An Antidote

Reflections on Queer Shame

Walking alone as the new, bright snow finds its way into the gutters and smothers all the sound with its thick sheet, still virgin, early enough in the evening that everything still whispers young. As for me, I'm high off a new hit, pheromones fresh and whiskey still pumping warm from my insides. I've spent the afternoon with a crush. And me being a queer girlboy, and him being a straight boy, it is grey but mostly in my head, and either way, we're close.

I like it alone in the orange sodium glow of the street, I like it dropped against the heavyset navy blue wash of the lake just past the hill's ridge. When I feel like this and take empty sidestreets where the wind off Mendota isn't harsh, I sing to myself. It's an old form of storytelling I've done forever. It's better than writing, better than talking. The lines are all throwaway - some of them are drippy and trite, some of them are actual gold, but none of them are gonna get written down, especially not on a shabbat afternoon just before Havdalah and the whole sabbath is forever and always trapped in amber - beautiful and unable to be accessed ever again. On shabbes, we let things go.

So I sing about love like the ephemera it is and treat it that way. With this much drink in my veins; with silly and delicious dreams of kissing and touching so close to alive; with myself, alone, only with unrecorded words spilling out on to the deserted sidewalks, I don't have to feel any shame.

On a call last week, the final reflection of my yearlong fellowship, the editor of the magazine I'm working for and the leader of our little cohort, Daniel, who is also non-binary, says to me, "Your work is like an antidote for shame."

But what parts of it? What elements, what factors? Where is that shame located? Who planted it? How does it grow? Where does it dwell in us, in what unfindable darkness, by what disguise? What is its shape? Its story? Do we burn it or just refuse to water it? Should we expose it to sunlight, raw and bright? What happens when it's finally gone? What echoes in its place? What flourishes in its rubble?

OR MAYBE HE'S IN SOMEONE'S ROOM.
OH - NO, YEHUDA, I DIDN'T MEAN IT LIKE THAT
I SLUT-SHAME MEN - I DON'T MEAN THIS TO BE ANYTHING ABOUT YOU
NO I KNOW
IT'S JUST HARD TO HEAR ABOUT — I HAVE THIS REACTION
WELL
I DON'T WANT TO MAKE THESE JOKES IF IT'S GOING TO CAUSE YOU SHAME.

It's only in the kitchen when Meg says it point blank do I realize I'd been making a huge mistake.

"He's probably up there right now in somebody's room." She says, all pugnacious, and my head swims.

The sensation of shame is hundreds of sprite bubbles, sharp and glassy, rising in my field of vision, my stomach faltering, the essence of myself that stands slightly in front of my face at all times collapsing inward, shrinking, fainting as it turns its back to everything else. Yes, shame is a physical reaction, psychosomatic primarily, but it disguises itself in other colors.

Meg notices immediately.

"Oh shit, are you okay?"

I say I'm fine.

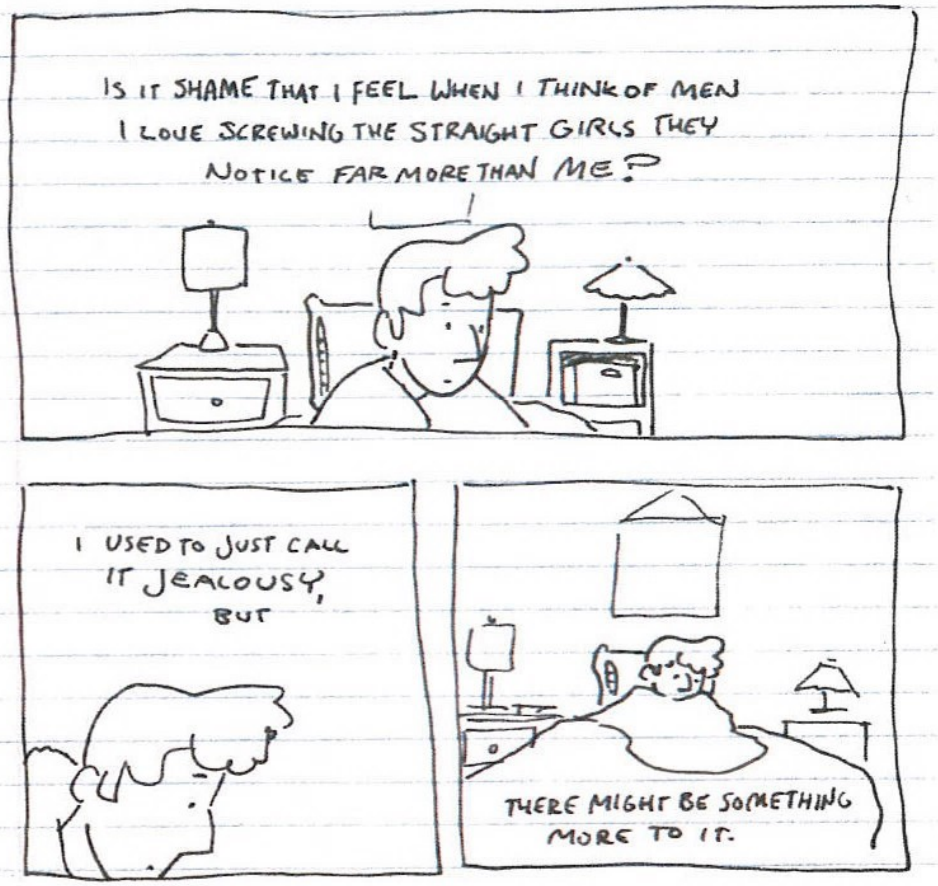
"I joke about men being sluts because they are. That's what I do. But I won't make those jokes around you if it causes you shame."

