

Jet-lagged but Otherwise having a pretty good time

Gregory Nero

Abstract—We each take a bite of the peach and launch it off of the cliff. The sound it makes when it hits the earth is something that is only for us.

Index Terms—here, there, everywhere

I. PLACES TO ROT

*I'm looking for somewhere to disappear.
To become the weeds.
To become the cobwebs.
I'm looking for a place to rot.
In between concrete sidewalk slabs
And the forgotten corner of the ceiling.
My bones will be soil.
My veins will be filthy gossamer.*

II. STRANGE PLACES (WITH YOU)

*I want to hold you hand in a place neither of us recognize.
I want to be surrounded by everything unfamiliar and feel
your skin among it.
Like in the back of a packed bus,
Or the noodle shop next to the busy alley.
I want to give you the pit of my plum lollipop,
And play arcade games with you on the third floor.
I want to ride the 182 line with you until we reach the end.
And when it's time to get off, you'll squeeze my hand twice.
We'll leave and get swept up in the busy street,
And maybe we'll disappear until we're ready to be found.
I want to learn something new about ourselves, together.*

III. MORE REFLECTIONS ON GENDER (WRITTEN ON THE PLANE TO TAIPEI)

I was an altar boy and I wore a white alb and I held the scripture for the priest to read. I lit incense before mass and I rang the bells after the words “do this in memory of me.” We said prayers about all things visible and invisible, seen and unseen. We learned about how in order to “properly” crucify someone you need to drive the nails between the wrist bones and not through the hands because the hand bones couldn’t support the weight of the hanging body would rip right through them. We gave peace and shook hands with our neighbors. We believed that out of divine mercy and love the Virgin gave birth to the son of God. We worshiped Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit. We learned this trinity was three in one and one in three. Spirit and body in beautiful harmony. The bread became body and the wine became blood. And we ate his body and drank his blood and asked for the forgiveness of our sins behind a thin screen. And this made sense. Treat thy neighbor as thyself. But not being a man was completely out of the question because that was too confusing and difficult

for other people to understand, as if the crucified Jesus above the altar was crying not for the sake of humanity, but because I don’t want to be a man or a woman.

From the side of the alley, I hear *Hey, that dude isn't wearing any pants!* I continue my walk (well, it was more of a strut) down the mostly ruined avenue and give a glance over my shoulder to see the two figures sitting up against the rusted-sheet-metal fence. Whether this remark was meant as an insult or simply an expression of confusion I’ll never know but I do know that I looked fabulous in that short red dress, sweating beneath the beautiful but harsh Tucson sun.

In the same red dress underneath the same sun someone with a clipboard and sheet of paper shouts *Hey, chica! Chica!* At first I don’t stop, thinking these shouts must be for someone else, but after more hailing I finally pause and reassure the person that I was in fact registered to vote in this county.

Somewhere close to midnight I wait in the McDonald’s drive through on my banana-yellow bicycle, waiting to get an M-and-M frosty. Before I get up to the first window I hear from the car behind me *Hey honey whatchu doin' later?!* I turn around, my ass obviously looking fabulous in my white skirt and the middle section of my back gleaming between its waist and my cropped t-shirt, to see the look of confusion on the faces of driver and the passenger who, after much confusion, apologize and say *Oh sorry bro, we thought you were a girl!* Never before have I experienced such a combination of euphoria and disgust in my life.

On the video call with my family I desperately try to answer the demanding question of *Why?* as tears stream down my face. Only after that did I realize how insulting it is to ask someone that without having the patience to hear the answer to such an impossible question.

I would say that one of my greatest fears is living a life disingenuous to myself. That I’m simply building a puzzle with shapes given to me by others, the edges and colors chosen by anyone else but me. And then when I sit down at the table by myself with the pieces as organized as I can make them, I look at the collection and think *now what the fuck is this jigsaw world trying to make of me?*

I have had a bright green “they/them” pin on my backpack for a few years now. It has a little red heart on it. It’s really cute. When I stand in line to board the plane, I can feel the person behind me staring at it. I wear it proudly, but to be honest, sometimes I’m afraid of being confronted about it. I’m worried that someone will see it and say to me *prove it.* And I’ll stand before them, patchy facial hair and Adam’s apple recovering from a gulp of desperation, with absolutely no clear way of convincing them that I’m neither a man or a woman in a way that they will be satisfied with.

