful to not get caught or if that would make it worse. She offers up a stunned okay, and asks if you would be willing to go to a mental health hospital to be evaluated. You agree, and she loads you into the car. Anywhere has got to be better than being alone in the house again, you think to yourself as Mom drives you to the hospital. They admit you because of your suicidal ideation and self-injury urges. They make you wear paper hospital scrubs while they search your clothes and feed you a mostly palatable dinner that you barely notice because you are so hungry. The hunger is new; you haven't been eating regularly before now. Somehow it's easier here. No one is expecting you to be anything but broken and it is easy to be friendly because people are expecting you to be a total weirdo. You end up spending Christmas in the

hospital and it is one of the better ones you have had. There are people and presents and movies. It isn't unwrap everything and then run off to go play with your new toys alone, it's let's celebrate the lack of group therapy by playing lots and lots of scrabble You feel safe here, and it's nice. You're stir crazy and more than ready to go home by the end of your week there, regardless, but it has been a nice break from the absolute drudgery of your home life.

Today, you come home from the hospital. Mom will take you out on a whirlwind shopping trip with your Christmas money and gift cards. You enjoy it, enjoy your tired feet and the exhausted feeling you get from actually doing things. You pick out a therapist and are extra excited to see that the one you like the best specializes in trans* issues. You wonder if she will be willing to help you come out to your mother and mom makes you an appointment. You're still spending a remarkably amount of time alone and every time you get dressed you notice your cuts are starting to heal and you don't like that. You like the red lines marking up your chest, the same way you did when you started self-injuring. You dig your knife out of your mom's purse when she leaves it unattended for a few minutes and use it to make two deep cuts, one on each breast. Nothing you have done before has left scars but that is the goal of these cuts, to have a scar that says these are not mine. That done, you clean off the knife and then put it back in your mom's purse. You decide not to tell Tate about these intentional scars, she is mad and worried enough about the self-injury. You're talking to her again and she is equal parts pissed so not wanting to talk to you and worried so not wanting to let you out of her sight. You don't really blame her after she heard about what happened and you didn't even tell her the whole extent of the damage. More and more you talk about how male you feel and how you wish you could live full time as James. She listens and consoles you patiently enough but after a while she tells you that you really should talk to other people about what is going on, although she eventually changes the subject when you start hyperventilating. You begin to withdraw from everyone, not saying much and living almost entirely in your room. This continues until Tate runs out of patience and tells you that it is time to come out to your Mother.

Today is the day you come out to your mother. It is New Year's Eve and you have not spoken to her for almost three days. You've spent the past few hours on the phone with Tate trying to work up your courage. She is starting to get impatient with you. She is encouraging and she understands a little bit of your terror but she doesn't understand your reluctance to do something that you so clearly need to do. With a final suck it up buttercup, she tells you that she is hanging up now and that you should call her to tell her how it goes afterwards. You lie in the dark for a while attempting to muster up your courage. You are more nervous than when you came out to Mom as a lesbian. Having Mom reject your trans*ness is more than a sexual orientation, it is a rejection of one of the most basic ideas of yourself and how you interact with the world. You heave yourself off the bed at last, deciding terror can attend your pity party while you put on your battle dress. As always when you are nervous, you want to put on clothes that will help you to feel more comfortable in your skin. In your case that means binding. You start by putting on two slightly too small a-shirts. These provide light compression and a grippy surface so the ace bandage doesn't just slide down. You can also pin the ace bandage to the shirts, not so much your skin. Next is the ace bandage. You haven't had the wits to figure out a way to get a binder without going through your mother so you are still using your stolen six inch ace bandage. You take a deep breath and hold it, shifting your chest up and into your armpits, unrolling the ace bandage around you several times. Just like you knew it would after your hours of practice, the tail ends up right at your sternum and you carefully pin it down. You put on an under armor compression shirt after the ace bandages. It doesn't squeeze down very much but it will help a little. It is followed by a tight t-shirt, a baggy long sleeve shirt, and then a baggy t-shirt. The cherry for this binding sundae is your magical passing hoody and you put it on, leaving it unzipped for the moment. You are nearly panting with effort and your ribs are screaming in pain, but you know if you can wait out the initial surge the pain will go down to a dull roar that will be tolerable for a few hours. The bottom a-shirt is starting to become slightly damp even in your cold room and it is no mystery that trans* men hate the summer. You are also starting to feel slightly silly for going through all of this effort just to come out to your mother but the outfit is giving you courage so you know it is worth it. Sillier,