Then it all clicks.

The difference between jealousy and shame is actually enormous when you're sober.

Jealousy: Someone has something that I want and I don't have. I'm frustrated about it.

Shame: Someone has something that I want and I don't have. **There must be something deeply wrong with me.**



Shame shapeshifts. It looks like other things, pretends to be rational, protective, useful. You will learn it by its opacity, by its inability to be known. It exists best in negative space, and often it needs to be exposed from the outside in order to see it in relief.

UNFORTUNATELY, MY "RATIONAL" SIDE HAS ITS OWN DEMONS, CRUEL & SHAMING THE MORE EMOTIVE, IMMATURE, & HORMONE-INFLUENCED PART OF SELF. NEITHER OF THESE CREATURES ARE FAIR TO ME... IF PANEL 2 IS WHAT "SANE(R)" LOOKS LIKE, IT LOOKS LIKE I HAVE WORK TO DO.

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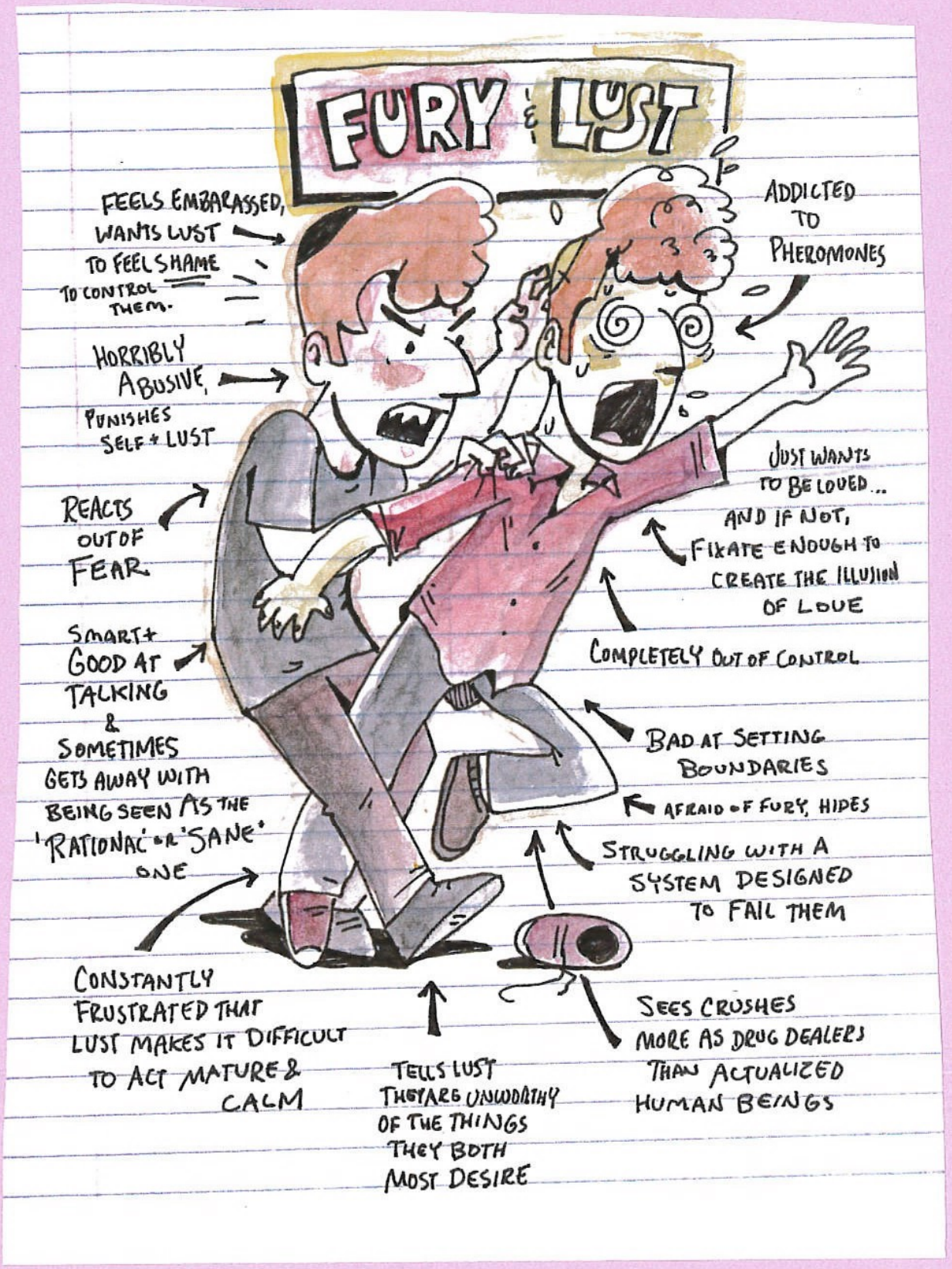

FURY & LUST
FEELS EMBARASSED, WANTS LUST TO FEEL SHAME TO CONTROL THEM.
HORRIBLY ABUSIVE, PUNISHES SELF + LUST
REACTS OUT OF FEAR
SMART + GOOD AT TALKING & SOMETIMES GETS AWAY WITH BEING SEEN AS THE 'RATIONAL' OR 'SANE' ONE
CONSTANTLY FRUSTRATED THAT LUST MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO ACT MATURE & CALM
TELLS LUST THEY ARE UNWORTHY OF THE THINGS THEY BOTH MOST DESIRE
SEES CRUSHES MORE AS DRUG DEALERS THAN ACTUALIZED HUMAN BEINGS
STRUGGLING WITH A SYSTEM DESIGNED TO FAIL THEM
BAD AT SETTING BOUNDARIES
AFRAID OF FURY, HIDES
COMPLETELY OUT OF CONTROL
JUST WANTS TO BE LOVED... AND IF NOT, FIXATE ENOUGH TO CREATE THE ILLUSION OF LOVE
ADDICTED TO PHEROMONES

The cure, the antidote. What is the medicine, how do we heal? Shame is social, it comes from places that are beyond us and then worms its way into personal narrative. And a lot of it changed after I transitioned.

