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Beyond the Binary: A Gender Memoir

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Beyond the Binary:
A Gender Memoir

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Abstract

This is a series of autobiographical poems that delve into the role the audience plays in an individual's gender performance and how that can be helpful and harmful to identity, depending on the person performing and the people watching the performance. The concept of gender as a theatrical performance, the basis for many of the poems, is derived from the work of gender and queer theorists Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam. Additionally, these poems take inspiration from the works of creative writers Stacey Waite and Maia Kobabe and build on their work, which dissects and deconstructs gender as a social construct.

Key Words

gender, binary, poetry, autobiography, memoir

dedication

thank you to the queer authors who taught me to read and write in a way i had never known, to the Black trans women who paved the way for this work to exist, and to all of the gender queer siblings we've lost to violence today, yesterday, and tomorrow.

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introduction

After reading Stacey Waite describe themselves as “after,” “post,” and “ungender” in their collection of poems, *Butch Geography*, I was suddenly thrust into a new understanding of my own identity. Seeing poems such as “Dear Gender,” where Waite writes about their complex relationship to gender—expressing struggles I have felt—changed the way I looked at myself, literature, and the relationship between the two. Waite writes,

Gender, rise out, an exorcism, from our too scarred skin. // Let us make the sounds we were never meant to make. / Let us curse. Let us drive. Let us grill steak in the yard. // Here I am, gender. Tell me the girl I should be, // please, just say it quietly so no one will hear.

(Waite, 22)

As gender theorist Judith Butler describes in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” gender is one big performance act. As we wake up each day, we make a (conscious or unconscious) decision about what gender roles we will perform for the world. However, as Butler also explains, performing your gender “wrong” can often lead to marginalization in society. This is where the “ungender” idea from Stacey Waite comes into play. Throughout my life, I have continuously performed gender “wrong.” I have spent the last two decades trying to figure out not just what I’m doing wrong, but how on Earth I could ever do it right. After reading the works of authors like Waite, Maia Kobabe, and Jos Charles, I came to a new understanding of my relationship with gender. Who even decides what’s ‘right’? If these artists are feeling the same way I am, hoping to exist between the margins of our binary society, who’s to say we can’t? *This* is why I chose to write these poems. Reading *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe was indescribably impactful on me. In this graphic memoir, e* fully explore eir* complex

experience growing up between the margins of binary society. On page 121, Kobabe writes, “The clearest metaphor I had for my own gender identity in college was the image of a scale. A huge weight had been placed on one side, without my permission. I was constantly trying to weigh down the other side. But the end goal wasn’t masculinity—the goal was balance.” Gender is confusing, messy, and hard to understand. But in reading the works of others who go through the same struggle to navigate the disorienting landscape that is the binary world, I learned that I’m not alone in feeling this way. Physical and social gender dysphoria can be extremely emotionally isolating. In writing these poems, I am working to better understand myself and my relationship with my “ungender.” I hope that this collection can someday help someone in the way that Waite, Kobabe, Charles, and so many others have helped me.

The way I have designed this collection is very intentional. It’s not just the words on the page that I am using to help tell my story—it’s the white space, meter, style, and order. A lot of my inspiration for the more stylistic creative choices I made during this process is from Jos Charles and her poetry book *feeld*. Charles plays with the rules of English by spelling words phonetically, using double meanings, and defying the standard conventions of punctuation. An example of each of these can be found in poem “XVI.”

gendre is not the tran organe / gendre is yes a
 hemorage / the nayme scrypt & the stayte scrypt
 preseed laping the milke in mye sacks / gendre lik all
 sirfase is a female depositrie room / in that clowde
 moses wept & wee expeckte a lawe /

Much like Charles uses language to work for her, I wanted this collection to be something that I felt was a true representation of my gender experience. Every poem in the collection was written organically, in the moment, as I felt dysphoric, euphoric, or somewhere in between. Each is one page, a window into a short, passing moment. I wanted to ensure that every poem I included here is representative of the true nature of my experience. These feelings are quick blips of time, sometimes days, sometimes hours, sometimes minutes. Each page can stand alone as a representation of these short blips. The collection begins with what I consider to be one of the first moments that I was enlightened to gender binarity and ends with where I stand today. The middle poems represent the multitude of ups and downs between those two points. The order of these middle poems is not strict but rather interchangeable and fluid, as a reader may see fit. Just as my gender is fluid from day to day, my poems follow suit. Included at the end of this collection is a glossary of terms, in order of appearance, that I use throughout the works. In writing these poems, I wrote them predominantly for me and people like me. As a result, some things may be difficult to understand to those who are *not* like us. Whether you understand these terms at first glance or not, by the end, I trust that you will know and understand them like those of us who live them. With these poems and every intention I have put into them, I aim to do everything within my power to disrupt the binary world I find myself stuck in. I can only hope that these poems will inspire you to do the same.

