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A Soul's Shape is Beautiful

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“A Soul’s Shape is Beautiful”



Original artwork of a hand holding a flame representing the soul and colored like the non-binary flag. Created by Alo Orozco, December 2021.

Alo Orozco

Senior Capstone

Creative Writing and Social Action Concentration

Creative Project

Professor Jennifer Fletcher

Division of Humanities and Communication

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Dedication

I dedicate this project to my parents. Though it can be difficult to understand, I hope this opens their eyes and hearts.

To everyone else reading this, thank you. I hope it allows you to open up to others and embrace your true self.

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Project Proposal

Name and Concentration

Alo Orozco, Creative Writing and Social Action

Project Description

I plan on writing a short story with a transgender/non-binary character. It will follow their story and discovery of their identity: it will show how they went from a cisgender person to becoming their true self. As the social action issue, I will be covering the LGBT community experience and including gender dysphoria and transphobia. The piece is autobiographical.

Alignment with Common Theme

My project connects to the course's themes of transition and transformation. The protagonist will go from one stage of their life into another, transitioning from something they thought they were into something they truly were.

Purpose

The purpose of my project is to enlighten. This project is very personal to me, being a non-binary person. With this, I'm hoping to get my parents to understand who I am.

Format Rationale

I believe a short story and narrative works best for my project because it can fully describe the process and journey of discovering the protagonist's identity. Stream of consciousness is a literary technique that I tend to use. In a short story, I can use stream of consciousness fully and in a way a poem may not be able to fulfill.

Capstone Title

I no longer want to use "The Metamorphosis" from Kafka. Instead, I want to use a technique or trope I have seen lately: using a specific phrase as the title that is also used within

the narrative. Because of this, I still don't know what my title will be, but I'm sure I'll be able to figure it out after my first draft.

Working Summary

For my process of writing, I tend to plot things out in a notebook. This helps me develop the plot of my stories, and it will help me plan the different chapters of my project. After that, I will begin writing the piece, starting from the beginning and going through to the end. Hopefully, I will be able to complete the project early so I can leave it alone for a few weeks. After that, I will do any necessary revisions.

Expectations

I expect to be able to delve into my craft and narrate a story of change and transformation. For the assessment criteria, I will follow the requirements and submit the progress reports and any related assignments.

Specific Skills Required

Since I will be writing a short story, I won't be using much outside of notebooks and Microsoft word/Google docs. The process will be very straightforward, simply writing ideas down and transferring those fragments into a narrative on a doc. These "skills" have been developed through many years of writing stories and essays.

Next Steps

I may work on some outside material in preparation for this. For example, if I wanted to insert a poem into my project, I would write some poetry a few days before attempting it. I may also refer to some other novels regarding coming out and ask some people about their experiences. As for the deliverables and assignments, I will weave them into my writing and time without neglecting the project itself.

Timeline

For October, I plan to complete my outline and some research. Hopefully, I will also finish writing the first draft by the end of the month. Then, in November, I will focus on revisions and rewrites. I usually take some time between the original draft and its revision, so during this time, I may think about altering certain plot points and interactions, and will settle on my title. By December, I plan to have the narrative done and focus on minor edits.

“A Soul’s Shape is Beautiful”

Mami would tell me to wake up every morning praising God. He blessed us with a new day. We should be grateful. *Gracias a Diosito por este dia.*

It was hard getting up early. It was the same thing every day. Mami would wake us up, help us with our clothes, *peinar nos*, feed us, take us to school. Sometimes Papi would take us to school. He worked with money. When he would take us, he would tell us the same thing.

“Think fast, move quickly. Who can you control? Make it a great day.” Every day the same words. When it would rain, he would tell us to keep our feet dry. Washing our hands was another thing he said. When we had tests, he would tell us to see which answers were not the right ones. If we did that, we would find the right one. My favorite one was “Everything is beautiful.” I always listened to Mami and Papi, but sometimes I think my sister pretended to.

After school, we would play with our cousins. One boy, one girl. My sister played with our girl cousin. They were the same age. I played with my boy cousin. He was one year older. We liked video games, superheroes, and Spider-Man. That’s what we would play. Sometimes I would play with my sister and other cousin. Sometimes it was just me and my sister. We liked playing house, with our toys, and Barbie dolls. We liked princesses and Disney movies too.

Our imaginations were big, and Papi would also tell us that imagination is greater than knowledge.

Las niñas. Mami, Papi, Grandma, Grandpa, *Tio*, and *Tia* would call us that. We were the girls. I was the first and I was older by 2 years. It was easy because we knew it was us when they said it.

I was a girl. They were talking to me!

Yo soy una niña. ¿Qué más podría ser?

We would sleep in the same room, painted pretty and pink. Our pajamas were pretty and we had a baby-light. It was the girls' room, not just mine, and we would pray before going to sleep.

Mami and Papi would read to us the Bible. We went to church every Sunday. It was hard to listen because they said a lot of words. In my little Bible book, the first story was about Adam and Eve, a man and a woman, and God's greatest creations. God made them for each other and there was nothing else. It was perfect, they were perfect, and so was *Diosito*.

My first-grade teacher would read us books every day. It was my second class in English but I was smart so I understood. One day she read a story about a girl that had to wear a pink dress. She wasn't happy. In the end, she changed into jeans and a hoodie and went skateboarding. It made me happy but I didn't know why. She was a cool girl and I wanted to be like that but Mami gave me dresses and pretty clothes. I liked pink and wore it a lot. It made me happy and so did the ribbons in my hair.

I wanted to be a pretty girl.

I had a lot of girl friends. Some boys would talk to me too. When I played with the girls, it was nice stuff like jump rope or monkey bars. When I played with the boys, it was fun stuff like pretending we were Power Rangers. I liked being pink, yellow, or light blue because they were girls like me.

