



**Butchfag**

More Reflections on Queer Shame

I meant to write this zine as a follow-up to "An Antidote: Reflections on Queer Shame", and I suppose it is a sequel of sorts. But a lot has happened since then. This is a zine about the history of an awful four-year sexless romance and a break up. It's a zine about being a faggot, a very specific kind of faggot that never has love stories or romances about them. It's a zine about the logistics of shame, the contours of it that have haunted me at my particular intersection of queer, and maybe, just maybe, a dream of something better and lovelier than I've known yet. I've been discovering that when we aren't bound to our shame, maybe, we grow into our full beauty and power. Yeah -- that's what this zine is about.







So it turns out I wasn't crazy.  
It turns out he's been in love with me  
the whole time.  
It turns out that his shame turned in on mine  
and we collided in that awful way  
turning ourselves til we grew sick  
and i  
turned myself inside out for him  
turned myself into a hungry ghost for him  
thinking the whole time  
it was me who was the problem





## SONGS FROM THE ERA

What does that make me?  
The lover boy without the loving  
What does that make me?

What does that make me?  
If I can never touch you like her  
What does that make me?

Just always around  
Like someone's hungry ghost  
Got those endless easy favors  
Got those endless little labors  
Got those unrequited aches that fill me up to break

What does that make me?  
If I want to be  
The only one you say the words to  
What does that make me?

2017

I used to think that one night stands could mean  
That love could sprout just like a seed  
From the plantpotted in my window  
But now I'm getting older and I'm  
Realizing soberly that nothing seems to change  
And I didn't want to get this far

Winter's coming home again I  
Think I'll be alone again  
Just one gloved hand with nothing to hold on to  
Too much boy for the boys  
Too much girl for other boys  
So I spend my whole life with my head turned down

This time last year I was told  
By someone I had learned to hold  
That someone some day will love me  
But I don't know where I'm gonna go  
If I keep on digging all these holes  
For that someone  
Who I wanna love.


Everything seems to fall thru  
With those I'd say I love you to  
They don't want it  
Too much boy for the boys  
Too much girl for other boys  
But they still keep me around

It's getting hard for me to believe  
That someone will look at me and say  
That's the one  
who I wanna love

It's getting hard for me to believe  
That someone could ever look at me and say  
That's the one who I wanna love.

2018

THIS IS  
HOW IT WAS  
FOR A  
WHILE.



Queer shame makes us hate ourselves for loving.

I was a faggot the day I met him, and butch. There's no literature that covers this particular cross section and I really do hate to be among the first, but it's important that this stays front and center: I'm a butchfag, that still-unknown term for a trans masc he-she who loves and wants masculinities or men the way all good lusty faggots do, too genderfucked to simply call myself a gay trans guy, affinities aside. I'm the grown-up tomboy who never became a lesbian, and so grows illegible beyond even the imaginations of our delicious and gourmet alphabet soup. Labels aside, Lou Sullivan got it. My low dose of testosterone, my hairy, strong faggot body in a tailored suit or thrifted blazer, my homemade haircut that makes men feel like pedophiles when they want to fuck this fourteen year old boy-looking butch whose voice is dropping lower than theirs every day. Where's the love story for that?





We were just kids when he confessed his love for me in an elevator, eighteen and nineteen. He was walking me back to my dorm after inviting me over post-Shabbat dinner for tea. As he put his shoes on, I asked him bluntly if he had a thing for me or not. He grinned sideways, nervous, stayed silent until he pressed the down arrow and we were lifted down to the ground floor. We didn't know each other well enough to know that this would become the chasm that threatened to ruin his life and by extension, mine. Only two weeks later when I pressed him, confused, he'd say he didn't remember ever telling me that I was "the most gorgeous and brilliant person he'd ever met" and that he'd "never felt this way about someone who wasn't a woman". He said he never said that. I didn't know what shame and trauma could do then, its power to erase and distort; I thought he could only possibly be lying to me or that I was crazy. I opted for the latter, far easier to believe than the alternative.

We internalize shit because it's so much easier to believe that the problem lies within than without. Why is it so much harder to see that I am not the problem?

This boy took me on vacations, extravagant outings with his family, called me "best friend". Less than a year after we'd met and two months into a new girlfriend, he invited me to come to Florida to visit his grandparents. He wanted me there for two weeks, I opted for five days. Road trips and family events and holidays and any time he's passing through my city. Pesach with my aunts in Minnesota. Christmas with his Jewish family in Vermont. Six days of hell, side by side with him in his white mazda across the American west, to move him out to Seattle when he finally left the town where we'd met. All this for four years and he couldn't stand me looking at him. The fracture points were everywhere. He wanted to believe it was all in his head, or mine.

I don't know his psychology but I do know that when a queer mentorfriend of mine finally laid out what was happening, "reading into it" actually saved my life.

This horrible, gay-bashing culture teaches men to fear one another, their beauty and gentleness. Affections of all kinds are demonized and tenderness is outlawed. To love other men is to be a failed man. Perhaps to love someone like me is even worse. At least men who know they're queer have been somewhat disabused of the specter of "normalcy" and can move on more freely to become what they were meant to become. But falling for a butchfag doesn't necessarily afford that same opportunity for reckoning, and so a "straight" man who finds himself in love with me has no referent, can only ever believe there is something wrong with him if his heterosexuality is malfunctioning to such an extreme. To understand my own shame, I have to understand his.



