

## Loving Outside Simple Lines

### Sonya Bolus

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Leaning over you in bed, I run my hand across your shirted torso, caressing breast and muscle, smoothing abdomen and flank. My touch on your female body does not emasculate you. You are not a woman to me. You are butch. My fingers tell you I understand.

My stone butch; I am prepared for you to pull away every time I reach for you. I don't understand the strange sense that guides my approach to you, but it is innate, instinctive, natural.

You gaze at me with trust and wonder that you can let me touch you so freely. I tell you I could make love to you for hours. I, young and novice femme, could make love to you, skilled and knowing butch, for hours. And you, tough from years of living as you do, lie quiet beneath my touch.

Sometimes I have to trick you. We pretend you are fucking me, so you don't have to think about what I am doing to you. I make my body available to you as a distraction.

Sometimes I use words: "Let me suck your dick." Whether I go

down on a dildo or a cunt, I am sucking your dick. I see it. I feel it. I know it. We both believe in this absolutely, and there is a shift from role play into another kind of reality.

Always, I give you my body, completely. I luxuriate in how well you know my needs, how well you match me and capture every strength and grace I hold within. I give over to you, and you take me to total release, drive me to sexual madness, then bring me back to safety in your embrace.

Without knowing that anyone like you existed, I searched for you. And now that I've found you, I feel such relief to know that you are real. Now I want to know the wealth of your mind, body, and soul, the hell of being you in this world, and the joy that also comes from living outside simple lines.

You ask me to marry you. "Yes" is my answer. And I say yes to life. I say yes with my eyes wide open. You will be my husband, for you are butch, and I can call you no other way. You will be my husband because you are worthy of that title, far more than any man I have known. You'll not own me, but I'll be your wife. I am already your femme and your girl, and I feel my own strength and power as never before. I marry you, and it is more than words or license or tax break, more than a church wedding or a white dress/tuxedo affair, more than a political statement, commitment ceremony, holy union. Marriage with you is life. You extend your hand to me. I step into your world and unite you to mine.

Comes the day you tell me you want your breasts removed. Top surgery. Chest reconstruction. I am oddly not surprised. I think I always knew we would do this together someday. And somewhere in me, though you have not said it aloud, I know this is the first step of a profound transition.

I love you. So I go with you to the computer, and we look up different transgender Web sites (places I have already been because I knew that someday you would want this information). We read about procedures and options. We have an animated and revelatory conversation. But inside me, a deep, overwhelming panic begins to build.

I want to scream, "I love you...as you are!" My desire for you is not confused. I'm a femme who loves butches, who knows butches. I understand your body. Why can't that be enough?

Ever since I met you, I have struggled to reconcile your breasts with

your masculine face, your cunt with your masculine presentation, your body with your masculine soul. I have wanted to "figure you out," using an intellect fettered by narrow expectations, so implicit in my culture that even I have rarely, if ever, questioned them.

You, simply by existing, question all gender assumptions. Gradually I have learned not to try to understand you with my intellect but instead to trust my heart, so clear in its acceptance and love for you.

Yet now, I fear, I want you to agree with me: "Perhaps if you had been recognized, accepted and validated as you are, maybe now you would not want to alter your body." Please, my eyes beg. I want there to be an easier way. I want that you should not need to do this. I want even the possibility that there might have been a chance for you not to need to do this.

You patiently shake your head. "The world is only part of this," you tell me. "The rest of it is inside me."

And my heart knows better. I know you better. You were transgendered before socialization tried to force you to choose "one or the other."

"Are you a boy or a girl?" has been ringing in your ears from earliest memory.

"What do you think?" you flip to them now, tired of explaining. Confusion turns in their eyes. What they say is: freak. What they do is: turn away. Stare. Laugh. Spit. Kill. Beat the spirit from your heart.

