

Exergue (or, The Politics of Memory)

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The power of memory reproduces a politics of meaning. A fondness for words helps in this regard. Piecing together affective memory is a process not unlike writing. It creates densities of feeling through re-remembering. Affective densities, let's say, are their own reasons to pause and linger. The politics resides in deciding which ones signify a power that disrupts the smooth surface of ordinary remembrance. Which ones call on me to speak? I re-member my encounters with gender and the body through my mother. My mother's name is Barbara Jean "Bob" Harrison Aultman. H/er nickname, "Bob," was a phonetic reduction of Barbara—the result of a southern drawl that extends the sound of the hard "Bar-" by way of a more genteel "Bah-." Barbara became "Bah-bruh." Everyone addressed h/er as Bob. Only h/er mother and children did otherwise. Other reasons for h/er nickname remain rumors. S/he was a tomboy growing up. S/he had hairy arms unlike other girls h/er age. S/he was gawked at by boys and girls. Bob was tough. Had to be. S/he was born into poverty. S/he was the strongest and fiercest of h/er siblings. Bob was the eldest of seven: two sisters and four brothers. H/er adult life would become a proving ground for this grit. A troubled first marriage. Then becoming a single mother (with me) after h/er boyfriend left. S/he worked as a freelance cosmetologist while sewing fabrics at what I can only now call a sweatshop. Late nights s/he tended the local gas station. S/he remarried and remade h/er life. But cancer would eventually overcome that tenacity. S/he died in 2004.

Witnessing what cancer can do to the body is one thing. Watching it eat away at the mutual feelings of personhood that obtain between mother and child is another. The effects of two mastectomies (separated in time) and a complete hysterectomy (toward the last few years of h/er life) leave powerful traces. To recall is to trace delicately but without a roadmap. Which memories require me to linger with them while others do not? The narrative decision emerges from some irrational kind of knowledge I had never learned at university. And so h/er presence in my narrative is a felt rupture in the textual tracing of h/er life. S/he necessarily breaks with pronoun normativity in a way that parallels my own. It is difficult to deal with psychic rupture. I have felt for so long that what was (what is) needed is a good theory to make sense of h/er discontinuities. But what is it to intertwine theory and ordinary life? Its braid would be uneven in texture. But it seems possible given a careful practice of representing h/er memory as a present absence, or a fugitive image. Bob complicates because s/he cannot be captured. S/he breaches the convenient protocols of social science research by redefining and reshaping the vast image-repertoire that grounds my own sense of being in the world.

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I do not know how complex the cultural circuits were that incite me to feel that my mother did not die as a woman. No doubt s/he had lived as one and identified as one up to h/er last breath. S/he was an expert on the subject of being a woman. I re-member a lesson in sexual difference. “A stiff dick hath no conscience.” This was a favorite saying of h/ers. I’ve never identified with my dick (for the sake of lexical continuity). Was I being admonished for future sins of a man I was not to become? To re-member is to compose—again and again. Perhaps this was a first lesson in the female complaint about sex, love, and consent. Women are doubly burdened by the anxiety of their appearance as they relate to conscience-lacking men. Bob’s first marriage was abusive. He imposed passivity. But s/he would take up a gun and threaten him before leaving him. These memories produce a murmured critique. To re-member h/er is like paying attention to stammering speech. It feels like straining to hear a voice considered too damaged by trauma to speak. What I feel is the intensity of surprised estrangement. H/er cancer took with it all those parts of the body my culture has designated “female.” Bob is a confrontation through discontinuity. S/he is a resistance to this reduction.