In "Giovanni's Room", James Baldwin describes the morning after his narrator has slept with his best friend. They're teenagers then, young. He's taken with the breadth of beauty of the dawn's light, the loveliness of lying side by side with Joey, whom he adores. Then the world kicks in: "But Joey is a boy." Baldwin describes it as a dark pit from which he may never emerge. In "Call Me By Your Name", Andre Acimen describes the self-disgust that overcomes his narrator after he finally has sex with the man who whispers the title in his ear. Acimen calls it a "giant, amorphous blob of a nightmare". Fear grows into the great threat. The fences of half-spoken rumors and unsaid rules become live and electric. What was sweet becomes vile, tainted, and irredeemable.

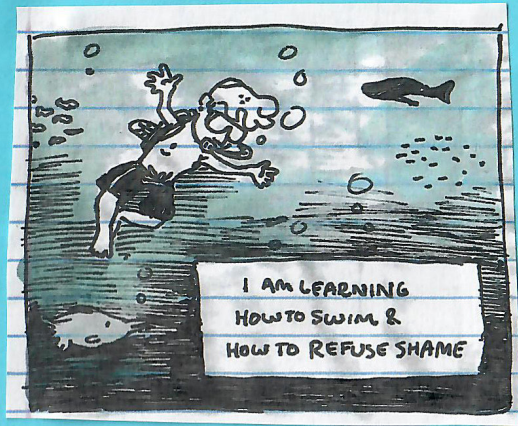


This is how I know that on the only "date" we ever really went on, when it seemed that he had completely lost interest in me by the end of our long walk around the city and no longer wished to grab bubble tea, it's not that he didn't like or want me; it's that when he thinks of it, all he can feel is shame.

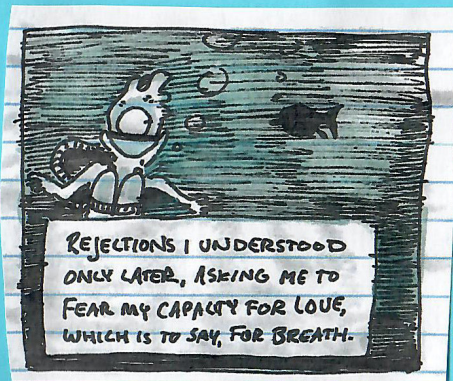
I didn't know that at the time.

Later, four years later, when we sit on the couch of his rich family's vacation home in Vermont late on Shabbes evening after everyone else has gone to bed, he accuses me of having feelings for him, tells me that I have violated him somehow just by looking at him, by even touching his shoulder. He has finally successfully and articulately taken the full weight of his self-loathing out on me: because he wants me and I want him back, I am the monster. And I believe him.



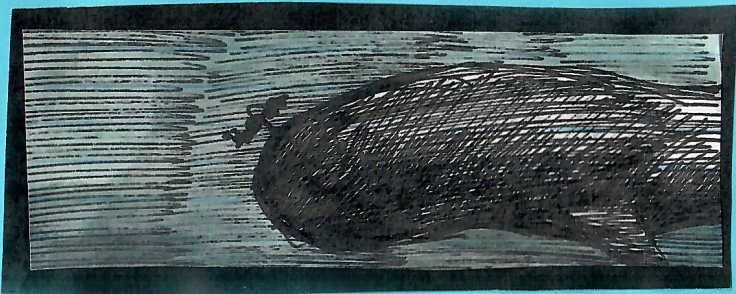


After that night in Vermont, after he had said the cruelest possible things to me, I wait until sundown the next day to draw, in a dissociated state while sitting in the twin-sized bed next to his, a comic of me seven leagues under the sea. In this comic, I am a diver with an oxygen tank. A great dark whale appears in the distance. I swim towards it. I am not afraid.

