

On Beards: A Memoir of Passing

I am large, I contain multitudes.

--Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

*Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in
an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?*

--Allen Ginsberg, "Supermarket in California"

*Ni un solo momento, viejo hermoso Walt Whitman,
he dejado de ver tu barba llena de mariposas ...*

--Federico Garcia Lorca, "Oda a Walt Whitman"

*

I dip my fingers into an amber colored ashtray beside my parents' bed. I move to the mirror
where my father shaves each morning, lift my fingers to my face, smear the dark
ash above my lip and across my chin, rub it in until it's sea green.

I'm a pirate. I grip my dagger,
a piece of cardboard wrapped in tin foil. It shimmers

light over my beard.

*

Ancient Egyptians and Romans let their beards and hair grow out when grieving.
Conversely, the Greeks shaved and cut theirs. This may have evolved into the ritual of
18th century widows in England covering or even cutting their hair off
after a husband's death.

*

To lose my other is to lose my self.

*

When she becomes he, people are confused, some are even angry. His girlfriend's mother

gets so flustered one day, “she, I mean, he, oh...” she begins to call him “it.”

He’s been called it before—in the seventh grade.

*

In first period math she slumps forward in her seat, hides behind the hair she’s been growing. It’s so long it whispers against the back of her

thighs when she walks. The hair is

a tent around her. She’s invisible

inside it. The teacher never calls on her. She never raises her hand. She is safe. No one asks, what

are you, a boy or a girl?

She thinks of

Cousin It from “The Addam’s Family.” What

hid inside all that hair? She doesn’t recall whether Cousin It was ever referred to as he or she.

*

In P.E. she is reluctant to change into her gym clothes. Her hair won’t hide all of her all the time. Most days she sneaks into the stall to change, even though it is forbidden. The coaches linger at the edge of the bathroom and watch for shorts sliding down over sneakers to the floor. She balances carefully on the toilet seat. She is in a circus act. She is an acrobat, a bearded lady.

*

In a portrait of Annie Jones, one of P.T. Barnum's bearded ladies at age 18, her hair is pulled back and tied by a black ribbon. Her face is fully exposed, though more than half of it is covered by her enormous beard and thick dark eyebrows. In addition to her beard, she wears a long fur coat that reaches her knees, where a dress adorned with large flowers flares out, then ends at the bottom with a ruffle along the seam. The fur coat looks less like fur and more like long wavy tresses, as if it were an enormous mane, or merely an extension of her hair and beard. She is nearly completely covered in hair, except for her shadowy eyes which look to her side, into the distance, her flowery dress, and her pale thin fingers, which she rests and touches delicately together over a long piece of fabric broadening out from behind her.

*

*With few exceptions, facial hair on women has been the object of neglect and scorn.
No historic edicts, laws, or papal decrees have ever governed its growth.*

*When St Kummernus' father ("kummer" meaning sorrow) sought to marry her off
to a neighboring heathen,
she grew a beard, a visible sign that she belonged exclusively to
God. Her furious father had her killed.*

*

*Hair does not continue to grow after death. Tissues
around it (especially on the face) contract and expose it,
giving the dead their five o'clock shadow.*

*

The grandchild plays on the porch with a toy gun. The grandchild's long blond hair flares out like a halo. The grandchild refuses to shoot the grandfather, a transsexual, and tells him, "You're the good monster, grandpa! Yes, the good monster."¹

¹ Scene from the documentary Southern Comfort.

*

I sit in a parked car with my grandma, while my mom buys gas. “Where we going, Grandma?” “To the mall to buy some pretty dresses for your very first day of school.” An anchor ratchets down in me. “I don’t want to wear a dress to school!” She raises her voice, as if we’ve talked of this before, “You’re a girl and girls wear dresses and you’re going to wear one whether you like it or not.” The car feels as though it is a great balloon expanding. All around my face the air swells with red. Perhaps a passerby hears muted yells coming from within, sees my vaporous figure inside. Waves of heat rise from the balloon’s elastic skin.

Now, I too yell: “I’m a boy! A boy.”

It is the first time I have ever said this to anyone.

Grandma lets out a long sigh, “Well then, if you’re a boy, let’s see your penis.”

*

*Abak he stirte, and thoughte it was amys,
For wel he wiste a womman hath no berd.²*

*

*FTM candidates actually practice the narrative of gender essentialism
they are required to perform before they go in to see the doctors
the price of using the diagnosis to get what one wants
one cannot use language to say what one really thinks is true*

*One pays for one’s freedom
as it were
by sacrificing one’s claim to use language*

² From Chaucer’s The Miller’s Tale.

truthfully

--Judith Butler, from Undoing Gender

*

*A berd! A berd!*⁵

*

We are painting pictures.

At home I have stacks of paper, even a roll of butcher paper from my aunt. Drawing's what I love to do most. I draw what I have called since I could speak, "mens," two-dimensional, flat, Egyptian-like pictures of older boys doing all sorts of things that I do or want to do—play baseball, play drums, be in a club or even a gang, skateboard.