perhaps, is binding only to throw the hoody on top but it is a security blanket, a safe place where you know you will always be seen as male. You run your hands down your chest to reassure yourself that you are really flat and you defiantly zip up your hoody. The pressure on your ribs is also an affirmation of your trans*ness. No one, sane or insane, would put themselves through this if they were not really trans*. That pep talk done, you jam your hands in your pockets and walk to your mother's study. Every step you take causes your shoulders to hunch further down. It is similar to the binding. When you get nervous, you try to hide your chest. Your heart is hammering and you knock on the door. She is surprised to see you and ushers you in. She waits patiently, and her patience allows you to start. You tell her that you are really her son James Harry. She starts at the name, and mentions the card from the flowers your father sent your her on the day of your birth. You nod, and say that is where you got your middle name. You tell her that it is just as well you weren't named Harry because of the Harry Potter books and she laughs. It breaks the tension and she tells you she is not really surprised. You're suddenly grateful to Eric and glad he came out first. You mention that you don't own a binder and would like one, so Mom starts up her computer. When you try to give her money for the binder, she tells you that it isn't a problem, that this binder is necessary for you and a reward for your courage. At that, you laugh your old bitter laugh. You laugh so hard that your mother looks at you, concerned. When you catch your breath you explain that this coming out is not courage. Courage would be coming out when you started to feel suicidal the first time or when you first understood what transgender meant. You would give anything to not have to do this, to either be happy as a butch woman or to have been born designated male at birth. That's not courage, that's a desperate need to survive. You don't want to live in the dark place with the girly mime puppet thing at the front. It is come out or die so much inside that you want to die on the outside and you are tired of dying. You snort at yourself because you didn't mean to rant all over your mother but she just nods, hiding any fear she has rather well. She orders your binder and you are so exhausted that you go back to your room collapse on the bed, calling Tate to tell her how it went. You're relieved it's over, even though it's not over, coming out is a process, and

you're still living on pins and needles, halfway between the man you are on the inside and the woman that everyone seems to think you are.

Today is your first real outing as a man. You are trying out a new church and a new church in a new neighborhood is a great place to try out your new name and pronouns. You're just as nervous as you were coming out to your mother but your battle dress is less complicated because suits and ties are great for both confidence and minimizing breasts. You also get to take your new binder out for a spin and it is so much less painful than your old ace bandage. Mom does amazingly well with your new name and pronouns, only slipping once. She switches back to your old name and pronouns in the middle of telling an older woman about your fibromyalgia diagnosis. The look of terror on the woman's face is so priceless that you almost start laughing and when she backs away slowly you do laugh. Mom looks at you a little bit sideways until you explain and she apologizes. You both head into the sanctuary and meet a woman named Amy, and your Mom almost mentions the coincidence before she remembers that there isn't a coincidence any more. It is your first real outing as a man and it feels fantastic to have people see you for who you really are. You passed and you feel like the son you are and it is refreshing to finally be seen for who you are and it makes you happy in a way you can't explain. You feel more in sync with the world and more like you have a place. You've been waiting a long time for this and you savor every correct pronoun.

Today you come out to your father. Your mother explains that she is tired of switching pronouns for you and it is time. You aren't expecting it to go well and you just want to get it over with so you could go shoe shopping. He didn't understand you as a masculine woman and his tiny world view doesn't allow for a man who likes shoe shopping either, so the fact that you want to leave to go shoe shopping discounts your manhood and turns this into something you are doing for attention. It doesn't really bother you that he doesn't take it well. You've already given up any chance of having a relationship with him because he refused to see you as anyone other than a pretty pink princess and disliked that you had no intention of blossoming like your sister. As he blanches and grumbles and even says back in my day people stayed the gender they were born you become more and more comfortable in your decision to shut down your

relationship as best as you can. He burned his bridges with you a long time ago in his refusal to accept your masculinity and now he is starting to burn bridges with your mother. Your mom tells you in private that she is worried your father's rejection might cause you to start hurting yourself again. You snort at that. You would actually have to care what he thought in order to want to self-injure at his rejection. The fights between your mother and father escalate as your father's refusal to use the correct pronouns becomes more and more pointed. She will tolerate a certain amount of bullshit for herself but none of it for her children. When she comes home to find you cowering in a corner of the kitchen while your father yells at you, you both spend the night at a hotel. In the morning, she talks to a friend from church and you stay with her until you and your mother find an apartment. She let you pick it out and for the first time in your life home actually feels like a home. You don't know if it is getting out of the suburb and finding a neighborhood that sings to you or if it is being away from your father but either way you love it. You love picking out decorations and furniture, dishes, everything that makes a home a home and having choices that are yours actually be yours to make. Home is a home and not a prison and it is a glorious feeling.

Today is the day you wash your binder. You wash it about once a week, usually on a Sunday, because you will not leave the house without binding and Sunday is often the only plausible day to stay home. Your binder has to drip dry and even if you wash it the night before it will still be wet in the morning. It is impossible and very cold to try to wear your binder wet, you tried, so you've given up and you just won't leave the house. Mom will seek you out, wanting to go to church and you will say you are not feeling up to it almost every time. She will be hurt, though she won't usually say much and you feel bad but you will not leave the house without binding. You don't pass well enough to pull it off. People will look you in the eye and then look at your chest to figure out what pronouns to use for you. She figures it out one day when she asks you if you want to go to Kohl's, because they are having a large sale and she knows that you need more new clothes. When you turn her down she is shocked and almost takes you to the hospital. Shopping for clothes is one of your favorite things in the world and you are very excited about getting an entirely male wardrobe. Anything short of something that would kill

you and you would be out the door and in the car in an instant. She prods you about what is wrong until you breakdown and explain. She immediately orders you another binder, explaining that no son of hers is going to be unable to leave the house because he doesn't have the right clothes. You're shocked because she doesn't usually buy you underwear or clothing without a lot of prompting. Part of you wonders if she set up the shopping trip to figure out why you wouldn't leave the house but after your binder dries, she takes you shopping. When your new binder arrives it is amazing that you no longer have to schedule events in your life around washing your binder and it boggles your mind that this is something cisgender people never have to worry about.