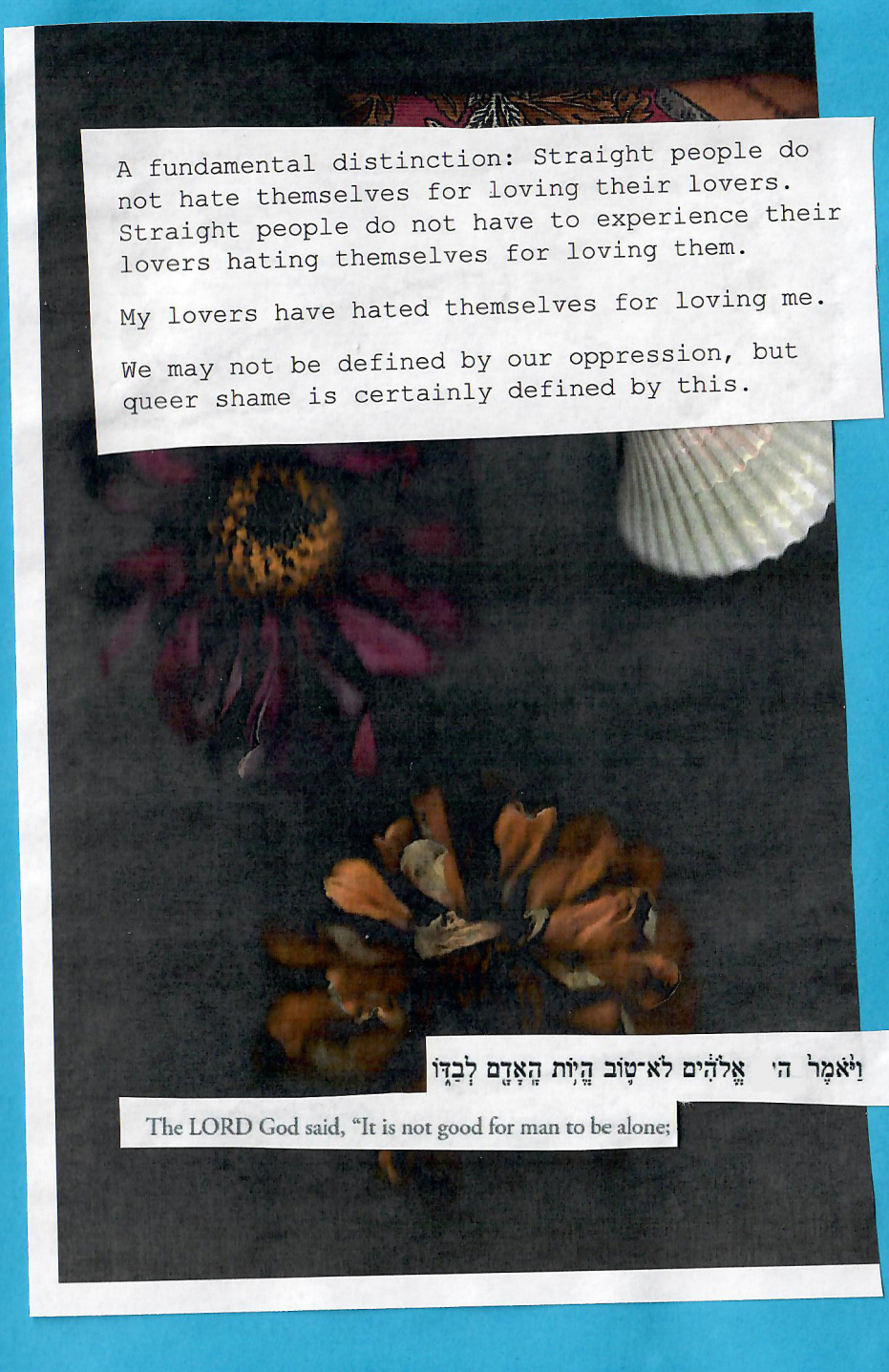


A memory written in my notebook from Sophomore year, when I let my friend Sara, a very pretty cis woman, tag along with him and I to the library even though I didn't want her to, as I watched him become infatuated with her, the only girl he would ever really seriously date in the entire five-year tenure of our relationship, right in front of me during a moment that I had facilitated:

"We sat on the library floor in the crevices of the Memorial stacks with a pile of very old books filled with American poetry. After Sara confessed she was irrationally afraid of water but always smiled on jetskis, I confessed that I found the image of big fish, enormous impossible fish, to be deeply comforting. Then, he confessed that he had never experienced more fear than when he went scuba diving in the Mediterranean, hyperventilating and scared, watching schools of fish eddy below him."







A fundamental distinction: Straight people do not hate themselves for loving their lovers. Straight people do not have to experience their lovers hating themselves for loving them.

My lovers have hated themselves for loving me.

We may not be defined by our oppression, but queer shame is certainly defined by this.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֱלֹהִים לֹא טוֹב הָיְתָה הָאָדָם לְבֶדּוֹ

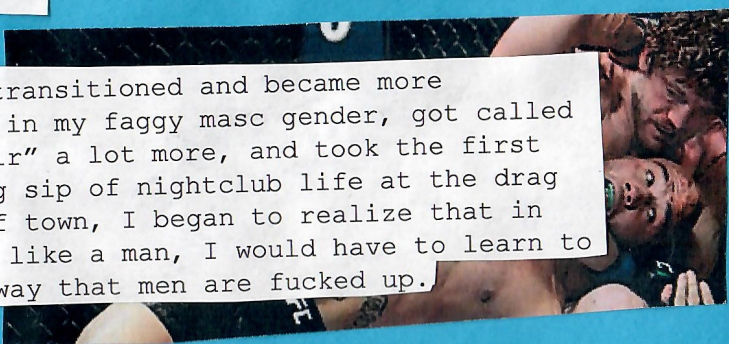
The LORD God said, "It is not good for man to be alone;



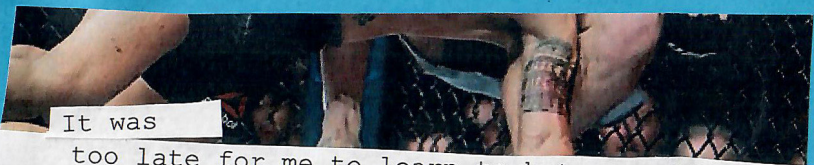
Being socialized as female, I didn't grow up internalizing this level and type of homophobia. While the boys ranked girls in their classes by hotness and began the implicit, psychologically violent ritual of policing who was acceptable to lust after and which desires would make you less of a man, I was writing gay fan fiction about our male teachers after school with my best friend who'd grow up to be a lesbian maven. I liked boys but only when they were kissing each other. When I discovered I could be the boy kissing other boys, it all got much more complicated.

You see, gender is not really that separate from sexuality. They both matter too much. Charts like the "gender unicorn" (which I've used in previous zines) make it so easy to understand, but that's always been a flattening reduction and we all feel it. I know that modern discourse has made it necessary for us to unbind them in front of that condemnatory gaze so we can get access to the right medical care and hormones and not be locked up in a fucking psych ward for wanting to wear certain clothing or fuck certain people, but truth be told I love the word "faggot" because it knows that all of those distinctions were only tactics for the outside world, and on the inside we're all just messy sexual deviants and so much lovelier than anything their washed-out brains could ever even imagine.

