

NAKED AMONG THISTLES

LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL,
TRANSGENDER &
RELATED IDENTITIES
AND MENTAL WELLBEING



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ELEPHANT JUICE
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FOREWORD

This book is about the relationship between LGBT+ identities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other related gender identities and sexual orientations) and mental wellbeing. It's also about explorations of identities and communities, labels and refusals, rebellions and happiness, love and loneliness. Whether you are a professional looking to better understand the mental health inequalities LGBT+ people face, a friend who would like to learn how to be more supportive, an LGBT+ person looking for solidarity, or just someone who appreciates the diversity of people's stories—this book is for you.

LGBT+ people are three times more likely to suffer from mental ill health than the general population.¹ When you consider the discrimination, stigma and everyday lack of understanding that LGBT+ people face—from our families, our employers and co-workers, even strangers on the street—it's not a huge surprise that our mental wellbeing is impacted. Imagine, then, that you find the courage to look for support with your mental health, and the person or organisation that you go to for help doesn't understand. Your friends and family might be doubly mystified because they don't understand your mental health needs or your identity. This dual stigmatisation makes each of these aspects more difficult to deal with.

We wanted to collect together the stories in this book so that those who have different life experiences can gain an insight into what it might feel like to have a marginalised

¹ According to See Me Scotland, 25% of people within the general population will experience mental ill health at some time in their lives (<http://www.seemescotland.org/about/whyweneedtotacklestigma>). According to the University of Brighton & Spectrum's report, *Count Me in Too* (2007), 79% of LGBT people reported mental ill health within the last five years. This suggests that the comparable statistic may be even higher.

identity, and how this can interact with mental wellbeing. We also wanted to capture the triumphs and struggles and moments of beauty that go with this as a piece of art and a historical artefact.

The work in this book was selected for its ability to capture a moment or experience in a way which makes it feel real for the reader—whether in the polished lines of an experienced writer, or the raw, honest words of someone who is just starting to put themselves onto paper. We are honoured to include a piece by the late Edwin Morgan that describes an LGBT+ community resource in Glasgow that no longer exists. This acts as a stark reminder of the lack of cultural awareness of the importance of the existence of LGBT+ affirmative safe spaces in communities in Scotland.

Part of our aim was to support people to tell their stories in new and creative ways; to do this we organised workshops on short fiction, poetry, scriptwriting and performance (wonderfully facilitated by professional writers Kirsty Logan, Sophia Walker, Jo Clifford and Harry Giles, several of whom contributed their own work to this book). These sessions went above and beyond our expectations; what started out as a set of workshops to learn new skills and share feedback turned into a community of people telling their stories with moving honesty and brave vulnerability, and listening and responding with kindness, support and respect. Many of the people who participated in the workshops have pieces in the book; those who simply shared their words in those sessions also contributed to the creation of a safe space in which (we hope) all of us were able to explore and grow.

The work in this book comes from a diverse range of people—from across the spectra of gender and sexuality, and from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, (dis)abilities, life experiences, stages of recovery, and ages. They form a

partial cross-section of LGBT+ voices in Scotland in early 2014, telling a small number of the millions of stories that we have to tell—and seldom have the chance to.

There were some striking themes that emerged from the writing that people submitted. It quickly became clear that what people wanted to express were their feelings about love and community: how important connection with other people is to their sense of self, their wellbeing, their recovery, and their ability to be safe and happy. The other side of this coin are the stories of loneliness and isolation, and the pain caused by being unable to make such important connections public for fear of stigma, discrimination, or the threat of violence. Some of the work that speaks about love and relationships illustrates the ways in which past struggles with marginalisation have been a barrier to people being able to flourish. They illustrate the complex ways that stigma impacts on mental wellbeing in a way which goes beyond statistics and case studies.

Another strong theme in the work is the use of labels; many people speak about the desire to have control over their own definitions of themselves. Just as connection through love and/or community helps people to find a sense of themselves in relation to other people, labels can help people define who they are. However, labels can equally be misapplied, or weighed down with stigma: there are stories of resistance here too—refusals to be told who you are or to yield to expectations, whether in relation to mental health, gender identity, or who you want to have sex or fall in love with. The overwhelming message of these stories is the importance of self-identification—whether that involves owning a label or refusing to be defined by one.

We hope that this book will serve as a celebration of the extraordinary people who have generously shared their

stories, and as a tool for fighting stigma—so that the stories of the future can be about love and self-determination in a world which nurtures everyone’s wellbeing and diverse identities equally.

THIS BOOK AS A LEARNING RESOURCE

If you would like to use this book as a learning resource, we have listed some pieces below which relate to relevant themes. None of the pieces fit neatly into just one category, so these are just suggestions of places you might like to start, and we would encourage you to use them as a launching pad to explore the whole book.

- LGBT+ awareness for beginners:** ‘When did you realise?’
- Labels and self-definition:** ‘Boxes’, ‘XX Move’, ‘Bigots, Bastards and Shits’, ‘Finding the Rainbow’, ‘The In-Betweenness’, ‘Labels Are For Clothes’, ‘Shame’, ‘G.G.L.C.’, ‘All I want for Christmas is to wear a dress’, ‘Zizi the Transvesite’
- Coming out:** ‘Goodbye’, ‘From Celibate to Celebrate’, ‘Love’, ‘Another Voice’, ‘dear god’, ‘Shame’, ‘Boxes’
- Stigma:** ‘Bigots, Bastards and Shits’, ‘My Grandmother’, ‘Apology’, ‘From Celibate to Celebrate’, ‘Survival’, ‘Bisexual Anxiety and Christian Guilt’, ‘Boxes’, ‘All I want for Christmas is to wear a dress’
- Experiences of mental ill health:** ‘Homecoming™’, ‘From Celibate to Celebrate’, ‘The Silkie Skin’, ‘The Invisible Woman’, ‘Bisexual, Anxiety and Christian Guilt’, ‘Don’t Turn Your Back on the Waves’, ‘Another Voice’
- Mental health recovery:** ‘That First Kiss’, ‘Eight Years of Therapy in Seven Lines’, ‘Strength’
- Transgender identities:** ‘All I want for Christmas is to wear a dress’, ‘Zizi the Transvesite’, ‘XX Move’, ‘Shame’
- Gender expression:** ‘Embodiment’, ‘Oh What a Drag!’, ‘The

In-Betweenness', 'G.G.L.C.'

Families: 'An Ongoing Conversation', 'My Grandmother', 'All I want for Christmas is to wear a dress', 'Labels Are For Clothes'

If you would like to discuss ways in which you can use the book as a learning resource, please contact the editors, Alison Wren and Katherine McMahon on 0131 523 1100.

TRIGGER WARNINGS

As some people might find it difficult to read about certain topics, we've provided some warnings below for common triggers. As the book as a whole speaks about mental health in a variety of ways and levels of explicitness, we would encourage you to take care of your own emotional wellbeing whilst reading it. Please seek relevant support should the pieces bring up any issues for you. There is also swearing throughout the book.