Then we moved to Denver to be with my other grandma. They were all happy we were there but my Papi wasn't with us. He stayed in Salinas. My Mami had a baby in her stomach. It was our brother.

Niñas. That was us! We were the biggest grandkids and we had fun at the new school. It was fancy and my classroom was on the second floor! It felt like the movies. My grandma had

cable and we didn't have that in Salinas, and all my friends were talking about *High School Musical* and *Hannah Montana*. I wanted to know what they were talking about so I saw them too.

Miley had a friend named Lily and I really liked her. She was like the girl in the book my teacher read. A lot of jeans and sweaters and converse shoes. I hadn't seen anything like that. A girl could wear things that weren't pink and pretty? I wanted to be like that! Mami still braided my hair and got me pink clothes but that was okay. I wore some pretty clothes and some cool clothes. Like Lily. Mix and match!

I had some girl friends and some boy ones. My class was 1st and 2nd grade. I was in 2nd and my cousin was in 1st. I played with him a lot. The girls were mean. One time they were making fun of another girl because she was using the bathroom. They didn't want to be her friend. That was mean. I didn't want to be like them. I was a good girl.

The boys were nicer.

We came back to Salinas a year later. We missed Papi. In third grade, I sometimes wore pretty stuff but mostly cool stuff like jeans, sneakers, and hoodies. We had cable in the new house so I could watch more shows. I liked the Disney shows but I still loved superheroes and cartoons and Pokémon. I've always loved them but other girls didn't. I didn't know why or how I was different. I was a girl too but not like the other ones.

Somehow I learned the word "tomboy." It's a girl that doesn't dress girly and likes things boys like. That was what I was. I was a girl and a tomboy too because I liked things that other girls didn't and I dressed differently. It was a lot better like that but Mami was mad. "*Como que eres un boy?*"

She didn't know that I wasn't a boy. I was still a girl but also a tomboy. They were different things but she didn't know. She was mad but kept letting me wear those clothes so it was okay.

But then I started changing. I used to wear undershirts but I couldn't anymore. My chest was changing. I didn't like regular bras. They were weird so I wore sports bras. I didn't like the changes. It was weird but my sweaters hid them. Other girls didn't care or liked their changes.

Mami told me about it. *Eso es lo que pasa a las mujeres*. It happened to her and my *tia* and all the other women we knew. It would happen to my *hermanita* too. That's how *Diosito* made us, with curves and bleeding.

Era normal.

At that school, boys and girls didn't like each other. The girls liked one thing and the boys liked another. I liked both things and played with both. During class, I talked with boys. I was always sitting next to them. When with other girls and when the changes got worse, I took the side of the girls. I was a girl and boys were lame. I wasn't lame.

I liked books. *Percy Jackson* was one of the series I first read. It was awesome reading about demigods. I wanted to be one. Mami got mad that I believed in Greek gods and liked them. *Sólo hay un dios, Diosito.*

Percy was a boy and Annabeth was a girl, but I liked Percy and Nico DiAngelo better. My friends really liked the books too so we would play Greek Gods during recess. I liked being the child of Hades. The girl gods were okay. Artemis was my favorite from them because she was a really cool hunter lady.

I read *The Hunger Games* in 5th grade and I wanted to be like Katniss. She was kinda like Artemis, a cool girl with a bow and arrow. She was a hero and a lot different from the girls I had seen in other books, movies, or shows.

6th grade was when things changed a lot more. I read *Hunger Games* again, especially because there was a movie coming out. I was the expert in the class and school. There was a special

dress-up day and I went as Katniss. My hair was in a braid and I had a shirt with a Mockingjay pin design.

I thought I was a cool girl.

I had a favorite hoodie. It was black and reminded me of Katniss' jacket. It even had pockets on the inside! I wore it almost every day and had it zipped. But my chest kept getting bigger. I didn't like it because it made my hoodie too tight and uncomfortable. I still wore it.

The other girls changed too but not as much. They got snobby and were "popular." They thought they were the prettiest girls in the world. I wasn't like them. I stopped hanging out with those girls. I had a few girl friends and boy friends in 6th grade. We all sat together in a group and talked during class. I liked being with the boys because we played with Pokémon cards and our DS games while the girls talked about other things.

One day my best girl friend and I went to the girls' bathroom during recess. The popular girls were there. We didn't really like them but talked to them sometimes. They came up to us and punched us in our chests and said, "Breast cancer!"

We told the principal but I don't think they got in trouble because they were playing.

I didn't like it.

Those same girls made rumors about me. I never did anything to them because I was reading, playing, or having fun. I tried to be nice to everyone because my Dada would always tell us the Golden Rule. Treat people the way you want to be treated. So I was nice.

They said that I stuffed myself to make my chest bigger.

It hurt. I didn't like what was happening to me and they thought I wanted it to happen. I wasn't like them, trying to get the boys to notice me and think I was pretty. I covered myself every

day with hoodies. I didn't want to be pretty or get the boys' attention. I just wanted to have fun. But they thought they were hot because they were girls and had boobies.

They were jealous of me, the girl that didn't like her chest. I didn't think I was any prettier with or without my big chest. They thought they were sexy with their small chests. But those girls were never called "fugly" by the boys in our class. They were looked at while I had to listen to them say nasty things.

We were little kids and they were obsessed with boobies and private areas.

I didn't get it. Video games, playing, and books were so much better. So why did I need a big chest?

My friends went to one middle school and I went to one across town. I was completely alone and making friends had always been hard. My Dada noticed and told me back when I was in elementary school. I spent a lot of time alone roaming between tables and just being with people. They weren't my friends. They were noise to keep me busy and not bored.