As I transitioned and became more comfortable in my faggy masc gender, got called "he" and "sir" a lot more, and took the first intoxicating sip of nightclub life at the drag bar south of town, I began to realize that in order to be like a man, I would have to learn to mirror the way that men are fucked up.







It was

too late for me to learn to hate myself for loving men - as far as gender essentialists are concerned, Lou Sullivan and I are straight women, so our attractions are perfectly kosher. But in order for me to survive my endless string of infatuations and yearnings for men who would never sleep with me, who often called themselves straight but followed me around til the tension was so thick I thought I was crazy, I developed attunement to secret survival knowledge that all estranged faggots learn: if you want to avoid actual violence, understand the lines.

Understand how, for men, every touch is sexual and therefore dangerous. Understand that they will be afraid of you for wanting you. If you tell them you want them, they will hate you for it. Most of all, if you hate yourself for wanting it too, you'll fit right in at the cost of everything you ever needed or dreamed of.



My greatest luck, whether by body or fate or just some strangely resilient piece of my soul, is that I never internalized it entirely. I was too old for their self-destruction to fully take root. Besides, I'm only like a man; I'm really a faggot. I don't live in that assimilatory delusion. Thank g-d I know that I'm something else entirely. Now, I'm learning to love other faggots too.



## THE FAGGOT VERSION

All the men could be faggots or their friends. They once were.

There still exists a faint memory of the past when the faggots and their friends were free. The memory lives in the faggots' bones. The memory appears at night when the bones are quietest. In darkness the faggots remember that once they lived in harmony with each other and their world. They adored the women who loved women and the women who loved women adored the faggots. Suddenly and strangely, some of the faggots began to show a dis-ease. First they cut down the trees which protected the other faggots from the wind and rain. Then they burned the earth which fed the other faggots. Then they killed the young animals and ate them themselves. Then they began to enslave the women—all the women. As the dis-ease advanced they stopped touching the other faggots and at that moment they became the men. They attacked the unsuspecting women who loved women. Bloodshed and devastation entered the bones of the faggots and began to drive the memory of harmony away. The women who love women and the faggots were the only ones who knew the cure for the men's dis-ease. But the men did not want to be cured. Their crimes against the others became more numerous and more demonic. More of the faggots became men and so more became implicated in self-loathing, a dis-ease of otherness. The men drove the healers away. And the healers went into invisibility to wait for the men to turn on each other.

At night in their invisibility the faggots remember freedom. They exchange the magical cock fluid and stroke each other's tired bones in memoriam and defiance.

FROM "THE FAGGOTS & THEIR FRIENDS BETWEEN REVOLUTIONS"

© 1977 by LARRY MITCHELL





THEM.US

New Research Shows a Vast Majority of Cis People Won't Date Trans People



Once, I was in a grocery store and saw a good-looking, straight, blonde couple necking in the aisle. He had his hands on her, cupping her waist, wrapped around her hips, then all over her ass. They were making out, all over each other in front of the canned corn. They acted entitled to it. Just watching the way that he touched her sent waves of nausea through me. I couldn't move.

Shame: just seeing a man kiss a woman reminded me of just how unwanted I am.



**T**he faggots consider it their sacred pleasure to engage in indiscriminate promiscuous sexuality. No faggot, regardless of age, race or physical appearance, should ever be horny. Horniness makes the faggots uneasy and nasty and distracts them from the revolutions. Sexuality, like all the necessities of life, must be free and easily available. So the faggots secure spaces where each can be anonymous, where all cocks are equal and all cock juice equally precious. "Feeding the faggots" they call it. Two rules govern these places of nourishment. First, all must remain quiet so the soft sexual noises can be heard. Second, anyone who is done must do. If you get, you have got to give.



Is it gaslighting if the person lying to you genuinely doesn't remember? If he's so attached to the idea of himself as a straight man, as a normal man, as not a faggot g-d forbid a faggot that he blocks it all out to the point at which he cannot access the memory?



-enemy is not a word of hate. it's what we call  
our lovers when we don't love them any more  
now they've rejected us. we live here.  
we think of the other house.

POEM EXCERPT FROM  
"THE HOUSE IS OLD" BY  
RON SCHREIBER





After four years of being in love with him and him hating himself for feeling the same way, after four years of him never admitting it, after our strange and unspeakable romance, watching him serially date women and call me after almost every hookup, hanging out at least three times a week when he lived in town, him calling me at least three times a week after he moved away, after Vermont, after five months of him pretending none of this had ever happened, of being so hurt I began to hate picking up the phone, of resenting being forced to carry on as though this were normal or okay, I broke up with him.

Broke up with him; my ex non-boyfriend.

None of my friends understood, and being misunderstood caused its own shame. At the time I could hardly even articulate how much this hurt or why. Feelings like this are reserved for real relationships that have sex and romance and physical intimacy; things that everyone else got to have, while I skulked around waiting for him to call me, pretending I needed nothing more, pretending it was just a friendship, that this was enough. I never drew him, never wrote of him after sophomore year, things I'd done prolifically for every other crush I've had, none of which ever truly went beyond one-sided infatuation. I repressed it all in hopes he wouldn't smell it on me. If he could, a great and terrible thing would happen. I would be guilty of the worst crime. This shame was all I knew and I acted accordingly.

It occurs to me this is the reaction of someone who has been abused. I feared his violence, which came out in moments that scared us both. A moment of hot tub roughhousing that turned into him shoving me halfway across the room, kneejerk explosive shutdowns to any conversation he didn't like and long, brutal silences that followed. These moments were traumatic for me and so imbued with shame for him that he trauma-forgot them to the point at which it wasn't even worth it for me to try discussing it. His shame became my shame - if he couldn't talk about loving me, then I shouldn't either. Slowly, I began to believe that any attractions I'd have towards men would only ever been seen as offensive, disgusting. Then I began to believe that they were offensive and disgusting. He alone did not teach me this, but he is not innocent of his role in building such a grotesque lie.