THIS IS **FURY** TRYING TO WREST THE WHEEL FROM THE PART OF ME ADDICTED TO PHEROMONES. BOTH OF THEM SUCK & COULD USE A LITTLE MORE COMPASSION. ONE LACKS SELF CONTROL, THE OTHER, SELF LOVE. THEY'RE ATTACHED AT THE HIP, BUT **FURY** CONSTANTLY FEELS ASHAMED BY EVEN ASSOCIATING WITH THE ANIMAL, CONSTANTLY TELLING THEM WHAT A FUCKUP THEY ARE, AFRAID OF WHAT IT COULD MEAN TO LOVE THAT VERSION OF THE SELF, NOT AS CRAZY BUT AS SEXY. THE PROBLEM IS THE SYSTEM OR THE SITUATION. NOT ME. NEVER ME. I SHOULD NOT FEEL ASHAMED.

AS BEN SAYS, "EVEN YOUR DEMONS ARE ONLY THERE TO SERVE YOU."

HEY, DO YOU REMEMBER...
HM?
I FEEL LIKE THERE WAS A TIME WHEN THINGS WERE DIFFERENT.
YOU WERE FUN & HOT... AND I DIDN'T FEEL SO ANGRY ALL THE TIME.
WHEN I FELT STRONGER & LESS AFRAID.
YEAH.
19 kisses $780

It is not a rational part of you.

Queer shame is not useful.

You should not tell stories that make you hate yourself.

Stop telling yourself stories that make you hate yourself.

Queer shame is old.

"I awoke while Joey was still sleeping, curled like a baby on his side, toward me. He looked like a baby, his mouth half open, his cheek flushed, his curly hair darkening the pillow and half hiding his damp round forehead and his long eyelashes glinting slightly in the summer sun. We were both naked and the sheet we had used as a cover was tangled around our feet. Joey's body was brown, was sweaty, the most beautiful creation I had ever seen til then. I would have touched him to wake him up but something stopped me. I was suddenly afraid. Perhaps it was because he looked so innocent lying there, with such perfect trust; perhaps it was because he was so much smaller than me; my own body suddenly seemed gross and crushing and the desire which was rising in me seemed monstrous. But, above all, I was suddenly afraid. It was borne in me: *But Joey is a boy.*

I saw suddenly the power in his thighs, in his arms, and in his loosely curled fists. The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured til madness came, in which I would lose my manhood. Precisely, I wanted to know that mystery and feel that power and have that promise fulfilled through me. The sweat on my back grew cold. I was ashamed. The very bed, in its sweet disorder, testified to vileness. I wondered what Joey's mother would say when she saw the sheets. Then I thought of my father, who had no one in the world but me, my mother having died when I was little. A cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words. I thought I saw my future in that cavern. I was afraid. I could have cried, cried for shame and terror, cried for not understanding how this could have happened to me, how this could have happened *in* me. And I made my decision. I got out of bed and was dressed and had breakfast ready when Joey woke up."

- James Baldwin, "Giovanni's Room"

©1956

Scholar and shame researcher Brene Brown claims that the cure for shame is empathy. "Shame depends on me buying into the belief that I'm alone." Brown says. "Shame cannot survive being spoken. It cannot survive empathy."

Here lies the necessity of queer community and camaraderie and history. Or at the very least, the cutting honesty of a zine, which feel all at once so secret, precious, and open. Writing is just another form of singing which is just another form of speaking. And I know that we need to speak this shame, that those who read this will listen to this shame, will receive me with an open palm.

It isn't wrong to have desire.

There are things that are too beautiful waiting on the other side.