Suicide: 'Bisexual Anxiety and Christian Guilt', 'Another Voice'

Self-harm: 'Bisexual Anxiety and Christian Guilt'

Abuse: 'From Celibate to Celebrate', 'The Silkie Skin'

Threat of violence: 'My Grandmother'

Gore: 'The Silkie Skin'

Reclaimed homophobic/transphobic slurs: 'Bigots, Bastards and Shits'

Sexual content: 'Love'

Emotional Distress: 'The Invisible Woman', 'All I want for Christmas is to wear a dress'

SOLIDARITY

Neither can we call this a begging of misery, or a borrowing of misery, as though we were not miserable enough of ourselves, but must fetch in more from the next house, in taking upon us the misery of our neighbours.

John Donne

a cyclist tricks the keys in her pocket / a line-cook
trills spittle over the locally-sourced / a chicken plucks
herself from the egg-groove / ooh it is murder / the
squawk /
the curtain / the quietus / an engine glosses herself in a
blank
cheque of scorch and smoke / a park heaves her
hummocks /
ejects sixty-six cops / one bank / eight roadblocks /
makes a fist of each fountain / a three-year-old packs
up the alphabet / chucks the toys out / sticks
her tongue in the hi-tech crib's socket / spies a godly
spark
and shoves up two infant digits / a grimace / a clerk
prefers not to / here / here / here / here / I urge you take
these knives to heart / suck failure into a pink and
vicious spike /
make loss your hearth now / here kindling / a hunk
of frank admiration / here luck / now hold it / our
reeking book

HOMEcomings™

I

when your ex-lover is puking towards death
and you end up
holding back their hair
or their manuscript
or the necktie they mostly use as a belt

things look different, then

II

The doctor says: if it hurts take Prozac.
The physiotherapist: just go back where you came from.
For sale: dreamcatchers but
Cree Onondaga Tuscarora Cayuga
Mohawk Anishnaabe Salish
meet blank stares

We're in love, did I say that yet?
The man she rejects tells her:
learn to speak English you cunt.
The man says: smash.

Both of us break right there, so simply.
Along with the glass.

III

Read my lips:
Starting over—the idea—is a lot like
the idea of mental health.

Under this mask another mask:
uniqueness
origin
stability
my little revenge

All I know is what I have words for—anger
has its own kind of string.

But listen, please:
It was as if the place (Scotland)
got up and threatened her.
Is it any wonder she has (we have)
gone to pieces?

IV

The loneliness I feel, waking up
on my mattress, the light not yet light.
The skin we put our lips to,
in offering. In prayer.

I offer you this—

my coils of regret
the dark days boundless
the faces of penguins
whose eggs have been stolen for science
the very water from my mouth.

Maybe desire is nothing but memory,
but in small dimly-lit rooms
I have seen miracles.

Magic made of flesh on flesh,
a little less space between.

EMBODIMENT

I

you are in the shower, small cubicle, x by x inches. yourself, y by y inches. occupying an ever-changing amount of space. your self wishes for static. yourself does not comply.

your self is incredibly conscious of yourself, of the skin. yourself feels soft today, all breasts and thighs and belly, and it disgusts your self. using the hands to knead the skin, your self willing yourself to diminish but it doesn't work like that. your self knows that but wills it anyway.

lift the head, the eyes closed into the stream. blindly allow your self or force yourself to dig the nails into the demanding stomach, scratch the hand that feeds.

II

you are on your bed, double, x by x inches. yourself, y by y inches. things are better wrapped in cotton towelling. your self checks your phone.

- new emails from: pizza hut—£5 deals; asos—sale sale sale; your doctor, confirming an appointment. your self deletes them all.

- your mother played “exists” on a double word score in words with friends. your self is still winning.

- a new tinder match—sam, twenty three, six kilometres away.

“hey cutie x,” says sam, twenty three, six kilometres away. ‘cutie’ reminds your self of yourself. softly gently cutie. accidentally femme. your self struggles to remember what was attractive about sam in the first place. your self knows that that is unfair but ignores them anyway.

III

your self wishes it was possible to ignore yourself.

IV

you are in sam's bed, double-or-is-it-queen, x by x inches. yourself, y by y inches. your self was bored and wanted to find ways for yourself to be used. sam seemed convenient.

yourself is cold but your self is extremely conscious of the interactions of the skin once more and so the distance between yourself and your self and sam is vast and increasing. the eyes stare up. no voice has spoken in three minutes.

“do you think I am butch?”

although often considering the question, your self is taken aback by the voice breaking out, asking the stranger. unsure of what response to expect or desire and unsure of being an “I”.

“uh, dunno. maybe not butch,” they drag on a cigarette, “but boyish, if you get me.”

“mhm.”

the eyes continue to stare skywards. the voices resume their silence. the distance between yourself and sam is static but the distance between yourself and your self diminishes ever so slightly.

HELD

I

She anchors me.
When I buckle under the raging torrent of my fear,
And am swept away,
She stands in the place where I left,
And draws me back to myself,
My point of origin and return.
She sketches a map,
Puts it in a bottle and sends it to me.
I open it and see my face,
Held in her gaze.

II

She lets me unwind;
My self unravels and breaks apart
Into scattered pieces, like reflections in the broken
shards of a mirror.
The words I use to glue myself together
Are replaced by a flotsam of ellipses, sighs and scraps
of sentences,
That drift in the changing tides of me.
She gathers me, like so many shells from the beach
Into arms that could reach around the world,
Arms that hold the bits of me and let me rest a while.

III

Held in the gentle swell of the dark,
In red plush and flickering shadows,
I seep into a space without edge or end.
Growing small, I glimmer like a tiny spec of light.
A star glitters above a quiet sea;
Where waters of silk stretch to meet an inky sky,
And on the horizon, a ship drifts in restful solitude.

THAT FIRST KISS

She told me later that she was stunned and excited—it hadn't been my intention to declare how I felt—it just happened. We had met for tea, on my arriving in Edinburgh from Glasgow and we checked out a few restaurants before deciding to eat at one nearby. The atmosphere was intimate and I watched her over dinner and felt my heart warming and so when we parted at the bus station later I guess I did kiss her. And that was the start of our friendship taking wings into a relationship. But it was to be a few more months before we had our first date when we went to see Horse in concert at the Edinburgh festival. Neither of us had been in a romantic relationship for over a decade and while we were drawn to each other, it was scary too!—especially as we were both in early recovery from mental health problems.

In hindsight I think I knew I was gay at about three years old—just a feeling—but as I grew up I knew I had to keep these feelings to myself—after my first love affair with a fellow student at university ended I withdrew into my 'closet' and stayed there until I met my first true love when I was 30 years old. Only then did I begin my journey of 'coming out' as a gay woman and it was an extension of this journey that took me to the LGBT Centre for Health and Wellbeing in Edinburgh on a Monday night in January 2013. It was that night I met her. We chatted easily and found we had things in common but had varied interests too. I told her I was meeting a few lesbian friends at the weekend—she rang me on the Tuesday night and decided to join us in Glasgow the following Sunday. And so began a to-ing and fro-ing between Edinburgh and Glasgow by bus for us both and my increased involvement with LGBT Health and Wellbeing—my sense of self was enhanced and I continued to make progress in my recovery from Bipolar

Affective Disorder, a condition I've struggled with and learned to manage for over 20 years. My illness was to rob me of my career, my first true-love relationship and brought me back to Glasgow in 1995.