We do not speak for months. He texts me once, twice, anxious and missing me more than I miss him.

I don't reply.

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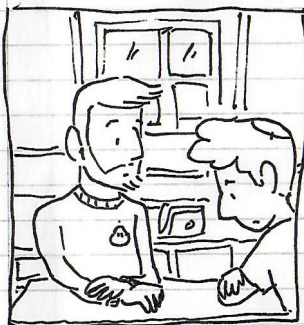
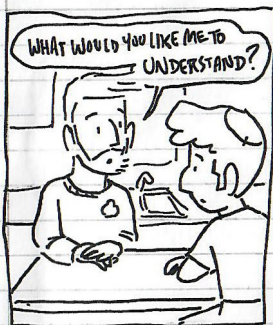
"I miss you. I don't miss the...shame and the pain and yearning and pining and hate that I felt when we were physically together. But I do miss the conversations and jokes and questions."

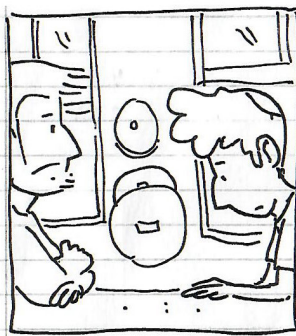
That's fucked up, I screamed as he spoke. That's fucked up. It's not supposed to be this way. It's not supposed to feel like this.

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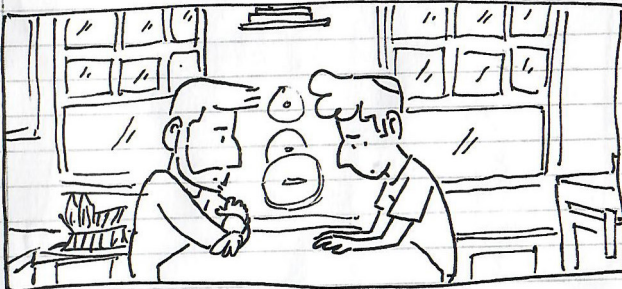


# ILLEGIBLE SIGNIFICANCE



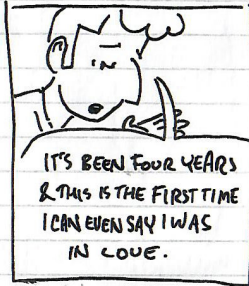
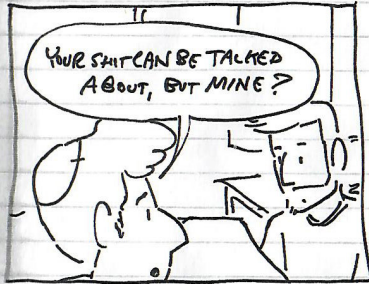












Shabbes evening, I dream of him. I'd been asking to dream of him and finally, I was given such a gift. In the dream, we are at my home synagogue at some big event in the Weiner room. There are many people there and we are avoiding each other, though I know where he is in the room at all times. Finally, I decide I want no more of this and I find him. When I get to him, I forget what I have to say and we just stare at each other until he says, "You're the only person I want to talk to, here. I'm sorry I've been pretending like you're not the most important person in the room."

I tell him we should talk and have a real conversation. We go to another room which, in dreamland, is the dining room of my grandparents' house, and sit down next to each other. At that moment, the homophobic old lady who lives in my co-op appears and sits down beside us. I try explaining that this isn't a good time and that we'd like some space. She promptly moves to the other side of the table, which is not as far away as I would like her to be.

Just as I'm deciding whether or not she is tenably far away enough for this conversation to even happen, my grandfather walks in, oblivious as ever, and plants himself where she had sat. I sigh, resigned, and he, charming as ever, engages sweetly and patiently with Melvin, whom he has always enjoyed talking with. I sit, dejected and upset by our ever unhad discussion until reluctantly, I accept the situation. Slowly, I drop my hand to the side of the chair, letting it graze down his forearm, feeling the brush of his hair til our knuckles touch and I take his hand in mine under the table.



He squeezes it a couple times and we sit there together, him talking to my grandfather, my hand in his.



When I wake up, the dream is not hard to remember. The emotions of it cascade from the simple, soft pleasure of it into a grief of its unrealized truth and the things I'll never have from him. I lay in bed semi-lucid and try to imagine other intimacies, but all the simple actions are impossible. I do not know how I could touch him, kiss him. All the vocabularies are missing. This thing is dead, must be dying. It will die without either of us ever having fulfilled our need for the other. In a different, straighter story, this admission of feelings would be a beginning. We'd be in love, we'd date, we'd make up for all the lost years and have it all. Here, it is by necessity of self-preservation an end. He cannot nor should not be mine. It's not safe to love someone who hates themselves this much just for loving you. Now all that's left is the grief.

"With you, I feel more free." He says to me.

"You need to find a way to be more free around people who are less free." I say to him.



I DON'T WANT TO CARRY YOUR SHAME AROUND ANYMORE





I've been spending time thinking about why queer shame grows so acutely when "straight" men fall in love with butchfags. If you've ever read anything else written on this topic, please let me know.