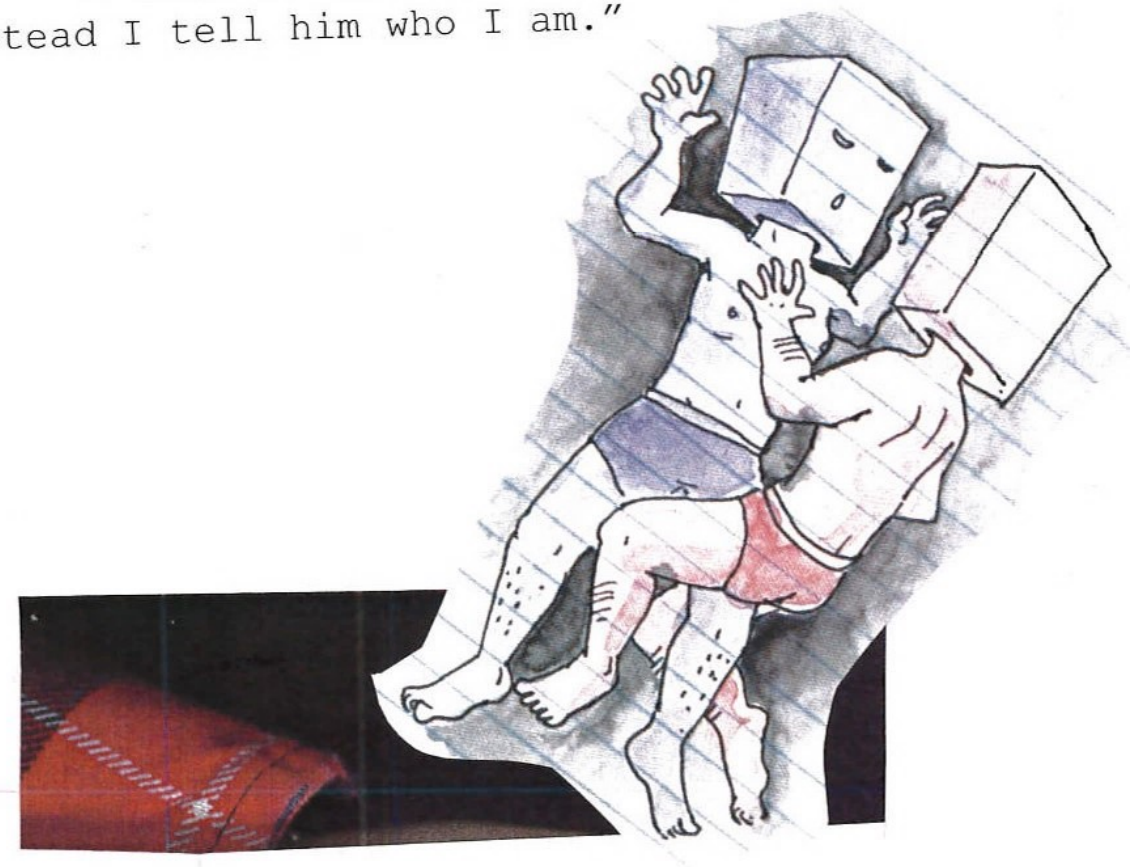
Queerness actually gives us the chance to be honest about what we want. There aren't scripts for this. We have to learn to see that desire as beautiful rather than shameful. There are too many beautiful and holy things waiting on the other side.

I just read "We Both Laughed In Pleasure: The Selected Diaries of Lou Sullivan, 1961 - 1991". Lou Sullivan was one of the first out, gay trans male activists in the United States - and perhaps the first writing I have ever read who wrote shame, spoke shame, and demonstrated to me that I am not alone.

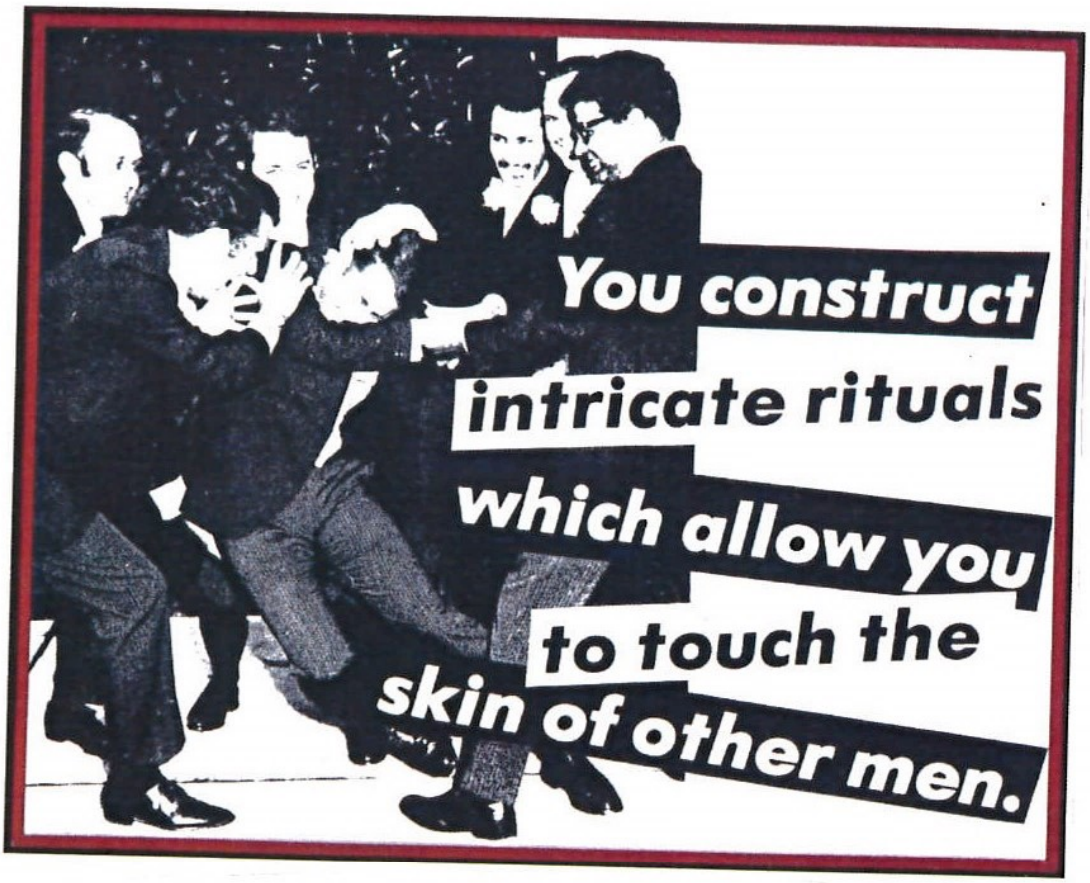
TO LOU, WHO I LOVE, WHO LIT THE WAY.