Today, you get your first dick in the mail. You bought it with money you have been saving for months. You crave a way to feel like you can actually fuck, and Tate is as interested as you are. You take all of your hard earned money to a local grocery store to buy Amazon gift cards because you aren't eighteen yet and can't buy sex toys from local stores and you don't have a credit card to buy them online. It takes five minutes to feed all of your charge into the self-checkout machine but at last you have your gift cards. You get home and get settled only to find out that you are eleven cents short. You almost cry, but manage to dig eleven pennies out of your other piggy bank to give to your mother to get her to send you an eleven cent gift card. You lie and say that you are ordering books, not wanting her to know you are buying a dick so you can fuck like a real boy. At last your dick is on its way and you eagerly await being able to pick it up. You nearly have a heart attack when the post office says they are returning your package to sender because you hadn't filled out some non-existent forms. Irrked and annoyed, you go by the post office and pick it up yourself, unwilling to risk it getting lost again At last, you have your dick. It is a feel-do, a double sided dildo that is designed to be used without a harness, which is why you bought it. The end that is supposed to go inside of you is far too large and you end up cutting it down to make it work. That done, it is ready and you are jittery and excited to have a chance to fuck like a real boy. Tate makes you slow down, take it easy, and stretch yourself to take the bulb without pain but finally your dick is in and you are ready to fuck. You clench your thighs together to keep your dick inside, squeeze it tight inside you so it won't fall out and Tate straddles you. She lowers herself

down on top of you and you are inside her, the erection you can feel but not touch is inside her, it is an extension of yourself and this is the most satisfying thing you have ever done. This is magical and one of the greatest things to happen to you, even though the fact that your dick is blue weirds you out. There is no way to satiate you, or her, and you both spend a lot of time at home, wearing nothing but a too small pair of briefs and fucking in every possible way that you can imagine until you both collapse. Afterwards, you cuddle, and talk, and sleep. Little by little Tate starts to move in with you, and you are in no way complaining. She wants to escape her crappy home life and you want an escape from your ill-fitting body and both of these things happen when you are together. You are a boy who has a penis that is not just inside of your head and what an amazing feeling that is.

Today is the first time you use the men's room without Tate glaring at you from the doorway of the women's, telling you that you will freak out the natives if you go in. You are at a movie theater, killing time before you have to go meet Tate. There is a play area near the restrooms. Apparently a popular kid's movie just let out and the play area is incredibly crowded. Of course you have to pee now that there is a herd of kids, something you try to avoid outside your own home, but the soda was tempting so here you are. You are never sure how well you pass but considering the cashier called you sir and you are wearing your shirt of boob invisibleness, good odds on the parents and children seeing you as male. You figure in the end that it is less creepy to be seen as a woman going into the men's room than the other way around so you head for the men's room. Your feet feel too large in a pair of your brother's old shoes and your heart is pounding as you walk over to the door. On the way you expect to be told that you are going into the wrong restroom but no one stops you. At last you get to the door. You push on it but the door sticks, so you push harder. It rebounds off the wall with a loud crack and you apologize to the boy that you startled. You dive into the nearest stall and slam the door behind you, taking a deep breath. You are nervous about needing a stall, about peeing with your feet facing the wrong direction, about getting found out. Done peeing, you bolt out of the stall, wash your hands very quickly and leave as fast as you can. Your heart doesn't stop racing until you are sitting in your seat at the movie theater. Your hands are still shaking

and you put your head or your knees. This fear was not something you expected when you came out. You expected some fear and you experienced some fear as an out and proud lesbian but nothing to this degree. At this moment, if anyone asked you if you wanted to crawl back into your closet and stay there you would have told them you wanted to, but it is too late and you know this is for the best. You cannot live happily as a woman so you are transitioning. You are willing to bid your safety good-bye, to live in this constant fear in order to continue living and passing as a male. Danger is a belter alternative to death in the closet, if only slightly and you are beginning to understand “and this above ALL to thine own self be true.” When your fear fades, you are giddy and rather proud of your accomplishment. Tate doesn't understand why you are so excited and it is not something you can explain to her. You are excited about every step that you take towards filling into your new gender role. You also feel like peeing in the correct restroom is a way of defying the people who want to keep you down. It is an accomplishment in the face of obstacles, but to Tate you are just doing something you were supposed to be doing in the first place. Funny how things look different from different perspectives.

Today is the day you become an adult. Happy eighteenth birthday. Tate will take you clubbing, and you are incredibly excited. You spend an hour getting dressed, making sure your binder sits just right and your hair is just so. You're wearing your favorite jeans, the ones with the leaves on the butt that your mother doesn't understand to this day. You're finally ready to go, having spent more time getting ready than most of the women and some drag queens you know. The dancing is fun, even though you know you look like a dork the entire time. Tate's brother tells you that you look like a guy and you barely resist the urge to tell him that you spent over an hour trying to look like a guy and wonder why you bother with cis gay men sometimes. It makes you sad that there are some people who will never understand the whole transgender thing. Your day was still fantastic and you have a doctor's appointment for a physical to see if you will be able to start testosterone. You're hoping to time it so that your period will end right as you are starting testosterone, a way of making it your last period. The semester is over and you will be graduating high school with your Associate of Science degree. Things are starting

to look up and you are unabashedly happy. This has been your favorite birthday as a boy who is becoming something rather fantastic.