awakening the egg

one day in the third grade, i came to school wearing my new, prized spongebob squarepants long sleeved shirt. i was so cool, right?
being a young child raised by progressive parents, i had very little understanding of the concept of “gendered” clothing. i just thought, “hey, i love spongebob!”

so, i loved that shirt.
i arrived at school that day with *pride*.
i was so excited about my new shirt.

after recess, i found myself walking down the mostly empty hallway, and i came across a boy in my grade. his eyes were immediately drawn to my bright (and awesome) shirt.

i was waiting for him to praise my impeccable taste.
(he didn't.)

instead, he said, with all the confidence of a little boy who can never be wrong,
“that’s a boy’s shirt. are you a lesbian or something?”
we were eight years old.
i did not respond. i didn’t know how.

in that moment, i was awakened to a new world.
i still wonder if that boy knows. if he’s ever known of the flame he ignited within me at that moment. still burning, over a decade later.

all because of my (boys) spongebob shirt.

predator or prey

not sure

where i belong
or what i should be

“assigned at birth”

not right

years of
evaluations
injections
pills
gels

how is it still not right?

one day
i am
prey

hungry eyes
devouring my youth

closing in
with every move
of my feminine body

another
i am the predator

arousing fear
the moment i arrive

no longer welcome
in those
warm
(fem)iliar
spaces

why is it never right?

what
why
how
where

do i learn
the space that i belong

if i am not
predator

but i am not
prey

what will i become?

androphobia

i finally escaped

abandoned the feeling
of

walking into a room
and shrinking into the corner

to protect myself
of

walking home in the dark

faster
 faster
 faster

with my head on a swivel
of

my heart sinking out of my chest
when

the doctor
classmate
teacher
alone with me
could be

him

after years of melting away
under

the fear
i didn't melt
or shrink
or sink

i became him
but

the fear remained
new this time

still shrinking
into the corner
a

new corner
because

i can't be
him
i won't be
him

so
sometimes i'm

not
when it feels too wrong to bear
and

every day when i wake up
i force myself to

decide
which version
of

him

i will fear

tick tock

it's always been drama with you
my earliest hospital memories
forever at your hands
for so long all i could think about

whether or not you would end it all

for some reason that all changed
when i wanted that shot so bad
they told me what it would do to you
it didn't matter anymore

who would get hurt

all those years i spent
figuring out what was best
down the drain with one little vile
who means so much more than you

half a decade later here i am

the drama clamored its way back
turning that sterile space
that had begun to smell of hope
to one that makes my skin crawl

does it matter what i do to you

you'll never understand
why i chose it over you
myocardium god
who gifted me life from day one

i know where my loyalty lies

wrong place wrong time

men's bathroom

blood

covers me like a newborn

screaming

blinded by those bright white lights

every move i make

echos

so loudly

as if i, tearing the dreaded pink wrapper,

am ripping the very fabric of this world

and as i sit here

i am reminded

i am in the wrong place

at the wrong time

and maybe

i was never meant to be here at all

an easter two for one special

today was trans day of visibility
it also happened to be easter

and oh boy did they love that
(you know who i'm talking about.)

every time something like this happens
and gains so much public attention i feel
like a spectacle

a zoo display for all to point and stare

because who are those missouri
republicans i grew up with going to
think of when they see today's fox
headline?

because who do my grandparents think
is responsible for the sacrilege that is
celebrating transness on the holiest of
days?

because what are those straight boys
thinking when i walk past them with my
beard unshaven and my skirt flowing in
the wind?

is this enough to tip them over the edge?

they cannot handle duality
that much is obvious

they cannot handle me
my androgyny eats away at them like a
plague

they cannot handle this
two for one special

how dare we celebrate those who go
against gods creation on a day like
today?

the answer?

it was actually much more effective to
have a joint celebration

i wonder how many headlines
mentioned trans people today? how
many thought of my face for the first
time in years?

