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Building the Trans Gaze For Myself

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Why does my assigned sex have to limit me at all?

In our friend Aaron's woodshop, the afternoon light was golden hued, tinted by the California Central Valley summer dust kicked up by the tree shakers beginning the walnut harvest in the orchard just beyond our friends' house. Everything seemed to glow—the piles of rough wood stacked here and there, the bits of finished but unassembled projects gleaming under their lacquer coating, the well-used tools reflecting light off their muted patina. I was alone in there for a minute or two, wandering slowly and lightly stroking pieces of lumber as I passed them, taking deep breaths of the wood-perfumed air. The sweet, tangy smell of oak, the dry warmth of cedar, the clean sharpness of pine—the scents enveloped me, and I was enamoured. This space felt holy, like a sanctuary. I never wanted to leave.

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And then, chaos. My brother stepped in behind me, closing the shop door with a grin, and took in the scene with me for a moment. Then the door slammed open again and our sister stumbled in, laughing and shrieking. “We found you! What are you doing in here!?”

I didn’t answer, I didn’t want to lose the taste of the beauty of this place quite yet, but it was too late. The garage door at the other end of the building rolled up slowly, and the spell was broken. I could hear my mother’s voice, melodic and high, and Aaron’s raspy laugh as he responded to her. Closer to them, I could hear him explain that every summer, he worked up in the mountains repairing small vacation homes owned by folks from here in the Valley. He said he always took a couple of the teenage boys from church with him to work all summer in the mountains and learn cabinetry.

Mom reached out for my brother and pulled him to her, saying, “Maybe Joel can join you someday and learn from you. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” she said. My brother’s face burst with shy delight, his eyes alight with the vision of the experience.

I watched the exchange with a sick feeling in my stomach, silent and unable to express the emotions washing over me, even to myself. I turned and walked back out the side door, leaving them to their conversation.

I wanted to be a boy that summer so badly. I’d often resented being a girl; the restrictions of protecting my girlhood were always onerous (“Dress modestly!” “Don’t play alone in the neighborhood!” “Take your sister with you to your friend’s house!”). But that summer was the first time I actively wanted *to be a boy* instead of just rankling at the rules of girlhood. I wanted to go to the mountains, to learn from Aaron how to take rough, unwieldy wooden boards and make them melt in my hands to beautiful shapes softened to buttery smoothness. I wanted to have the blanket latitude to leave home and do things away from the family that maleness lent boys in my world. Only a boy would be encouraged to go be alone in the mountains with a male family friend for an entire summer; the risks of what sending a girl with someone like that would imply were too much to imagine.

As an adult, now, I understand the caution here but would prefer it applied to boys just as much as to girls. That aside, what I wanted was not so much to *be* a boy, but to be seen in the sexually neutral, full-of-potential-and-competence, blandly permissive way that my brother and other boys in my life were seen by the adults in our world. I wanted to participate in the world without being seen as a liability or as a sexual tabula rasa. I wanted to like what I liked without reactions framing it in terms of my inevitable future as a wife and mother: “Oh, you like baking? That will be so nice for your family someday!” “Oh, you want to learn woodworking? That’s interesting, maybe you can marry someone who will teach you.” Hearing these things, I’d look at my hands, sometimes soft, sometimes callused, and think about how much more alive I felt when my hands were hard and strong, unfeminine, unladylike. I wanted to be free of these arbitrary ways of thinking about gender, to love what I loved just because I loved it.

The divide between genders seemed so contrived, so disconnected from actual personalities or interests. Adults were constantly reframing my actions, interests, or expressions according to gendered lines. Who I was, *actually*, was irrelevant to the sorting process.

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When I did get married, I didn't find someone who could teach me woodworking or any of these things, nor did I want to. I found a sensitive soul who came alive in music, theater, and the world of ideas. I found someone with soft hands who was useless around the house, who refused to do dishes when asked, who felt like putting together an IKEA shelf was a triumph of engineering prowess deserving of a medal of honor. I puttered around behind him, fixing things up, painting rooms and moving furniture while he wrote music on his laptop at our kitchen table, tapping out rhythms in the air as he worked.

I wanted to be free of these arbitrary ways of thinking about gender, to love what I loved just because I loved it.

When I got divorced, I dated boys with soft hands like him and boys with rough hands like Aaron. What I wanted and what I was craving varied moment to moment. The capability and confidence of hands well-accustomed to creating things turned me on without fail. Sometimes I found myself holding my breath watching someone particularly dextrous at work (one time, my artist friend was cooking in my kitchen and I had to walk away from watching him chop vegetables with precision to write a poem about how hot that moment felt). But I also always wanted to join them and try to match their skill. I wanted to participate in what they were doing, to have hands like theirs and work side by side with them. I was unwilling to be merely an observer. I wanted my hands to be strong and clever too. I wanted to match the energy of these men and be seen as an equal.

The boys with the lithe, soft hands who needed me to open jars for them, who were unsure of their elbows and hips on a dance floor, who watched everyone cautiously before joining in the laughter—these I loved too, brashly drawing them out and laughing as I cherished their softness and hesitancy. I wanted to protect them, I wanted to make love to them, I wanted to keep them tender as long as the world would allow.