Today, your first doctor decides that you don't get to start testosterone. Tears drip down your face as the doctor tries to pat your knee. You flinch every time she does it and somehow she doesn't understand that you don't want to be touched right now. Until this moment you were more nervous than excited about starting testosterone and you didn't know how much it meant. Mom is about ready to rip the doctor's head off for touching you when you so clearly don't want it but as she goes through the list of reasons for why you don't get testosterone you can practically feel her rage fill the room. The doctor thought you were a year younger than you are, in addition to calling your homophobic and trans phobic pediatrician to see if you should have hormones. The letter from your therapist saying that you not only deserve hormones but you need them to further your mental health is not enough, and surely the pediatrician who you haven't spoken to in well over a year knows better than she does. The final straw, however, is the fact that the scars on your chest that you carved there because you were dysphoric discount you from being able to get testosterone. Mom's face goes white, and you leave. Remembering some fliers you saw at the LGBT center, you call Planned Parenthood and make an appointment. You will try again, because you now know how much these hormones make to you and how badly you want them, gatekeepers and obstacles be damned.

Today, Tate and Mom come with you to Planned Parenthood. You are happy to have them along for moral support. You are hungry because the people here weren't sure if you would need fasting labs, so they figured better safe than sorry and you haven't eaten in twelve hours. You're day dreaming about the bananas and jerky in the bag under the chair your mom is sitting in while you wait impatiently for the nurse to check up on the state of your labs. You nearly burst out of your chair in excitement when you hear her knock on the door. It turns out that everything looks good and you just need to fill out some forms to get your shot. The nurse has to read all of the side effects and consequences of testosterone out loud while you initial each one, though at least she is gracious enough to let you eat while you listen. The whole bag of food is gone by the time you get to the end of the forms and she finally leaves to get your shot. You're bouncing up and down

and Tate is grinning and gets up to hug you. You both go back to behaving when you hear another knock on the door and the nurse comes in with a rather impressive looking needle. She has you drop your pants and expertly shoots you in the butt. It takes a while for the drug to push in because it is rather thick but she finally finishes and your prize is the stickiest Band-Aid you've ever used in your life. The band-aid will last through several showers and the nurse will usually rip it off for you when you are ready to have your next shot. In celebration of all of the man-juice flowing through your veins, Tate takes you for ice cream. She says she will even get you a shake if you promise to never again call your testosterone man-juice. It amuses you how much it annoys her, so you don't make the promise and don't get a shake. You spend the rest of the day bouncing around with an almost manic energy, excited to have finally started hormones. Later, when you are home and it is dinner time, Mom will ask you how you are feeling. You don't feel at all different, except for being massively horny. You don't think Mom needs to know that. Tate, on the other hand, is thrilled. From now on, she will come home every second Wednesday, eager for how eager you will be on shot day. You bought yourself a realistic dick for your birthday so you could feel more comfortable with fucking and the already enormous amount of time you spend fucking increases. Your body is a wonderland instead of a dysphoric trap, and it shows. Your clit grows larger and becomes more responsive, like a tiny penis. Your breasts shrink a full cup size and begin to droop, becoming easier to bind. You start sprouting muscles in places you didn't think muscles existed, gaining weight from all of the muscle growth and losing it again as you shed body fat. You also get more body hair, which amuses you to no end and you are delighted to be able to flaunt it without getting harassed by anyone except Tate, who teases you good naturedly about being a Yeti. Your body is starting to become more and more comfortable, less of an M.C. Escher Sketch that doesn't make sense if you look at it for too long.

Today, Mom will attempt to wash your budding moustache off for the third time. Theoretically, you're having a hair growing contest with a trans * friend of yours who started testosterone the same time that you did, but as it stands you're tired of being ambushed and having your lip vigorously washed before your mother realizes you don't

have dirt, just hair. You had her buy you shaving cream and a razor a while back and carefully wrote down instructions from an older male friend of yours for how to shave. First you fill the sink to warm up your razor and get your supplies all laid out. You carefully start to put shaving cream all over your face before you realize shaving cream first, and then fill the sink so you can rinse the extra cream off of your hands. You use far too much and spread it on rather thickly so quite a bit ends up in your ears and up your nose. At last you are ready to actually shave and Tate looks on giggling. You slide the razor down your cheek and try not to laugh at the massive pile of shaving cream that plops into the sink. Carefully you go over your whole face, trying not to make funny faces lest you make Tate's giggles worse. At last you are done and you wipe up the last of the shaving cream with a warm wash cloth, convinced that nothing feels quite as nice as the warm terry cloth hitting your freshly shaven face. Tate kisses you softly and then takes the wash cloth to wipe up a bit of stray shaving cream that somehow ended up behind your ear. You grin and sneak by her to show off your freshly shaven face to your mother. She looks up briefly to compliment you on a job well done before she goes back to cooking dinner. You go and lie down with Take until dinner time, just quietly talking. For the first time in your transition, you are acutely feeling the absence of your father. You don't really miss your father, at least not him as a person. He was kind of an asshole. You miss not having a guide through manhood, someone to take you shopping for your first suit (your mother did that), someone to teach you how to tie a tie (you googled that), someone to show you how to shave. You grieve for the fact that he never understood you and will never understand and through this you grieve for the boyhood that wasn't. At the same time you are starting to love who you are and you are who you are because of a father that doesn't love you and a boyhood that wasn't. It can be hard to find the love in transition, within the dysphoria and the family shock. It's hard to feel like you will never be normal but this not normal, this grief, has born something that is incredibly beautiful. The questions that you ask about what it means to be a man, what it means to be who you are mean that you choose the way you present your gender instead of sticking with society's default. Because you ask questions you see more choices than just what society sees and become more than "just a dude." The area in between grieving for what you will