One day I decided to join the art club. Art has always been something I loved so I thought it was a good idea. I met one of my closest friends there and she introduced me to her friends. Finally, I found people I related to. We all liked cartoons and anime so we got along easily. Not a lot of people liked that stuff so I was lucky to find some that did. They told me about a lot of different anime and taught me things.

It was through them that I learned about the LGBT community. It wasn't some weird thing but a group of people.

My friends taught me that being gay wasn't bad but normal, and they taught me that there were a lot of other sexualities. In our grade, a lot of girls said they were bisexual or "bi-curious."

I didn't know what that meant so I asked. It meant someone liked both boys and girls. Most of the girls that said that were faking it or looking for attention. They were straight girls trying to be special. However, I soon found out that some of my friends were bi. My best friend thought she was, and our other friend is bi.

The one thing that I didn't understand as easily was being trans. I asked how it worked and one of our friends got a little mad. She was explaining the differences between transgender and transsexual. Transgender is with identity, and transsexual is with identity and the body. None of my friends were trans so it was a little harder to understand. I accepted it either way.

In the first 13 years of my life, I thought I was straight. Mama and Dada had always told me that Adam and Eve were meant for one another. Men and women were made for each other. Anything else was unnatural. They told me I had to find a husband, get married, and have kids. They told me a lot of stuff that was written in the Bible.

Everyone around me was talking about their crushes and dating. We were all teenagers and everyone was incredibly hormonal. Puberty. It was a strange time. While that happened all around me, I didn't get crushes. For the most part, I just saw people as people. I still do. Yes, I did find some people more attractive than others but there wasn't any attraction. It was weird. Was that normal? Everyone is bending over backward to get a boyfriend or girlfriend. They were all hugging and kissing and holding hands. I wasn't. I was talking with my friends, laughing, and having a great time.

Somehow I found out. There is a sexuality that isn't talked about as much as the others. It's called asexuality and it's when someone doesn't experience sexual attraction. It made sense. I didn't care for sexy-time stuff and only wanted to live my best life. Nope, no interest here. There was a lot of sexual content on tv and in movies. I always looked away, still do. One time I was

really into a book and suddenly they were having sex. Holy shit, why was a girl practically my age having sex in the book? I was shocked to read it. It had been my first time seeing that in a novel. I told my mom and she was grossed out. Christians with their celibacy.

It was crazy to find out I was different from other people but I got over it. I was still me. Everyone likes different things. It was normal.

There were a lot of memes floating around on the internet. Some of them were about sexualities. They were funny. One was about drinks. Straights drank coke, gays drank Pepsi, bisexuals mixed them, asexuals had water, and so many more.

I later found out I was also aromantic so I didn't experience romantic attractions either. Going back to the meme, the best way I've learned to describe it is with cake. I like to look at the cake but I don't want to touch it and I really don't want to eat it.

It can be different for other people but that's how it was for me. No sexual or romantic attractions for me.

How fun.

Like I said, people were hooking up all around me. It was weird and sometimes I was asked out. Once as a joke. A random kid on the grass dropped on one knee while I was walking with my friend and proposed. It was very funny. The other time it was serious.

It isn't easy having to reject people. Whenever he saw me, the boy's friend would call me a heartbreaker in a mean way. We had a class together and I had English with the boy. He didn't have control over who he liked and I didn't have control over not returning any feelings. It was like taking a piece of paper and expecting it to reach the stars. It doesn't work like that.

Included in the many thoughts I had were ones about my body. I didn't see the point in having these parts. I was told that they were meant for pleasure and reproduction but I didn't want

either. They didn't work for me and I didn't need them. I didn't want to have sex or kids so why did it matter if I had them? If I didn't have them I would be the same person, so what was the point?

We had to wear a uniform at school. It made things easier. We all had black and white so there was little difference in what we wore. It was easy to hide my body beneath a baggy sweatshirt. I was a shapeless blob of black walking to class. But sometimes I wore things that showed off my "figure."

That's what teenage girls did, right? They showed off their brand-new bodies like a shiny new toy. They also wore makeup and fixed their hair. Girls were pretty and teenage girls were excited to try out new pretty things.

Except I straightened my layered hair and wore dark eyeliner because I also liked metal music. The quiet ones always listened to screamo, one preppy girl once told me.

Even though I was a girl I was still different. Those girls wore *very* tight clothes and carried around their tiny purses that fit nothing but their phones. They had their books in their arms or had a boy carry them for them. They didn't wear a lot of black and were full of themselves.

I was never prideful like them.

But girls would be girls.

Most of my friends were girls. They were different and I was still different from them. It worked though. We all liked each other and preferred to talk about anime or our stories than our brand-new clothes or accessories. Those things probably didn't last but our anime did. Who's superior now? Us quiet kids that made something with our lives instead of obsessing over things that didn't matter.

A lot of girls did that.

Then we moved again. Freshman year in high school and I was in a completely different town. It was tiny, with the biggest store a Walmart under construction. It sucked. It smelled like sewers. Fitting for its name, Los Baños.

If I was lost before now I was stranded. I knew no one, knew nothing about the ways of the town, didn't know anything.

I thought I had OCD because I kept obsessing over keeping things clean and neat. Funny how my mind wasn't like that. My thoughts remained dark and without organization. Wanting to go back to my friends, once again not having any, keeping to myself with my metal music and my drawings.

The first high school I went to was across town. No one spared me a pacing glance but I made some friends. A junior in my math class, a freshman girl in the same class, a freshman boy in my P.E. class. Ironic how they all confessed to having feelings for me. A day later, I moved to the high school across the street from my house because finally I got accepted.

Poor kids. I crushed their hearts without saying a word.