I'm not suggesting we need another word for another very niche sexuality, though categories certainly help bring ambiguities into acceptable daylight. What I do know is that there is a whole swath of men for whom I am their entire sexuality, or at least a significant part of it, whether they'll admit it or not. We are not women and we are in many ways similar to but not the same as gay men. Butchfags are hot, despite the fact that I have never in my life read a book or seen a movie or watched a TV show which features one of us, especially not in a bombshell relationship with the guy of our dreams. Honestly, I'd even take a tragedy just to feel like we're less alone.

I think that the hard part of this location comes from its unnamable greyness. No straight man would or could or should love us, for loving us by definition cannot be a heterosexual affair. The idea of a man touching me the way he touches a woman throws me into a dissociative, dysphoric fit. I remember hook-ups with closeted bisexual boys early on in college, the way I was an experiment for them in their uncertainty. They thought my binder was a bra. One guy, a big white boy who was always snapchatting about the locations of solo-cup parties and a card-carrying member of the College Democrats with his pronouns on his nametag, talked to me at length as we made out on my dorm-room futon about how the only men he really likes are huge, muscular hunks. Besides that, he said, he's only interested in women. So what the fuck did that make me?

The way I want men is so scriptless and without paradigm that every time I write a story or draw a picture of what I really want, it feels like I've done something completely transgressive - but potentially world-changing, revolutionary.

I keep rereading those last paragraphs and imagining some psych doctor from just a little earlier in the century checking boxes of psychosis, or a TERF like Rowling calling me hysterical or gender traitor.

After we stopped talking, a new space in me opened up.



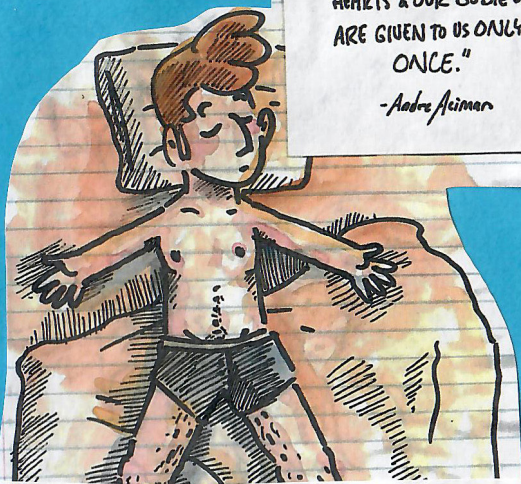
Maybe it's the space where a real lover can live.





"BUT REMEMBER, OUR  
HEARTS & OUR BODIES  
ARE GIVEN TO US ONLY  
ONCE."

-Andre Aciman



I used to fear being seen as a lesbian. I was neither a woman nor interested in women, and so the categorization was not only wrong, but I felt it deprived me of my full sexual personhood. As a faggot who loves men, the word "butch" seemed precarious, despite both its historic usage as a word to describe "masc" gay men as well as dykey women who loved women, two queer alignments well-deserving of my solidarity. For a while in middle school and early high school, I even assumed I was a lesbian - in fact, very much tried to convince myself I was, for if that was true, my gender would be easily explained. This was before I really understood the word "transgender" and years before I'd even heard the word non-binary or genderqueer.

Since I came out as trans, I'd spent a lot of time running away from being called "butch" or having anyone insinuate that there would ever be any similarities or parallels between me and a lesbian. I chalked it up to dysphoria and misgendering -- both acceptable excuses for any kind of internalized self-hatred -- and was content to never examine it again until an older butchfag friend who had lived much of her life identifying really only as a butch lesbian called me the fuck out for it.



I was trying on a new white shirt in front of her, one she'd insisted I needed for all the new blazers and ties she was finding me at Dig'n'Save and the other local thrifts. I was a little under a year on testosterone at the time. My hips had melted away and my legs had grown hairy and hard. Despite the thrilling changes, there were still moments when my reflection flickered in the mirror. As I buttoned up the shirt without my binder, my still-small tits protruded out and sculpted my chest with a curve rather than a line. As soon as I noticed it, I began to tear off the shirt, wanting it off my body immediately.

"What? I thought it looked hot. It fit you just right."

"I look like a fucking *lesbian*." I spat. She sat there stunned. Then, it turned to anger.

"What's wrong with looking like a lesbian, you asshole?"



And to that, I had no reply.



## FROM DYSPHORIA



When we have dysphoric reactions, it's usually fight, flight, or freeze. Fight: take it out on everyone else for what they've caused you. Flight: tear away at the clothes, situation, or your own skin to get away from it and hide as far away as you can. Freeze: Paralysis, stuck in the wrongness so deep that you can't move.

However, consider this: Your desire *not* to suffer is proof of your own intrinsic goodness. It's a reflection of the divine, a reminder that you have divinity in you. So dysphoria, then, is just one of the many ways in which you desire not to suffer. Dysphoria is the negative space of a desire to feel right and good and resonant and at harmony. It's just a sign that we love ourselves enough to want better, proof of our desire to become.

With this in mind, I have been learning to see dysphoria as a teacher. It's a terrible feeling, awful. But it has lessons within it about what we really want, what we really need. I try not to tear off shirts anymore. Sometimes it's so bad that I can't help it, but in the moments when I feel gentler towards myself, I'll sit with it a while longer, side by side, until something new reveals itself to me. There are secrets in it that I don't want to ignore. It's related to queer love, somehow, and undoing those knots of shame. I don't quite understand the connection yet, but it's there even if I don't have the words.

Even shame, in all its terrible paralysis, has something redeeming at its root. Shame is what happens when we want to be good, but the world tells us we are bad, and so we believe that we are wrong in order to become good again. It's heartbreaking, but the root of shame is really our desire to be loveable.