never have and loving who you are is starting to become what it means for you to be trans * and when you accept both halves of this strange dichotomy you see a life that you're quite fond of. It is a rather new thought and as you cuddle with Tate it makes you smile.

Today you come out to your mom's friend Elaine. You've been coming out to a lot of people lately as the effects of testosterone have become harder to hide. You've noticed there is a form to most people's reactions. People ask when you knew and depending on the relative age of the people who are asking they ask you about your sexual orientation, your genitals, or both. Unsurprisingly having everyone ask you if you want bottom surgery when you can't even afford top surgery under the current health care system gets old really quickly. You are expecting much of the same basic trans* education questions when you meet your mother at your favorite Chinese place. You don't really want to come at to Elaine at all but your mom bribed you with Chinese food and here you are. You are absolutely stunned when you explain and she says oh my cousin is trans*. She is a good friend of mine, and over your favorite Chinese food she asks you all kinds of well thought out questions about your social transition. By the end you are so excited you would be willing to marry her if she wanted because you never get questions about your role in society, just about your body as if the physical is the only change that matters. You personally think that what goes on inside your head is much more interesting than what is in your pants and also considerably less private. Elaine's questions are an amazing and refreshing change and a reminder that people will always surprise you when you least expect it. Sometimes when you come out it is a good surprise and sometimes it is a bad surprise but it is the surprise that always makes it terrifying. It is no small wonder that most of the time you would rather that people come out for you.

Today is your first day at college. You have been holding out for this for months and it has been worth the wait. You move into the queer dorm and you are amazed to find a place you belong. This is the beginning of the end to you getting female pronouns. You don't know if it is the testosterone, your height, or just that no one here knew you as female but whatever the reason you pass all of the time. It is weird though, because the more you pass and grow into your social role the more your dysphoria around your body

grows. Your breasts begin to startle you more as you continually forget them. You will be going about your day and scratch chest only to come back with a handful of breast. Your breasts destroy the manhood you've set up for yourself; they betray you just when everyone else is starting to get the picture. This isn't helped by the fact that your ribs become absolutely intolerant of binding. At first you can't handle the strongest binder you own but then you cannot even bear the snug under armor that barely does anything at all. You really only have two coping mechanisms for dysphoria and they are binding and cutting. Being unable to bind will test your somewhat fragile abstinence from cutting to the absolute limit. When you can stand it no longer you take sharpies and draw all over your breasts. You label them not mine, use them to draw landscapes trees, sometimes simply a proper male chest. You trace your scars and want to scream. Eventually, you figure out that wearing your dick all of the time helps and you buy a soft dick to wear when you get tired of tying down your erection. The soft silicone gets sticky and needs to be dusted with corn starch lest it rip out your pubic hair every time you move. It becomes sweaty and the sweat will help make goo out of the cornstarch. Sometimes it will get caught on your boxers and make it look like you have a raging erection. It is miserable, but despite its flaws you wear it as often as you can, even when you are sleeping. It has a comforting weight to it and even though it doesn't directly help with your chest dysphoria it does help you feel more male. Out of sheer desperation you talk to your mother about chest surgery. You have no hope that it will actually be able to happen because it is so expensive and not covered by health insurance. You're not sure why a surgery that would so dramatically improve your life isn't covered by health insurance when cis guys have no problem getting their tits chopped off when they have them, but then no one asked you or any other trans * people. Unsurprisingly, mom tells you that there is no money, though she will help you set up an account for you to save up. Frustrated, you investigate alternatives to binders and discover corsets. They don't squish, but simply rearrange your chest into a more male figure. Unfortunately, these are also pretty pricey, though at least hundreds of dollars instead of the thousands of dollars for chest surgery. Either way, you can't afford one right now. You're stuck with the old sports bras that barely keep you from bouncing. Even those hurt your ribs after too long.

It's depressing and one of the many reasons you wish you could have been happy living as a butch lesbian.