The second high school I went to was better. On the first day, everyone was so nice and excited. They kept saying, "It's a new girl! Hi new girl! What's your name, new girl?"

So many friendly people and I made friends on the first day. I hung out with a group of girls from my P.E. class. They were nice girls, not the mean ones that thought they were hot shit. There was also a sweet girl that liked anime and her group of friends. I liked them. I had another class with two of them. One of them was a little weird but nice.

Once, a girl was talking shit about them. She said that they were asexual and that it was scary. She said they wore two sports bras.

I didn't say anything. I was asexual too. Was I a freak in her eyes?

But then I started questioning my sexuality.

There was a Dungeons & Dragons club at that school. I joined it because I love nerd stuff. There was a guy there. He was a senior and we quickly became friends. He helped me with my character and was the Dungeon Master. It took a while but I developed feelings. I was so happy after our sessions.

I knew he liked girls so I dressed prettier. I did my makeup, dyed my hair, wore jewelry, did *anything* to get him to notice this not-pretty girl trying to be a pretty girl. It didn't work but we were friends. Eventually, I was the only girl in the club. I told him that made me the alpha and he laughed.

My character was a girl. Once, an enemy attacked and cut her on her chest. A boy that was sorta my friend laughed and said, "You're asexual now!" as a joke, because haha the girl didn't have boobs. I looked at him seriously, not laughing. I might have said it, might have not. *I am asexual*. That was that. The year ended and the senior graduated. Little came from it and then I moved away. He didn't want a little girl, although we did have a "lunch date."

Then I moved back to Salinas. Sophomore year and I was reunited with most of my middle school friends. I often wore dresses because they were easier than jeans and more comfortable. I wore flowers in my hair, dressed in dark clothes (though that hasn't changed), wore red lipstick and black eyeliner. I wanted to be the pretty girl, the head-turner.

That didn't happen. People didn't pay attention to me (as always) and they probably thought I was a lesbian because I was always with my lesbian friend.

Oh, right. The thing about my friends and sexualities. There was this saying, "Gays travel in packs." Well, none of my friends were straight. Bisexual, pansexual, homosexual. We weren't a big group but we were gay anime kids. Heck, two of my friends were dating each other! I came

back after a year to find out two of my friends were gay for each other. It didn't last too long but they're still friends.

I thought I was an exception because I was ace (short for asexual). It was in high school that I realized I was also aromantic and I was still different from my friends.

Living in a hypersexual society is weird. There would be a sex scene or something sexual in almost every movie or show and I always cover my eyes. We were the anime kids and there was a lot of anime porn on the internet. I never got into it (for obvious reasons) but these two kids in my class were obsessed. They talked about it all the time. They overly sexualized women, fetishized anime girls, were obsessed with boobs, and touched themselves in their rooms.

The only reason why I knew this was because they would always talk about it around me. For some reason, the teacher always assigned our seats near each other. Sure, we were friends, but really?

Maybe they did it to get a reaction out of me. Maybe they were just gross. But they brought me into their conversations. I never felt like I was part of the girls they adored because I was different. Plus, I wasn't an image for them to gush over.

One day our class had a presentation with the FFA class. They had flowers and goats outside. Because we liked anime, I was with one of those guys and we were talking (about anime, probably). It was an "accident" but he touched my chest. I didn't care but it was weird. If it were another girl, she would have made a big deal about it. She probably would have screamed. I just looked at the animals.

That was the second time someone else had touched my chest. Sometimes I still think about them. They were both so weird and unexpected. They shouldn't be a big deal, really.

Then junior year came and it was most of the same thing.

Dresses, makeup, getting through classes. I still drew but I started drawing boys. Most of my favorite characters had always been boys but girls had been easier to draw for so long. I didn't draw sexualized anime girls but girls that felt like me.

I started writing a little bit more. Before my protagonists had been girls but then my stories had boy protagonists.

Remember that D&D senior? Yeah, we started talking. As friends online.

At that point, I was really into a video game called *Undertale*. It had been my obsession for over a year and was my first real experience with using they/them pronouns. The playable character was a child with no specific gender so the other characters would refer to them with gender-neutral terms (and I did too). I didn't really get it but I didn't question it.

A lot of the game's fans referred to the character as a girl and it didn't sit right with me. I didn't know what it was (maybe because I saw the character as a boy more than a girl) but I didn't like it. The same thing happened with my favorite character, another child that had died several years before the game took place. When I saw them portrayed as boys I was happy. When I saw them portrayed as gender-neutral I was happy.

An artist I liked also used they/them pronouns. It was weird to see something like that. One of my online friends had also been using they/them for a few years and I just didn't get it. I tried to fulfill their wishes but I didn't entirely understand.

How can someone refer to themselves with they/them pronouns? Weren't there only two genders? What's a non-binary person? Were there *actually more* genders? I knew about being transgender but not much else. Naturally, I went to Tumblr to do some research. There were so many genders. Genderfluid, agender, bigender, etc. I was shocked but didn't question them, just accepted their existence.

There was a cartoon floating around at that time called *Steven Universe*. I always thought the gems and characters were girls because they were referred to with she/her pronouns but one of my friends told me they were non-binary. They're rocks! They don't have gender, you nincompoop.

So many characters from my favorite shows and games were given "headcanons," meaning the fans came up with unique interpretations of them. Some of them were of my favorite characters being non-binary or trans but a lot were about their sexualities. I had some, approved of some, shrugged at others.

Senior year began with the same routine as before: excitement to begin school and to finally be done with high school. I thought it would be fun since I had a lot of classes with my friends, like AP Japanese, AP Art, and AP British Literature. It was a lot of fun and those were some of my favorite classes—content-wise and because my friends were there.