When I draw I'm in another world.

Painting is different. The water colors move out of my control. I've already dripped a fat black drop onto my self-portrait. I begin to move the brush along the jaw line in the papery mirror. I spread the thick mistake into a beard.

When Mrs. Hertz passes my table she pauses, "Oh look at how wonderful! That must be Abraham Lincoln. Is that Abraham Lincoln? Look children, _____ is painting one of our most important presidents!"

I am the shyest student in my class. I never speak. I don't want to tell her the picture is me. The kids will laugh and I will have to confess my error, even though I like the way my face looks out at me through its beard. I just keep my eyes on my face, nod my head, and begin to paint a long line across its forehead. At first the mark is a dark cloudy frown. But it will become something else. It will become a stove top hat. He will need more than a beard if he is really going to be Abraham Lincoln.

After recess our paintings are dry. We spread out around the room to hang them. Mrs. Hertz asks her aide to get the teacher next door so that she too can admire our art work. The other teacher immediately expresses how impressed she

⁵ Ibid. In Middle English, "berd" can mean both facial hair and trick.

is, especially with the picture of Abraham Lincoln. She says, “We should send the student to the principal’s office to show everyone!”

I am sent to the principal’s office for the first time. I’m in trouble for something I didn’t do. But no one person has done anything. No one’s to blame.

At the office everyone smiles at me and Abraham Lincoln. They tell me, “what a lovely painting” and “aren’t you so pretty!” I believe I am a great artist.

A few weeks later, at open house, my parents and I arrive to find Abraham Lincoln wearing a long and shiny blue ribbon. He has won first prize for the annual district contest. Everyone is smiling except Abraham Lincoln. I look at him. He stares through me.

*

Axis IV: Problems Related to the Social Environment: Difficulty being accepted in social environment due to incongruence between expressing masculinity and lack of masculine physical attributes.

(From letter from therapist to endocrinologist and sex reassignment surgeon in accordance with the Harry Benjamin Standards of Care and the DSM IV.)

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One fall, he and his girlfriend go to the movies. The parking lot of the local mall is crowded with cars full of teenagers blaring music. A group of boys calls after them, “Hey! Hey dykes!” He holds his girlfriend’s hand tighter, quickens his pace, and tries to stare past them. He focuses on his girlfriend’s hand in one of his, and the movie ticket in his other. He imagines it brightly, an aspen leaf torn from a branch and floating into the cave of his jacket pocket. They hurry into the safety of the dark theater.

The screen lights up with Brandon Teena’s face.

Lana’s mom says to him, “Come ‘ere and lemme get a look at you.” The audience knows

he is not a “real” man. He is afraid he will be discovered. Again, he grips his girlfriend’s hand tighter. His breath quickens. Lana’s mom slowly caresses the smooth and hairless skin. His eyes dart nervously to and from her face. The camera moves between the mom’s face and her hand on the tense, naked jaw. He is afraid he will be discovered.

At the end of the movie, after the audience has watched Brandon’s rape and beating for over ten minutes, then later, how, in seconds, he is shredded by gun shots, his girlfriend is sobbing uncontrollably. She buckles into his arms in a row just behind a path toward the exit. When the lights come up, people file out. His girlfriend buries her face in his bound chest.

Strangers stare.

Now, he is inside the movie. He has become the movie. He wants to leave, but is afraid to go out into the night, into the parking lot that will be filled with cars barreling spotlights toward them.

*

*There are two kinds of people in this world that go around beardless—
boys and women.
I am neither one.*

--Greek saying

*

*In the context of individual and group therapy, has expressed his feelings of being male
these feelings surfaced during childhood*

*In addition to his work in therapy, has also communicated with other female to male transsexuals (FtMs). Being with other F to M
individuals, noted a sense of belonging and comfort*

he has never experienced

in the past. Recently, made the decision to undergo hormone replacement. Since

*making this decision, he has noted
increased pleasure and an overall sense of “relief.”*

(Letter from therapist to endocrinologist and sex reassignment surgeon in accordance with the Harry Benjamin Standards of Care and the DSM IV.)

*

When he grows out his beard, or what little there is of it, he worries,

Is it full enough? Do I look
like a man? Or a boy

trying to look like a man?

Regardless, he knows that any amount of hair on his face signifies male.

In a San Francisco bar, a woman slurs
thick through beer breath into his ear,

“I think you’re hot”

asks him,

“What’s with that?”

pointing to his beard. He tells her,

“I don’t know
yet. I’m experimenting.”

She says

“You can stop

now; the experiment is

over. It looks

awful, not just awful, but you look

like a twelve-year-old trying

to look tough.” *What should I do*

*with him? Dress him
in my apparel*

*and make him
my waiting-gentle*

woman? He that hath a beard

is more

than a youth, and he that hath no

beard is less than a man:

and he that is

more than a youth

is not for me, and he

that is less than a man, I am

not for him⁴

The grain in the wall just beyond her head blurs and swirls
into a sea. His gaze sinks.