Today, Mom is looking at houses. You flew home for the weekend of your birthday because you were so homesick you couldn't bear it. Since your last visit, Mom has decided that she wants to own her own home as a protection against rent hikes. She tells you that it will mean selling the house in the suburbs that you hate so much and you snort. Like you care. Mom is still almost dancing excitedly and you look at her funny. She tells you that the extra money she will get from selling the house in the suburbs should be enough to pay for chest surgery. You scream and leap out of your chair, hugging her tightly. You dance around the room and start feverishly looking for houses in the price range your mother gave you. You, your mom, and Tate also look at small houses in the heart of the city's art district and everyone is thrilled. Your mom loves smaller houses and while the neighborhood might not be her favorite you absolutely adore it. Excited for the house hunt, you head back to school. Mom still sends you real estate ads to look over and she and Tate both fall hard for one house in particular. Even though you haven't seen it and it makes you nervous you tell Mom to go ahead and make an offer on the house. She does the math and tells you that you can start looking for surgeons, there is enough money. You spend the next month on the internet looking at pre-op and post-op photos. You ask all of the post-op people that you know for recommendations and read a whole bunch of different blogs of people talking about the process of getting chest surgery. Some surgeons are better than others and some have websites that are better than others. Mom tells you to go for broke, that you'll have this chest for the rest of your life and you should get a good one so you choose Dr. Paul Steinwald, based in Chicago, Illinois. He is more expensive than some of the other surgeons but his pictures show that he is worth it. You are impressed with the different techniques that he uses, in addition to the fact that he is board certified in both general and plastic surgery. You book a consultation for the beginning of August. You send in photos of your naked chest to be analyzed for a quote and fill out what feels like a massive mountain of paper work. None of this quells your excitement at all. You have to wait another two months to get your surgery and every time you think about it you get so excited and anxious you feel like you are going to

explode. It is the ultimate Christmas present and a trip to Disneyland wrapped up into one and you end up putting it out of your mind to avoid dealing with all of your intense feelings. This works rather well until you realize it is the day before you are due to leave for Chicago and you have a to-do list a mile long. You pack in a flurry and spend the night talking with Tate, bidding goodbye to your chest in your usual way of farewells, with lots of sex and talk of gender. It is a strange combination but one that works for you both. You fall asleep cuddling her, your body finally giving out even though you are absolutely wired. You dream you were born in the correct body and when you wake up you don't feel sad at the loss but excited for the way your body will be.

Today you FINALLY head out for Chicago. It is six in the morning and you are amazingly awake considering your late night. Mom needs to save vacation time so you're making the sixteen hour drive in one day, hence the early start. Your butt goes numb in the seat after six hours and you are grateful to stop and eat delicious Thai food with one of your online friends. You get to spend an hour and a half talking about quilts and the fun ends too soon and after a goodbye hug and congratulations you get back in the car for another ten hours. It is hard to stay awake after the sun goes down and whoever built the Chicago highways was clearly a sadist. Finally, you get to the correct area of Chicago but it takes ten minutes to find your hotel because it is poorly marked and in the middle of a maze of parking lots. At last you're here but there is so much to do before you can sleep. For one, two weeks of stuff, including a sewing machine and quilting projects for your mother needs to be brought in. When you feel your bed, you're terribly glad you brought a sheet of memory foam with you. It is hard enough to be the origin of the word "bed rock" and recovering from surgery on a naked one doesn't sound at all pleasant. Finally, you're ready for bed and you collapse, satisfied that your consultation is in the morning.

Today is your consultation. You make Mom leave early and you are very glad of that when you get lost on the way to the hospital due to the Chicago highway sadist. Finding the correct building is another challenge. When you do, the receptionist hands you more paperwork and you plop down on one of the leather sofas to fill it out. That done, you don't have much else to do but be intimidated by the poshness of the waiting

room. There are golf magazines and tabloids on the designer coffee table. Awards cover every open space not already taken by expensive art and there are well groomed real plants. You feel more than a bit out of place in your comic book t-shirt, especially after a woman with designer sunglasses and a purse that probably cost more than your admittedly beat up car side eyes you. You are in a different tax bracket than the usual clientele and everything here screams money. It makes you antsy but you sit down and force yourself to not fidget as the woman with the expensive sunglasses reads a tabloid. Not being interested in celebrity gossip or golf you lament not grabbing a book as sweat begins to gather on your palms. At last it is your turn to be seen and you are escorted to an exam room. There is a folder with yet more forms for you to fill out and a gown for you to put on, backwards so the doctor can examine you more easily. Gown first, then the forms, and by the time you are done with that the doctor comes in. He interacts with your chest in a way you've never experienced before. He isn't just attracted to your breasts, which is nice and a good thing in a professional. But he's not attracted to you as a man and seeing through your chest either. Your chest is not a draw or an awkward stumbling block, it is a paycheck. As he measures you, you can see his mind drawing lines on your chest and figuring out where he wants everything to go. He sees not only what is there but what will be there after he makes your chest into what it is supposed to be. It is rather comforting and it is the first time you don't mind your breasts being there although that might be because they are about to be gone. Everything measured, he hands you a folder of post-op care instructions and a list of things to pick up before your surgery. Shopping done, you head back to the hotel room for the longest few days of your life. Time crawls by and the night before your surgery you barely make it to sleep. You are nervous, hungry, and your whole body sings with anticipation.