I'd like to state, for the record, that all of the hottest styles of masculinity are almost always pioneered by brilliant butches and that being told I look like a lesbian should really have been the highest form of honor. I know it is, now.



The way I love masculinity is all-consuming. I want it, I want to be it, I want to hold it, I want to kiss and fuck it. I want that same beauty to be seen in me by someone who understands it, craving it just as much as I do.

LISTENING TO: "YOU MUST BE OUT OF YOUR MIND"  
BY THE MAGNETIC FIELDS ♪

In Stone Butch Blues, Leslie Feinberg briefly mentions two particular butches who also work at the factory. They keep to themselves, two friends who don't hang out with the other butches. Instead, at the end of the day, they go home to their husbands. These characters are not elaborated on, simply noticed. A curiosity - who were they?

Sometimes I speculate that there are a lot of potential butchfags who never transitioned to become butchfags because they knew the stakes: if you go through this door, you may never have anyone to sleep with ever again. You may be gaslit by the culture and by would-be lovers into believing that your desire is like dirt. So, these maybe-butchfags stay women or some women-adjacent form of acceptable, not-threatening, still-femme enough for men to want to fuck or love them, never really opening the pandora's box of self. I guess it's not the priority for some. I don't blame them, I just don't relate.

I don't know where the boundary is between acceptably and unacceptably genderfucked exactly, but I'm certainly well past it now. It's fucked: it seems that the more I love myself, the less likely I am to be loved.

I suppose that many of us end up choosing along the edges of gender or sexuality. For those of us with this gender who love men, there are two options: You can live fully as yourself, as the gender you are, or you can maintain your social-sexual capital by staying cis-femme enough to be legible and have a man to sleep with. Pick one; you can't have both.



I chose the former.



Some of us are lucky to be bisexual enough to slip onto the exit ramp and into the ranks of butch lesbians to find someone outside of the world of men to love them fully and on their own terms. For me, this was never an option. For a long time even I thought there was something wrong with me. When even the subculture won't have you, where exactly do you go? There's hardly anyone to talk about this with.

I'm done feeling like I have to sacrifice some part, whether sex or self, to lead a full life or be seen by other faggots. The problem is that refusing to make compromises with this gender means you're less likely to ever get laid by the men you want, even when they want you back. (What does that do to a person? I'm not sure therapy for this even exists yet.) Regardless, I won't let the lack of categorical interest shame me into thinking my desire and love for men is wrong or even impossible. I refuse to believe that, after everything I know now. This boy loved me hard, even in his shame-ridden, self-loathing state. Even in his superbly fucked up way, he is proof of the possible.



As I'm writing this, the hottest butch dyke in the house comes to my room and knocks on my door. She gives me a cologne sample she stole from bath and body works. I love butch love.

LISTENING TO:

"IN A RIVER" BY ROSTAM



Maybe one day, there will be butchfags living and loving so fully that they will never have had to repress any piece of this splendid flavor of existence and so will never have to do the painful work of opening and cleaning the wound made by shamed-up lovers and a world that wishes we destroy ourselves. Maybe they will only ever be wounded in the ways that heartbreak is meant to feel, not this stunted, atrophied version that kills the last bits of beauty still beating in our tarnished hearts.



## ☒ TWO LOVE STORIES ☒

When I was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, I was in my high school's theater sketch comedy show, a production entirely written by students. In my company was a twiggy, derpy, darkhaired, and pretty boy named Owen Aeneas Paveljeanus Flanagan. Owen was two years older, but didn't yet walk around with the confidence of upperclassmen. He seemed young even though he was tall, and I had quickly become friends with his friends, who seemed more like social outsiders to the frenetic core of goodlooking, extroverted theater kids. Owen hadn't much been on my radar til one day when my troupe decided to play "lap tag". Lap tag is a wildly horny teenage game that could only truly exist in a highschool theater or summer camp with little adult supervision. An outer circle of players is tasked with physically restraining an inner circle of players whose numbers have been called and must reach the person in the center before the other player breaks loose. First person to touch the director's feet wins.

As you might imagine from my set-up, I was on the outside circle, tasked with holding Owen down as hard as I possibly could. He was taller than me, but our strengths were matched. When Owen's number was called, I grabbed hold of him so hard that a switch flipped in my brain. 14 year old me was so sexually triggered by poor Owen's frantic, helpless struggling that I assumed it meant I was completely in love with him. The infatuation was immediate, merciless, and lasted several months until I told him I liked him and he awkwardly made it clear he did not reciprocate.

I think I liked his softness but also that he had a bit of fight in him. I wrote a little ditty about him that comes back to me now:

The boy with the Harry Potter backpack  
And shoulders up too high  
He's walking there with that fat boy  
He's so skinny I could just die  
He draws little hearts on chalkboards  
And he wanders when he's bored..  
Doesn't know where he's going or where  
he'll end up to be  
Hope it's next to me

Who wouldn't want to be written about like this?

I can't remember the rest of the lyrics but the song was mostly a list of weirdly specific observations about him that I found romantic, vulnerable, or endearing. I was enamored of his general sense of helplessness, despite a really genuinely grounded self confidence. Owen knew what he was about, he was just really doe-eyed. And at that age, I wanted to dominate the shit out of that. Too bad it didn't work out.

Funny enough, Owen was queer and in love with Justin Piju, one of the writers for the show; a senior and a very cool kid. I have this one picture of Owen leaning on Justin and looking so happy that he might explode into the ether.

