

LIBRO LEVI BRIDGEMAN

#1

It's hot. It's 2020. I'm on my way to Lithuania for my hip replacement surgery. I only have osteoarthritis in one part of my body. It's gone from mild to end stage in 3 years. The cartilage is non-existent. My hip bone grinds against the surface of my ball socket – it crunches, groans, cracks. I can walk 20 minutes before I start limping. The NHS has me on a waiting list for a Total Hip Replacement but that could go on another 4 years so I've found a clinic in Kaunas that'll perform the procedure.

The NHS will cover the costs – so it's win / win.

It's the first time I've been on an airplane since the pandemic. I'm wearing a bomber jacket and shorts. People don't get my gender in a facemask. I'm called "Sir" as I put my belt and the contents of my pockets onto the Xray trays. I pass through the bleacher and advance towards the pat down area. To avoid more confusion, I lift up my mask. A female officer nods at me. I am waved through. I make my way to the Duty Free Shop. There, I am mis-gendered again "Sir" and again as I buy coffee in Leon "Sir, Sir, Sir". I haven't been to the washroom yet, but of course, that'll be no different. I need a pee. I hold it. I picture my bladder as it fills like a see-through flask of urine, like a hospital bottle. I wait until I'm bursting.

Eventually, I venture in via the female washroom's swing door. A woman applies lipstick at the sink. She stops applying, spins around, glares at me and narrows her eyes.

She hisses at me: "You shouldn't be in here." I yank down my mask.

"Why?" I hiss back. "Is this your washroom? Do you own it?"

My bladder aches, I'm desperate to pee. My hip is throbbing. The woman stares bug-eyed but says nothing. I replace my mask, limp into a cubicle, bolt the door, take off my shorts and y fronts, sit on the toilet seat, clench my butt cheeks and eject the loudest pee jet possible. Steam rises. There's a spout of pressure. A piss fountain. I fantasise that the yellow gush will overflow the toilet, run along the floor, career towards the sink, and drown out the lipstick woman.

I don't want to be a man (I never did). I don't want to be a woman either. I just want to be ME. A non-binary person of indeterminate gender. I yank on a sheet of toilet paper and wipe myself. I think of all the people who rail against the binary. How our lives get disrupted in these fundamental ways – as we pee, buy food, withdraw cash, go for job interviews, cross the road, wait at bus stops. How we get stopped, questioned, ridiculed, challenged, set upon, assaulted, correctively raped, killed.

I pull the toilet flush. Feel sick of my life feeling like 1 long butch monologue.

Where is the non-binary (the bon-binary) joy?

I come out of the cubicle. The woman at the sink is still applying. Why has it taken so long? I know 25

femmes that could clobber her with a lesson in speedy application and advise on tone and hue. Her lipstick is frosted candyfloss. The woman clocks me, narrows her eyes again and opens her mouth.

That's when I let her have it.

"Look, I'm a 50 something, hip sore, masc of centre, gender non- conforming cat AND dog person with a big bladder and little patience . Andthat is a LOUSY lipstick."

The woman looks horrified.

"If I were you, I'd upgrade your potential." "What?"

"Invest in a Showstopper Red."

I scrub my hands, turn from the sink, and limp away. Like Long John Fucking Silver.

I exit the washroom. Back in the waiting room, I pop a pain killer, write the exchange down in my Moleskine. Then I think of all the other artists trying to make sense of the gender madness – Kae Tempest, Lena Waithe, Hannah Gadsby, Janelle Monáe, Ivan Coyote and of course, Cassils.

#2

The first time I see Cassils is in 2013. The piece is *Becoming An Image*. I'm invited to the South Bank by my friend who has a spare ticket. It's late notice. This is the best way to see things – without any preconceived expectations.

Of course, I *know* of Cassils, who doesn't? They'd recently done the ice sculpture piece *Tiresias* that people had raved about. In the South Bank, we cram into a crowded room. This is a holding space. There are other people there. So many. An usher tells us to leave our bags outside on the metal locker areas. The photographer, Christa Holka, is uncomfortable. They wiggle their bag.

"I've got £3,000 worth of camera equipment in there."

It makes no difference. Christa's bag goes on the shelf. In we all go. The usher informs us there is only 1 entrance & exit. People are shunted forward without recall. The small theatre fills. We sit on the floor. In the middle of the space, is a lump of clay. The space gets busy. Heated.

There's a shiver of anticipation. It's stifling. Cramped. People aren't talking. They're muttering. It's like sitting in church. There's a sense of hush.

Stillness. Deference. There's a person next to me in a dress who is rocking semi-catatonically.

They are repeating in loop: "Fucking hell, fucking hell, fucking hell, fucking hell, fucking hell, fucking hell, fucking hell."