I had heard a lot of things about the teacher for AP British Literature but wasn't ready for what I got. He was amazing, a total cool-uncle figure. He was so fun and open to everything, and he wanted us to be as creative and passionate as possible. Every week, he had OPUSs, which is an optional assignment where you can do literally anything and get points for it. I did a lot of drawings and it wasn't until later in the year that I started submitting writing.

Quickly, it became my favorite class. Of course, I still loved Japanese and my *sensei* with all my heart, but they were so different.

I knew about Shakespeare and Milton, but that class opened my eyes to a lot of other dead white men. There was Chaucer, Spenser, Shelley, Byron, Keats, and so many others. We read mostly poetry, and though they were hard to read, I managed to understand them. The topics were so broad that I couldn't say what the class' main theme was.

That was until we entered my favorite era, romanticism.

The poems we read spoke of the purity of nature, of its intimacies and innocence. Humanity—with its greed and materialistic ideals—had been corrupted, and we needed to return to our state as children, simply living in joy and prosperity. Our major reading for that unit was *Frankenstein*. It quickly became one of my favorite novels with its excellent prose and devastating story.

At the same time, I played the newest *South Park* game. Players were able to pick their sexuality and gender. My character was asexual, of course, but they were also “genderless.” As a joke, I took a picture and said it was “legit me.” I thought it would be neat to continue playing as a genderless or gender-neutral character.

It felt nice.

One day, I was sitting with my little brother in his room. I was probably reading, messing with my phone, or doing something else, and he was playing video games with his friends. He was talking with them, and all of a sudden, he started talking about me.

“She,” he had said.

I stopped what I was doing and looked at him. *She*. For some reason, it struck me. I didn’t know why, but it suddenly didn’t feel right. It was like being called by a name that wasn’t my own. It should have been familiar but it wasn’t. I didn’t say anything to him and kept the thoughts silent.

She.

My mom was pregnant with my third sibling. We had all wanted them to be a boy so we could have two girls and two boys. He was born in January and brought “balance.”

Literature class continued with the same motif: if we’re going to die, why would it matter if we’re rich or famous? What does any of it matter if we’re going to die and we’re not happy? So many beautiful words were written by these long-dead men. Ironic that it ended up that way, but

at least their words, thoughts, and feelings are passed down through time. It got me thinking about things. The soul was one thing the poems commonly spoke about. The soul, the truth within.

What shape is it?

My body, the very thing I could never be without. It was going to change in ways I wouldn't want it to. Hell, it already had. I had curves in places I didn't want; its shape wasn't the one I wanted. It would continue to change and age, and it was going to die one day. What would happen to me then? Would my soul cease to exist? Would it return to what it came from? If there was a God, would He take it? Would I roam the Earth and haunt the living?

Whatever was to happen, how I looked in life wouldn't have mattered.

The body will constantly change, but who I am will not. If I'm actually a soul and not this body that will change and die... the soul has no structure, no form, no gender. Why should I?

As my sexuality had once been questioned, my gender was as well. This time, it changed after contemplating.

I knew I wasn't a boy so I wasn't transgender, but I wasn't cisgender either. I thought I was a girl but that no longer felt right. Endless lists and pages of information hardly helped. I wasn't a girl but I didn't know what I was. Then I found it.

There was a thing called "demigender" and it had variants: demiboy, demigirl, and deminon-binary. Basically, it was partially identifying with one gender but not entirely. Yes, that was it! My body was female, and I've lived as a girl, but wasn't one anymore. That was it and I finally found it. I wasn't a girl but a demigirl.

Good for me.

I figured it out.

At least, I thought I had.

The joy that came from it wasn't great. It should have been something incredible and grand, but it wasn't.

After a while, I told my friends. They were happy and accepting, and not much changed. Of course it didn't. I was still me regardless of how I referred to myself. Besides, it wasn't like I was super different.

Then I told one of my sorta-friends, and he laughed. He was laughing and laughing, mocking me for what I had said. "A demigirl? What's that? It sounds like something from *Percy Jackson*, a demigod."

I don't remember my reaction. Maybe I ignored it, maybe I thought about it for days.

It hardly mattered because it was just a phase. Demigirl started to feel strange as well. As always, I didn't know why. Thoughts like these were never easy. Feeling uncomfortable in one's own body is a strange phenomenon. Was this not me? Why didn't I feel welcome in my own skin? I kept thinking and thinking, wondering why things were changing.

Demigirl had been an excuse, a hesitancy to abandon that which I had known my entire life.

Girl, *niña*, lady, ma'am, miss—the lot of it. It was all I had ever known, all I had ever thought I was. What do you mean there's more? What do you mean that my body doesn't dictate who I am?

It was confusing, really. In searching for myself I was also hesitant to accept it, *blocking* myself from accepting the truth. It would have been easier—*so* much easier—to push those newfound thoughts away and live the way the world saw me: a quiet girl that liked anime, books, and drawing. Since society saw me that way, what was preventing me from following along with it?

It was simple, really.

That wasn't who I was.

The demigirl phase didn't last long, and the deminon-binary phase was even shorter. They simply prolonged the inevitable. Regardless of the hesitancy, regardless of the internal conflict and resistance, the truth manifested in a sudden realization.

I am not a girl, not a woman, nothing of the sort. I am non-binary, someone that exists outside the physical restraints of the body. I am a being that seeks kindness and wishes to live in euphoria. Is that not what all want? To simply be and live in pleasures without the burdens of society and weight of obligations.

An irony came from my realization. The senior from the D&D club—we were still talking, and after I had come to realize who I was, he at long last confessed that the feelings were mutual. I had discovered who I truly was and had my first real boyfriend. It didn't change my sexuality, and the tenderness from my newfound identity was fresh. Though he claimed to be accepting, I don't believe he was. He wanted a woman, but we made it work.