Now, years later, I play-wrestled with a friend in the kitchen tonight and was taken back to fourteen years old, so turned on I didn't even know what to do with it, just from holding a boy down as he struggled to get away. It's so much easier to write about passing sexual triggers or high school memories of early infatuations than writing about him.



Darkly, I remember the infamous incident of us playfighting in the hot tub and the explosion that came after. I wanted his body against my body, wanted to hold him down or him hold me down - wanted to struggle against him hard with one of us not letting go.


With him I think I almost always wanted to be his bottom, oddly, though in certain ways he almost always saw me as his top. He's the only boy who could ever lead me around like that, but I often wonder if it got that way because that was the quality of our love, of just because he needed to keep me under his thumb for fear of losing me.



If he and I had sex, it would almost definitely be rough sex that started extremely gentle. It would be nights with all the little things before that, long nights where we play catchup on the years of damages, of withholding. A lot of barely touching followed by only touching. We would lose our language together, abandoning words, words, the medium that had been our binding cord and conduit, the most acceptable intimacy we were allowed. We wouldn't speak as soon as our hands made themselves clear and supine to each other. Tongues would have one purpose and for days there would be no talking, only sounds and murmurs. The faculty of intelligence would leave our mouths and he'd grow dumb with me, for me. I'd lick all of him, savor the hairy parts and knuckles most of all. I'd suck all of him, every finger and extension and hiding place. Our breaks would not be breaks - every time I'd leave for the bathroom, upon my return he'd grab me back onto the bed as though he were afraid he might lose me forever. We lost so much time to his shame, my shame. He'd grab me in fear we'd waste even a moment, and that at the end of our lives, as G-d recounted every second like so many beads, we'd look at that empty minute and weep with grief.









The first night we'd hardly sleep, neither of us wanting to tell the other that it was time to doze off. Everything would still be too new, possible, and electric - too heavy with the years of avoidance not to be looked at. It would take time for us to be sure it was safe. That's why we'd turn out the lights around midnight; to feign that we might stop and withhold. To reveal, in the secret of the dark, that neither of us would want to forgo anything so precious. To have that promise fulfilled through our bodies the splendid surprise of our own bottomless need.

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As the night thickened and opened, our movements would grow slow and minute, local and acute, long expanses of our arms, chests, legs, necks resting now, almost entirely still except for the smallest drizzle or stroke. At this point in the night we do not kiss, having forgotten kissing on the voyage across the dark. Instead, we touch each other as though we are sending smoke signals or flares, like we are cell towers blinding light across a field to ensure the other: I'm here. I'm here. I'm still here with you.



Neither of us fall asleep. We couldn't. It would be a sin, to disappear even a moment before the other. To leave him alone and without you. To be alone without him.





We would spend the first night in a hotel like this. Sleep would move us as the sun remembered its rising. He would be the very first person I could sleep with entwined, every limb enclosed, without anxiety or discomfort. He would wake up before me but fall back asleep out of reverence, his greatest virtue. Maybe even in my slumbering I'd feel his eyes on me, loving being looked at.

The second night we would kiss into oblivion, mouths inseparable, throats excavated. He'd push me down against the pillow and headboard, then I'd hold his hips against the sheets and lean over him, then he'd gather me up and let me throw my arms over his neck and put his hands on my back and knees as though I were something that had been saved from a great fire, something rare and priceless, beyond a value he could divine, and we would kiss and kiss and I would kiss him in relief and kiss him in calling and kiss him in answer and kiss him just to kiss and kiss. We would know the heat and scent rising from our legs and beneath our boxers but would ignore it for now, wet and sticky but needed other things before this.

We'd play bite and pull and chase and lip. Then he'd get an idea and kiss low, kiss neck and lobe, kiss while on all fours, kiss nape, kiss up and down every notch of spine. Then I'd draw his hand and kiss his fingertips, kiss joint and knuckle, kiss palm, kiss wrist, forearm, crevice of elbow til I pull him down and he ragdolls in front of me, giddy to be light and tugged. I kiss him from above, kiss him like a raindrop, kiss nose and indent above upper lip, kiss like a brush then kiss like an anchor. The spit on our bodies dries into us like pottery glaze and we become more beautiful as we bake.



That night, we sleep before dawn. I am the one who grows tired and ready, and he holds me, nestled like spoons or eggshells as I nod off. I can feel his pride glowing through his chest and into my back like so much orange light. He is proud of having me, of having the chance to have me, of loving himself enough for me, of my having and having him absolutely. Waking up in hotel white linen sheets is deliciously lazy and silly and he makes me laugh as we lay tired together.



I won't tell you about the third night. That one is for me.



I am not going to tolerate lovers who hate themselves for loving me anymore. I realize this rules out a lot of would-be lovers and the pickings are often so slim that the world tells me I can't afford to be choosy. But I will not settle for table scraps anymore. The part of me that loves myself not only knows that I deserve better, but knows that better is out there, somehow, somewhere. I just have to find him.








I want better for us, all of us. For the boys who love us, are intoxicated by our sexy ambiguity and genderfuckery, the way that butchfags can control a room, seem more significant and specific than almost anyone you've met. The way we're gentle and powerful all at once. And I want better for us, who have often settled for romances that cannot ever be called what they are, must languish without ever being named, and live long stretches of time without sex or love on our terms, the way we want it according to our wild, splendid dreams. We don't have to believe that we're the problem anymore. The first step is realizing that. I don't know what comes next, but it's more beautiful than what came before. There is wonder in the surprise.





I DON'T WANT TO CARRY YOUR SHAME AROUND ANYMORE.

Rena Yehuda Newman

October 2020

Madison WI