But that first kiss with her was the beginning of an even newer journey for me in my recovery and we've just celebrated six months together as soulmates, lovers and for me a welcome panacea to my struggles with my mental health—a rewarding time of growth and mental wellbeing for us both.

And just for today, all is well in our little world—bring on the future!

COMING HOME

Down the stairs she tells of his arrival,
her barking a wake up call.
He turns the key,
and opens wide the door.
He turns the key,
and my heart opens wide.
He steps across the threshold,
I see him for the first time,
smile, lips, face and eyes,
wrapped up in his blue coat.
Twinkling he kisses me,
excitement turns my stomach over,
relief floods me as blood flows.
A lonely day without speaking
is over.
My quiet solitude broken
by the presence of another
by the presence of my lover.
We talk.
Telling stories of moments
passed away, captured and gone.
His characters become the highlight of my day.
The yeses and nos of where he's been
and what he has seen,
fill up the room with light.
My heart rests in safety
with this simple, simple thing.

THE FOX AND THE GIRL



Sally Fox

I don't know safety
I don't know what safety feels like
But when I sit on my sofa with her
and I am held
in her gaze...

Well, I resist. Of course I resist
That's just what I do.
But the smell of warm biscuit and jasmine
lingering on even the jaggiest of her jumpers
Just pulls me in,
and the curl of her lip
spells out unconditional acceptance and love
I am caught in our orbit
and our eyes are locked in kindness
My heart beats irregular and fast
And breath is seeping through my chest
But my body is still and steady
And yes I am ready
I feel safe here.

WINDOWPANE

two worlds
neither of them ours

a world of someone else's words
of lives unlived

we both escape reluctantly
returning
to eat
to drink
to fuck

in a silence filled with words read
and lives waiting to be written
you return to your book

and through the now open window
I inhale
a world on a breeze
that you will never read of
and I will never live

APOLOGY

Sometimes, when I go to hold your hand
in public, or make to put my arm
around your waist, I panic.
Suddenly, I become

excruciatingly aware
of all who surround me—
what they might think,
what they might do, if

they see me—us.
So, sometimes, though less now
than before, I don't touch you.
Instead, I ever so casually

let my loving gesture
break into a wide reaching yawn,
or I point at something
ever so NOT interesting

in a shop window, or I simply
stuff my clenched fist
deep inside my trouser pocket
and continue to walk—hand NOT in hand.

GOODBYE

This is based on a real conversation I had with the first man I ever truly loved. It was one of the most painful moments of my life. I know there are many others who go through this. That is why I write this, so you know you are not alone—because as Harvey Milk said, “you’ve got to give them hope.”

[Outside, on a bench. It is a cloudy, dry day. There are people walking past all the time but no one takes any notice of the conversation taking place. DARREN is sitting on the bench smoking. ALEX stands next to the bench. They rarely look each other in the eye.]

DARREN: I needed to see you, about the text I sent.

ALEX: Yeah, I guessed. At first I thought you’d sent it to the wrong person.

DARREN: I meant every word.

ALEX: I know.

DARREN: I need to know. I need you to say it even though I know it’s going to hurt.

ALEX: My answer’s no.

DARREN: *[heart breaking]* ... Thanks, I guess I needed to hear you say it.

ALEX: I wish I could say otherwise, I really do, but I can’t.

DARREN: I know. Part of me wishes I'd never text you but I had to know.

ALEX: Yeah... It can't be easy.

DARREN: It's not. Your first true love being a straight man. Great. Just my luck.

ALEX: You wouldn't really want me. You can do better.

DARREN: Your girlfriend... If she said that to you when you told her you loved her would that make it any less painful?

ALEX: No, it wouldn't. I can't change who I am though.

DARREN: I know.

ALEX: You, of all people, know that you can't change who you fall for. So, even though I don't get what you see in me, I get it... it hurts.

DARREN: [*Holding back tears*] Do you see where I got the... the things that made me think you felt the same? Do you see why I thought you loved me back or were at least curious?

ALEX: I'm not sure. I didn't think anything of it.

DARREN: [*Tears burning down his face*] We practically lived together, we even slept in the same bed, many times. We spooned almost every night, went shopping, talked on the phone or msn for hours at a time. We've even cried in each other's arms. How could I not fall in love with you?

ALEX: [*hurt*] I did all that because I do love you, I'm just not in love with you. You're closer to me than you know, you're the brother I never had. And I don't want things to change between us.

DARREN: [*brushing away tears*] I don't want them to either... but they will. They have to, otherwise I'll end up never moving on... and I need to stop loving you.

[*End of Scene.*]

SHE SHOOK HER HEAD

She shivered at his smiling face,
recoiled at his tender touch,
for,
in the mirror of his shining eyes,
she saw a million mothers'
servitude stretching out like the
heirs of Banquo,
and she said,
No,
I dare to be different.

FROM CELIBATE TO CELEBRATE

Celibacy wasn't a choice for me
Dangly bits between groins just didn't turn me on
As for feminine allure, I wasn't quite so sure
The women that I'd gone to bed with in my head
were cardboard cut-outs of affection
Intimacy's never easy when you've been abused
Being pathologised a damaged heterosexual
I consistently ignored the calling of my heart
Perhaps I wanted nurturing from women
sterile sex from men

I tried as hard as any woman could
to reconcile the contradiction
I dressed as Don Quixote, which quite suited me,
then disassociated into Peter Pan
Each Wendy in my midst
whose lips I might have kissed
was thrust in to the role of mother
as I tried to smother my desire

Then one day my Sally came along
and turned the pockets of my doubt inside out
The rest I'll leave to your imagination!

LOVE

“The thing is...” I said, “I love you as a friend but...”

“You’re gay.”

His words thundered through me like bullets. Tears exploded. All around us, diners were craning to look at us, and I saw them dissolve behind their coffee cups.

“I’m so so sorry,” I sobbed. “You’re my best fucking friend in the whole fucking fucked up shitty world, and I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t,” he said, quietly. Then, “I’ve known for ages.”

“But how?”

He shrugged, and gave me a tired smile.

Maybe it was because I’d only given him one blowjob in the history of our almost-year-long relationship. Or maybe it was because I preferred him using his fingers to his cock. Or maybe it was because I froze totally corpse-like that time he was fucking me in my parents’ house, when he told me mid-shafting that he was in love with me.

It could have been any number of things. It could have been something to do with that redhead girl that I couldn’t stop staring at in the bookshop that time (but I was sure he hadn’t noticed).

“I don’t even know what I am,” I said. “I just know that me and you... we’re not... I mean... I just don’t feel like that...”

I saw his mouth twitch. I thought for a second he was going to cry, but he didn’t.

Somehow his hands found mine across the table, and I didn’t flinch when he touched me.

“We should probably get out of here.”

“Yeah,” I nodded.

And we were halfway to the train station before I realised we were still clinging on to each other.