Near the end of my senior year, we had an assignment in literature class: write a story with an epiphany. I wrote a short story, as my seriousness with writing flourished in that class. It was about someone realizing they were dead. There were so many binaries in that story: life and death, rich and poor, white and black. From those binaries, the protagonist existed in the space between them. Their name was Gray, used gender-neutral pronouns, were neither rich nor poor, and they were in a strange plane between life and death.

Perhaps the entire thing was a subconscious metaphor of my gender, perhaps not.

I started putting more of these factors into my original stories. Of course, most—if not all—of my characters were in some way LGBT. For the most part, it was their sexualities, but then

their genders began to change as well. One of my major projects has a genderless alien race, and more of my characters are falling into the areas between societal expectations and the potential of the human.

Regardless of my gender, I still had very long hair and wore feminine clothes. For graduation, I wore makeup, heels, and a dress. Dressing feminine was more comfortable and that was all I had in my closet.

One may believe that upon discovering myself, all things would have come easily. I knew who I was; I should have been happy, joyous, ecstatic.

No.

Contemplating the purpose of having a large chest morphed into loathing its existence. “*Why do I have these parts*” became “*I need to get rid of them.*”

They call it “gender dysphoria,” a phenomenon that many transgender and non-binary people experience. At times it came by the hour, others it faded with a distraction. It was truly strange, being uncomfortable and repulsed by one’s own body, though it was not unfamiliar.

I’ve always struggled with my appearance. I dress how I want to, do my hair how I want to. It all hides the shape I am, hiding my body because I am not comfortable with it. Once, I had started to get comfortable with my not-thin body, only to be given ill words and disgust from my parents. It started when I was young and happened more than once.

It was hard enough hating my body for not being as thin as I wanted it to be, for not fitting in certain clothes because of its curves—wide hips, narrow waist, rounded legs, large chest.

Reject the physical and embrace the truth.

A simple phrase inspired by literature.

They were flesh sacks on my vessel that held the weight of the universe, antimatter because they should not matter. I wasn't female but I have these ultra-feminine parts. They are there, drawing attention, begging indication—screaming that this form is one of another, one that doesn't represent me.

Their existence plagues me, burdens me, ruins me.

The tumultuous loathing that comes from carrying these pieces—these *tumors*—on my body is unimaginable. Disgust is not a word that can properly deliver the sentiments that stem from my body. It grew and grew, much like my chest had throughout my life. One day there was nothing, and the next there was a mound of flesh and revulsion.

I had to get rid of them. A chest binder would aid in my agony. They went on like a tank top and flattened the mass but not without restraints and consequences. It could only be worn for a few hours, had to fit a certain way, could *not* be tight, and could not be worn when working out. I needed one, and so I told my mom.

Long hair was another thing that made the world see someone feminine. I had seen so many androgynous people with short hair, and I had always wanted to cut my waist-length hair, and so I told my mom.

I told her I wanted to cut off my hair and get a flat chest.

Never before had I seen such hatred on her face, such anger for a stupid idea. Immediately, she told my dad, and the anger ensued. They were *pissed off*. How could I want such a thing? Cut off my hair and flatten my chest? *Please*. I was supposed to be the smart one and I had those stupid beliefs in my head. It doesn't exist.

I don't exist.

Multiple times I tried to tell them, tried to get them to understand.

Never could I speak to my parents about these things. They gave me hatred for saying I was asexual, making excuses about it. All that anime was ruining my mind, feeding me false ideas. I was just being picky, as my dad was. I *had to* get a husband and give them grandchildren. I had to. Now this? Unbridled rage, unrelenting condemnation.

My friends were accepting. Of course they were. They had more love for me than my parents could ever muster because they did not allow an ancient and mistranslated book to dictate their lives. They did not care for outdated beliefs or expectations, simply for who I was and whether or not I was happy. It didn't take them long to adjust from feminine pronouns to gender-neutral ones, and everything was fine.

My boyfriend continued to claim he was accepting, but he helped me deal with my parents' bullshit and hateful remarks. He told me to not listen to them, to ignore them, to do my own thing. It took me years of hearing those words before I accepted them, way after our relationship returned to a close friendship.

Still, the echoes of their voices penetrated my heart.

My declarations had either gone forgotten or were completely ignored. They could not stand the thought that their prized daughter—the one that so easily respected their wishes and did what was expected—became an abomination.

I turned a blind eye.

They call me a lady; they expect me to get married and have children; they want me to be the ideal woman.

I guard my heart with my silent truth.

The old routine of going to school, following their words, having fun—it had been replaced with one unkind and unjust.

Every feminine term, every feminine role, everything regarding the female and woman—they thrust it onto me, burdening my already aching and heavy chest. They want me to wear bright and pretty clothes that are “girly,” but I need to hide and cover these indentations and extensions.

Las niñas. They still refer to us by that simple title though we’re grown and different: the girls, a simple title with lies embedded into it and a veil of simplicity that hinders reality. *Girls*. I had once taken their empty phrases and preserved them in my heart.

Now, it’s corrosion on my skin and soul, acting out their fantasy for fear of living my reality.

We were raised on Bible verses and God’s love just like any other good Christian family. Adam and Eve, God’s greatest creations. Adam and Eve, men and women, God’s only creations. Pick one or the other, there is no none. How strange is it to think that this ethereal being with no gender created genders? God Himself has no form or physical manifestation, nor do the angels or demons.

We were fed on false words that male and female were all. If identity is not enough to challenge that, then there are people biologically born different, and there are cultures that do not follow such restraints.