Lou writes about his desire for men with rawness and longing. "My God, when he stands so near to me I feel like I'm going to be burned if he brushes against me. I can hardly hold myself back from taking hold of him. He looks like he tastes good. He smells good." In the second half of his life, he falls hard for a youngman he calls "T". This is after he's medically transitioned with testosterone and top surgery, but he's constantly afraid of T finding out that he's trans. "Oh sweet brat boy // Bellyward on my bed." Lou seems horrifyingly unsure if it would make T repulsed by him, or worse, actually give him a better chance, since T seems to identify as straight. But then he wrote the truest line:

"I want to tell him what he means to me, instead I tell him who I am."



[UNTITLED, Barbara Kruger, 1981]



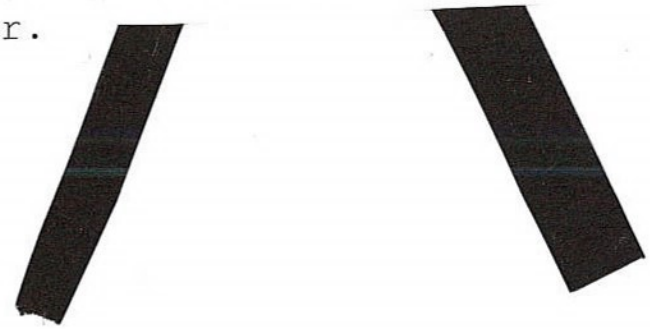
"When I finally got into bed it felt like I was floating on a cloud in heaven - I couldn't believe my fortune. My eyes sneakily devour this beautiful youth, huddled in blankets, wearing sleeveless A-shirt, his black curls in disarray on the pillow. I dare not touch him + wanted to show him we could lay together as brothers. My heart pounded loudly as he turned or changed positions, not sleeping."

Shame gets taught young. Little kids get reprimanded for touching their genitals in public, or a girl gets chastised for sitting with her legs open while wearing a dress, or a boy gets smacked for playing with barbies. Everyone talks about how that classic gender minutia is tied to stereotypes and norms, but it does something else to those of us who fell on the receiving end: it plants shame, early and well. There is no clear reason for these responses, for the violence wrought on to children who blameless transgress these mundane and sharp boundaries. So when we get older, we internalize that response, never really knowing why and often never knowing it isn't simply a natural feature. If something has always been there, it becomes impossible to adequately notice or feel like, perhaps, it might be better off in the trash.

One of my earliest gender memories is in fact a shame memory. The summer before kindergarten I'd been enrolled in a shitty daycamp called "Summer Stuff", where there was a lot of disorganized time, unhappy children, and once a week we ate burnt hotdogs that our counselors had hand-roasted over a park campground fire. On the playground, a particular boy I had initially befriended began to harass me constantly. He could not believe that I was a girl. In fact, I had liked that he thought I was a boy, yet I thought this was somehow wrong because telling him I was a boy felt like deception. It escalated, the argument over my gender, as I insisted I was a girl and he insisted that I was lying, until eventually I threatened to pull down my pants and blessedly, in the summer heat, the threat was enough to stop the attacks.

This was common, frankly, for people I met to assume I was a boy. All little kids look androgynous to a certain point, and I wore my brother's handmedowns, acted with the belligerence and energy misogynistically assumed of boy children, and had my curly red hair bobbed into an ambiguous mane. Every time someone would call me a boy, something in me would resonate and shine - but I knew that it would be wrong to lie, to allow myself to deceive those poor fools. And from the equally true experiences of gender euphoria and fear of lying grew queer shame. Each time I "passed" (another word for the erasure of the self), it still felt like I was simply getting away with something. To the outside, maybe that's all transness looks like: lying and lying, until you've trapped someone else in a bathroom or in bed, and when they see the horrible truth it's too late.

Like most anyone today over the age of 20, I didn't grow up with words like "transgender" and "genderqueer", and the term "non-binary" didn't even exist yet. My childhood gender vocabulary consisted of "tomboy" and "sissy" and "girly-girl". The most I knew about this obscene, adult world of formal gender non-conformity was from a MAD Magazine fold-out which satirized a maternity card, an anthurium flower's stamen edited to look like a penis in full bloom, a commentary on the popular, tabloid shock-story of the mysterious, repulsive pregnant man (!) who of course I would later learn was not a mystery at all but rather someone who had taken testosterone, had a uterus, wanted a kid. A harbinger of my future. But all I saw was the dick flower.