Today is the day of your surgery and once again you wake up really early. You don't get lost on the way to the hospital at least, even if you can't find parking and have to hike in from the back of the lot. When you get inside the hospital a volunteer escorts you up to the wing where you will get prepared for your surgery. A very kind woman makes a copy of your driver's license and insurance card just in case there are any emergencies further on down the line. You get to fill out yet more paperwork and are

escorted to a lovely room with sunflower paintings on the cornflower blue walls. There are lots of nurses buzzing around you in a flurry of questions and paperwork. Everyone asks you the name of your procedure and your date of birth as well as some basic medical questions. A brief silence falls as everyone leaves for you to dress in your gown, a moment of contemplation as you strip down to your basketball shorts and neatly fold up your clothes. A nurse comes in and takes away your things in a garment bag and the flurry starts again, faster this time. Another nurse comes in and expertly starts feeling out your veins while you are asked yet more questions by an adorable woman holding a clip board. You barely feel the IV as it goes in and you are glad the nurse is good at her job. Someone places a cap on your head and another person takes your temperature. The flurry halts again as everyone leaves so the doctor can come in to draw the lines for your surgery on your chest. The marker tickles and you try to relax so you don't end up shaking. He leaves and the nurses come back in. The flurry increases and takes on a hint of panic as the nurses realize that you haven't had a pregnancy test and the reason for them asking you when you had your last period suddenly becomes clear. You roll your eyes and sign the pregnancy waiver, having been period free for a year and a half. If you were pregnant, you would name the baby Jesus. That done a nurse comes in with a syringe, breaking through the huddle of people around your bed. She tells you that you aren't going to remember very much after it is injected, and you scoff. It turns out she was right. You remember feeling high and seeing the lights roll by, the rumble of your bed and an elevator ride. Suddenly you are on the operating table and the air feels stale. You paw at your face to try to get a clean breath and someone moves your arm. Your eyes fall shut and everything goes black.

Your chest hurts, And you're nauseous. More nauseous than you have ever been in your entire life. Your eyelids feel heavy and gritty. Your head also feels heavy and there is a black space where your thoughts are supposed to go. Slowly you lift your head and open your eyes, your stomach rolling at the light. You don't have your glasses and everything is fantastically blurry. A nurse asks you about your pain levels. You tell her a six or a seven through the gravel in your throat. She tells you that you said five, maybe six last time in a tone of voice that says you are lying. You don't remember the last time anyway and blame

the anesthetic. You also tell the nurse that you are nauseous and she tells you that they will load your IV up with more anti-nausea drugs. You're rolled down to the recovery ward and a burp makes your nausea go away. The nurses set you up in an armchair and you start to feel down right perky and hungry. You eat two packets of saltines and a packet of Graham crackers and wash it all down with two tiny cans of ginger ale. You are excited despite the pain until your nausea starts to come back. Burping doesn't make it better this time. You start to have a rather large sense of uh oh and frantically look around for one of the tiny pink emesis basins that are lying around for you to throw up in. At last you have one and your stomach heaves. As it heaves your chest is thrown into your compression bandage and it starts a new fire in your chest. The tiny basin is no match for your stomach and it overflows on to your lap, causing your stomach to heave more. When you're finished, a lovely nurse helps you out of your vomit soaked hospital gown and into a clean one. You are grateful to be clean. You go to the bathroom. Back from the bathroom, you sit down, no longer perky. You are given fluids with some sugar in them to try and settle your stomach more. You're also given an anti-nausea patch, complete with another sheet of instructions to go in your after care folder. You are tired and grumpy and not quite able to sleep. You want to go home and lie down fully and be where it is quiet but they want to get pain meds into you before they send you home. You don't end up managing to keep anything down and throw up three more times and go through three more hospital gowns due to the unfortunately tiny size of the pink basins. The last time, you throw up the painkillers the nurse tried to force and the only thing worse than throwing up right after chest surgery is pill vomit right after chest surgery because your chest hurts and you cannot get the chemical taste out of your mouth. At last a nurse you have become rather fond of tells you that you can be miserable at home or miserable here and home will be much more comfortable. She shows mom how to clear your drains and gets you ready to go, loading you up with goodies. Mom gets a kit full of easy to digest food, ginger ale, wash cloths, barf bags and a few of the stupid pink basins to take care of you. The nurse also tells you to just take the hospital gown, they have plenty and it isn't really worth changing you. Mom leaves to get the car while the nurse takes out your IV and loads you into a wheelchair. You babble at her incoherently about

the benefits of waxed tile floors for wheelchair users as she escorts you through the hospital. Your mom has the car ready and the door open for you so the nurse just helps you in. You're surprisingly steady on your feet although you aren't looking forward to having the seatbelt across your chest. Mom drives super carefully to avoid putting pressure on the belt and although she succeeds in not causing chest pain her driving isn't gentle enough for your stomach and you are glad for the fancy barf bags. At the hotel, you negotiate around a puddle of puke in the walkway and mom opens the doors to the hotel for you. They are heavy and negotiating them with your chest on fire is impossible. It takes some maneuvering but you can finally lie down on your back on the bed. You still can't sleep even though you want to so you read. You read until your mother is ready to go to bed but the pain is becoming more than you can bear and you cannot sleep. Mom thinks you should try taking pain killers but you make her call both the doctor and the hospital before you acquiesce. All you know is that pain sucks but throwing up would make the pain worse and you have already thrown up enough today. Almost as soon as the pain killers start working you fall asleep, although you wake up in almost exactly four hours for your next dose. This is how you spend the next day, sleeping in four hour chunks and waking periodically to take pain killers. You are too weak to flush the toilet and in too much pain to feed yourself and you can't breathe because of the compression bandages. You're grateful for the hospital gown because it means Mom can check your drains easily. It is one less thing to worry about and you are looking forward to tomorrow, when Dr. Steinwald will check up on the condition of your nipples and take off your compression bandage.