Our God teaches forgiveness and love, a phrase that was drilled into me from the beginning. It was a phrase, empty words spat and repeated by mindless lackeys. My parents would say it but not follow the philosophy that they so desperately needed their children to believe in.

They say I’m confused and stupid, that a fucking demon is making me think and feel these things.

“God made you a woman and that’s all you are.”

They return to that book every time, caring little for my perspective.

Please tell me how a child raised with the Bible, God, and Jesus contemplated such metaphysical concepts. I did not craft this narrative from nothing, for it all started in childhood, and my parents obviously were not paying attention or cared enough to ask.

As I reject my mortal flesh, I will reject all that hinders and loathes me, and perhaps that includes their God. “Love thy brother and forgive them.” That is not the being they so eagerly worship if it damns my existence. Clearly, the one they raised me with is completely different from the true being. Whether or not They exist in the first place is something else entirely, but I will not blindly follow those stories.

It’s hard enough accepting myself when my body pains me and brings me dread. The very thing I seek and live for—kindness and happiness—I can never hope to achieve if my parents reject me, and yet I honor and love them. I was raised on those words, as I was raised on these: “A parent will love their child no matter what.”

Well, apparently not.

Vulnerability manifests itself in youth. The characteristics of a child are innocent and pure, unknowing yet wise. They know not of the dangers in life nor the venomous hatred that dictates the world. In my youth, my Padre spoke with me and drilled into me the phrase that reigns over my soul: Everything is Beautiful.

He said that to me and yet my existence cannot be beautiful to him nor my *Okaa-san*.

There is a cruel irony that comes in preaching the phrase and being unable to live it. He was the one that taught me, the one that helped mold me into the person I am today, and yet spiteful eyes and frozen backs are offered whenever the conversation occurs. They fear what they cannot understand, fear and hate it. They offer no attempts at comprehending, preferring to take their hatred, their ignorance, their malcontent, and strike it into my soul as if I’m some kind of sin.

And maybe I am a sin—*sin amor verdadero porque para ellos nomas soy una mujer.*

They can never understand me; they can never *see* me. It holds all significance and importance for me, but regardless of their thoughts and words, it does not change anything.

The body is a vessel of the human, something that gives a physical form and is treasured but finite. This image that will change and fade away holds more importance than the true being within.

I live in their lie that brings bile to my throat and disgust to every fiber of my being. I feel loathsome outbursts from my beloved parents for simply existing. I cannot stand their declarations of malice hidden behind supposed love and acceptance. I am not the ghost they call, a faded memory that will be forgotten. The fantasy they hold means nothing, but the reality standing before them means everything.

I am me.

I am me.

I am me and there's no one else I'd rather be. I get to live and breathe—but goddammit why doesn't anyone understand how hard it is to be seen? I reject my mortal flesh but don't reject me. This is as real and true as the air we breathe, not the stupid idea it's claimed to be. Open eyes, an open mind, an open heart—allow me to speak the sentiments of my soul and truth of my existence.

I am non-binary.

It's not complicated. I am non-binary and though everything has changed, all things have stayed the same. I am still me, I am still the firstborn, I still love books and anime. Even with a slightly different name, I am still the same. My identity, my sense of self, they have changed—but so have many other things in life.

I am not a woman.

Please do not refer to me with feminine terms. My dysphoria comes and goes but it has been getting better. These parts don't matter—they really don't. I am me regardless of whether I have them or not, but an emphasis on them does not help. I am not a lady, I do not want a husband, I do not want children. I already have a cat and he holds my entire soul in his tiny paws. Is it not enough for me to be happy? Is that not what parents want for their children, for them to be happy and prosper?

I am not a sin.

Do not look toward me and expect a stain, a shadow of once was, or loss of what could have been. In discovering myself, I have uncovered my true potential. Through everything, I continue to love and create. I do not allow such vile existences to damn me because I have grown and focused my soul on what truly matters, on that which was sown into my heart all those years ago.

Everything is beautiful, and so am I.

Reflective Essay

With the first draft, I don't think there was a lot of involvement and dialogue with the seminar's topic. It was a lot of summarizing and putting words down. It needed a lot of work, but it was done. Of course, it was fixed in the final draft. With fixing the order of things and adding/removing others, I worked with the seminar's topic.

The nature of my project itself is based on the topic: Change, Transition, Transformation. When I first saw the topic on the class catalog, a coming-out story (specifically mine) immediately came to mind. It follows my journey starting from childhood to the present. Already there is a change in the narrative, following the protagonist in growing up. In addition to that, it will follow my stages of education. The major sections of the narrative are based on my grade: elementary, middle, high school, and current. The primary focus and theme of my narrative are coming out, and that is where the seminar's topic will fully be engaged. So many different elements are involved in that, ranging from my thoughts on genders and how I feel with my body. It can get very complex and abstract, but I hope it's still understandable.

With the change and shift from one section/period to another, I decided to change the diction and voice of the narrative as well. I thought it was a neat physical way to see the changes going on. Childhood had very simple and easy diction, and it will slowly become more complicated and sophisticated. Now, I adore writing in a style like classic writers. That was used in the later sections of the narrative, showing my growth as a person and a writer.

Since the narrative was long and covered a long time, I decided that a short story would be the best form for this. I am a fiction writer: I write a lot of long narratives because I am going to write novels. A short story felt like the natural thing to write since I am more than familiar with them. As for characters and settings, I decided to keep them vague and unlisted. I did this because

I didn't want the real people to feel outed or on the spot. Regardless, I put details that made them recognizable to the person and their friends.

I wanted this to be a written insight into how I discovered who I was. Some things were kept simple because I want to show this to my parents, who are not familiar with this area at all. As stated in the dedication, this is for them. They are my primary audience because I want them to know who I am. For my other readers, I hope this provides some insight for them about gender, and I hope this inspires others—closeted or not—to accept themselves. It can be a very difficult thing to do, I know. When I told some people this was my topic, they called me brave. Maybe I am, maybe I'm not; this story just wrote itself.

