

Transition

C.H. Williams

You can throw away the vial after two doses. Don't bother trying to get that little bit out of the bottom.

The first week working from home, I feel perpetually nauseous and shaky, because I got a text saying that my next follow-up appointment was cancelled due to the pandemic, and I decide to ignore the clinician's advice. I can get that little bit out of the bottom of both the vials, I can go another week without a new prescription.

I'd only been on testosterone for a month when the world shut down. My throat had been itching from the first injection, teasing at the voice drop that'd come months later, and I had been excitedly hiding lozenges at my desk and sipping honeyed tea.

After my first injection, I called my friends and told them that now, more than ever, I needed our connections. I needed to talk to them often, needed them to partake in these beautiful shifts with me, because my transness is best cultivated with the people I love, and this was a moment of flourishing. Around this time, someone sent me the Julian Jarboe quote that reads, "God blessed me by making me a transsexual for the same reason he made wheat but not bread and fruit but not wine; because he wants humanity to share in the act of creation," and it was champagne bubbles in my chest, because I felt so righteously vindicated for sharing this experience.

My vials of testosterone made me feel like I was getting away with something clever. After a barrage of hurtful remarks—*you're perfectly feminine, I feel like I would be losing something if you started hormones* and other transphobic vitriol—I was able to prioritize my own well-being over my fear of disappointing people who weren't really that invested in my well-being.

So when my next follow-up was cancelled with no new appointment date set, I panicked. I'd fought an uphill battle to be okay with this. Those tiny vials on my dresser represented years of intense emotional work and deep self-love—and the idea that they'd disappear without my consent was mortifying.

Lockdown was industrial-grade paint stripper, chipping away at my transitional agency. This had been *my* process. I had dictated the timeline, how I would practice self-acceptance and self-love and patience with my shifting sense of self, but that was always a fragile agency.

They did set another appointment before the prescription ran out and I secured another one-month refill. But everyone else rushed to the pharmacy, either trying to get prescriptions filled while they could, or else just to try and cram as many thermometers and bottles of flu medicine into their baskets as possible. I held up the line for thirty minutes when my insurance refused to cover the prescription, and though I do go back the next day to get it, I am still frustrated about this in spite of the months that have since passed, because this refusal is a symbol for how my transition has been re-routed by the pandemic.

The trouble with being trans is that I have not been permitted any difficulty with my transition. To admit that parts of it are rocky is to open the door to people demanding to know why I would do this to myself if it's unpleasant; to say that it is going perfectly negates the rough waters that are just part of life, and ignores the ways in which cisnormative culture makes transitioning difficult. Lockdown amplifies these tenfold, and it's because being trans is perceived as elective. I think there's certainly problems with the *born this way* narrative, namely that it excludes people who transition later in life, but a tactic of transphobia is to disregard nuance, and I will not be cornered into a two-dimensional narrative. I achieved a great deal in my life before I transitioned, and there was the sense from many individuals that because Covid poses a substantial threat to public health and I was "functional" previously, the potential lack of access to medical care was not concerning.

Testosterone changed my anxiety. It soothed it, made it manageable. For the first time in years, I stopped having anxiety attacks. Covid changed my anxiety, too, and brought me six steps back when it came to dealing with my anxiety, and it was a curious battle being waged.

I thought T was helping, though.

It does, I insist. But being trans isn't me becoming someone else, and I in all my imperfections cannot perpetually face this catastrophe with grace and poise.

To complicate matters, my mom, who I had not spoken to in nearly six months, e-mailed me when things began shutting down. She was worried, and even though we didn't have a relationship, wanted to tell me she loved me. What a measure to take, sending that undoubtedly terrifying message. *I love you so very much--forever. In this life, and beyond this life, no matter*

what. That's what she told me, and more than anything, it made me afraid. We take our cues from our parents, whether we mean to or not.

As that fear continued to fester, the beautiful, communal cultivation of transness that I'd so poetically gushed about to my friends really started to annoy me. As I talked about the difficulties I was having month to month getting the supplies I needed, my low-grade perpetual panic got dismissed, because everyone was having trouble.

If everyone is struggling to get access to the medications they need, then there is a fundamental problem. When I say that I cannot get the right needles because the pharmacy tech insists I don't need them, I am not taking away from the other people in line behind me whose insurance will reject the claim, who will have to stop taking their medication because they can't afford it, or those who aren't even at the pharmacy at all, because going to a doctor is prohibitive and inaccessible.