I'm reminded of when I visited the Vatican. As you enter St Peter's, there's a huge statue of the saint to the right of the door. Visitors queue to touch St Peter's feet. There's a sense of awe. Panic. Young people await their turn convulsing in tears. I remember noticing that the toes of St Peter's left foot

were worn away with kisses. This theatre has the same desperate expectation.

The space goes dark, Cassils descends the iron staircase.

In the blackness, they start to hit the lump of clay, Pummel it. Beat it. Whack it. Pound it. Splice it. They use their fists, their arms, their feet. They're dressed in a pair of micro shorts. Their body is over-bit by muscle. They have muscles on top of muscles on top of more. They are a chorus of sound. Energy. Sweat. They moan. They grunt. There are no lights in the room. The only way we witness Cassils is via the camera flash of the photographer, Manuel Vason. Vason whirls about Cassils. It's dark. Cassils appears in the flashlight. Rapid-fire. Like a flickerbook. Their image moves, dances, shape-shifts. They re-calibrate the clay. They mould it, attack it, carve it, destroy it.

It's like a celluloid massacre.

I smell spit and pheromones and dust.

In the incremental light, Cassils's frame is beyond robust. It's colossal. Staggering. Unspeakably brave. The aesthetic is pure picture book – Caravaggio for the bon-binary. A gender queer Rodin. *Becoming An Image* is a revelation – but not for the epileptic or the flash-light sensitive. My sitting co-companion is still semi catatonic. I feel their limbs tremble. They weep. It's still like St Peter's but this time with our saint, our deity. Cassils in their cutaway loincloth. Their brown hair boxed off like a Caesar. All boundless ecclesiastical sinew.

"Fucking hell, fucking hell, fucking hell."

#3

Sometimes, when I write, I document my body and the bodies of those people around me - the non-binary bodies, the surgicalized bodies, the bodies that are complicated to occupy. The bodies with the chests that Ivan Coyote refer to as having "land mines."

But it's problematic.

How can we speak of a body that's not documented? A body that is not seen? A body that is not recognized? The scarred body, the unnamed body. The body that slips between the cracks of reality. The dickless, titless body. The unexplainable body. The unknown body. The body that is beholden in mystery and intrigue. This, of course, gives us power – what breathing person isn't threatened by something that they cannot define?

But if a body can't be recognised, it can be easily undone. If nobody knows about this body then nobody misses it either. The stats are there to prove it. Approximately 350 Trans and NB people are killed every year for just being.

The Queer British Art exhibition didn't know about our bodies when they documented the years from 1861-1967. I bought a ticket for Tate Britain. I visited the site. I moved from room to room looking at the Tukes, the Strangs, the Sergeants. I saw white bodies, male bodies, nude bodies. I saw Oscar Wilde's

prison door and how small it looked. I didn't see myself anywhere. On the canvases. On the walls. In the cabinets.

There were no titless, dickless bodies.

I stared at my ticket. Crunched it in my hand. Wondered if was refundable. Days later, still haunted by the work, I texted the queer portrait painter, Sadie Lee.

"Paint me." "How?"

"I've had chest surgery I want to show my scars."

Sadie phoned me back. "I'm thinking about a diptych. 1 painting of you in a suit & 1 painting of you bare-chested. I'm going to send you some examples."

"Good," I said. "I want to be counted. Named. Marked. Labelled. I want my body to be real."

Sadie emailed me a Gwen John image and an explanation. She wanted to paint the two portraits in exactly the same position but with different states of undress – one with the formality of the suit, the other with the intimacy of the bare chest. The clothed non-binary physique and the unclothed – a cut naked chest to sit among all the other uncut, cis male naked chests in any Queer Art show in the Tate or otherwise.

Sadie and I started to plot and prep and scheme.

One morning, Sadie arrived at my apartment with her camera and standing lamp. I stood in my suit jacket, shirt, and tie in front of the black curtain.

Sadie turned on her lamp and photographed me. For the second pose, I removed my jacket, shirt and tie and stood in the same position with my chest scars sprouting white and pink across my rib cage. Sadie stopped shooting photos. She sat on the bed and started to cry.

The intimacy. The gaze. The non-binary joy.

I thought of Cassils's flickerbook frame under Manuel Vason's lens. The rapid eye movement of their groaning, clay-pummeling frame.

#4

The second time I see Cassils is in 2015. This time there is no clay. They are setting themselves alight at The National Theatre in *Inextinguishable Fire*. Cassils isn't a circus performer. Cassils isn't a carnival freak. Cassils is an artist taking on death-defying risks. Striking extremities. Unleashing their limits.

I take my then girlfriend at the time. We climb the steps and get into our seats.

My ex girlfriend says: "This is pure porn for me." "Excuse me?" I say.

"Pure porn."

I don't know what to do with that information. Does Cassils's want to be pure porn? Cassils is a risk busting visual artist. An internationally renowned, multi-award winning, live performer not a sex commodity.

