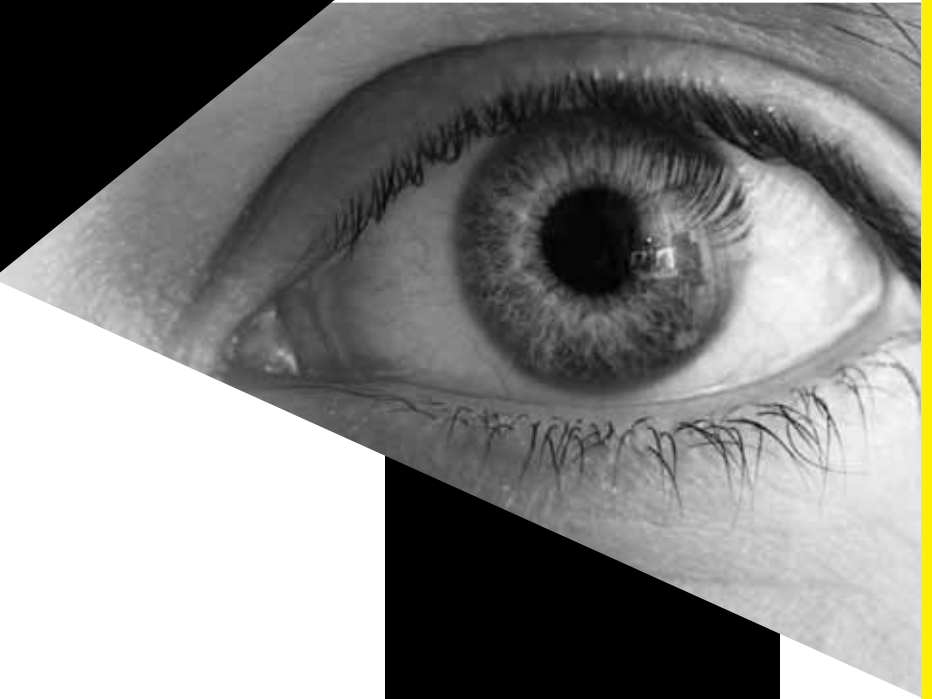


# complications



**t**he motions i perform each day seem rote, but they're riddled with pauses that betray the litany of doubts littering the background of my brain.

is my binding okay? wait, i'm not wearing a binder.† but i feel flat-chested... oh right, i had surgery: i don't need a binder anymore. but it does feel weird, cotton against skin.

i wore garments to bind my chest every day for eight years, and my sensory processing system got used to the deep compression. i feel normal (gender) and scattered (sensory) and un-tense (unbound) and fat (eating disorder) and sore (incisions).

i ask the mirror: does eyeshadow make me look like a girl? a cisgender†† girl, or a girly boy? what if i add eyeliner? it only stares at me, blank-faced.

mirrors are a classic feature in stories about body image, but not without reason. they tell me what furtive glances and outright stares from

strangers on the bus never completely let on.

if i wear my hair like this, will it compensate for the eye makeup? i hate myself when it parts in the middle. i don't know if it makes me look like a girl or a boy or if it just reminds me of how i wore my hair when

i was young and didn't know what to do with myself. when my body started changing and i stopped eating and people started taking me to doctors.

this is self-centered, selfish. do i really think about myself this much? don't i care about other people at all?

i shouldn't write this. i shouldn't sign my name.

again, the mirror: i'll make my hair messy, wet. but maybe i should just take off the eyeliner.

what's the point? either they're going to think i'm a boy or they're going to think i'm a girl or they're going to stare at me until i look up from my book with the tingly feeling of their eyes scanning my body up and down. buses, strewn throughout my day: why am i being stared at now? scars? size? gender? and don't i do this to myself enough? don't i run my eyes over my body more than enough times to outnumber all the strangers i'll ever see? it doesn't matter how they'll see my gender, they'll still see i'm fat.

self-centered? all i care about is myself? it can't be that i care about myself: if this is self-centered, it's self-hate. self harm, self image, body image, body hate. but it doesn't have to be. remember? recovery?

mirrors tell me, if not what i look like, then what i think i look like. there lingers the pointlessness of the reflection, the strange way it makes me leave my body. you'd think

twenty-six years would be long enough for me to have learned how to inhabit myself. standing in front of the mirror clarifies nothing and confuses everything. and yet i carry it with me the rest of the day; the inside of my skull reflecting against itself like the mirrored walls of a ballet studio.

the mirror only reflects disguise over disguise over disguise. there seems to be no number of layers that approximates my self and no number i can peel away that would reveal me, either. taking off my boots and cargo shorts at the end of the day feels more like putting ON drag: the barefoot walk between my closet and my bed feels like someone else's shoes. like my body, stripped, is hiding something from me.

i hide, i've hidden: self-injury under bracelets, and tattoos under concealer... i've hidden my chest from myself for years, and now that it's better, it turns out i have a belly underneath those old binders. but i don't know how to hide my belly away except to hide the chocolate on the top shelf and the leftovers in the garbage can. i have to eat breakfast. (it's hard to hide from hunger.)

but first i have to take my meds, even if i don't feel like it - pills, like pink and blue candy. i know they calm my thoughts. but are these what made me fat

in the first place? or, is blaming them just an attempt to absolve my guilt? i'm not supposed to feel guilty for eating; i'm not supposed to feel guilty for having made myself fat. but maybe i'm not fat? or maybe it's okay if i am?

when i can't make myself eat breakfast, i drink a nutrition shake like i promised. i write it down in my food log - amount, appetite, time, place. i promised. even to myself.

still, all i want to be is skinny and less gendered. how is it that my basic drive for authenticity got tangled up with these haunting notions of emaciation? it doesn't matter. i just want to be skinny.

and yet, somehow, i'm trying to recover. i'm trying to learn how to care about myself, remember? to care for myself. and, yes. that's why i bound and that's why i got surgery and that's why i drink nutrition shakes when i can't get myself to eat and that's why i fight the mirror every morning so i don't have to fight the strangers on the bus: it's self-care. it's why i go to treatment. it isn't easy, and, i can do it.

it's recovery: fighting the mirrors of my mind for my sanity, for my life, for my body. twenty-six years in, realizing i have a right to be inside myself. i can do everything i can to keep away from my body, to reign myself in and keep cover in my brain and layer on clothes and avoid the mirror, but i still have a right to inhabit my tangible self. if, and when, i get there... my body will be waiting for me.

### AUTHOR

e\* *corbin* is a trans/nongender young person who works at a nonprofit in portland, oregon. they recently (finally!) had gender-affirming surgery, and they currently attend an eating disorders treatment program. e\* values both their scars and their recovery.

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† in this piece, the word binder refers to a tight-fitting undershirt that flattens breast tissue.

†† cisgender is a descriptor of people who identify with the sex they were born as (i.e., people who are not gender variant), and drag to imply forms of gender expression (clothes and beyond) that push the edges of the expected.