a celebration of transformation,
revelation, and new life

trigger warning - mention of sexual assault**want or need (alt name - the interview)**

about 2 or 3 years after it happened, when i was around 15, my new therapist informed me that she was a mandated reporter. she didn't bother to mention this before i vomited the ills of my past all over her office.

after the report, i was forced to go tell some random people at some random place the whole story. a story i had been fighting against for years, desperately trying to rip away the parts of my brain that those memories lingered in.

it was probably the most uncomfortable conversation of my life. they recorded my words to show to him, for some reason, like hearing it from me, while sitting in cuffs, would do anything for him. she pointed at a cartoon penis and asked me, completely seriously, "so, what did he call this?" i boiled with humiliation in a way i hadn't ever known.

i found out later that my mother could hear everything we spoke from outside the room. i don't know which one of us got stabbed the hardest.

shortly before this, i had finally received my long-awaited big chop. i had been

slowly destroying my long curls for months, shoving them up into a hat to hide the length. i started dressing more androgynously, i was finally reaching the age where i understood what all these feelings over the years had meant.

in the interview, with the random lady, in the random place, amongst the tsunami of painful questions, she asked one that has stuck with me year after year, like a scar from a burning cattle brand.

"this whole situation—is this why you want to be a boy? it's very common for women to cope with sexual trauma by presenting as masculine to feel more safe; i see it all the time."

the truth was that no, this wasn't why. i "wanted to be a boy" long before he polluted my young body.

however, it was through that pollution that i finally realized that i couldn't survive the life i was living any longer. it made me realize i didn't want to be a boy. for now, at least, i *needed* to be.

so all i said was "maybe."

bloom

three years ago
i never could've imagined myself
feeling the way i do now

something about the way she makes me
feel

it changed everything

never in my wildest dreams did i think
i would allow someone to know me
in the way
i've been known by her

never did i think i would see value
in this skin of mine
until she showed me how

it's changed my entire world

i used to believe that if i did not look a
certain way,
"m or f"
that my worth didn't exist

that nobody could ever see
such a blurring of boundaries,
the monstrosity that i felt inside and out,
and still believe that i was not
too othered for this life

but the way that she looks at me,
in every state of being,
despite every categorical box that i
cannot be shoved into,
has shown me what really matters

as days became months and months
became years, each day i realized more
and more
that my performance doesn't matter

my script could change, and she would
stay

so over these long, but too fast, three
years
she gifted me life
like the spring air that births flowers

and every day
i bloom

not just for her
but for me
for us

stepping stone

it stopped happening once i started to
become less clockable

however, for years of my battle to be
known as 'man'
i found myself being used as a stepping
stone

nothing gives a young trans boy gender
euphoria like dating a cis gay boy
something about the affirmation that
this *man*,
who only is interested in
men,
likes
me, a *man*

there seemed to be an ongoing trend
for almost all these boys, i was the first
boy they had publicly dated

at the time, i didn't see the problem
but once it happened again
and again and again
and they always left
more confident than ever in their
sexuality to go on and date only cis men

for a long time, i couldn't understand
why this kept happening
they made me feel so masculine, so real

how could they not see me that way

the answer was much more simple than
i'd like to admit

for these boys,
i was nothing more than an experiment

a test

a toe in the water
of a world they couldn't decide
to keep or hide

so, they used me as their gateway
to queerness, to men
away from women
a last, final confirmation
that they really like *men*

not me,
not someone who *looks* like a man,
but a *real* man

one who can do all those fun things
a real man can do for them
but not me

i could try,
be whatever person they asked me to be
in the hopes it might convince them

but it never worked

they always realized, at some point or
another, that they
definitely,
really,
with *no doubt*,
only like *men*

real,
flat chest,
not-flat jeans,
deep voice,
strong,
manly,
men

epicene
how do i escape
these

barbaric
binary
binds

drowning me slowly
any divergence will be

poked
prodded
punished

my hair my hips my fucking hands

all signals
signs of my

incorrect
incompetent
incomprehensible

performance

no bearded woman

cute skirt

no garment
compressing my chest

to hide what my mother
and so many others
have lost

my curls
so carefully pulled
atop my head

desperate
to counteract the length

but my chin
my jaw
my neck
my lip
and those

course

little

hairs

that (finally)
grow there
so innocently

are all that you can see

i can dress fem
fix my hair
wear makeup
show my tits

present my body
in a way
i've become so accustomed
to fighting against

but as long as those little hairs remain
populating my face
without a care in the world