SURVIVAL

A gentle breeze ruffled through my fur, as I stalked beneath the tall pine trees. The ground was soft under paw, owls were screeching over yonder, and I felt alive. It was a beautiful night to be out hunting, and I'd caught a scent. I just knew tonight was going to be a lucky night, and I'd finally satiate my aching hunger.

There up ahead, almost within striking distance now, lies my prey. My mouth waters at the sight of those plump juicy deer. I slowly creep through the undergrowth, a silent shadow.

Wait, what was that? A rustling behind me, and that unforgettable scent. It couldn't be Her. Could it? Panic setting in, I frantically look about me, terrified that She has found me.

Nothing is there, but the night. Resisting the urge to turn and flee, I try to focus back on the hunt at hand. But it's too late. My moment's hesitation was enough to alert my prey and for them to make their escape. Cursing myself, I skulk back into the heart of the forest, alone, with just my thoughts and rumbling stomach for company.

I'm meant to be a wolf, not a scaredy cat. How could I have let myself get distracted? Of course She wasn't there, how could She be? I fled from Her seasons ago, travelled the length of the country. There is no way She could get to me, even if She did want to.

So why do I still feel Her presence, smell Her scent, as real as the earth, wherever I go? Why can't I get Her out of my head? Why can't I be free of Her? I trace a claw over my scarred face, my ever present reminder of Her wrath, and flinch at that memory.

Tears trickling down my face, I wonder how I got here. I was destined to mate Wilfred of the Sundown pack, the

fastest, most courageous wolf of the southern forests. My path was set. So why did I have to go and fall for Her charms instead? Become so enchanted, that being with Her was all I cared about, even if it meant exile from my pack, my family.

I can't believe I ran away with Her; believed that we could survive on our own. And such foolishness; to not see Her for the wolf she truly was—a wolf who would turn on me the moment things got tough. Oh She could be sweet as honey when She wanted to be, but beneath the veneer, a vicious, icy heart.

And now, I am all alone, broken, with no pack, no family, to call home. Fear and hunger are my only companions.

Yet somehow I am still alive, and somehow I have to survive.

ALIVE

Waves breathe and sigh, the gulls mourn.
Your children are grown, your children are gone.

Wet sand like silk, stretched, only just stops
you falling into the reflected sky,
and when you die, you will find yourself on an
empty beach
where the waves lull you to sleep, hush, shh.

In the black hall at Amroth your love lies waiting
and you want to find her a shell with pink folds,
but all you hold is death in your cells unfolding.

Waves breathe and sigh, the gulls mourn.

In the black hall at Amroth your love lies bruised.
She fell, a girl, and rose an old woman.
You saw it in her eyes.

So you huddle with her like bleached bones
and feathers, listening to the tide drawing in.
When you find her secret fresh shell-flesh,
she moans and sighs,
and you breathe and sigh, alive.

THE SILKIE SKIN

From four days after St. Valentine's Day until the anniversary, we seemed to have shed that tough slippery skin and revealed our essences to one another. I would never forget the words I wrote on that first card, slipping out of my silkie skin and exposing my beauty and ugliness.

"If you would like to know a crazy Scotsman better, maybe we could create something special. You have brought warm sunshine into my long winter."

Over ensuing weeks we exchanged forensic details of our tortured childhoods—the searing losses, wrought-iron separations, white-tile hospitalisations, ice-cold parental disdain and neglect. Both needing to be loved yet lacking the capacity to fill those wells of emptiness. Only someone who has been loved is truly able to love.

But from the moment I was spellbound by those twinkly seal eyes, my hitherto calm, ordered existence was flooded by a tsunami of unfamiliar emotion. I ached to be close to him, never to separate from the warmth I held at night. I clutched him and he clutched my hands around him with a desperate intensity. I yearned to be subsumed into his flesh, to take refuge beneath his skin, where time and reality could not find me.

At thirty-one I had achieved the unimaginable. A handsome, smiling, intelligent, educated, sophisticated man kissed me every morning. But I was an inexperienced adolescent who had been in developmental limbo throughout my boarding-school years, my university years and my career-driven twenties. I crept, chameleon-like, through life, invisible to living people. The only love I had experienced was happy-ever-after, second-hand Hollywood melodrama.

We courted, Burns-like, on Loch Lomond's shores, meandering along wooded Sunday paths, hand-in-hand,

hidden from censorious eyes.

Until the blinds came down.

We had been living together for many months and I had just slipped a gold ring onto his finger on our first Christmas together. Out of the blue my Canadian parents announced their imminent arrival that morning. I steeled myself for the judgment. Colin would be passed off as 'my lodger'. Fortunately mother was unconscious on anti-depressants, etc., while father could be plied with whisky haze to mask the gaping void between us. Mercifully they migrated backed to Canada a few days later.

But the murky pools of my subconscious had been disturbed. Shortly afterwards I woke, wet-eyed, from a gothic vision of myself hunched over the corpse of my father, eating his flesh. A week or so later I was walking home from work. Normally I would be anticipating Colin's smile, a kiss and hug. Instead I could feel only dread at having to appear happy to see him.

When he saw my unresponsive face, his smile crumbled. The next day was a re-enactment of the first. The third day I said I needed some time to myself. I could not carry on the pretence of happiness. He looked me coolly in the eye and told me to see a psychiatrist. I thought of my mother's prescription addiction, repeated shock 'therapy' and spells in psychiatric hospitals. How could he even suggest a psychiatrist? I wanted to say, "Please help me," but no words came. The silkie skin twitched.

The following day he was gone.

THE INVISIBLE WOMAN

It's such a paradox that the bigger you get
the more invisible you become.
It happened to me.
I became so fat that I could no longer be seen,
not even to myself.
As I entered my forties I fell into a decade
eclipsed by my body mass index.
A time in womanhood considered prime
Was lost to a diagnosis and the medication intended
to treat it.
It was the side effects that made my body wax,
and their effectiveness that made my emotional and
sexual self, wane.
The absence of feeling meant that I didn't recognise
hunger or satisfaction of any kind.
I ate, I slept, I cried, I disappeared...

Sally Fox

BISEXUAL ANXIETY AND CHRISTIAN GUILT

I once tried to commit suicide because I couldn't
deal with being bisexual.

Living with my ex-girlfriend I'd started a
relationship with a man,
but as I'd been identifying as a lesbian it didn't
really compute.

I felt ripped open, strung out, compromised.

My mother is a Fundamentalist Baptist and
filled my head from childhood.

Messages that sex itself was sinful. Something to
be endured to make babies.

Something for men to do to you. The trick, it
seemed, was to avoid it.

Men were the danger. They would hurt you.
I know I internalised these ideas. Would cut
myself through my teenage years.

Didn't want to desire anyone, feel anything. It
was wrong.

I'm not quite over it. Years of therapists,
incorrect diagnosis.

Eventually a counsellor recommended
affirmative therapy.

She told me: *You just need someone to tell you
you're okay.*

It frustrates me to think those decades of
trauma and illness sprang
from something as simple as sex.



EYELASH

Lovers howl—
dead behind the eyes they
roll over a dry
coral-covered, coal-coloured dusty beach.
Their eyelashes
tear through cornea against
stormy winds and
flickering lights in the sky
suggest orgasmic friction.
And as they contort, crushing fossils and
sun-shells,
their spirit emerges—
free from oppression and rainbow shackles.
Life bursts from their eyes—
in all its citrus splendour and
a seahorse named Equality is born.