*

In gay slang, the word “beard” is used to describe a woman who is a cover
for a gay man’s orientation. She, the beard, is used to hide his identity
by accompanying him in public so that he might pass for straight.

⁴ Shakespeare, Much Ado About Nothing.

Beards were often “worn” to gay rights meetings in the 70s
as a form of protection
should the meeting be raided.

There is a parallel word, though used less commonly, to describe a man
who appears in society as a cover for a lesbian. This man is not called a beard, but a “merkin.”

A merkin is “an artificial covering of hair for the female pubic region; a pubic wig for women. Also: an artificial
vagina.” Merkin is also slang for “female genitals” (OED).

I have heard that a merkin was originally worn by prostitutes who had to shave their pubic hair when they contracted a
disease.

*

He visits a gynecologist before his hysterectomy, a procedure transmen are advised to have within the first few years of
hormone replacement therapy because they are at a heightened risk for cancer in the female reproductive organs. The
doctor points at his pelvis, says, “Don’t worry, you won’t have to shave all that hair.”

Then asks him if he wants to see his cervix, tells him, “Come on, take a look.
It’s really cool. It looks like you have a penis, a big swollen penis head.”

He looks up and watches the bulbous organ, which seems to float inside the watery black TV suspended over him and
magnifying everything. It is a planet in a grade school science fair planetarium. Jupiter angled up as if to breathe. It is a
pinkish whale arching its blow hole out from under the viscous water.

He reminds himself to breathe so that he will not pass out.

*

*farewell
with your old dress and a long black beard around the vagina*

--Allen Ginsberg, from “Kaddish”

*

Some nights he goes to the Otherside,
 a piano bar on the east side of Los Angeles
 that caters to daddies. When he and another trans friend sit at the bar,
 many of the men stare. They cannot be sure of exactly
 why the men stare. No one calls them she. No one asks how old they are, even though
 they look fifteen. They are never served drinks anywhere else without getting carded first,
 even though they are nearly thirty.

Usually, when he gets up to go to the restroom, a man will follow. Once, a man asks, “Are you a model?”
 as they stand over the sink washing their hands together. He avoids
 looking at the man in the mirror, smiles and focuses on the water, warm and cascading
 over his small hands, and says no. Walking back to the bar, briefly,
 they make eye contact. The man comes closer to whisper,
 “You’re just so beautiful.”

Another time, a man sitting near him at the bar begins to growl. The man is dressed in
 a black leather jacket and black jeans, and wears a full beard. He has his back to the man.
 He feels the bone of the man’s knee push into his right ass cheek. It jerks into him
 a little more each time the man growls. He does not look at the man, but
 into his friend’s eyes, sucks in his breath, hesitates, laughs.

*

I am sitting on Santa’s lap. I wear a faux fur coat. It is striped black and white. I am something polar bear and zebra
 under pig tails. I am crying. What did I look out and see? A flash of
 white light. Spotlight. Lighthouse beam crossing over a drowned body. And after, a ghost, some dream, thin trace of
 lightning?

Santa’s eyes loom large over his beard. They are brown and his lashes thick and long,
 his eyebrows thin black penciled lines. Face smooth and slight. His beard is not a part of it.
 His beard is a white mask, a shroud. His hands, cold, gloved, a surgeon’s.

*

In 16th Century England, a beard was a sign
 of sexual virility; the longer the beard, the more potent the man
 growing the beard was. Queen Elizabeth I disliked beards so much that
 she had them taxed. Men of the clergy usually shaved their beards to indicate celibacy.

*

My mom and I sit on the couch and look at old family photos. We come across one of me
 on Santa's lap. "Even though you were so young," she says, "I think you could tell
 something wasn't right."

And finally, "That Santa was really a woman."

*

*In spite of...unaesthetic results transsexual patients...[display] what doctors call a "poor reality" sense....the patient is regarding his new
 body theoretically; it is, he is, male, however
 attractive or unattractive the appearance.*

--Marjorie Garber, from Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety

*

Under the fluorescent lights in a parking lot, his friend looks down at his chin:
 "What is that?"

He thinks,

tiny seeds sprouting
 below my lip, black tears, thin
 chain of ants crawling across
 my chin, flash of pubic
 hair under a gown of moon

light, a field of
 long grass where
 night blooming
 flowers might
 grow

Says instead,

“You don’t like it? It isn’t thick enough to grow yet, is it?”

His friend wags a finger,

“Uh uh, you need to shave that.”

A little while later, stopped under the emulsive red glow of a traffic light, the friend reaches over, grips his thigh, asks,

“Before you shave, can I touch your tranny hair?”

Pulling the car over, he leans toward his friend, feels his breath brush against his cheek.

Together they stroke the little issuing from his jaw.

*All quoted text devoid of attribution is from One Thousand Beards: A Cultural History of Facial Hair by Allen Peterkin (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001).