The impulses for this story originate in a personal struggle. I turned to art and fiction to explore a path that was not open to me in life. I was compelled to spend a great amount of time and effort searching for a way to be the person I should be without dismissing or denying the person I am. It was easy to create a character based on who I wanted to be, but it proved much harder to present her as a true reflection of me without the burden of what I am. I struggled for years to find a way to give her the insight and experience to carry the story inspired by my life, only to reach the conclusion that the only way to accomplish that was by giving her my life as a foundation. Once that was clear, there was no need for the many contrived approaches I developed for this story. The one question that remains— as I strive to settle all the conflicts generated in those approaches—is where to begin.

There are four parts to the greater story. The first part is set in the United States on modern Earth, featuring a transgendered boy with severe abandonment issues and an indomitable spirit. His parents divorced when he was three, he was put up for adoption when he was four, and spent a year in foster care before finally being placed with his new family. The lack of a stable home and favorable male role model could have contributed to his failure to identify with men or other boys, but unfavorable reactions to his feminine behavior and self-identification contributed immensely to his fear of abandonment. He had literally been told that no one would want a boy who acted like a girl. So, he hid what he truly thought and felt, pretending to be a boy for everyone around him while searching endlessly for a way to become a girl to stop living a lie.

The second part of the story begins when the boy is seventeen, and has turned his attention to the study of philosophy, religion and the occult after confirming that science and medicine offered, at best, only a cosmetic solution. Of course, the search for a magical or miraculous solution was not very promising. A priest he confided in accused him of submitting to *demonic* temptation. While debating the implications of that accusation, he was confronted by a *real* demon and possessed. Divorced from his body, “she” manifested her true spirit while trapped in the depths of the demon’s mind. There, she was hunted by the rogue gods of the inner realm, captive souls in competition with each other for domination over the world they had dreamed up together to escape the nightmare of their enslavement.

The second part follows her through the initial experience of waking up in a nightmare as the person she always dreamed of being. Trapped in the nightmare with her was a young man the demon possessed to get to the boy she had been. Together they face a new existence in a world where gods and magic played an active role in shaping reality, in spite of the rise of technology. They are introduced as lost souls recovered from the rift by the founder of the Order of Aeslyn Tear. Impressed by their ability to function outside of reality, the order recruits and trains them in the psychic, magic and martial arts a rift walker needed to survive missions out on the threshold and among the shattered realms. Several books can be devoted to this portion of the story, supported by existing notes and rough drafts.

The second part includes adventures in reclaiming a haunted mansion won in a hand of cards, being recruited into the order of Aeslyn Tear, rescuing lost souls from rifts in the fabric of time and space, fighting in wars in the shattered realms, and battling an adversary committed to exploiting demons for power. To protect themselves from the predation of rogue gods, they conceive new incarnations of themselves to preserve their psyches in the event of their death or destruction. As members of the order they learn the arts and skills they need to survive an encounter with a rogue god, earning their place among the paladins of the Order of Aeslyn Tear facing threats in the common realm as diverse as demons, dragons, wraiths, vampires, weres, wizards, witches and warlocks. On the threshold, among the shattered realms, they faced even greater challenges.

The second part of the story ends with an attack on a gathering of the order at their home. The order had faced a plague of demon activity they had traced to depths of Aeslyn Tear. The goddess had sacrificed the city in ancient times to seal away a host of demons unleashed in the war that broke out among the gods at the start of the purge. A rogue member of the order was recruiting followers willing to risk their souls to harness demons and become gods. Few, if any, succeeded and the demons they resurrected ended up on the rogue paladin’s leash. This adversary sent the demons to destroy the group before it could find proof of his actions or identity. During the attack, the demon of the realm was provoked into defending its host from a demon assassin’s attempt to possess her. Her daughter took her demon to save her soul, but nothing could stop the dragon that devoured her.

The third part of the story begins seven years before end of the second, with her reincarnation as a girl. Her companion had argued that it would be easier and safer to conceive a male incarnation, but when she tried, she simply could not put her soul into it. Instead, she captured the soul of the demon’s focus. Before the massacre, the girl was betrothed to the reincarnation of her mother’s companion. Following the massacre, the girl was fostered by the boy’s mother, with the intent of making her his bride. In between, she had survived as a street orphan and fallen under the patronage of a vampire underlord who had his own plans for her future. He cultivated those plans through an agent of the underworld at the academy. At the academy, the girl and the boy became friends and rivals with the reincarnated companion.

The third part of the story picks up ten years later, when the trio return home for their last summer as initiates. Haunted by nightmares, the girl is compelled to find out who was responsible for her parent’s deaths. The memories unlocked by her nightmares include memories of her former life, and those memories make her sympathetic to her lover’s ordeal under the influence of a cursed ring. Transformed into her twin, her lover is able to hide his ordeal by posing as her while she probes the mystery surrounding the massacre. Unfortunately, her lover has to put up with her fiancé’s renewed interest in her. Worse, her fiancé’s interest and activities in the ruins of the underworld have made him a target for assassination. Worst, while venting her frustration she gave the assassin the impression that she had been given a similar contract on the boy’s life.