STRENGTH

Good mental health heals the body,
all others are just symptom curers,
putting the inevitable off,
a fall to the depths of oblivion,
to the drains of the world.

Pills, comfort, distraction, distortion,
denial, coping mechanisms, life, enjoyment.
All just procrastinations of predestinations.
Overwhelmingness is the size of the ocean,
depth is into outer space and back.

How do I reach the stars in the sky?
When they are centuries away?
How do I heal this pain, this hurt?

Hit the bottom like a ton of lead bricks,
that is what my gut is telling me.
How can you overcome something,
unless you go through it?
Really feel it.

But will I ever get out of the spider's web?
Am I willing to try?
Who will cut the spindles of web,
from my tired, weary body?
Will they even notice my struggle?
I will,
I will cut myself free.

I will take on my fear of pain,
I will conquer the world,

stand up and be me.
Even if it stings of death.

Then I will truly get to be.
To stand up in the world,
with the web at my feet,
as a proud trophy
which I reach for
when the dark creeps in.
I will wave it and say,
Look I did it before,
you're not having me back!

EIGHT YEARS OF THERAPY IN SEVEN LINES

I am so lost, alone
You can't love me.
Vulnerable, scared
You must love me.
You are compassionate
We are connected
I must love me.

Elspeth Morrison

DON'T TURN YOUR BACK ON THE WAVES

Don't turn your back on the waves!
Words of wisdom, too late
as I crumble and fall
my mouth, ears and eyes
filled with the salt spume of the sea.
Sometimes a crisis must be faced head on:
no matter how unprepared I am
I must see out the crashing surge alone
with a distant voice urging me on.
But loss, like a tidal wave
rips at my foundations
and leaves me standing
on shifting sands.
Guilt, shame and regret
lap darkly at my feet.
I try to swim,
but a riptide catches me
and pulls me away
from the safety of the shore
I am drifting out, alone
powerless against its strength
I focus on her, so far away
she'll come for me,
pick up the pieces
accept all that I am
and save me from drowning.



ANOTHER VOICE

A gust of wind almost carries him off the edge, into the traffic.

Not yet; he'll go when he's ready. Go now, says the little voice in his head, the same one that tells him he's a piece of crap. Go now.

The flyover is higher up than he imagined. Beneath his feet, cars and trucks roar past. He hangs on to the barrier with one hand and checks his phone. Nothing.

What was he thinking? Pouring out his feelings like a lovesick teenager; like the lovesick teenager he is. It would be all round the school by tomorrow morning: David Carroll fancies Mark McDermott.

Maybe it would have been easier if Mum was still around. Dad's all right, but he doesn't do heart-to-hearts. Go now, says the voice. Get it over with.

He's taking a step when another voice reaches him, carried by the wind; a man shouting at him. His van is parked at a crazy angle and he's running towards David, his mouth forming the 'o' in 'no'!

It's warm inside the van. The driver is silent, eyes on the road. He takes David to a deserted car park. What happens next? Abduction? Assault? None of this happens. The driver listens as David's story spills out. Finally, he turns to David.

"Life's a struggle, eh?"

Dropping him off, the driver hands David a small card.

"Good people; good listeners."

The van is a speck on the horizon before David realises he doesn't know the driver's name.

Turning the key in the door, he's embraced by the warmth of central heating, the aroma of Irish stew. Dad calls out from the kitchen, with the main headlines: dinner in five minutes; Man. U. got gubbed again; someone called Mark came round.

In the kitchen, Dad is mashing potatoes with medieval abandon. David tries to sound only vaguely interested.

“Did he say anything?”

“Just that his phone died and he’ll see you at school tomorrow.”

He gives the potatoes a final pounding.

“Oh, and he left that for you.”

On top of the fridge is a football magazine. The cover promises an interview with a player who’s just come out.

“David, are you listening?” I said. “Tell your brother.”

Upstairs, David looks in on Robbie.

“Dinner in five, and we’ll sort out your maths homework afterwards, ok? Robbie!”

His brother, still engaged in saving the universe (level four), mumbles a reply.

Little shards of rain are anointing David’s bedroom window. In the middle distance, traffic continues to flow across the flyover. The familiar refrain strikes up:

“Dad’ll be disgusted. You should’ve jumped when you had the chance. You should’ve—”

He stills the miserable mantra, pulls the card from his pocket, and places it between the pages of the magazine.

“David! Robbie! Feeding time at the zoo!”

Robbie bursts from his room, taking the stairs two at a time.

The shower has passed. Beyond the flyover, an aircraft is breaking free from the earth into a purple sky.

SHAME

Was it shame I felt when I took him to football,
shouting on the terraces, letting him ignore me?

Was it shame I felt when I suggested he start a band?
He wrote some songs about me but never let on they
were mine.

Was it shame I felt when I watched him getting drunk?
I was always there to stop him getting out of order and
letting people know about me.

Was it shame I felt when I saw him getting married to a
woman that I loved?

She wasn't even aware of my presence in the room.

Was it shame I felt when he held their baby in his arms?
I stayed away for a couple of years. He didn't need me in
the way of nappies and bed-time stories.

Was it shame I felt when I saw their marriage fail?
Collapsing like a tree that has stood too long.

Was it shame I felt when he finally acknowledged me?
He said I'm tired of pretending, you need to be free.

Was it shame I felt when I packed him away?
I took him to Oxfam, I even got some points on my
Nectar card for him!

Is it shame I feel not fulfilling others dreams?
No, it is pride!

BOXES (LYRICS)

Walking back through the streets to my home,
the places I've known, the people who've shown
the key to this life, the words to my soul,
the drinks that have flowed, but the feelings I've stowed

away from you, because I don't know how to
say it out loud, and I'm supposed to be proud.

So I will write it all down, pour it out on this page,
let it wait on your bed for it to be read,
when you come on home, say *It's fine* on the phone
we have all grown, now let's leave it alone

away from the light, 'cause you don't think it's right
just to say it out loud, are you supposed to be proud?

Something so small can be a kick in the balls,
make a grown girl crawl, make an empire fall
into the cold, when he cannot hold
his hands up and say, hey people I'm... me.

For we all find it hard
to put our hearts
in a box for the world to see.

XX MOVE

I've just moved
feel battered, shattered.

Now I'm in my new flat—guess what?
discovered my postcode is... 'XX'
Why couldn't it be 'XY',
'XXY' or just 'AB'.

But life's not straight forward,
no easy rewards.
Postal codes have to identify
one's being. These days that's a fact.
Big sister eyeing me
pointing back to the
day and way
I was born:
battered and shattered.