The class discussion on 15 November was on linear and non-linear change. I think this discussion was particularly beneficial for my project and story because my journey was not completely linear. There was a lot of hesitancy and confusion at first, and there still is. With the final draft, I implemented a lot more of that: a lot of back and forth, progression and regression, willingness and hesitancy, etc. There was a bit of that in the first draft, but it was not very long. It was a few sentences long, and like a lot of writers have said: show don't tell.

Continuing with this focus, I think it has made me think about change, transition, transformation, and growth in general differently. Of course, I always knew it wasn't a simple process, but I never thought about it in a linear/non-linear way. It's not just an "It's done so we're done" thing. Sometimes there needs to be more work done afterward, be it to maintain the change or to continue the process.

That's one of the things about change: it's constantly happening. It's like the saying of change being the only thing that will never change. I think working on my project and listening to the class discussions made me understand that more than before.

Reading is something I do a lot as a writer. It's natural for me to read novels as inspiration, motivation, and goals for my writing. Lately, I've been reading a lot of LGBT books. Some of the characters struggle with their sense of self, and there is a lot of internal dialogue in these books. In particular, I reread *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz in preparation for this project (and because the sequel finally came out). That was my first queer novel—back in 2017—and it holds a special place in my heart. I love the way the narrative reads so naturally but has poetic lines within it. It has such simple yet beautiful diction that holds an incredible amount of emotion.

In terms of the project itself, I think I've learned a lot. I thought I would have been able to complete the first draft quickly and easily, but that was not the case. Like my thoughts and feelings, it was very chaotic and had little form. Certain parts were very bland and quick but some sections were pure and raw emotion. In the last section, I had to stop writing due to the content. Not too far prior, a professor in another class said that writing to ourselves in the past was therapeutic and beneficial. Well, that wasn't the same, but it was difficult nonetheless. In terms of content, I thought a lot about my journey. I've always known it wasn't an instant realization, and that it had started when I was young, but it's very strange to analyze yourself and write about it. Regardless, this project is incredible and excellent for telling my story and reflecting on it.

Synthesis Essay

HCOM 475 was the class this semester that I was both excited for and scared of. I didn't know what to expect, only that there was a theme—Change, Transition, Transformation—one of my favorite professors was teaching it, and there was a final project at the end. We had to do a few readings, respond to them online, and then talk about them in our class sessions. For the most part, they were student-led.

This class was quite different from all the other classes I've taken at CSUMB. The biggest difference between it and others was the format. As I stated, there were discussions on the readings and content, and they were student-led. Dr. Fletcher had told us that its format was similar to a graduate program. At first, our discussions were easy and well contained. As the semester progressed, our discussions flourished and had no bounds. Topics discussed were on a wide range of things, from students to sea otters, the internet to butterflies. The class was as limitless as the potential for our projects.

Within the class, I provided as much insight as I could. For the most part, this was during the reading responses or group discussions. One example I can immediately think of was an activity with two poems. As a creative writer and someone familiar with poetry, I analyzed the poems as a literary critic would. My peers had focused on the content while I looked at words and poetic techniques used.

Our theme was Change, Transition, and Transformation. With all of my classes, I feel like a different person by the end of them. For this class, I believe it's especially true. I went into this class as someone who didn't want to share much. Now, I'm publishing my journey of discovering myself. Though I wanted to write about that when I saw the theme, it's completely different from doing it. My insights on the theme have also changed. I didn't think that change, transition, and

transformation could apply to such a wide array of topics. My peers shared their project themes, and I was amazed to hear how different everyone's was.

Working individually has always been one of my strengths. Easily, I can do all my assignments in one go. For my first draft of my project, I completed it in two sittings and a couple of hours. It didn't take me long at all because I knew what I had to do and did it. Working in a group can be a bit harder for me. This seminar had a lot of collaborative work. Our major activities—the class discussions—were done in one large group. Though I listened intently and mentally reacted to the content, I didn't do much talking. I've always struggled with speaking out in front of a lot of people, and that is one of the things I should have worked harder on this semester. However, other things were easier. Our small group discussions and writing conferences were a delight. It was so interesting to see the different things people thought and were working on. One of the members of my writing group was researching agriculture. That was incredibly different from my project. Since these groups were smaller and more intimate, I was able to participate a lot more in them.

Meeting certain criteria and standards is something that every student attempts to accomplish. My project follows the 20-page requirement, though it went a bit over, and I engaged the seminar's theme within my narrative in multiple ways. The additional pieces and requirements were also fulfilled, such as having a title page, proposal, and two additional essays.

For my project, I delved into myself and my thoughts. As stated in my reflection, it covers my childhood and ends at my current state. I wrote simply in the first section, using mainly short sentences and little detail. That was how a child would speak and write, I thought, and thus I used that framework for my childhood narrative. For middle school and early high school, my sentence structure and tone had changed. The voice was less free and more judgmental and harsher, and the

content was more mature. In the last section, I used my usual writing style. I often write complex and poetic phrases in my pieces, and that section had a lot of them. On a surface level, the writing style and form followed the seminar's theme.

In terms of content, I wrote about my transition from a believed heterosexual and cisgender person to an asexual, aromantic, non-binary person. Each section covered my view and feelings on the matter, and each section advanced deeper and closer to the truth. I had thought one thing in the beginning only to realize it was something else in the end. Of course, my journey has not ended, for there are still many things that are changing. That is one thing that we discussed in the seminar, that change is never over and always continues. The same is true for me, for there were many things left unwritten.