Cassils uses their body as an act of social sculpture to depict violence, struggle, survival. We, the audience, bear witness. Just that. Cassils starts to talk us through the process. 2 stunt guys cover Cassils's frame in fire resistant underwear soaked in freezing solution that will induce a hypothermic state. Cassils must only breathe out so as not to burn and damage their lungs.

They are set on fire.

I breathe in. Breathe deep. I breathe in all the air that they can't. Cassils is in flames. A burning effigy on stage. I breathe. I breathe. Cassils is a transgender Guy Fawkes. I breathe. I breathe. Cassils is a toasted non- binary body. I breathe. I breathe.

Are you for real? Is this snuff theatre?

Aren't we actually watching self-imposed 3rd degree burns?

I breathe.

The fire is alive for 14 seconds. But it feels like 14 years. Eventually, 1 of the stunt men shouts: "Down!" Cassils hits the floor. The stunt men put out the fire. There are extinguishers. Smoke. Pants emit from Cassils's body. There is steam. Cassils shivers. There is a lot of breath.

The house lights come back. My then girlfriend nods. "Pure fucking porn." OK," I whisper. "Jees. But what about their courage? Their aesthetic?"

"Aesthetic?" She whispers back. "You gotta be kidding. You just *witnessed* the *fitness*."

My ex girlfriend gets out of her seat. I watch her retreating back. Cassils inflames burns into my retina. I think of the fire as a metaphor for the genderbinary. For the fire of napalm that was originally captured in Harun Farocki's film that Cassils referenced. I catch up with my ex-girlfriend. Unsurprisingly, she's still muttering about porn. Her eyes are the only things on fire now.

It's going to be a long journey home.

#5

In 2019, we take *The Butch Monologues* to Australia. We start the sell-out tour. The reviews are amazing. Australians love *The Butch Monologues*.

It's a brilliant time. However, something is happening to me. I'm considering a name change. It seems obvious. People call me Doc or Dr B. But for my professional life and writing credits, I have a female name. My birth name.

It sticks. I've started using the term non-binary. I had chest surgery in 2016, Sadie Lee's painting me

naked. I'm not male. I'm not female. As I walk the Sydney coastal path, from Coogee to Bondi. I run possibilities in my head. I want to keep my initials. I want to keep to Mum's Jewish roots. I'd use my surname but it doesn't please me. Bridgeman is nothing if not male and binary.

The man of the bridge. FFS.

I list other gender benders: Brandon Tina, Jack Halberstam, Leslie Feinberg, Paul B. Preciado, I return to Cassils. I think I remember them becoming Heat, then Heat Cassils, before condensing their name again. Streaming it. Distilling it.

Sometimes, I tell myself, it takes a few iterations.

I think of books. I think of star signs. I think of Mum. Soon after *The Butch Monologues* tour, and a year after my mum dies, and a year after hip surgery, I land on *Libro* (my rising sign) and *Levi* (for Mum).

Both of them together.

#6

The third time I see Cassils is at Queen Mary University. It is 2019. It's part of The Sexual Cultures Research Group. The live artist, Whiskey Chow, sits next to me. Cassils stands central at the lecture table. Buck-boned, composed, hedge-haired. There are some tech issues. The aesthetic is scorched. Behind them, there's a blank screen. The technicians are trying to fix it. Eventually, some power is restored. Images flicker. Cassils starts to speak. The lecture hall is rammed. There's a feeling of awe. I think about my ex girlfriend – is she here? I think about porn. About worship. About the statue of St Peter. About piss and clay and fire.

At the end of the talk, I ask Cassils a question. "Do you ever use text in your work?"
They look at me.

"I'm an artist not a theatre maker. Brecht is not really my thing."

I smile. The audience in the lecture hall laugh. They're mostly performing art students. Most self-respecting performing art students know theatre is dead. That fourth wall and people pretending to be other people won't cut the mustard. But Cassils isn't dead, they are alive. They're not even clay splattered or piss stained or burnt. But in that lecture, they have recounted *Pissed* (their bathroom piece involving 200 gallons of urine), *Becoming An Image* and *Tiresias*. They have presented a road map of their own body.

Like Ivan Coyote's "landmines" or Sadie Lee's diptych.

Cassils is performing new scriptures. We both are. They are there, on stage, effortlessly brave. I am here, in my seat, effortlessly attentive. Neither of us is going away any time soon. Our breathing beings are out there to be documented, observed, put up on the walls.

Maybe remembered somewhere in history
herstory

personstory

Disrupting the mainstream. Carving out the new. Removing the old binaries and oppressions – the gods, the priests, the judges. Applying our very own Showstopper Red. As I go home that night, I think of St Peter.

His toes must be swirling like sand.

Text commissioned upon the occasion of Cassils:
Human Measure at HOME, Manchester (2021),
Cassils' first UK solo exhibition and 10-year survey.
Curated by Bren O'Callaghan. Copyright author's own.

www.cassils.net

www.homemcr.org

www.brenocallaghan.com