I re-member a story s/he told as though it bore repeating. I was a child. It was our annual family reunion. My younger cousin ran into my grandmother’s house. “Aunt Barbara Jean, Aunt Barbara Jean!” My mother was alarmed. Wigless and bald from radiation treatment, s/he turned toward Cari. Without missing a beat my cousin pivoted: “Uncle Barbara Jean, Uncle Barbara Jean, [B] is playing with them boys out in the field!” Cari’s pivot feels like a disclosure of something I know about identity. Every repetition of the story was a reminder that our being is a function of being seen. There’s something more to it, though. I can’t help but remark on the uncanny likeness it bears to what it means “to pass” for many in trans communities. A child sees and understands that the underlying person (Bob) has not changed. What changed was the image. The abruptly unexpected absence of an aunt’s long hair transforms the aunt to uncle. Bob’s substance remained. The mark of gender was torn apart in that instant. The body indexes the norms we take for granted. And norms (like gender) have the bad habit of reassembling themselves even after their annihilation. H/er decision to have the first mastectomy was based on the necessary removal of a malignant tumor. The chemo and radiation treatments that followed would emaciate h/er and leave h/er bald. S/he wore wigs. After more than two decades of such treatments h/er body would be excised of almost all that which culture (medicine, law) invest with gendered and sexed meaning. The traces of these investments inscribed upon medical and legal documents might attest to someone in permanent “transition.” Bob is a text whose form negates such formalism. With h/er I found a space in which to situate my anxieties about gender.

I write because such texts act like sutures between my historical present and h/er narrative of being. Not a narrative of cancer but mutual decoding of the commonality of “life lessons.” S/he existed as h/er own person. But for me s/he is a relation binding trauma and love. It is not a sentimental relation. More like a proximity to what is possible under the conditions of discontinuity and rupture.

Ruptures feel like finding a breast. Bob wore a prosthetic after the first mastectomy. I found it as a child while scouring through h/er closet for shoes and clothes to try on. It was in a closed box. The object looked fleshy and similarly toned to my skin. I juggled it. I put it over my shirt. I could see there was a nipple. Then put it away. S/he approached me about it because I failed to put the thing back in its proper place. S/he made me promise not to touch it because “its insides

could hurt me.” S/he wasn’t angry. S/he gave me a lesson. “This is my breast,” s/he said while holding out the prosthesis. I re-member asking how. S/he showed me h/er mastectomy scar. I giggled because near the very top of the scar was a nipple-shaped keloid. And s/he put the prosthesis into h/er bra as part of h/er body that seemed indistinct from it. By the second mastectomy s/he decided there was no longer a need for prostheses. That surgery was precautionary and was soon followed by more surgeries. More chemo and radiation. By that time I was in high school. I got my first car (my step-father’s truck). I would drive to school and paint my nails with the hoard of polish Bob had in stock. I took h/er hair clips. I would change into crop tops, skirts, or jeans that looked like skirts. What a sissy, faggot, he-she. I never told them that “looking like a girl” signifies differently to a teenager whose mother’s body resisted what was merely or simply feminine.

Discontinuities feel dizzying, bridgeless gaps between what one knows and what is there in actuality. Radiation stripped h/er body’s ability to regulate estrogen and testosterone. S/he required replacement therapies for the molecules we were being taught in high school biology that were unique to female bodies. Another cultural index of reproductivity that didn’t seem to apply to my mother. I re-member coming home. Bob was sitting on the loveseat watching daytime talk shows. H/er legs were crossed “like a woman” and in one hand s/he held a glass of Dr. Pepper. H/er fingers barely touched the glass. S/he was still bald and usually wore leggings paired with a sweatshirt. S/he asked me what I learned that day. (I cannot help but remark on the relational banality of such a scene between a child and dying mother discussing biology.) I told h/er about hormones. “Mom, ‘estrogen,’ is a conjunction of the Greek word *oistros*, meaning passion and *genesis*, meaning creation.” I told h/er we learned that such molecules were biologically distinct to female and male bodies. “I have problems with regulating mine, you know. Do you think I am any less of a woman,” s/he asked. I told h/er no and looked puzzled. “I am who I am,” s/he said. Being re-coded from within and re-arranged from without. S/he was not the reduction of cells. A being who persists in h/er Being. S/he was confident where I seemed to question and resist. This discontinuity of cultural discourse and subject. Bob and h/er queer child formed a brief hiatus. Bob could stand astride that gap. S/he was defined by forces outside the control of the I am. But s/he still defined its limits. Could I do the same? Discontinuity was Bob’s site of redefinition. This is an odd truth. It reflects the power of something monstrous—something portentous and powerful. The monstrosity of all possibility that finds its home within spaces that expose the limits of selfhood.