i can never truly be fluid
you won't let me

i can never be truly be her
and still keep him

***totally appropriate workplace
conversation***

at work
no binder
comfortable clothes
sweater, jeans, doc martens

simple

my beard makes me a man

but my painted nails, protruding chest, and
soft features tell another story
whispering softly after years of hormones

as we sit here in the library on this cold
november night she asks me
“are you, like, strictly ‘they/them’? or do you
use ‘he’ too”

i am strictly they/them
i tell her, lifting my name tag with my
clearly printed pronouns for her to see

i’ve known her for months at this point
spent many hours at many shifts in skirts,
no binder, feeling fem as ever

but tonight she decides to dig a little deeper

once i’ve clarified my “preferred” pronouns
she continues with her “psychology
interrogations” towards me and my other
coworker, a cis gay man

“so, since you’re both biologically male...”
and i freeze

i do not know how to respond

never has anyone been so fervently insistent
on the non-existent dick in my pants

the one i’ve longed over for years

historically, when someone insists they
know what’s in my pants, this is not the way
it goes

but i still feel the pain

the same pain i felt in ninth grade when the
boys demanded that i could never be one of
them

my poor mother must be so disappointed
my poor father can never walk his baby girl
down the isle

and now
i am biologically male
(according to her)

i have never known this prospect to be
uncomfortable until this moment

confronted, in public and at work, by an
absence that haunts me and affirms me at
the same time every day

i never know what to do in these situations

not against the ninth grade boys, not against
my senior-year-in-college coworker

why does it matter?
why must you put me in a box just because
you think you can?
who gave you the right to decide what is or
isn’t in my pants?

it doesn’t matter, and you cannot decide
interrogate me all you want
i will not let you imprison me

end of the world

somehow
the world didn't end
when i was sixteen
and all of you told me

that name
was the only one you'd ever know

somehow it still didn't end
a year later
when you said to me
what you promised you never would

that i wasn't the one
who lost my daughter

the sky didn't fall
when they made we wait
those extra weeks for that shot
even though i was sure

i might just die
without it

somehow
after everything
i am still here
and i am still me

despite all the times
the world and i stood no chance

i felt her soil beneath my feet
and i came back
to save her life
and mine

double edged sword

now that i'm masculine
i can walk into a room of men, and not
feel their eyes burn away the fabric on
my body

now that i'm masculine
getting dressed in the morning is so
much easier

now that i'm masculine
nobody bats an eye when i speak loudly,
assert myself, dominate the space

but now that i'm masculine
it's what they expect
of course i'm dominant, assertive, loud

isn't that what being a man is?

i must dress simply, don't put too much
effort into your looks, you'll look queer

i must feel comfortable around my
fellow men

and what if i can't?
overpowering, simple, comfortable
around those who arouse fear in me like
no other

am i too queer? too fem?
too submissive to really be a man?

to other men,
i am the byproduct of the gradual
emasculatation of their most sacred
practices

to other women,
i am a threat

***nex, 14 year old me, and all the
rest of us***

so many hear your name
and feel sorrow
fear
pain

i just don't feel that way anymore
i probably should

simply put
i am pissed

the repeated failures
the blind eyes
the disregard for a fucking child's life

does it make you feel better to break
down our young bodies?
tear us down bit by bit?

a special fuck you to every school system
that continues to fail us

west st. francis county, my abysmal alma
mater
how many have you treated like me?

how many other 14 year old children
have you told that they are "inviting"
death threats, harassment, and slurs for
"choosing this lifestyle"?

these schools, my school, nex's school,
and so many others

our blood is on your hands

what will it take for you to protect your
students? not just the ones that fit your
pretty, perfect, heteronormative fantasy

all of us

who will protect us?

yes, i am pissed
i cannot afford to live my life in
sorrow, fear, and pain

and at this point,
what else would i know?

what am i to you

why do you look up to me?
you think i know what i'm doing?

it wasn't some magic trick or secret
potion—two years experience and fifteen
hundred miles can do a lot for a person

they watched you crack your shell
step out of your box
try to squeeze into a new one

i was already crumpled and shoved in
when i arrived

so they didn't mind as much when i
asked them to respect my new box
how could they miss something they
never met?

so when you ask me how i did it
how i got them to treat me this way
how do i tell you the truth?