When I shave my facial hair my neck usually bleeds. Unfortunately, this has become a metaphor. Before I leave

for the bars on Friday night I look at my face closely in the mirror and think to myself *you are so fucking beautiful, please know this*. While I'm buying nicotine at the local smoke shop, the cashier gives me a harsh look. I'm not sure if it's because I'm buying an addictive substance or if it's because my skirt is too short. I'm not sure which case is worse to the cashier.

It has been my experience that being queer and non-binary as someone who is typically read as a man (unless hours of cosmetic preparation beforehand can "convince" people otherwise) means never being able to feel like I truly belong in queer spaces because I'm automatically labelled as a man pretending to be queer, and never being able to feel like I belong in cis spaces because I'm just a man pretending to be a woman.

I would like to acknowledge that privilege, though, of being able to "be a man when I want to." This of course means "be a man to *others* when I want to" but sometimes these two very distinct things become blurred. At the McDonald's drive through, I was automatically "safe" because the passengers of the car both "realized I was a man" and backed off. That is a privilege. I escaped harassment simply because they thought I was a man. So, when people say to me I just don't see how the gender binary affects our lives I think of that situation and scream.

One of the tragedies of my identity as non-binary is that the world has forced me to become politically radicalized in order to justify my own existence, when in reality I just wanted to exist in a way that made me feel beautiful. I just wanted to exist without my very existence being a spectacle. But I get caught in a loop which goes something like Why can't you just be a man that likes to do "girl" things? with me replying Why does it matter if I'm not a man or a woman? My initial naïve acceptance of "gender is made up" comes back swinging with full force when I enter these debates, which is when I realize how fucking wrong that is. Gender is very real and we experience that reality every single day.

I've been considering lately: gender as a system for expression vs gender as a system for oppression. In what ways do I use gender to feel like I belong somewhere in this world and in what ways does that same system come back to bite me later on? Put another way: gender as a game vs. gender as survival. For all the ways I can feel euphoric navigating outside of the binary there are dozens that tell me I'm doing it wrong, or doing it for attention, or that I'm plainly making it up. I initially thought (and maybe I still do, but in a way that feels different) that gender is this beautiful platform on which we can express ourselves. And part of me still believes that, if only we allow gender to be flexible. But recently I've been unsure of this. Gender more recently feels like a tool for making sure that those who don't conform to it feel alienated and afraid, a tool for oppressing and limiting the potential of others. If this is the way gender is and will be then I don't want any part of it.

Before the bike ride, we say our names and pronouns. I pick a new name and say today my pronouns are the sounds that the leaves make. And honestly, I've never felt more like myself.

At the house party, two groups stand separated, simply by

social diffusion, on the back porch. The 'girls' side' and 'the boys' side' emerges as the girls dance and the boys stand around talking about something or another. And someone points that distinction out and makes the comment *hey it's like a middle school dance* and I think of myself in middle school (a stranger I care about a lot) and I nervously leave the boy's side where I was standing talking about nothing to lock myself in the bathroom and sit on the edge of the tub to think about identity and my place in this world. I left shortly after.

I think about gender non-conformity I experienced growing up, however limited it was. I remember the "tomboys," the AFAB gender deviants who wore basketball shorts and baggy shirts and liked to hang out with the boys. But I can't for the life of me remember a single AMAB person who defied gender like that at an early age and I'm devastated because I know the reality is that any hint of that would have been quickly snuffed out. Being a girl who liked boy things was okay, but being a boy who liked girl things was unacceptable. And that fills me with immeasurable sadness and anger. The world would be a gentler place if boys were "allowed" to be girls sooner.

I have a hard time remembering my early childhood and even most parts of my middle-school and high-school life. People sometimes tell me that it's because of trauma but I'm not so sure about that. I am very grateful for the life I had growing up. But still, there's this gigantic gap where my memories should be, memories that my old friends can recount so clearly. Unfortunately, this has also become a metaphor, but I'm still not sure about what yet. I do know that every year I feel like I get closer to myself.

I am my mom's non-binary son. If that doesn't make sense to you then I can't really blame you. That means I'm not a boy but I'm still her son. If that makes things more confusing, then I still can't really blame you. What I mean is that "son" doesn't mean "boy." "Son" means that she raised me and that counts for something. In fact, that counts for a whole lot. And it's precisely because she raised me that I've ended up where I am. I want her to see me the way I see myself. This is a gift I want to give to her. I can be her non-binary son because queerness is a platform for radical inclusion and love. I can do this because there's no "right way" to be non-binary.