Naysayers who dismiss the necessity of access to gender affirming care like to pretend they're triaging wreckage, and it's only gotten worse during the pandemic. The narrative posits only two options: either you go without, or you are causing harm to others. It's a tactic designed to pit people against each other, all the while allowing national and, at times, local leadership to run amok. The answer is not to start sacrificing vulnerable members of our community. To believe that someone must be left behind in the wake of catastrophe is perhaps the deepest flaw of humanity.

My transness was perceived as an elective process that was based on a desire, rather than a need that could've been easily met had appropriate and frankly compassionate action been taken. And we are in a global crisis, listening to an administration that tells us sacrifices must be made.

The problem never had anything to do with gender affirming care or transness, and has everything to do with an inept government and a culture that perpetuates instant self-gratification over communal good.

In between the waves of panic, wondering how many months of testosterone I'd able to do before the other shoe dropped, I did—and still do—revel in the changes.

There was something very sacred about being allowed privacy through this process.

I was bitter through the spring, that my community had become distant and that my anxiety had spiraled too much to maintain connections with those I'd promised a role in cultivating my garden of transness, as it were. Profound sadness marks a lot of my time, still, because this has been proof that our world could've been better. People don't have to suffer. But they do, and it is preventable, if both national and local leadership had put any sort of value on human life that couldn't be condensed into a budget summary.

I still feel really guilty for taking pleasure in our new isolation, because that isolation is a symptom of a broken country. But I'm glad that I don't have to listen to off-color remarks in public anymore. I'm glad that nobody has asked me how my husband still loves me, a trans man, and whether romance between us is even possible—that's the kind of thing people know better than to put into an e-mail, but that they'll still mutter in the elevator with you, knowing it's sixteen different kinds of inappropriate.

I like that I don't have to worry about using the bathroom. I like that people are less inclined to misgender me when we communicate via e-mail. I like that my voice cracks get to sing freely in our home, and my husband can celebrate them with me together in our living room, and they belong to us and us alone.

There's no one in my space but the man that I love, and with him, I get to reclaim all the awkwardness of transitioning.

But it was an ebb and flow, and I very quickly found myself, at 27, outgrowing my clothes again. Testosterone builds muscle mass, and I was already a broad-shouldered man.

I chewed on this panic for probably about a month, all the while not really having clothes that fit and thus, my too tight clothes introduced a dysphoria I hadn't felt before. Somewhere in this time, my binder stopped fitting, too, and while the clothes had been disappointing, the binder broke my heart (and almost my ribs). It'd been along with me from the start, and I'd been binding even before I knew I was trans.

I was worried that ordering clothing and a new binder would put someone at risk—a worry, I'll add, that wouldn't have been so substantial had our country responded to this pandemic like the public health crisis it is.

Ultimately, I decided that supplementing my clothes was fine, but I also dove into my husband's closet. That mutual sharing of clothes was something I had always vaguely found cute, and it was surprisingly affirming of my own identity. The few things I did buy, mostly t-

shirts and shorts, also ended up being shared between us, which felt like a strange sort of allyship and a deep validation. The clothing that we both wear belongs to us, two men, regardless of whether it's the terrycloth maxi skirt that is so irresistibly comfortable or the graphic tee that reads *Plant Daddy* across the front.

“Your surgery is scheduled for July 2nd,” the nurse tells me.

“It wasn't cancelled?”

“No, dear, it wasn't. This is the call for your five-week pre-op appointment.”

After catching my breath, I worried over whether to call my step-dad to tell him that I was going to be having surgery after all this summer. I'd been waiting on the pretense that it would probably be cancelled.

It wasn't, and so we got on a video chat, as one does these days, and I told him.

He said all the usual things that an unloving man does, demanding to know why I was doing this to myself, and that we were going to have to agree to disagree about me being trans. Red faced and tired of yelling, we both hung up, and I haven't talked to him since.

I needed a Covid test 72 hours before having top surgery, and because of the back-log in the courts, my name change papers got stuck on a judge's desk for months, so the tech doing intake for the test was really confused.

“Sir? Ma'am...” He glances at my driver's license. “Oh. Ma'am.” He doesn't know that he's driving tiny little knives into my gut every time he says it, and my husband looks at me, pained, but we need to get this done.

