

This

Aideen Scanga

No amount of emotional resilience, self-esteem, or confidence could have ever prepared me for the day I became a ‘this.’

When I first met my ninth grade European History teacher, I approached him and explained that I was nonbinary. For his convenience, I defined the word, and I kindly asked that he use the pronouns ‘they’ and ‘them’ to refer to me. Of course, he used neither of those pronouns in his response, looking into my eyes and laughing to himself, “So this is what the world has come to.”

I smiled awkwardly, thanked him for his time, and left in a daze, eyes stinging with tears, half-convinced I had misheard him.

I had already found by then that being nonbinary allowed me to become many things: a phase to my mother; a frequent visitor to the nurse’s office, or as I knew it, the gender-neutral locker room; a ‘dangerous ideological colonization’ to my church. Still, until that day, I had never once imagined myself as a ‘this.’

Lucky for me, fate turned me into much more than a simple ‘this.’ One year after that unpleasant exchange, I became anorexic, starving away my thoughts, emotions, and will to live in an attempt to rid myself of the pain my parents refused to acknowledge. In my empty battery of a mind, I took great delight in my shrinking chest and vanishing menstrual cycle, proud of myself for transitioning in the only way I could.

I became a patient waiting in the emergency room of a psychiatric hospital, weighed down with suicidal thoughts, my empty-battery brain swimming as I sat for six hours just to hear that the doctors could do nothing but write my name on a months-long waiting list for an outpatient appointment. Then again, it wasn’t a pointless trip; in the hell that was the drive home, my mother admitted that maybe my identity wasn’t a phase after all.

From there, I became a student on medical leave, skipping a quarter of my sophomore year to attend full-day group therapy. The program returned me to some sense of normalcy, but at a cost. I became a reminder to my therapists of just how ill-suited eating disorder recovery centers are to helping transgender patients. Every tear I shed and every frustration I vented earned me a soft smile from the program leaders, who repeated *ad nauseam* that managing the root cause of my eating disorder—my gender dysphoria—would have to wait. I had to finish my three months in partial hospitalization and two weeks in an evening program before I could even begin discussing transition. Though I would never demean the joy of my anorexia recovery, it taught me a lesson I can’t afford to forget: No matter the urgency of my situation, I will have to teach my highly-educated doctors how to interact with and care for transgender patients.

Finally understanding that my problems couldn’t be solved through blatant ignorance, at the courtesy of my mother, I became another name on a list of endocrinology patients. There, over the drone of my sobbing, my mother asked the doctor why her daughter believed she was anything

but, seeking professional advice on whether or not I could be cured. The endocrinologist responded as bluntly as a battering ram that I needed to choose if I was a boy or a girl, and so I became a question with no answer.

That summer, I shared with a coworker that I wondered whether I was created by Satan, unable to square my Catholic faith with my gender. Struggling to explain my identity, breaking down in tears while stressing that a family's rejection of their transgender child could result in deadly mental health struggles, my coworker shrugged. "That's not what I've heard," she sighed, her eyes cast away from me as I became a simple exaggeration, my life and my pain too hostile to her notions of gender to be real.

To save paper, I won't delve into how all of my high school teachers forgot I ever came out, or how I was locked out of my school in the snow because walking from the nurse's office to the gym took more time than my P.E. teachers had for me, or how I solved every one of my problems alone, in shame, having internalized the message that my transness was something only to be discussed in matters of life-or-death urgency. No, I'll keep it brief: it hurts like hell to be transgender right now.

So if *this* is what the world has come to, it's got a long way to go.

If *this* is destroying our country—a teenager trembling as they state their pronouns, unable to meet anyone's gaze for fear of laughter—is the downfall of American society, we must stop and ask ourselves what values that society exists upon.

Do you want to know what 'this' really is? This is Aideen Scanga, an imperfect, insecure eighteen-year-old who loves to write and draw. This is a self-professed nerd, someone who can rant for hours about the Watergate scandal or the anime *Death Note*. This is a baby who barely survived their own birth and a child who tried their best to survive their bullies. This is a story with a difficult past and an uncertain future, a giant question mark on a page, glaring at the reader, hoping they might decide its major or its career. This is someone who's been hurt, maybe worse than they thought.

Still, this is someone, and this is someone's child, someone's sibling, someone's cousin, someone's partner, someone's student, someone's friend, someone's hope, someone's pain, someone's joy.

