

# Our Stories of Accessing Gender-Affirming Surgery

Brendon T. Holloway and Anna Putnam

**Abstract:** As an act of resistance against the recent surge of anti-transgender legislation targeting transgender and nonbinary youth in the US, we share our experiences of accessing lifechanging, lifesaving gender-affirming surgery with you through poetry.

**Keywords:** gender-affirming care, transgender, nonbinary, LGBTQ, poetry

We write this piece with heavy hearts. In 2023, we witnessed an onslaught of anti-transgender legislation in the US, particularly targeting trans and nonbinary youth and young people. More than 400 anti-trans bills were filed in over 30 states with many bills prohibiting access to gender-affirming care (Peele, 2023), a type of care that is often deemed lifesaving for many trans and nonbinary people. Several lawmakers have villainized trans people and further oppressed a community that already experiences significant marginalization (Funakoshi & Raychaudhuri, 2023; Kattari, 2022; Kinney et al., 2022). As an act of resistance to these harmful and potentially deadly bills, we have made the choice to share our experiences of accessing gender-affirming surgery with you.

My name is Brendon, my pronouns are he/they, and I write to you as a nonbinary person. I came out as trans in 2012 and began accessing gender-affirming care in 2016, days following the 2016 presidential election. I started hormone therapy that week, and I had top surgery—a double incision chest reconstruction—in February 2017. Without top surgery, I do not know if I would be here. Being able to access this surgery allowed me to feel at home in my body for the first time in my life. I have written the piece “The Surgery That Saved Me” to describe my experience and share the importance of accessing gender-affirming care.

My name is Anna, my pronouns are they/them/theirs, and I’m non-binary. For me, gender-affirming care has entailed many hours in therapy with a gender-affirming therapist and top surgery (double incision chest reconstruction). I also see a primary care provider who supports my identity and is willing to help me access other gender-affirming care, should I choose to do so. As you will read below in my poem “Coming Home,” my decision to have gender-affirming surgery was fraught with doubts, fears, and a plethora of questions. Ultimately, I made the decision that felt right for me, right for my body and my identity, and it changed my life. After 36 years of living in this body, I am now the most authentic, genuine version of myself—and it feels so good!

Before we proceed, we want to send a message to trans and nonbinary readers: *We see you*. We are existing in a world that was not built for or with trans people. Therefore, collectively we must build and create something better. For you, for us, for our ancestors, and for future generations. We are the butterflies of the world, constantly transforming into better versions of ourselves. We are the bees in the wild, producing sweet honey no matter how many times people swat at us or try to kill us. We are the dandelions that conquer rolling fields, often viewed as invasive but masters of survival and good for the Earth. We are here, here to stay, and stay we will.

## **The Surgery That Saved Me**

Brendon T. Holloway

### *[Part 1: Before]*

I want to love my body  
But I can't.  
I wear flannels in the summer  
To mask what's in between  
The buttons of my shirt  
Even though bystanders can tell  
What is underneath  
Tension, I feel  
In my back from hunching over  
To hide what lies beneath my shirt  
I am uncomfortable  
In the place I should be able to  
Call my home.

### *[Part 2: Moments Before]*

I have arrived  
February 24, 2017  
It's cold  
I'm hungry  
I'm scared  
Oh, the questions racing  
Through my mind  
Will I wake up?  
Will I like what I see?  
Will I die?  
Is this the end?  
Yes, yes, it is.  
And it is also the beginning.

### *[Part 3: After]*

I was so used to hating my body  
That loving it felt unfamiliar

I remember the day I first loved my body  
It was a cold morning in March  
I arrived at my surgeon's office  
And saw my chest for the first time  
Breastless  
Breathless, I was

I remember the next time I loved my body

A t-shirt went over my head, hugging my  
Flat chest, breastless for the first time  
Breathless, I was

You may wonder and ask  
What does gender-affirming care mean to someone like me?

Gender-affirming care feels like  
The ocean's saltwater kissing my scars  
The sun's beams warming my chest  
Looking in the mirror, feeling my mind rest  
Backpacking through groves of aspens  
With straps laying comfortably against my chest  
And no binder to restrict my breaths

Gender-affirming care feels like  
Having a purpose and wanting to live  
And wanting to grow old  
To ensure my stories are told

I am now so used to loving my body  
That hating it feels unfamiliar

## **Home**

Anna Putnam

*[Part 1: Before]*

I had more questions than an inquisitive 3-year-old.

Why is the sky blue

The grass green

The How

The Who

The What

Why

When.

And like a child

I somehow also know

This is exactly what I want

Even if I can't explain

Why or

How.

I just know I want,

I need,

My sandwich cut in squares  
Not triangles.

*[Part 2: Moments Before]*

I am deep in the forest  
Alone at night.  
No flashlight  
No cell phone  
No stars to guide my way.  
Do I walk  
Do I run  
Do I climb  
Do I stop  
How do I move with  
No map  
No light  
No guide.  
I have never been more nervous in my entire life.

I feel atomic atoms exploding inside me  
Tiny bursts of energy  
Releasing  
Over and over  
Again  
By the millions  
With nowhere to go,  
A pop bottle shaken  
To edge of explosion.  
All that energy  
Contained inside my body  
I'm ready to burst open  
To thrash  
Flail  
Walk  
Run  
Climb

STOP.  
Breathe.

Close your eyes.  
Find the rhythm,  
The one you know  
And find  
Without thinking.

And then I realize  
The moon is there  
Casting light  
Helping me see  
I'm on a path  
Right where I'm supposed to be  
Headed toward a subtle  
Shimmering light.

*[Part 3: After]*

I am sitting in a chair  
By a placid lake.  
The shimmering light,  
The moon  
Reflected on the lake.  
On the table next to me  
My sandwich is cut in squares.  
I hear the water lapping at the shore  
The titter of birds as they settle for the night  
The rubber band chorus of frogs.  
I've never been here before  
It's new and different,  
Yet familiar.  
There is comfort  
There is peace  
There is joy.  
I don't have any more questions.  
I am home.

## References

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