

Not Binary

By Nilaya Dhamat

Second place: Narrative, Reflective, Expository, or Personal Writing

I wanted to wear basketball shorts. From the moment I entered the fifth grade— when the days of my mom carefully curating my outfits were far behind, and my years of self-discovery were waiting on the horizon— I wanted to wear basketball shorts. It was not because I played or even enjoyed basketball, really; in fact, I was not all that athletic. I wanted basketball shorts because the boys got to wear them.

The descriptor of “tomboy” was one which I tried to wear proudly throughout my adolescence, but not because I envisioned myself as somebody rebellious, rejecting the “girliness” my peers exhibited. Rather, I liked that there was a word to depict how different I felt from the girls around me. In recent years, tomboyishness has been reduced to girls being “attention-seeking,” an incredibly harmful label— especially for young girls who don’t fully want to conform to their femininity or who enjoy things considered traditionally masculine. To feel ashamed of your identity is perhaps some of the harshest pain you can experience, and, unfortunately, I was not always exempt from this experience.

My mom had already been vocal about her distaste for my clothing choices. Often I would get asked, “Why don’t you want to wear girl’s shorts?” or “How come you never wear your dresses?” These questions only relented once I broke the news— the news that I wanted to buy a pair of basketball shorts. My mom could not fathom why I would want to wear a pair of shorts that were meant for boys. She made faces of disapproval each time I stepped out of the Old Navy fitting room and shook her head when I came downstairs in the morning wearing my brand new basketball shorts. I, on the other hand, was in a gender euphoric heaven although I did

not know it yet. Despite my situation seeming entirely unremarkable from the outside in, I felt a sense of freedom wash over me that first day I wore my new shorts to school. I remember being greeted with some surprise at my outfit of choice. One of my male classmates told me my outfit was so “different” from usual. I didn’t normally take innocent comments like these negatively, usually because they weren’t meant to be taken that way. As I got older, though, and conformed less and less to what was expected of me by the gender norm, I began to experience the first glints of shame— of who I was, and of who I might be.

Middle school was like a battleground. People’s comments were no longer passable as innocent or lighthearted. It was in middle school that I first heard a racist comment targeted at me. It was in middle school that I was first catcalled. It was in middle school that I first had vulgar remarks made toward me. How could the amalgamation of these experiences possibly make me feel secure amongst my peers or even with myself? Despite all of these occurrences, another seemingly unremarkable memory stands out to me— when I wore my basketball shorts to P.E. Rather than feeling more confident or comfortable, I quickly began to feel insecure. I thought all of the boys in the room were staring at me, ridiculing me with their gaze, aware that I was different from them and would never *be* like them. I no longer perceived myself as somehow relating to boys and didn’t find myself *wanting* to relate to them; and yet, I did not want to succumb— as harsh a word as that might be— to my femininity, either. For so long I had treated these basketball shorts as a beacon of self-expression, but I now was disinclined to wear them. It was like I was just retracting into the person I was before, someone who allowed others to impact how I portrayed myself. No version of me felt like it was the right version.

It was not until high school that this pile of puzzle pieces culminating in my identity started to come together. During these ripe teenage years, I learned so much more about the

world around me and realized how I fit into it– and how I fit into my own skin. Before the ninth grade, I was not familiar with the term non-binary. I understood what it meant to be transgender on the surface, but I had not been aware that the community was an umbrella, one under which non-binary people resided. I was already juggling a new understanding of my sexuality– an understanding which shifted on several instances– so it was not until later on that my gender identity came into question. I remember the hesitance I felt every day as I came closer to grappling with my truth. The impostor syndrome would creep in whenever I asked myself whether I was nonbinary, and I was unsure whether I was masculine enough, dysphoric enough, non-binary enough. This question of “enough” was the only thing holding me back from embracing my true self. When I was finally able to break past this barrier, it was as if I could finally breathe fresh air again.

It was a heart wrenching kind of joy I experienced upon accepting that I was not cisgender. A joy I wish I could have experienced sooner, but which I was still immeasurably grateful for. Finally understanding the significance of my obsession with those basketball shorts may have been the single most important epiphany I ever had.

Also around this time, I finally cut my hair short into what’s universally known as a “boy-cut,” ironically. Although I received many comments telling me how my hair looked better longer, especially from my dad, I also received tenfold in compliments, something I had never really experienced before in relation to my gender expression. Perhaps it was the influx of confidence I had now that I was finally sure of who I was, or maybe I had just grown enough to understand that the bad can be accompanied by the good, but I finally felt fulfilled.

What I am still yet to confront, though, is that my parents are blissfully unaware of the part of myself that makes me the happiest. As I have grown up and taken to presenting myself in

an even more masculine manner, my parents have become increasingly skeptical of my gender identity. As much as I wish I could tell them the truth, I know they would not take it well, as I am aware of all the prejudiced opinions my parents— especially my father— hold against the trans community.

Although coming out is not something that is required of a queer person, the ability to look into our loved ones eyes and reveal this part of self, and then to be met with love and acceptance, is something that many of us crave. When I first came out to my parents as bisexual, I remember being asked whether I was sure, whether I had enough experience to know that I was bisexual, whether I was not “fully gay.” When I later came out as a lesbian— not because of my parents’ sentiments but rather due to my own experiences— it should not have been to my surprise that they weren’t any more accepting. They somehow seemed further upset with me even though they were the ones who had made it seem like they would rather I be “fully gay” instead of an unsure bisexual, which is in its own right a harmful stereotype against that community. Coming out as yet another “unsure” person, a non-binary individual caught between the throes of cisgender and transgender (another harmful stereotype administered by cis people), especially given my parents’ vocal bigotry toward trans people and trans issues, just seems impossible. Depressing as this reality is, suppressing the piece of me that is the most sincere, I also know that it's in my best interest, which is something I need to consider once in a while.

Given the opinions of my family, I have been lucky to befriend queer youth like myself. High school and college, especially the latter, are times where we begin to have autonomy over our lives. This autonomy is incredibly important for queer people who are granted this escape from their spurning home environments. These shared struggles, though, do not take away from the fact that for many of us, we have reached a point where we can finally practice

self-expression unscathed. For the first time in my life, I am not trapped beneath the judgmental gaze of my parents. I am not afraid to be judged for the clothes I prefer to wear, for the pronouns I use, or for the people I love, and it is an incredible feeling.

Nowadays, I do not wear basketball shorts much anymore. It is not because I still feel insecure about that dreaded day from middle school, or because I am afraid of being judged in the present for wearing them. Even if I do decide to sport them outside of my home, it is not to make a statement, it is simply because *I can*. I have changed as I've grown up, and my perception of what best expresses my gender identity has changed. I no longer feel like it's necessary for me to walk around in the droopy nylon shorts that defined my youth in order to prove anything to anyone. Despite this change of heart, I do keep a few pairs with me. They are tucked away in my dresser drawer, and when I see them, I reminisce on that ten-year-old's euphoria.

Nilaya Dhamat is majoring in Kinetic Imaging at VCU. They composed their essay, titled “Not Binary,” as a freshman for Professor Kim Zicafoose’s UNIV 112 course in Fall of 2022. They love to spend their free time discovering new TV shows or going for walks in the park.