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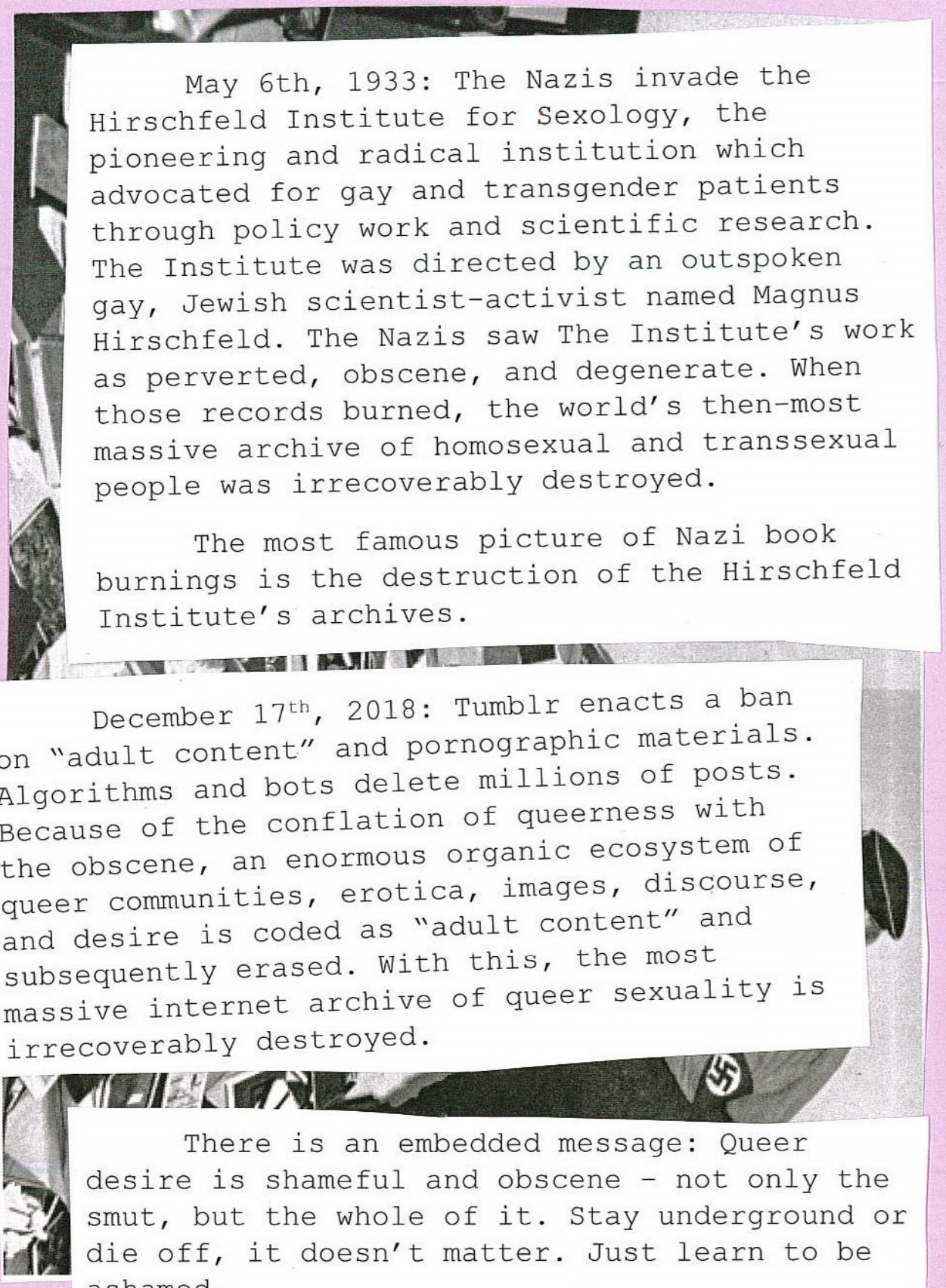
Ironically, the "deceptive" side of queerness (and specifically transness) doesn't actually ever have ramifications for those outside of it, but can be catastrophic for queer and trans folks. Cis-het pearl-clutching over being deceived is nothing compared to the actual consequences of that deception for the perpetrators. It means trans women get murdered by straight men terrified of being gay. It means watching someone unwind every memory of you when the almighty truth of your genitalia is revealed. It means that the tinder boy I've been sexting with for three days might block me as soon as our

snapchatting gets under my clothes. It means saying it was idiotic of me to even try. It means my desire is frightening to those I desire. It means learning that the boys I want will find me repulsive as soon as they know me. It means believing that my love is threatening. It means telling myself it could not be possible for someone to love me back. Shame: I am a liar. Shame: I am beyond the acceptable. Shame: there must be something deeply wrong with me.

[redacted]



May 6th, 1933: The Nazis invade the Hirschfeld Institute for Sexology, the pioneering and radical institution which advocated for gay and transgender patients through policy work and scientific research. The Institute was directed by an outspoken gay, Jewish scientist-activist named Magnus Hirschfeld. The Nazis saw The Institute's work as perverted, obscene, and degenerate. When those records burned, the world's then-most massive archive of homosexual and transsexual people was irrecoverably destroyed.

The most famous picture of Nazi book burnings is the destruction of the Hirschfeld Institute's archives.

December 17th, 2018: Tumblr enacts a ban on "adult content" and pornographic materials. Algorithms and bots delete millions of posts. Because of the conflation of queerness with the obscene, an enormous organic ecosystem of queer communities, erotica, images, discourse, and desire is coded as "adult content" and subsequently erased. With this, the most massive internet archive of queer sexuality is irrecoverably destroyed.

There is an embedded message: Queer desire is shameful and obscene - not only the smut, but the whole of it. Stay underground or die off, it doesn't matter. Just learn to be ashamed.

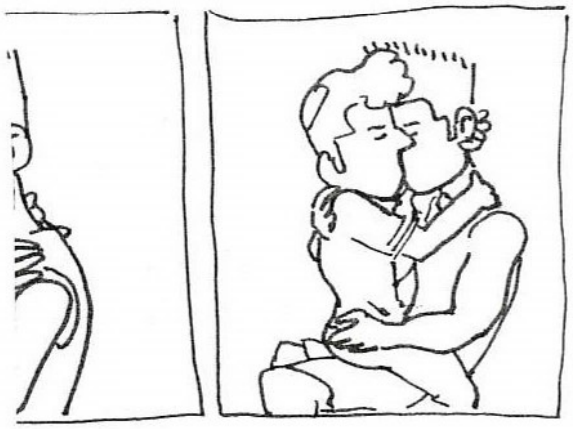
The fascists want us to hate ourselves.

