

Dear Herculine "Layers"

Dear Herculine,

A LETTER CONCERNING THE LAYERING OF SHAME ONTO SHAME

Layers. Layers are preferable. All through my body I'm full of a deep animal shame, which runs right up through my choice of clothing like rain water through weak stalks of yellow wheat. I avoid removing my clothes in public settings at all costs. I check who is in the bathroom before I go to make sure that no one sees that I never use the urinals. I'm always already in the toilet stalls sitting to pee. I'm 14. I'm hermaphroditic. I try to avoid going to the same bathroom twice, and I always wear a loose button up shirt to cover over the shape of my androgynous, fattened body parts.

Knit sweaters.

Loose shirts.

Button ups.

Undershirts.

Layers are preferable. I layer the space between others and myself as I proceed through my days, making sure that the façade of my gender is never broken. A stiff bubble of clothing over a stiff bubble of flesh. I layer my clothing to make sure that my innermost secrets remain my innermost secrets, inaccessible secrets impastoed into the skin below my shirt rind. I layer my clothing and I layer myself – a creature-thing hiding below a verdant wilderness – below the layers, helpless prey.

Layers. I wear layers over my layers. And I always worry about being seen naked, about being seen in a different gender than the one I assume out of the two given options. I don't trust the options, but I tuck myself into one for comfort. I always puff myself up, masculinize my ideas, and tumble like a sac of embodied testosterone and swelling muscle.

Beating.

Animated.

Layers. And masculine contortions. And I did these muscular movements even before I injected myself with hormones. The idea of being masculine is as strong, no *stronger*, than the chemical implications of a needle full of cow testicle juice pulled full to the .7 line and stuck right in the leg and the vigorous physical weeding of energy, red skin, pimples, and hair loss that spreads out of from that sharp pain.

I inject myself weekly, a pulsing bubble of oil and hormones in my leg.

But the bubble, the abstract idea, of *masculine* came even before the injections.

The actual goings and comings of masculinity are a vast and impenetrable rhetoric, a comfort, a thing I embody, a set of practices that still deeply comforts me as I proceed through the world the way mud proceeds through a mudslide. In the world like mud laid over mud. Physical, dirty, catastrophic on a small scale. Yet below the movement of my masculinity resides a confusion, a confusion that encloses me against the outside. The confusion encloses me, so I keep that confusion hidden below layer upon layer of clothing and shame. Clothing, shame, and all the borders I draw between myself and others using the objects and words that shape rooms. Clay against clay, playdough against playdough, and the bad blood bubbling its black black between the borders.

The first thing I notice while reading your memoirs, Herculine, is that in the moment they expose your gender to the world is the moment you become an outcast, incapable of securing work, incapable of being with your lover. And that leads to melancholy. And that leads to death. And this book is written from death. And what if we are already biological? What if we are already compost? What shame is there in standing naked in front of an animal in a room? What shame is there in standing naked in front of a mirror? What shame is there in sitting down to piss out of a stunted phallus? What shame is there in shame?

Certain things are necessary because they are almost nauseating, and this seems to be the case in moments when shame is so sharp that it makes you shiver a dark thought out your animal eyes. Such moments bulge with vulgarity and demand to be unfolded like complicatedly pleated and re-pleated fabric taken out of a box like an explosive accordion until it fills the entire room. In this letter I am a grotesque puppet unfolding that entire universe. I dance perversely and my limbs flit like a raucous sac of sex, and as I dance my tongue snakes out twitches epileptic. The folds in the fabric hold melancholy. Melancholy (n.) a long lasting sadness. Melancholy (n.) a black bile. The box from which I unfold the fabric is my guts, my greasy flesh that unfolds in an inhuman mode.

Dear Herculine,

A LETTER ABOUT THE NATURE OF THESE LETTERS

This letter takes the form of a series of letters that create a hermaphroditic link, from me to you, Herculine Barbin.

This letter is not letters thrown off into the void to be picked up by whomever; the direction of the words is specific and pointless coming to terms with our own death that is already happening.

This letter is letters written into a filthy loop, two bodies consuming each other, flesh into flesh, and the filth that spreads unreasonably outward – the visible and invisible ectoplasm extruding from a single link on a floor made of chain.

This letter is about both of our lives simultaneously, and the mess of memories and body parts that emerges from our selves, each of our bodies covered with and interwoven into their own texts, rubbing against each other and bleeding into each other.

This letter confuses its pronouns even though the stories are specific to certain bodies – you is I, I is you, you is the author, I is the reader, and so on.

This letter is the mess that stands between two bodies caught in the process of becoming corpses within all of the meandering “stuff” that composes up the very way in which we proceed through the world.

This letter as a space in which that which is described is messy ecology in the way that any border between any two environments is messy, especially when those borders spill over into each other.

This letter is two intersexed bodies composed of multiple parts, and the mess of flesh and text that stands between.

This letter believes that all bodies are intersexed, yet dwells in the extreme of two bodies until the two burst and spread out into the floor.

PS: You are born in November of 1838, and you die in February of 1868 alone in a room before you even turn 30. I am born in November of 1982, and as I write this I am thirty. A century and a half after your death, and many of the same structures of gender remain, or have been replaced with medical manipulation of the genital flesh. Genitals are cut and refigured to fit norms. Bodies are given two options, male or female, even if there are, in reality, five thousand thousand sexes.

Sure, there are new techniques for dealing with bodies like ours (“progress”), but still the way one unfolds into a room with other bodies remains strange. There is still a hidden world below the fabric of our clothing, there is still the expectation of how one is supposed to be, and the expectation is itself amplified. The image of the ideal, objectified body is the loudest thing. Standing at the front of the reproduced surface with the same qualities as plastic and metal objects, what does it mean to uncover the sheen? What does it mean to set our corpses naked in front of one another, exposed? This letter is an exposition of such exposure.