that i used to be you
without a me to look up to

it nearly killed me

so i abandoned nearly everything i had
ever known just to find some peace

here, nobody knows the person i was
never met that girl my family misses
so it's not hard for them to give her up

but every time they see you
they see her

and every time i see you
i'm haunted by the life i had to kill

why do you think
i know what i'm doing?
do not look up to me
i only know how to survive

life as a categorical anomaly

i'd like to tell you it gets easier
but what good would lying do?

when i was younger i thought i would
have it all figured out by now

and in a way, i think i have

the answer isn't comfort
or ease

maybe the answer is that i don't need
one

why do i need to figure it out?
is a label really all that important?
it's so much less painful to just be

to wake up each day and not confine
myself to what you will think of me

shouldn't i just do what feels nice?

if only it were that easy

so, i just try my best
some mornings it's hard

one outfit after the other,
nothing feels right
but that's okay

because at the end of the day
when i strip it all away
i realize

none of it matters

i cannot shed my skin

so i must learn to live with the days it
pulls me to the ground
and relish in the days where i feel like
i'm floating

nothing is perfect
i'm certainly not

i cannot fit in your pretty categories
and i do not care anymore

phoria

its hard to explain to someone
whose never experienced it

the way something can feel so right,
tailored just for this skin only

but the very next day,
it's wrong

foreign weight
pulling down my frail body

when i wake up
the guessing game begins
get it wrong, incessant battle ensues

it's a triumph worthy of a federal holiday
if i'm somehow able to string together
the correct combination

of colors, patterns, textures
on my first try

when i do,
the sky may as well be opening

the sun spreading her warm grace
across my body

but on those days when i can't
andichangeandichangeandichange
but it's still not right

i close my eyes
i hold my breath
and i wait

for the next day
that i will slip myself into those same
thousands of threads

they will either swallow me whole
or
i will swallow them

enough

is it enough yet
or is it too much?
how do i find the balance

the one that doesn't hurt
the one that makes you
comfortable around me

i spent years becoming enough
never feeling like it was true
it was obvious when it happened

the air around me changed
the side eye stares
the clutching of purses

i feel safer now
(sometimes)

i feel more confident
(not really)

do i scare you now?
(i wish i didn't)

when i finally became enough
something flipped
how is it still not right?

i miss the ambiguity
the "um"s and "uh"s
i want you to be confused

is it not enough
or is it too much?
who the fuck am i

why do both feel so wrong
where is the middle
how do i do this

why can't i just look how i want
why must you put me in a box
why am i like this

i wonder if i
i wonder if you
will ever understand

how it feels to be here
stuck in this intersection and
every direction is not mine to go

maybe one day
possibly tomorrow
hell, even today

i will find the middle
you will understand
i will be free

it will be enough
not too much
beautiful, beyond-binary balance

glossary (terms in order of appearance)

1. **egg:** Slang term for someone who is trans but doesn't know it yet, an embryo of the trans person they will eventually hatch into.
2. **androphobia:** Fear of men.
3. **myocardium:** The muscular tissue of the heart.
4. **Trans Day of Visibility:** International Transgender Day of Visibility is an annual holiday. Every March 31 since 2009, this day has been dedicated to celebrating transness, raising awareness of discrimination faced by trans people worldwide, and celebrating our contributions to society and the queer rights movement.
5. **clockable:** “Clock” or “clocking” is slang used to identify (someone) as trans or as the gender they were assigned at birth, especially when they do not wish to be so identified.
6. **gender euphoria:** Satisfaction or joy caused when one's gendered experience aligns with their gender identity. The opposite of gender dysphoria.
7. **cis(gender):** A person who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth. A non-transgender, binary individual.
8. **epicene:** Having characteristics of both sexes or no characteristics of either sex; of indeterminate sex.
9. **binder:** "Binding" refers to the process of flattening one's breast tissue; a binder is the garment used to achieve this look.
10. **Nex Benedict:** A 16-year-old non-binary (two-spirit) American high school student who died the day after a physical altercation in the girls' restroom of their

high school. They had been experiencing ongoing harassment due to their gender identity. School staff knew of the bullying well before Nex's death.

11. **hetronormative:** Heteronormativity is the concept that heterosexuality is the preferred or normal sexual orientation.
12. **gender dysphoria:** A deep sense of unease and distress that may occur when your biological sex does not match your gender identity. Dysphoria can be both social and/or physical.

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