

## With Weight Removed

The old trees sit heavy, as if they were carrying a burden one cannot talk about. I stare at them, saddened by their inescapable condition. As the car rolls by, I mull my own options for sharing what is on my mind. I focus on one of the trees as it pans through my window of view. What is the tree carrying that makes its branch droop? The Lyft pulls up, waiting for me to step out. I thank the driver and am engulfed by the dewy, cool Minnesota morning as I set my suitcase on the sidewalk. It's 5:00am, and I am still waking up. The automatic doors swoosh to the side, their sound drowned by my sleepless yawn. I inch my way through the TSA security protocols, awaiting the inevitable. As I pass through the full-body scanner, I sigh in resignation. Beep.

"Please wait right here. Would you like a private screening?" the TSA agent asks.

I glance behind me and see the yellow blob glowing on the two-dimensional human-shaped outline. It's centered on my groin. There are two options for a transgender woman like myself: my chest or my groin. The former indicates breasts on a man. The latter a woman with a penis.

"No, I'm fine being patted down here," I say, disappointed by the ordeal but relieved that I was gendered female by the agent who was presented with two buttons on the scanner. One with a pink background, the other blue. I have taken to wearing shirts that I know will result in the scanner indicating a false positive to eschew suspicion that the genitalia I was born with is incongruent with the expectations of the software coded by some government-contracted technology company.

I sink away, grabbing my shoes and laptop from the conveyer. I search for the nearest café, ready to forget about this entire encounter. A few weeks ago, I decided on my new name. I have told several people already, but I want to give an update to many of my friends at once, avoiding coming out hundreds of times. As I sip a lukewarm Americano, I tap away at my phone's keyboard. I am drafting a long-form piece that avoids the traditional here's a life update, and instead proceeds like a work of fiction, trapped in

scene. I continue adding it to during the plane ride and over the coming days. Edits here and there, crafting a narrative of my trip that ends with a reveal of my new name. I sit in an Airbnb in Maine as I click “Post”, sending this story onto my Facebook page for all to read.

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Facebook – *the* social media network – has seeped into the public imaginary. With over two billion active monthly users, it is hard to escape its firm grasp. Even if one doesn’t have a Facebook, they know about it. Facebook’s mission, according to their investors’ site, “is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what’s going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them.” A central premise to actualizing this is for users to share “status updates” – generally pithy blurbs about their lives. A quick meander through my feed – the list of posts created, liked, and commented on by friends – shows myriad examples.

*It's Sunday night and I've been working this weekend. I don't have the time or energy for GOT. I love my priorities in life!*

*We signed a lease and are moving in on Wednesday. PM me for the address 😊 Also, schedule your trip to the mountains now. We'd love to host you! 😊*

*Frozen yogurt is nasty! Not the tasty stuff you find in the freezer case at Wegmans, I mean actual yogurt that froze because your new surplus refrigerator was set to “stun”.*

This world of User-Generated Media, as Guosong Shao described in a 2008 article, has reconfigured the way people consume information and interact with each other. Our interactions are mediated through a film of gratification – How many likes will my post get? Posts are made not only to connect with others, to build community, or to inform the world. Rather there is an often-subconscious undercurrent that plays into one’s innate desire to be liked and valued – the digital reassurance that people

are acknowledging you but more significantly are validating you and your thoughts. This forces the question “For whom do we share these statuses?” to be asked.

Several studies have been published discussing a related phenomenon called social media addiction. Kuss and Griffiths, some of the original authors on social media, conducted a literature review on excessive social media use. They note that “Nowadays, social networking does not necessarily refer to what we do, but who we are and how we relate to one another. Social networking can arguably be considered a way of being and relating.”

In 2006, *Time* magazine declared “You.” person of the year. By this they meant everyone who contributed to the digital revolution of user-generated content, such as Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace. The cover story written by Lev Grossman included:

“Look at 2006 through a different lens and you’ll see another story, one that isn’t about conflict or great men. It is a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before. It is about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia and the million-channel people’s network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace. It’s about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes.”

One would be hard pressed to find as positive an outlook towards the digital universe nowadays, expect maybe the board room of Facebook. Privacy, fake news, and the central idea of democracy have overwhelmed public and private discourse and the role of social media in perpetuating these. However, among the discourse and the growing number of people “unplugging” – removing themselves from digital platforms – there is a constant current of users sharing life updates from the mundane to the life-changing.

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I am anything but laconic, often bordering on a writing style described as incessant rambling. My Facebook posts are seldom under 300 words. I share much about my life, although I have never shared

what I just ate or my thoughts on a movie. My use of Facebook is narrowly tailored. I have made four posts in the past year. Each has been posted and written with a specific purpose – to share a major life update, event, or announcement or to congratulate a friend.

On June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018, I came out as transgender. My Facebook feed was not the first I told but provided me an outlet to come out in one-fell swoop – a technique I have used several times over. I announced my new name on August 18<sup>th</sup> of the same year. This later post was not written as most posts are – neither concise nor direct. Instead, it was a foray into an essay, before I even knew of it as a form. It began in medias res with me sitting in an airport, searching protections for transgender people in New York City. The reason for writing an unconventional Facebook post is not clear to me even now; though, it felt right in the moment.

Of course, I cannot help but compare the number of likes each of these posts have received. My coming out post, 285; 252 for my name change update. Am I an exhibitionist of my emotions? Is there a non-cynical outlook for the motivation to post personal details on a public platform?

In reflecting on what I have shared so far through this essay, have I not been an exhibitionist in a way already? I detail intimately my experience being trans and how I navigate such through the public. Perhaps I am trapped to only ever share my troubles and trauma. Or maybe I can only process my pain and struggles through launching them into the public sphere, making others confront in some way the same emotion that I deal with constantly. Is my writing forever one that is mediated through a lens of my discomfort?

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I am curious about the Facebook post as a genre. Perhaps it is too naïve to attempt the creation of an entire genre to encompass the entirety of the Facebook post. Maybe this basis is attempting to bring into discourse that which necessarily eschews it. As much as it may seem, this is not an essay about

Facebook. It investigates the human condition – the one of sharing. Not sharing of things but sharing of oneself.

I recall a comment made by my theatre teacher during my senior year of high school. She said that it was easier to act in a drama than a comedy. She explained that it is hard to overdo drama. Comedy, on the other hand, requires striking some balance that borders on being contrived and insincere. I think about this frequently, especially as I write this now.

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An acquaintance of mine once posted the following to their Facebook:

*The only escape is death at this point. I've never been this dead inside, but I feel like the pit only gets deeper. Everyday gets emptier and everyone blends into the background. The only relief is knowing my days are numbered.*

Who do you reach out when you feel like you have no one to turn to?

This person a few days later posted a photo of the Newport Cliff walk with the text “Goodbye.”

Cannot you only be an exhibitionist of emotion if there are voyeurs of the same?

Are there limits on what you can share?

I attempted suicide seven years ago.

Emotion comes from the French “émouvoir,” meaning to stir up, to affect, to disturb.