XXY

AB

XY

XX

BIGOTS, BASTARDS AND SHITS

There's a lot of
bigots, bastards and shits

There's also a lot of

faggots and poofs and lezzies
and dykes and queens and nancies
and butches and fems
and separatist lesbian feminists
and shirt-lifters and mollies
and collars and ties
and big girls blouses
and uphill gardeners
and turd burglars
and bum bandits
and bull dykes
and spleen chasers
and unisex dykes
and big old daddies
and sporty dykes
and huggable bears
and drinking dykes
and jobby jabbers
and rolex dykes
and batty boys
and bean fuckers
and sausage jockeys
and lipstick lezzies
and muscle marries
and bum boys
and carpet munchers
and benders

and fairies
and wofters
and poofters
and queers
and lemons
and that's not even
starting with your
standard, work a day
lesbians and gays

There's a lot of
bigots bastards and shits

but there're nothing
compared to the lot of us

G.G.L.C.

Come all ye persons of goodwill,
from Newton Mearns to Maryhill,
rattle the chains and launch the boat
and get it properly afloat.

I bash this poem against the bow,
name it G.G.L.C., and endow
its future cruise with benedictions,
dailing past all feuds and frictions.
Come all ye lovers and affairs,
singles, discrete souls, and bears,
straightest of straights, bentest of bents,
carbolic scrub, Armani scents,
Doc Martens girls, minikilt boys,
buyers of exotic toys,
opera queens, ballet queens,
and all the hesitant in-betweens,
trendsetters and anoraks,
underdogs looking for whacks,
indomitably spring-heeled dykes
sweeping up on mountain bikes,
jessies with attitude, closet cases,
solicitors with bright red braces,
Levis with a coloured hanky
to signal the right hanky-panky,
Lurex and Spandex and other ex-es
to mix the senses and the sexes,
but if you should prefer a suit
we'll certainly no pit ye oot,
for this is where we all can meet
down by the river in Dixon Street,
and the Broomielaw rolls on to the sea
with the happy cargo of G.G.L.C.

Edwin Morgan
On the opening of the Glasgow Gay & Lesbian Centre, 4th November 1995.

FINDING THE RAINBOW

I've been all alone for such a long time
to hell and back, I tear myself away
a whisper in my ear, *find the gateway*
all of a sudden something starts to chime
a smiling face my spirits start to climb
Don't you worry it's in your DNA
Let's have a dance, it's YMCA
after all these years I feel in my prime

those horrible years in the wilderness
now I have a label, I'm lesbian
these society norms they're just B.S.
we're all God's creatures and so he will bless
so I'm a happy strange bohemian
this rainbow community to access

OH WHAT A DRAG!

When I dress up in a drag king's garb
it's not because I want to be a guy
I'm just expressing something quirky in my nature

If you see me in a suit and tie
it's not for power or status
I don't need a reason
other than the fact I get a kick out of being me

It's not enough to wear my eccentricity in secret
That would be like saying I'm a freak
Even if I look a little odd
you can't help noticing I'm happy

And anyway my top hat matches one of my shoes
so I'm not all that different from you!

THE IN-BETWEENNESS

Daughter/son of the grey
in-between your eyebrows
lies the rejection that
doesn't lie in-between your legs

Needle going tic-toc-tick
Amongst boxes that don't fold
quite so neatly around the edges.

Halfway between 'them' and 'that'
Is me, fluidly navigating yet bursting,
crashing into the barrier reefs
of those that say are my own kind

Visible to some, invisible to many
I carry this in-betweenness
right within the delicate hem
of pin-striped pants and flowy pirate blouses
Twirling around the curly verges
of what I seem to see clearly
but fogs up your mirrors:

Objects may seem darker than they appear

Objects may seem not as how you put me
This in-betweenness can turn off
the certain grrl, the uncertain them, the insecure he
Piss off that little part of me that says
since when do I have to show you my sexual CV?

Since when is this in-betweenness
unreliable, flaky, teeter-totter

Since when has that not-classification
turned into verification
that you will not be enough?

In-betweenness is what made LGBT, LGBT
In-betweenness stuck through stone walls,
histories, violence and mysteries
In-betweenness gets stuck between your teeth
and yet you pick at it
Instead of savouring its delicate greyness
letting it fizzle slowly on your tongue.

Amid, through, not here nor there
Is a lens to peek through, help you
sift through tick boxes and checklists
Put aside the What are Yous and What Ifs
Tumble down the millions of gazes and
Shift:

Subjects are larger than they appear.

LABELS ARE FOR CLOTHES

Are you gay, straight,
femme, butch,
fat, thin?

Why are we so preoccupied with labels
trying to fit in?

Why does it matter what clothes I wear?

I am a mum who has never given birth
a sibling to four others
yet my parents' only child.

I am your best friend
your neighbour
lover
sister

I am all different things at the same time

I—am—real,
so go ahead
label me!

Who needs to fit inside a box so badly
that we deny ourselves
the other part of who we really are,
who we can be...

I am so much more than the sum of my parts
all of us are.

Are we parodies of ourselves
conflicted
ironic
sarcastic?

Sometimes downright bloody difficult,
I am a woman who loves women
yet will never understand the female psyche
anymore than a man,

slightly jaded, I remain ever the optimist
we are alike, you and I
only not the same
I don't like to label what I refuse to define.
The truly amazing
delightful
wonderful thing about people
is their complexity
changeability
spontaneity.
You can't put a label on that!

AN ONGOING CONVERSATION

I am never off my guard when it comes to kids' literature. I loathe the feeble ninny-ing princesses. The one-dimensional, pompous heroes depress me. I grew up with the privilege of an open playing field. I played at pirates, I played at witches but I never picked a side. I was free to be me.

My daughter is an exquisitely thoughtful four year old. Not much gets past her. We were deconstructing a school book before bed. My attempts to draw out a latent gender bias, a prejudice, smears of closed mindedness were unsuccessful.

In fact, when I review the conversation, I see only the beauty of her young mind. Unsullied by politics or religiosity. Balanced, honest and acutely focused on the contents of her stomach.

ME: Why do you think the queen does the cooking in the beginning of the book?

"She might love cooking." This had not occurred to me.

ME: But she isn't very good at it. Why do you think the king has to fix stuff?

"Because that's his job."

ME: Right, but why is it his job to do that?

"Because he is an engineer." I grudgingly conceded the plausibility of this explanation. But I wanted more...

ME: So it's nothing to do with the fact that she is a woman and women 'do cooking'. And he is a man and he 'does DIY'?

"But at the end of the story they swap jobs. So if a real lady isn't good at cooking they can swap jobs with their dads." I literally had nothing.

Later we got talking about families.

ME: So do all children have a Mum and a Dad?

She gave me a patronizing glare and vigorously shook her head.

ME: No? What do some families look like?

“They just have a Grandma. Or some people have two Mummies or two Daddies.”

ME: What do you think that would feel like, to have two Mummies?

“I would have two Mummies to speak to. And if one wanted to cook, and they cooked nice roast potatoes, then we’d have lots of nice roast potatoes.”

ME: What do you think it’s like for children who have two Daddies?

“I think it could be strange.” Strange? Why would it be strange? “You never know, one Daddy might be magic.” I hadn’t considered that scenario.

“Sometimes a Mummy or Daddy might live in a different house.” Ah, I see.

ME: That’s true. Sometimes their Mummies and Daddies do live in different houses. How do you think that makes them feel?

“A bit sad.” A little bit, maybe, yes.