After that, it's back to quarantine.

We bought more clothes, this time zip up hoodies and some button up shirts for after the surgery, and this time, I feel a lot more confident that my need for post-op clothes is valid. I also have an intense anger at the system that made me question this.

The elective surgery wing of the hospital was deserted when we arrived at 6 a.m., and after getting our hall pass with our temperatures written on it, my husband and I wait.

We have to sit six feet apart in the waiting room, and it was kind of funny, because of course we will, but this is such a poignant moment of emotional closeness and now we're unable to be close.

I got taken back first to have my vitals taken and to change into the hospital gown. A very strict nurse told me that I shouldn't have been allowed in with my homemade mask, and quickly swaps it out for a hospital-issue one.

My husband is allowed back after this.

He sits with me until a the very strict nurse puts something in my IV, and then the next thing I know, someone is handing me a paper shower cap, and then a woman is telling me to breathe.

And then, recovery.

My best friend was supposed to be there with us in the days following my surgery, but her life, and the life of her husband, isn't worth having the extra help.

The thought of not having extra hands nearby terrified me. My husband has been carrying so much, and now, it's all on him. Being trans has meant feeling alone while other people take time to catch up, and I feel alone again, before the surgery, because this pandemic has stripped all of the hands-on support systems we had planned to rely on.

It's not fair.

But my husband rises to the occasion. He diligently empties the drains and keeps a detailed log every time he does. He keeps a checklist of when I've had my antibiotics, and he geared up with his mask and hand sanitizer to go to the grocery store for fear that he would run out of soup (Reader, he did not, it has been almost two months and we are still eating soup).

We both broke down, because it wasn't easy, and occasionally, we'd fight, because he is one person, and I didn't mean for him to carry so much. We'd fight because I was in pain and exhausted and fighting felt like an outlet.

He wasn't allowed into the building when I got my surgical dressings taken off, and I saw my chest for the first time since the surgery.

I sat there alone, the nurse stuffing bandages in a trash bag, and when I finally got wrapped back up and sent back to my car where my husband was waiting, there was a deep frustration between us.

We both knew that he'd missed something critical, but there was nothing we could do about it. He'd missed getting to see me—really me, a me I had been working towards for a long time, a me that was at ease, a me at home in my own body—for the first time. And with the lifetime in front of us shadowed with a world that is terrifyingly uncertain, it hurt.

It was a forty-five minute drive home, and we were both yelling for most of it. Not at each other, not really, and that's probably why it carried on so long.

I don't know that I'll ever be able to give advice about transitioning, given how many parts of my transition happened during lockdown. In many ways, I'm stuck with a well of dichotomic advice.

HRT is one of the best decisions I've ever made. I feel more myself, and I've never found anything that eased my anxiety as much as testosterone has. My feet are on the ground and I am more in touch with my feelings than I've ever been before. Managing amplified emotional rawness and panic as the pandemic continues on has been a monstrous feat, though, and the self-kindness and patience of allowing myself to adjust to new hormone levels is often lacking.

Top surgery is one of the best decisions I've ever made. It is so freeing, and more than anything, I wanted those around me to revel in this new-found sense of belonging I had. But the empty space was very heavy.

This pandemic unquestionably removed some of my agency in transitioning.

There was going to be loss, transitioning. My step-dad, a former paramedic, never checked in after my surgery. He never asked if I was doing alright, because he made it fundamentally clear that what I was doing was unnatural and wrong and above all else, unnecessary. That has nothing to do with the pandemic or the lockdown, but the sting of having a parent turn on me with such disgust hurt even more as I found myself confronting big moments alone for the sake of safety.

Sitting alone with my flat chest for the first time meant there was space for the argument I'd had with him to come whispering back. Where my husband's words of love and support should've been, my mind filled in the blank as I sat by myself. It's like I said—we take our cues from our parents, whether we mean to or not.

Lockdown seems to have amplified every emotion, though, because there have been moments of profound joy, too, approaching something almost sacred. Isolation has removed much of the conflict from my ability to celebrate what I chose to, in my transition. I can wear my athletic shorts and my graphic tees and my gay AF ear cuff and absolutely rock my scraggly facial hair and purple sunglasses and the only person who sees me every day is a man who unapologetically loves me for being myself.