This is me.

I know that all those years ago, my teacher didn't call me 'this' to teach me some deep metaphorical lesson. He didn't do it to help me write an essay in college, or let me reflect on the power of words. That was a lesson far beyond his degree in history. Even so, maybe he was onto something.

There's this funny habit that pops up when we talk about our pain. Sometimes, we find our past and our present so overwhelming that when we finally break down in a puddle of tears and tell someone how we feel, we can only describe it as 'this.' What's wrong, people ask? This. *All*

of *this*. We gesture wildly with our hands to ourselves, or our minds, or whatever corporal or spiritual being is responsible for our sorrow.

Everything on these pages are my ‘all of *this*,’ the root causes of my many problems, the dark underbelly of my insecurities and anxieties. If someone asked me to name my biggest flaw—just one trait I could change and improve my quality of life—it would be tempting to say that my biggest problem is being transgender. It’s a humble response, plainly true in the sense that it would increase my happiness and lower my odds of hate-based murder, but it denies the reality of my situation.

As shocking as it may seem to some particularly concerned right-wingers, my life isn’t consumed by my gender identity. I don’t wake up every morning, stunned by the realization that my assigned sex doesn’t match my internal gender. In fact, until my attention is directly called to the matter, I forget about it entirely. It would be utterly absurd to suggest that all of the suffering I’ve endured is the result of a trait I barely think about. Still, that ridiculous notion allows me to recognize the depressing truth of the situation.

My transness hasn’t caused me any suffering, but transphobia has sufficiently drained my happiness, my confidence, and my health. The day I became ‘this,’ I learned that to some people, I am not a human. In their eyes, my well-roundedness and intelligence are mutually exclusive to my gender identity. That was the day I lost all faith in myself, because I became a problem instead of a person.

No person should ever be called ‘this,’ but if I could offer a suggestion, it’s about time we called ‘this’ out for what it is. This is transphobia, and this is destroying the lives of our neighbors, friends, and loved ones.

By all accounts, my story is one of transgender success. Privilege and luck both stood on my side to allow me to live a life free of the suffering of so many others. After coming out, I was allowed to stay in my house. I was never physically or sexually assaulted in an attempt to ‘fix’ my gender. I sit here today, writing this essay, as part of the mere 44% of transgender youth that has not attempted suicide, according to the National Institute of Health (Austin et al.). ‘This’ is how low the bar lies.

So, if after months out of school in full-time eating disorder recovery, asking myself if I was created by Satan, and hours in a doctor’s office meant to ‘fix’ my ‘gender confusion’, I’m considered lucky, I shudder to imagine what an unlucky life could look like.

I wish there was a happy ending to ‘this’, but the unfortunate reality is that being transgender makes the safe world much smaller. Like everybody else, I want to live life to the fullest, and yet many of my decisions are burdened by the effects of transphobia and ignorance. For example, I qualified to apply for an all-expenses paid trip to Germany based on my placement in the National German Exam. However, German is a gendered language, and while neutral third-person pronouns have been proposed in a variety of forms, none have truly caught on with the general public. If I wanted to succeed in Germany, I would have to choose between allowing others to misgender me or staying so far removed from them that I’m never discussed.

When applying to colleges, my transness forced me to view a school's LGBT policies and protections with the same weight as academic rankings. I decided it was not worth it to force myself into a restroom that didn't align with my gender for four years, or to have a roommate assigned by my birth sex until I could afford my own housing. Like other applicants, I considered the location of the college, but not in terms of transport, view, or climate; instead, I based my decision on the local laws pertaining to transgender rights. Some states, like Kentucky, have codified transphobia into their laws, forbidding teachers from using pronouns that differ from a student's assigned sex at birth (Hassan). In other words, a teacher can face prison time for respecting a transgender student's identity. To willingly submit myself to that kind of dehumanization is not only unthinkable, but unacceptable.

I might not live in Texas or Florida. I might not belong to a fundamental church that forbids diverse gender expression. I might not live in a country where my gender is punishable by death. Still, the prevailing climate of intolerance towards transgender individuals holds an immeasurable, insurmountable weight over my shoulders.

At its best, 'this' has brought me feelings of shame or embarrassment, and, at its worst, 'this' has brought me to the brink of death.

However, for transgender youth in America, and indeed across the world, 'this' is nothing more than an everyday occurrence.

Works Cited

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