“Because if their Mum was a really bad cook and their Dad was a really terrible cook. I mean if they really, really weren’t good at cooking roast potatoes. And they both weren’t good at fixing things. Then, I think they would all feel hungry in the night.”

In conclusion, you could have two Mummies, two Daddies, a Mummy and Daddy, a Mummy or Daddy living in different houses as long as someone in the operation can bang out a decent spud?

“It doesn’t really matter what families look like.” That’s brilliant Bea. Thank you.

MY GRANDMOTHER

When I was born, my grandmother celebrated and got so
drunk,
they had to put her into the boot of the car on the way to
the hospital

I think somewhere
in that empty bottle she left behind
some roots started to grow.

They followed the car, like a trail of ribbons saying
just married
like a handful of confetti thrown in the air
like spells hand drawn with chalk

If a tree ever grew from the roots
I am sure my grandmother sleepwalked through dark
nights
and dreamily started to carve a house in its sappy bark.

The roots dug through the concrete,
and made a loving web through the streets and the land
they spread through to the parking lot
and in front of my grandmother's flat

And as I crossed it, ten years old, going for her door
looking up at her window from which she always waved
goodbye I thought
This is our Queendom.

But that morning, I had to run.
Yes, I had tried to defend myself, and had paid the price
so I went for the building's door,
the grey stairs, the dark corridor
and ringing in my ears, the echo of the bully's bark

If I find you I'll kill you.

I kept running,
in the corner of my eye the yellow bag of the postman,
the shame
the bark
I hid in shame to protect my pride

My grandmother shut the door behind and hugged me
the radio was on, fat chicken was frying in the pan,
the Postman knocked on the door,
it was opened, and the cold rushed in

Granny, your back at the door was so broad and strong
I didn't care for the postman's curious glance
or for the salty wet patch I had left on your woolly
jumper
or for the chicken that I stopped stirring, and which was
now burning
Go away, this is our queendom

The chicken, the table my grandmother had laid for us,
the little window overlooking the car park

Go away, this is our queendom,

The door shut again, and the radio carried on
the chicken, the table my grandmother had laid for us,
the little window overlooking the car park
all became blurry and wet,
and in a whiff of old soap and golden sap
I felt safe.

ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS IS TO WEAR A DRESS

Christmas is for children. So they say.

But I don't think it was ever really there for me.

The trouble with it was that I was supposed to make a Christmas list. That's how it was in my family: you made a list of the presents you wanted.

And what I wanted was not what I supposed to want. Because everyone said I was a boy. They gave me a boy's name and boy's clothes to wear, and right enough I had a willy and everything, and so I was supposed to want to have boy's toys too.

But I didn't. Because they weren't me somehow.

I was really ashamed of this and frightened of it too because I really upset people when I tried to be me.

Really upset the people who loved me and looked after me, and that's really difficult when you're a child and so quickly come to understand that in some really deep and important way who you are is just totally unacceptable.

In no time at all I had learnt I could never ask for what I really wanted and I could never get what I really wanted and I just had to pretend I did.

Don't ask me how I learnt this. I just did.

It was part of Christmas, like going to church in a grey suit with thick socks and scratchy shorts, and I just hated it.

Because what I really wanted to wear was a dress.

Which was impossible, obviously, I wasn't even supposed to think that. But I did, I couldn't stop myself, and every Christmas I felt really frightened and ashamed.

And then eventually a time came when I left home and had a partner and two beautiful daughters of my own and the wonderful thing about that was that I could do everything I could to give my daughters the Christmas

they really really wanted and in a kind of a way that was me giving my girlhood self the Christmas she never had.

Their grandma was a problem though. She was a Plymouth Brethren and somehow she ended up coming to us every Christmas and that made it hard for my partner, because her mum never really altogether approved, and especially hard for me.

Because my mother-in-law knows I am an abomination.

That makes life hard for her, too, because she loves me and can't bear the thought of my being an abomination, nor the embarrassment and shame this causes her.

So that even now when in fact I can wear a dress whenever and wherever I want to and everyone in the world knows me as Jo she still, in defiance of everything and everybody, is the only person who calls me 'John' and introduces me to everyone as her 'son-in-law'.

This is how she deals with inconvenient truths like death and chronic illness and transsexuality: she simply ignores them.

And I know I, too, have my inconvenient truths I try very hard to ignore. We all do. So I find it very hard to condemn her.

But it really hurts me when she tells my grandson I'm his grandad. Because I'm not, I'm his grandma, and there is something about the whole pretence of it I simply cannot bear.

And when I do wear a skirt or a dress or in some way do something that makes it impossible for her to continue ignoring who I actually am the suffering becomes too difficult for her to bear and she withdraws into an icy angry shut down silence that really really effectively communicates her distress to everybody.

And you don't want that at Christmas.

So I dress ambiguously and there we all are in the room with the crackers and the Christmas tree and this enormous angry elephant all of a sudden, hello dear elephant, and somehow we rub along.

Until this Christmas. This Christmas was different. not because we've really found a way to deal with this but because my eldest daughter was away in Orkney with her in-laws and my younger daughter couldn't get the time off and was working in London on Christmas eve and my mother-in-law was being safely looked after in her care home.

And she couldn't be in my Christmas any more.

So I went down to London and did wear a dress and my daughter who at Christmas always does wear a dress and look gorgeous said that what she'd always wanted to do was just slop about in her pyjamas...

And so that's what we did. And we both got the Christmas we wanted and it was really lovely.

And I know it's taken 63 years and in some ways it's not that big a deal but in other ways it's enormous.

And I don't know what day of the year it'll be when you read this but whatever day it is I really hope it's a happy one.

And a free one too.

ZI ZI THE TRANSVESTITE

It's only clothes. An experiment. Tanned-colour
pantyhose
tried on in a dimly lit basement, unravelled from the
sentimental box
of an ex-girlfriend's belongings. A sparkly top with angel
wings
match the golden crescent ear-rings, and he stops in
front of a mirror
to take in the full picture; you beautiful thing.

Outside now. Night reaches stalemate with the morning
blue,
and Elvis bridge lights hip-shake in white jumpsuits,
causing wind chimes
to vibrate metallic tunes. The moon's harsh spotlight
powders his face,
and a menacing terrace of charcoal crows caw from their
nests,
censuring the booming clunk that each heel-step makes.

Awkwardness passes. The long blonde wig now tucks
behind his ears
instead of curtaining his glasses, and when he sits on a
bench, his shaven legs
are perfectly crossed with ladylike manners. Lipstick
kisses are blown
to dawn's fading stars, which are sucked underneath the
wheels
of passing milk-carts and confused-looking drivers.

Like a snowman's suicide note, the sun transports a Star-
Trek beam
through the sleeping streets. There is no encore walking
home,
as Galaxies retreat behind wheelie-bin trash.
Then when the clothes lie on the floor like a defeated
scarecrow,
he considers tomorrow's plan—to shave off the
moustache.

WHEN DID YOU REALISE?

When did you realise?

How did your parents take it?

How did you know, for sure, you were straight?

Did you have a lot of straight role models?

Are all your friends straight too?

How can you be sure though, if you've never had sex with anyone of the same sex as you?