Today is unfortunately not the day you get your compression bondage off. Dr. Steinwald does peek at your nipples and he pulls out a whole bunch of gauze and cushioning that make it slightly easier to breathe. You resign yourself to not breathing until tomorrow as Dr. Steinwald shows your mom how to strip the lines of your drains to get all of the fluid. He also gives you the good news that you can take ibuprofen instead of vicodin and you are incredibly grateful because the vicodin has been starting to make you nauseous and you do NOT want to throw up again. More awake now that you are not on narcotics, you spend the day reading. You also get real food instead of crackers though

Mom has to feed you because moving your arms that much is still painful. Toilet flushing is also still beyond your grasp and you and your mother muse that this hotel room seems designed to be terrible for people recovering from surgery. Your pain is improving, although you can still tell when it is time for your next dose of ibuprofen. You're already tired of sleeping on your back and mom is already tired of not getting more than four hours of sleep at a shot. Neither of you can wait for you to be recovered.

Today, Mom cuts off your compression bandages. You are so used to being oxygen deprived at this point that you don't notice how little you have been breathing until your vision goes black at your first real breath. Even though you know you should put on the ace bandage the doctor gave you, you make Mom take a picture of your new chest. There are white strips dotted with blood that cover your incisions but it is still the most beautiful thing you've ever seen. This is what makes all of the pain you are going through worth it and you are amazingly happy and cannot stop staring at the picture. Mom puts gauze pads over your drain sites and wraps you snugly in an ace bandage. After sharing your chest photo you go back to reading knowing that your chest will be beautiful. The next three days will be spent getting better. You figure out how to feed yourself, how to flush the toilet, how to use the computer again. The fluid from your drains slows down considerably so Dr. Steinwald takes them out. He removes the stitches holding the skin of your chest down and the stitches around your drains. He pulls your drains out and tells you that he wishes he looked as good as you do and you grin. You happily let him take pictures for his website. That done he puts some fancy strips on your chest incisions and sends you off with some scar guard samples and medical tape. Mom says you can head out in the morning and you are thrilled at the idea of being able to get out of the tiny hotel room. Somehow you manage to sweet talk her into making the whole drive in one day despite frequent stops to change your ace bandage. The doctor told you to keep your incisions dry and being in the car is making you sweat rather a lot. So the first time your chest is exposed to the open air is in a gas station parking lot while Mom digs in the back for a fresh bandage. The thought of being able to legally expose your chest makes you smile and you smile more at being done with your antibiotics and getting to sleep in your own bed.

Today you realize just how much mom sucks at being a nurse. You've always known she was rather terrible at it but this sort of takes the cake. It is a Sunday, so she wants to go to church, which is fine. What you mind is that she didn't leave your pain killers, water, or saltines within easy reach. She also doesn't answer her phone when you cannot even find the saltines after digging through the kitchen. Eventually you manage to take your painkillers and collapse on the bed. The trip yesterday took a lot out of you. You have a fever and are sweating on your ace bandage, which makes you incredibly nervous. Tate had other plans because she was expecting you to be out of town for another day so you sit and worry about the condition of your incisions. It is a rather miserable six hours while Mom is gone but you still scoff at the idea of her delaying her return to work. You're not entirely certain you can manage on your own but if you can get to food and pain killers you figure you'll get by just fine and you can get Tate to set that up for you. Mom delays her return to work because she is tired, though you manage just fine without too much help. It is the escalation of your recovery. First you start sleeping through the night without needing to wake up for pain killers. Then you reduce your ibuprofen to the regular dose, until you only take it occasionally and often for the pain in your ribs caused by binding full time to keep your new chest from swelling. Your mobility is coming back and you get such pleasures as showering without help and being able to wash your own hair, getting hugs without pain, and not needing to rely on others to make food. You get to return to work and countdown the days until you can stop binding full time.

Today is the first day you can stop binding full time. You venture into the world with your flat chest, achieved without binding, for the first time since puberty. Even though you have to leave work early because your chest starts to swell and you didn't think to bring an ace bandage this is the beginning of the end of your recovery. Soon, you drive up to a remote town in the Rocky Mountains and admire the view, enjoying mountain air on your naked chest. You will fuck and be fucked with the lights fully on for the first time in a year, reveling in the flatness and beauty of your chest. You will show it off to just about anyone who asks and a few people who don't. When you get

back to college you celebrate no longer needing to tape your incisions by going to the Rocky Horror Picture Show and the dance party afterwards wearing nothing but a tiny yellow mini skirt. Rocky, but you couldn't find gold shorts. You dance until you have blisters on your toes and you are exhausted and sore. Your scars have a little more maturing to do but today, at this dance, is the day your body becomes a home. It is a beautiful home with muscles, copious amounts of body hair, and a beautifully sculpted chest. This is by no means the end of your dysphoria or even the end of your struggle with your gender but surgery has allowed you to make peace with your body in a way that wasn't possible before. Your brain cannot imagine your chest any other way and it is beautiful. Welcome home little one, it has been a long time coming