You fight them. Survival. Best defense is Get Them First. Show your menace; you are not to be toyed with. "Dangerous" is the message in your eyes, clothes, walk. The razor edge walks with you. You anticipate attack or threat at every turn, exchange, and glance. You talk through. Survival. And "tough" encases your heart.

End of the day and your voice is cold. Your eyes, too old for your years. Tears backed up, held in at what cost? I draw you into the circle of my arms and feel your tension ease. You breathe, and I know you are quietly bringing yourself to me. You can hardly believe you can let it all down, that you can let the tears fall. You can. I know your strength; you have nothing to prove to me. Every part of you that they hate and fear gives me delight. In loving you, I am assured of my own normality.

It is this I fear losing.

The next morning I am driving to work. As I hand my \$2 to the toll collector at the bridge, I try to calm myself. "Whatever happens, she will still be my Mary," I whisper again and again, like a mantra. But then

I realize you will not be Mary anymore; you will have a new name. And as if that were not enough, you will not even be "she."

We are in uncharted territory.

One night, several weeks later, I awaken to see you sleeping next to me. Your breasts—dusky in the half-light—are spilling onto the bed. Your breasts, which I never touch without knowing a part of you shrinks from my hand. Beautiful, womanly breasts.

Suddenly I can't lie beside you another moment. Tears from nowhere stream hot down my cheeks. In the bathroom I leave the light off, sit on the edge of the bathtub, double over in the moonlight. I rock against my confusion.

Anger. How dare you throw my universe into disarray! Just when I think I finally know myself! When I think I know you!

Fear. This is too much to ask of me! I can't bear this weight. It is impossible. I feel insane!

Betrayal. Who are you? Are you a butch only because there was no other choice! Am I really a lesbian? What does this mean? How can I be a femme if you are a man?

I want to scream at you. Hate you. Instead I stifle my crying in a towel until at last the tears come silent, flow gently. In the morning you find me curled on the couch in the living room. You hold me. Your eyes are so sad. You tell me how sorry you are.

For what? For being true to yourself? I don't want you to apologize for this. I don't know what I want!

I let you hold me, and it does feel better. But I berate myself for being so angry. For hurting you. I wish I could just get to the other side without going through the pain.

Every day I feel different: I drift in and out of anger and pride, excitement and fear. I grapple with monumental theories and insignificant—but suddenly important—consequences of your transition.

My greatest fear is of how this might affect my own sense of self. "Just don't ask me to be straight," I tell you. "It took me too much pain and time and struggle to come out queer, lesbian, and femme-proud. I can't go back." But you never step on or dictate my identity, and for this I am grateful beyond words.

Instead you inspire me to look with courage at my self-definitions. I see how they are true to me. I also see how they sometimes limit me. Though they have often given me security and a means to self-awareness,

I notice parts of myself I have suppressed: the attraction I once felt for men, the desire I feel now for other femmes, the need to examine my own "othergenderedness."

Some days I feel very alone in the world, like the biggest "freak among the freaks," and I turn old internalized hatred upon myself. Other days I feel like part of an ancient, unspoken tradition, as one who is particularly "wired" to partner a transperson. I feel almost sacred.

Months pass quickly. Every time you bleed, you feel a little more insane, and I feel less able to be your safe harbor. We go to meetings, get to know other transmen and their lovers and wives. We search the Internet for surgeons. We figure out which credit cards can hold the weight of this surgery. Time eases pain, it is true. I love your breasts, but now I release this part of you so beautiful and mysterious to me.

I am changing. Part of me begins to address this surgery with a note of erotic anticipation. I notice that much of my desire is linked to the disparity between your gender expression and your body. When you bind your breasts, pack a dick, when you wear a suit and tie, T-shirt and boxers, when you shift before my eyes from woman into man, I am aroused, excited beyond belief.

I relish the way you construct your gender despite the dictates this world links to your body, which further manifests your particular gender.