How can you be sure though, if you've only had sex with a few people of the same sex as you?

How can you be sure though, if you've never had sex?

Sorry, is this making you uncomfortable?

I've heard that straight people never have sex, is that true?

I've heard that straight people have sex all the time, is that true?

Doesn't it ever bother you that you'll be able to have kids? Like, even if you really don't want them, you might still have kids one day?

Sorry, is this too personal?

Do you think that there was like a particular trauma in your childhood that led to you being straight?

Do you believe being straight is more of a nature or nurture thing?

Do you think that being straight is a choice?

Oh my god! I've always wanted a straight best friend! Do you want to like hang out and do prescribed straight-friendly activities next week?

So if you're straight does that mean that you...
Like to eat food?
Occasionally listen to music?
Have hobbies?
Oh my god, me too!

So let's just get this straight though
Sorry, so if you have a partner of the opposite sex, does
that mean your straight? Or just straight-curious? Or
is it like a phase thing?

If you're straight, do you like have to, you know, dress
straight?

If you're straight, do you have to go in the Straight
Parade?

How does your being straight affect your beliefs?

Is it really hard to be both straight and white?

Is it true that bisexual women just make out with men to
get women's attention?

Sorry, is this offensive?

Sorry, I know this is like politically incorrect? But
I can tell straight jokes, right—I mean, I have a straight
friend?

I have this totally cute straight friend, I should hook you
guys up!

Did you ever watch that one TV-series about straight
people?

Do you know this one other straight person that I know?

Do you hate men?

Do you hate women?

Do you hate yourself?

HUMANITY OR THE MANY VOICES OF HUMANITY

I put you on a pedestal
way up there amongst the gods
I stretched my arms to reach you
I failed time and time again.

The tale of the outer god
the one god
with one Truth
(I dare not tell a lie.)

Others held that truth (so I thought)
the secret gauntlet
each took a sip
it splashed down my chin.

For years and years
I bought into that number
gave up all my money and worldly goods
to be on that train to belong
to the one and only dogma I knew.

Leaving that world has been my saviour
to open gently my eyes
and not feel the pressure of something
that makes something holy and only

Today I met a neighbour
who spoke her Truth
I collapsed into her arms
I had found another way
in the ordinary world of neighbours.

Yet she is by no means ordinary
we found a common language
in our marginalised stories:

of HIV positive
of alopecia
of LGBT
of single womanhood

of the disturbances which disturb
the very fabric of our worlds
where secrets unfold
and tales are told
and our very humanity
comes to the fore
after years of struggle
we can put down the sword.

DEAR GOD

I call you god but you know I don't believe. I never have. well, maybe I did once, for a few months, when I was nine. remember that little book of bible stories, the one with the mustard-yellow cover and shiny red letters? of course you know. you know everything. or you would, if I believed. I spent hours staring at that illustration of lot's wife turning to salt from the toes up. already her calves were bitty and pale under her shawls, but her hand in her husband's hand was still a hand. just. I stared at that photo and I also stared at the one of daniel about to get munched down by lions and also the one of the tower of babel toppling over and also the one of sodom and gomorrah burning burning burning. you know my least favourite illustration, god? the last one. the one at the very end. I didn't know what it was, but it looked boring. it had some animals like rabbits and lambs, and a bunch of trees, and a few white people sitting on the grass and smiling the sort of smile my mother smiled when my father talked about football or the next-door neighbour talked about her new baby, that sort of "yes, lovely" smile, but I knew she didn't really care. I figured out what that last illustration was, and then I didn't look at the mustard-yellow book any more. I told the neighbour that her baby was boring. I told my mother that heaven looked boring. it's just a thing that little girls do, right? I had just stopped reading the mustard-yellow book when I met Her. She was an angel, god. there's no other word. She's been with me ever since. right from the muddy spotting of our first periods to the swollen blush of acne to the coke-sweetened kisses behind the bike sheds to the ache of tightened braces to close-mouthed smiles in yearbook photos. She was there, in my hands, on my heart. She was my girlboygirlfriend. but now She's gone. I see Her in the halls between classes but

She won't even look at me. it's like we never shared popcorn or rolled down hills or told secrets or rubbed against our pillows or said we would get married or did kissing that we said was for practice but it wasn't practice, god, it was real. it was what love tastes like. She said it's because of Her parents. and Her friends, and Her teachers and Her future kids. but I know it's because of you. She thinks you wouldn't approve. She thinks things like damnation and wrath and hellfire and judgment and burning. She thinks salvation. but I know salvation, god. salvation tastes of Her tongue. salvation smells of cut grass on the soles of Her feet. salvation feels like Her hair across my cheek and Her fingers against my lips. now there's nothing without Her. there's just a rabbit and a tree and some white people on the grass, and that is nothing. I know I don't believe in you but I believe in Her, and She believes in you. so I'm asking. so I'm praying.

I'm praying.

please.

tell her it's okay.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was facilitated by LGBT Health and Wellbeing, and funded by See Me Scotland. LGBT Health and Wellbeing promotes and facilitates opportunities to improve and equalise the social, emotional, physical and mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Scotland. This project formed part of LGBT Headspace, our mental health and wellbeing programme. You can find more information at <http://www.lgbthealth.org.uk/>. See Me is Scotland's national campaign to end the stigma and discrimination of mental ill-health. You can find more information about them at <http://www.seemescotland.org/>. The project included a series of workshops facilitated by Kirsty Logan, Sophia Walker, Harry Giles and Jo Clifford. The editors would like to thank them for their thoughtful sessions, encouragement and engagement. We would also like to thank everyone who attended the workshops for creating a safe space for all involved and participating with generosity and heart. With thanks to the Scottish Book Trust for their funding and support for the project's pilot event in November 2013 as part of Book Week Scotland. We would also like to thank Serenity Café for hosting the workshops and The Scottish Storytelling Centre for hosting the book launch. Launch night music provided by Shaz & Jules. With thanks to Prof. James McGonigal and the Estate of Edwin Morgan, and David Thomas. A section of 'Homecoming™' by Sandra Alland was published in an earlier incarnation by anything anymore anywhere. 'G.G.L.C.' by Edwin Morgan was published in *Dreams and Other Nightmares* (Mariscat Press, 2010).

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If you are affected by any of the issues explored in this book and would like to talk to someone, you can call LGBT Helpline Scotland on 0300 123 2523, Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 12pm–9pm. The Helpline provides information and emotional support to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and their families, friends and supporters across Scotland, and is also there to support anyone questioning or wanting to discuss their sexuality or gender identity.

Collecting established names such as Edwin Morgan and Jo Clifford alongside newer writers, *Naked Among Thistles* is a moving anthology that speaks honestly about issues which are too often hidden in stigma and silence.

Whether you are an LGBT+ person looking for solidarity, a friend who would like to learn how to be more supportive, a professional looking to better understand the mental health inequalities LGBT+ people face, or just someone who appreciates the diversity of people's stories—this book is for you.

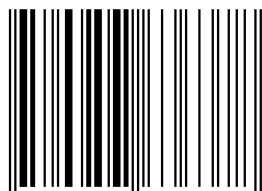
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