We can deny them that.

I love men. I love masculinity, its softnesses and weights, the curvature of the bodies of boys and their distinct beauty. I love it in myself, I love it in the boys for whom I hunger. Their contrasts and secrets and scared, sacred parts. How they blossom for me. I don't love men how the stories and scripts say men should be loved. No, I love them tender and sweet and intense, different and rare. I am a faggot and I am a lover. We deserve to love these things in the way that we love them, want to love them, want to be loved. Fuck you, I will not be ashamed.

Sportstar by Alex G

Sportstar
If you want me I'll call
If you want me to fall
I'll fall
My dream
Let me play on your team
I'm clean
Let me tie your Nikes
Holding on for sportstar
Let me wear your jersey
If you want to hurt me
Hurt me
I play how I wanna play
I say what I wanna say
I play how I wanna play
I say what I wanna say
I play how I wanna play
I say what I wanna say
I play how I wanna play
I say what I wanna say
Sportstar
In the back of my car
Could you hit me too hard?
You're scarred
Sport star
I can hear your echo
Pass go
Driving on my white throne
95 to sport star
If I make it back on
I don't wanna live long
Just strong



When I'm lonely, I draw myself kissing an imaginary boy.

He came from a song, "Sportstar" by Alex G. The first time I heard it, the lyrics washed over me and shocked me with its familiarity and intimacy. The words went to a place that no straight smut pop song can ever dream to reach. It was the very first time, I think, I had ever heard my kind of desire articulated in music.

I call him Sportstar but his real name is Aaron. I met him while I waited to pick up my roommate from the gym, playing in the local basketball league at the Y. The story goes that I sat on the benches drawing the players as they shot hoops until one day he noticed that I was staring at him the whole time. He asks to see my drawings. My stomach swims because they're all of him. I show him anyway.

"They're good." That's all he says.

For months I would draw this ongoing comic in the back of my notebook, the night he asks for a ride home, him telling me my music sucks, us pulling over on the side of the dark road so he can smoke a cigarette, our hands touching on the hood of the car, our silhouettes in my headlights, the leatherette backseat of my 1996 Lexus, the hoodie and shorts, the smell of postgame sweat, his mouth on mine. Then I'd close my notebook and forget the thumbnail panels, wondering what I'd say to the few people who saw the comic and asked, "Who's that?"

Dec 17, 10:05 PM

Can I ask -- is Julien a character or based on a real person?

Dec 17, 11:13 PM

He's purely a character. I started this painting with him and me in it and a while later, he came back as a full character.

Sometimes I worry that I'm too attached

❤️

I always feel like I need to have a justification behind what I draw especially with Julien. And I just always said that I made it all to combat loneliness, and while that's part of it, I always felt like there was something that I couldn't explain. Something I felt while drawing that I just couldn't put into words.

Is it odd that I find it amazing and sort of a relief that he's a character?

I do this same thing

My character Sportstar is entirely a fictional boy, who I did pages and pages about.

I feel like this kind of art is absolutely necessary for the kind of healing that we have to do as a very specific kind of queer

In general, transmasc into men/ butchfag gender-sexuality is so unspoken about and it's only been this year I've started to understand how much healing I need, how hurt I've been by the lack of narratives that show me a model of desirability for my own body in a way that feels right

But we need queer fantasies like these because they help us dream up the kinds of love that are possible and the kinds of love we deserve

I resonate so deeply with your drawings of Wrigley and Julien -- I think some of the most intense artistic affinities I've ever felt is while looking at that work of youra

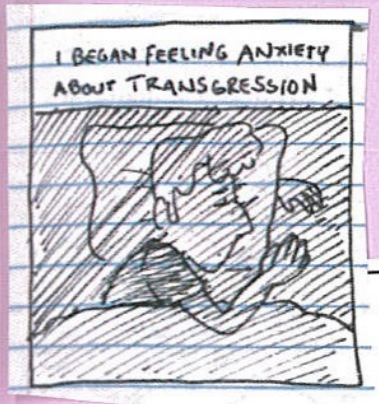
*yours. I feel so grateful for it, that you share it.

Often, drawing erotica or honestly more usually, gentle scenes with boys real or imagined feels like painting that world into being. I don't think it's unrealistic. I think it's actually one of the most pragmatic things we can do. We deserve things that beautiful, that kind. I actually believe it's possible.

You're right. You're entirely right. I guess we do really need stories like this. Making things like this make me feel comforted in a way that I've never really felt.