The third part of the story has been through the most revision and encompasses a number of conflicting impulses. The girl’s investigation leads her into a conflict in the underworld that results in her death and resurrection as a were vampire. The tomboy unwittingly causes the death of the girl’s fiancé and the girl is arrested for his murder. The boy wakes up on the threshold with the memories of his previous life fully restored. The tomboy falls prey to the demon unleashed from the bonds of the paladin’s ring. The demon hunts the girl down, compelled to take her place in order to fulfill its task as a weapon against the goddess. Only the fact that the tomboy was a reincarnation of the goddess prevents her true destruction, though the event proves that she is no longer the focus. When the girl attempts to end her twice cursed existence, she proves that she has replaced the goddess.

The third part of the story includes a different take on the slain lover threads. Since the tomboy is no longer presented as a male incarnation of the girl, the boy who ends up haunting the girl’s mind is actually the slain rival. He finds his way into her consciousness by indulging his curiosity about how the world he came from had changed, he intended to catch a glimpse through the eyes of the demon.

The fourth part of the story pits the girl, now a goddess, against the rogue gods who are intent on domination. Only now, instead of dominating the demon without, they must find a way to dominate her. Instead of simply wanting to eliminate her as a rival for the demon’s power, they must devour her. Among her opponents is the order’s hidden adversary, a man who attained godhood by devouring a demon. Among her allies are the tomboy goddess, a dragon born of her mother’s mind and body—both, duplicates of her, the dragon’s sire—the one her mother met in the shattered realms, and her mother’s companion from the outer realm. Unfortunately, her allies are also rivals over her. Even the adversary, intent on devouring her body and soul, is perversely infatuated with her. Her only ace in the hole is the old incarnation of her in the outer realm.

A boy

A woman

A girl

A goddess

The shattered realms – The dream the demon’s focus shared with the inner gods became the first of the inner realms. The rest of the inner realms started as the private domains of individual gods, founded on their mortal memories and shaped by their imaginations. As life emerged in the common realm, the realms became havens for mortals who entrusted their souls to the gods keeping upon death. Without such intervention, the mortal souls of the common realm became stranded on the threshold of the abyss, in the nightmare of demonic imprisonment. An attack upon the goddess created the rifts in the common realm that made it possible to retrieve and resurrect lost souls in the inner realms. When a god was destroyed in the purge, his or her realm became shattered, exposed to the fragments of other broken realities, slowly decaying as their inhabitants lost their grip on reality.

A girl’s nightmares – Although nightmares have figured prominently in every approach to the story, the current approach is based on a different foundation. Some notes already lend themselves to the mother’s memories surfacing in the girl, but only in a few was she originally male. So, it will be necessary to define how and when the girl would begin to remember a life in which she was a transgendered boy on Earth. The first idea along those lines would involve dreams in which she wakes up in a strange world, in a male body, and experiences the agony of loss and the ache of futility of knowing who she is but remembering nothing to support it and being able to do nothing about it. *I wake up and I’m still me but that’s not how I remember myself, nor how I actually am. I’ve always been a boy, and tried hard to live up to the fact, but it just isn’t me. Unfortunately, magic and miracles can’t be found in this world—I know, because I’ve looked harder than anyone else to find something to change me into what I should be if I’m to be me. Genital mutilation and hormone replacement is the best medicine can offer.*

A boy

A woman

A girl

A goddess

There are a few oddities that present themselves in response to the realities influencing the evolution of this story. The simple fact is that the whole story appears to derive from my own experiences and imagination. Although I can look to the world around me for most of my inspiration, the world, the characters and the circumstances of the story are all my creation. There is a part of me that insists on reflecting that in the story. The question—unasked until now—has been, how can this be done?

There are many different answers to that question, depending on the perspective applied. A simple adjustment of the premise I’ve outlined in four parts presented itself to me a few nights ago. A rogue god might have engineered the conception of a new incarnation of the focus in the outer realm, sired via the body of a host, to remove her from the equation in a plot to conquer the demon. An attempt to sire an incarnation of the focus could inadvertently result in a conception of the demon’s true soul, drawing it out of union with the absolute. He is a soul born divorced from his—or rather, her—inspiration; in the first place because the spirit—as an angel—could not bear to let a mortal embodiment of its inspiration die, and in the second place because the soul—when it was incarnated—was incarnated in complete contradiction to its true nature.

The problem with the simple approach is that it feels a bit contrived, somehow. It misses something. After a few nights away from the problem, the thought that occurred to me was that my involvement in the creation of this story is too intimate, the world and its circumstances too much a product of my mind and soul. The focus, too much a personification of my self. I am not able to determine if my notion of myself is a remnant of some previous incarnation or a product of true self conception. I know how I am drawn into manifestations of my inspiration, how I identify with particular traits in particular combinations. What drives me, however, is the impulse to be myself—so much so that I reject the prospect of being someone else. I cannot help questioning the facts I am presented with, asking of each thing, “Is this really me?”

Even my story is subjected to this inquiry. The only place I have been free to be myself has been in my own mind. I have drawn on the ideas of others for both inspiration and for vicarious experience, inventing characters to introduce concepts and circumstances to create a world where I could be the person I want to be. I’ve created characters through whom I could be myself in worlds created by or with others. I have lived moments of lives distilled from all these different sources in my dreams, and suffered their distortion and desecration in nightmares. So, perhaps the solution is to present the story suggested by reality. The world is in fact the world I dreamed, the girl is the side of me denied life except in dreams, the boy is the side of me tormented by demons born both in the nightmare of reality and the reality of the deepest dream.

The foundation of the inner realm shifts closer to the original model of point paradox, the revelation I had as a child, that worlds are dreamed into reality and realized through the participation of their inhabitants, based upon how coherent the structure of their information is.