What I wanted to savor changed so much as I kept trying on new lovers, but slowly the difference between what I was *drawn to* and what I wanted to be *seen as* began to show itself. I wanted all of it, but I wanted to be strong, to be capable, to be solid in ways that the twenty-one-year-old wife (twenty-one is so young, I know that now) I had been never was.

Searching for a photo to illustrate a story I'm telling my crush, I stumble into my honeymoon pictures by accident on my laptop. When I look back at these photos of myself as a new bride, I see tense, birdlike limbs curled in on themselves, big eyes uncertain of anything much. I see myself shrinking to fit under the slim arm of my husband, making myself small to snuggle in next to him. I look uncomfortable. I would never look like that next to a partner again. What was I so afraid of then? Not really of him, I don't think. I think I was afraid of my own strength, my own untested inner force.

I don't share that photo with my crush, but the image is a totem, a warning. I never want to feel that fragile ever again.

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Eight years and a lifetime after my divorce, I now live in a hundred-year-old farmhouse I'm renting because it's close to the community college in the Virginia Appalachian highlands where I teach. It's here that I resume my handy housewife habits. I clean the house and feed myself—I live alone—but my delight is scheming on how to make little improvements to the space here and there.

I wish I owned the house outright; I'd throw myself into gutting and redoing the unsealed plywood ceiling and press-on tile wainscoting in the bathroom that have been painted with primer and left to crack and peel from the shower steam. But I have been filling in and sealing the holes in the walls of the closed-in-porch-cum-spare-bedroom where the builders left the drywall seams unfinished around the edges of where they join with the main house. Tomorrow I'll tape the baseboards and freshen up the paint in there, give it a brighter, cleaner look overall.

Repainting the spare room is a task that won't give me much in return—it's not a space I use often, and it wasn't looking that bad to start with. But I've just been dumped, and I want to make something in my environment fresh as I recalibrate how I see my future and my world without this person so closely in it anymore. It was my first relationship while out as trans, and my first time being sexually intimate with someone without having to push back on assumptions or performative roles, without being gender typecast. The wholeness from that connection I'm still carrying with me: I feel sturdy, capable. My hands are strong. I feel tireless and alert.

As I wrap up this painting project late at night, I catch a glimpse of myself: old shapeless pants covered in paint, a hoodie, tousled short hair, a beer in hand. I could be any gender, seen from behind. I am any gender, seen by my detached self. I am the gender that moves with confidence and ease around tools and small animals. I am competence and nurturing. I am strength of hand and lightness of foot.

I am any gender, seen by my detached self.

I'm content here, without the eyes of a lover or anyone else to size me up and react to what they think they see—there's no role I am expected to fill; there are no assumed gender roles for me to play. Here, in my own space, the casually established rules for what is allowed for a gender assigned at birth dissolve.

But in spaces where the assumptions revert back to default binaries, in spaces outside of my own realm, I'm forced to remind myself how everyone else operates so I don't create a collision. I usually try to stay out of the cisnormative, heteronormative traffic, but sometimes I can't help myself and force others to join me in a detour. I recently asked a close cis friend, who was complaining about how hard dating men can be, if she would ever consider dating a trans man. Her immediate reaction was a quick no, as if the thought was not to be entertained at all.

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Why does her answer have to matter at all to me? Why does my assigned sex have to limit me at all? I asked myself this as a child, and I ask myself now. What does this change about how others see me, now that I've come out?

At home, or with other trans people, none of these things cross my mind. I'm unencumbered by the outside gaze and forget to be self-aware, cautious. Now when guests come to my home, as they eventually do when they get gradually vaccinated, I know I'll feel comfortable in my skin in this space. I've had so much time without a gender-assuming gaze on my body in this lonely last year that if they look at me and see anything other than my whole self, I am not unsettled. I will not be unseated from how I see myself and want to be seen by their misassessment. I see me, even if others don't see me.

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I've built up my tool collection over the last couple years. I own two drills now, one of which had a broken engine, which I disassembled and rebuilt from parts. I'm lousy at finding studs and hanging shelves on straight, but I'm good at freestanding construction and repair, restoring and refinishing second-hand furniture as I slowly shape this old house into a haven where I feel relaxed and creative.

The years of living in strictly cisgendered spaces have cost me—I haven't learned woodworking yet. But I'm the strong-handed dyke in my friendships; those who are close to me are thinkers and digital creators whose hands are better suited to keyboards than to tools requiring a strong grip. I've become the queer version of the competent masculine energy I was so drawn to as a child and a young adult. The attraction, I now realize, was never sexual. I didn't want to fuck them; I wanted to be them. I wanted to be strong, capable, sure—and I am now in ways that I could never have envisioned when I squirmed with envy in Aaron's workshop all those years ago.

I don't really know anymore where gender plays into the way I organize my life now. It feels irrelevant, an afterthought. I quilt and I cook and I garden. I pull the harvest indoors and reshape it into nourishment and healing aids for my loved ones. I line up my emotions in a row on a page and embroider them for the world to enjoy, or not. I teach my classes with the confidence I only saw from pastors in my childhood, with the attention to moods and nuance that the mothers in my life brought to their parenting. I contain the whole sensory spectrum of a summer day—the tenderness of the breeze, the fragility of the wildflowers, the ruthlessness of the sunshine, the ingenuity and relentlessness of the water in the creekbed behind the barn.



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