Christmas week we travel from San Francisco to Maryland for your surgery. We make love in the cheap motel room near the surgeon's office. I want to touch you, but you tell me you just can't. I could cry.

Later I ask if I can kiss your breasts goodbye. You grant me this, though I know what an effort it is. But I have to ask for this; I'll never have another chance. I kiss your nipples as tenderly as if they were made of snow. I let my tears fall onto your soft skin. I know I will always remember how your nipples quietly harden, even under such a gentle touch.

The next day we go to the clinic. You leave me in the hallway as you make your way to the operating room, looking back to mouth, "I love you." Your eyes are wide in fright, but you are smiling.

Then you are gone. I spend four hours waiting.

There is a strip mall next door. In the coffee shop, I write in my journal. In the drugstore, I buy you a card and makeshift bandages. I try to be objective about whether sanitary pads or diapers will be more comfortable

and absorbent against your wounds. The lady at the checkout counter asks me how I'm spending my holidays. I tell her, "Quietly."

After three hours, I come back to the waiting room. It is a cosmetic surgery office, so a little like a hotel lobby, underheated and expensively decorated, with candy in little dishes, emerald-green plush chairs, and upscale fashion magazines artfully displayed against the wall.

A young woman comes in, frantic to get a pimple "zapped" before she sees her family over the holidays. An older woman comes in with her daughter for a follow-up visit to a face-lift. She is wearing a scarf and dark glasses. The nurse examines her bruises right out in the waiting room.

And you are in the operating room having your body and your gender legally altered. I feel like laughing, but I know it make me sound like a lunatic.

After a lifetime of waiting, I am finally called to the recovery room. You are woozy and weak but smile at me when I take your hand. I remember why I am willing to nurse you through this and anything.

Over the course of the next several months we embark upon a journey filled with dramatic peaks and valleys. You start testosterone treatments and your very thinking is changed, along with your body. Most profound is the change in your sexuality. You are more driven, yet more open and vulnerable. You want me like men have wanted me. Sometimes I am so frightened; it is only your love that makes sex possible.

And yet, if anything, you are more sensual to me now. On you, "more masculine" seems like "more butch." I never thought it possible that you could be more butch.

You strut more. Sometimes I find you looking at yourself in the mirror, curious and even delighted. I never saw you take such an interest in your body before. You let me touch you more.

There is a giddy feeling to our lives. Clothes shopping, making love, just being together in this journey is funny, surreal, and filled with a strange, joyful expectation.

And there are stray moments when I stop in my tracks, suddenly realizing my own transition, how I have also changed. How I am changing even now.

On one such day I make a word for myself: *transensual*. And in naming myself, I feel substantial—connected. I am reminded of when

I discovered the word *lesbian* and later *femme*. These words name me and help create me at once. My self has reached for these identifiers, found them and filled them out. Now I make them unique to me. Transensual femme lesbian.

I often bless this path you have taken, for your own sake and for mine; it has propelled me into my own journey, and I have found a part of me which needed to emerge. I see people, the world, differently. I am different.

I am trans-formed.

When you came out over 30 years ago, a young butch in the Chicago bars before the lesbian-feminist movement swept you up in its passion, did you ever long for this second chance?

When you burned your last bra and wore your last dress, did you ever think your path would lead you to this future?

When you swore to yourself as a child that you would somehow find a way to put your elbow in your ear if it would change you into a boy, did you ever think your wish would come true?

You are a boy now. And you are a transgendered butch with a 50-year history. Your politics and passion, your anger and hurt, your emotional capacity and human consciousness—these can never be erased. When I move against you, when I hold you to my breast, when I take you in my mouth, I take in your whole self. You feel my soul and I respond to you, as a femme, as a lesbian, as a transensual woman...as myself.

Tonight I wake up to see you lying next to me, your chest softly rising and falling with each breath. I hardly notice the scars, you are so beautiful. Sleep well, my butch, my boy, my man. I will be here when you wake.