A final rupture is the realization of banality. S/he died just before I graduated college. I was, of course, devastated. The news was sudden. S/he had kept h/er terminal diagnosis a secret from everyone except h/er husband and his mother (h/er caretakers). I had to fly to Colorado immediately. It felt scandalous. Why was I betrayed with willful non-disclosure? My furious speech was cut short when I entered h/er room. The solemnity of h/er death felt interrupted by the bureaucracy going on around us. I re-member crawling into h/er small bed. S/he was lucid enough to speak for a few minutes. S/he told me to be strong. “Not for me, sugar—for them.” I thought: Why should I be strong for my family? Most barely accepted my queerness. Me, the emotional rock for them? What a farce. S/he fell asleep before I could argue. I stared at the gray walls. There was off-white base-molding that was obviously washed daily. The TV hovered on its stand. This was it. The eventual rupture of death amounts to waiting in a dully lighted room with a bad paint job. When s/he did pass I collapsed in an adjacent room. I didn’t hold up my end

of the bargain. But it struck me only recently that “being strong” wasn’t for them. It was a command, of sorts, to preserve the “I am” in a world that seeks to extinguish me and my kind. S/he couldn’t fix the everyday violence that I had told h/er about (after school, during college). What an odd aperture through which h/er command calls to me—to remember not only who I was but, in doing so, grasping the strength required to do so. It was a strength in the everyday. Violence and the ordinary are often close friends. Sage advice to a queer child.

My mother lived as a woman but did not die as a woman. This does not rob h/er of an identity. It signifies how Bob-as-event re-narrativizes all that I know about my body in relation to the world. The technologies of medicine that prolonged h/er life are the very same that consolidate another’s embodied identity and prolong theirs. What occurs in-between requires the strength to endure a body that might not feel livable. Strength in the face of bureaucratic banalities that delay or disallow gender affirming care. Bob never transitioned in the sense used in trans communities. S/he challenged the limits of attachments to a discourse that defined the body (my body) as immutable. S/he lived through the slow decomposition of all those cultural markers that define “femaleness.” S/he claimed the possibility of h/erself in the space that was created. There could be no normal body under h/er dialectic. Only the body s/he assembles h/erself.

For my PhD dissertation I had the privileged responsibility of reading archived stories from transfeminine Americans while a visiting scholar at the University of British Columbia. These stories were varied in form: autofiction, diaries, poems, or editorials. They repeated a common refrain: “We are more than a disorder.” They were women. They were who they were. *The echo of Bob’s “I am what I am.”* The trace of re-remembered affects began to intensify their stories. I imagined how those outdated gender identity clinics must have shared the hospital room’s dull lighting and depressing color schemes. Where one woman was mired (and thus made real) by a bureaucracy of medical documentation another vanished as quickly as the spoken word. Why did these women choose the events they inscribed on the page? So as not to disappear into memory? My transness became an affective landscape of re-memory. Transness is what it is. The route to its meaning, like my mother’s, is far from coherent. Re-memory is a kind of tracing that cannot reunify what was broken. A politics of memory is a politics of the self. Writing sutures together an outline of my-self. Just at the borders I glimpse the exergue. It is the mark of my limits and the sign of possibility. It is neither words nor phrases coherent. It is affective memory retracing its steps. I often telegraph my narrative through theory. What I braid together leaves traces—the exergue’s being is the monstrosity of something not yet born but possible. The exergue counters the fiction that memory (like the past) is lifeless.