I'm just trying to excavate these feelings idk

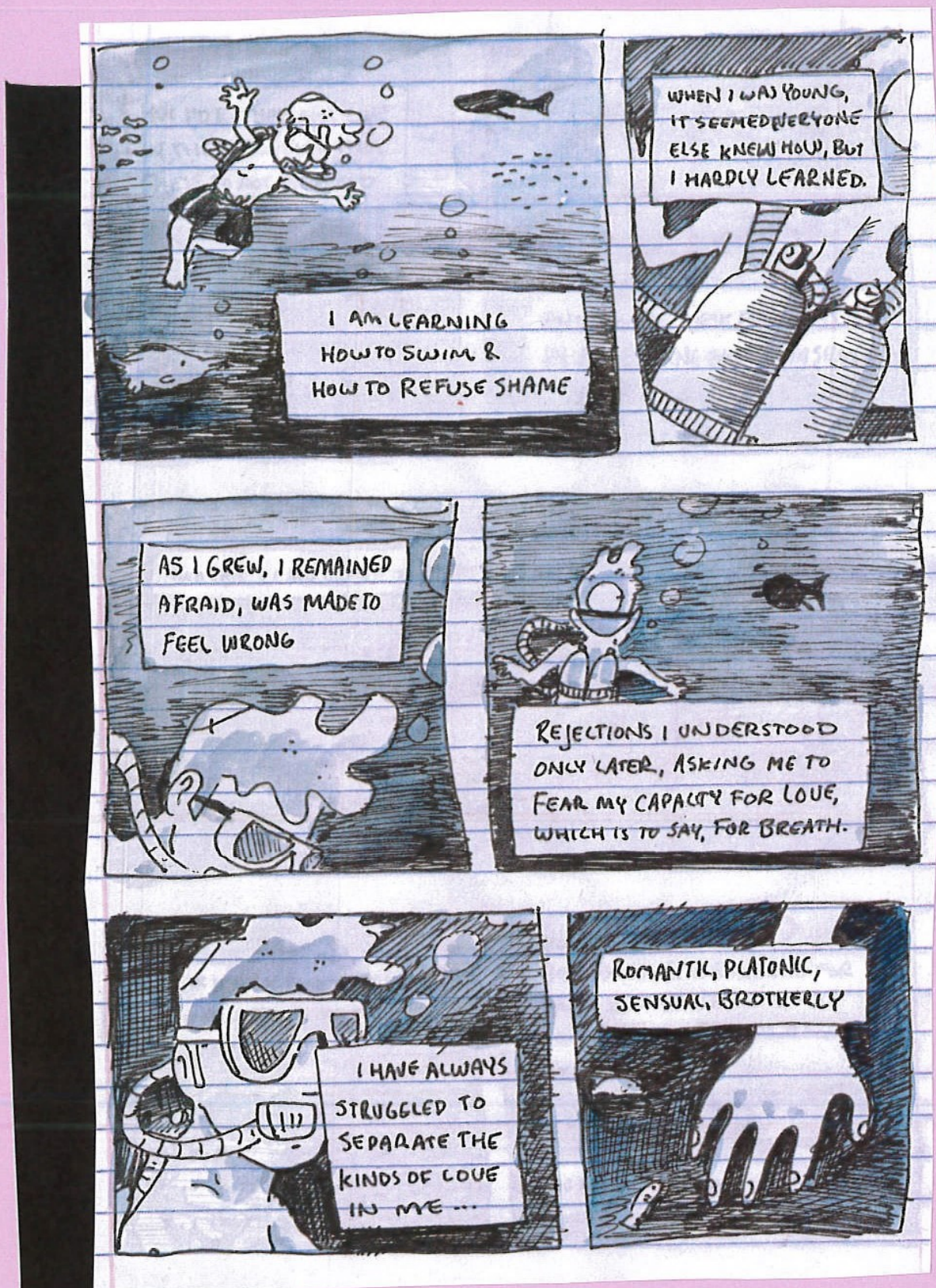
I sometimes fear that I'm reaching too high. Like I'm creating a world and people that can't ever exist. I just really really hope that some day I can feel this kind of stuff and not have to snap myself out of a daydream.



Aristotle's Nicomachian Ethics
Chapter 9: On Shame

Shame should not be described as a virtue; for it is more like a feeling than a state of character. It is defined, at any rate, as a kind of fear of dishonor, and produces an effect similar to that produced by fear of danger; for people who feel disgraced blush, and those who fear death turn pale. Both, therefore, seem to be in a sense bodily conditions, which is thought to be characteristic of feeling rather than of a state of character.

The feeling is not becoming to every age, but only to youth. For we think young people should be prone to the feeling of shame because they live by feeling and therefore commit many errors, but are restrained by shame; and we praise young people who are prone to this feeling, but an older person no one would praise for being prone to the sense of disgrace, since we think he should not do anything that need cause this sense. For the sense of disgrace is not even characteristic of a good man, since it is consequent on bad actions (for such actions should not be done; and if some actions are disgraceful in very truth and others only according to common opinion, this makes no difference; for neither class of actions should be done, so that no disgrace should be felt); and it is a mark of a bad man even to be such as to do any disgraceful action. To be so constituted as to feel disgraced if one does such an action, and for this reason to think oneself good, is absurd; for it is for voluntary actions that shame is felt, and the good man will never voluntarily do bad actions. But shame may be said to be conditionally a good thing; if a good man does such actions, he will feel disgraced; but the virtues are not subject to such a qualification. And if shamelessness--not to be ashamed of doing base actions--is bad, that does not make it good to be ashamed of doing such actions. Continence too is not virtue, but a mixed sort of state; this will be shown later. Now, however, let us discuss justice.


I AM LEARNING HOW TO SWIM & HOW TO REFUSE SHAME
WHEN I WAS YOUNG, IT SEEMED EVERYONE ELSE KNEW HOW, BUT I HARDLY LEARNED.
AS I GREW, I REMAINED AFRAID, WAS MADE TO FEEL WRONG
REJECTIONS I UNDERSTOOD ONLY LATER, ASKING ME TO FEAR MY CAPACITY FOR LOVE, WHICH IS TO SAY, FOR BREATH.
I HAVE ALWAYS STRUGGLED TO SEPARATE THE KINDS OF LOVE IN ME ...
ROMANTIC, PLATONIC, SENSUAL, BROTHERLY

73 kisses 5780

When shame is spoken, it changes.

Madison, WI

January 2020

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