

Bottle Blonde

PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

Lillie Markel, Grade 12, Fine Arts Center, Greenville, SC.
Sarah Blackman, *Educator*; Region-at-Large, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **Best-in-Grade Award**

1. Though the line between adulthood and childhood is arbitrary—some can name the moment they lost their innocence, some never lose it at all—I wanted to make one decision for myself before I turned eighteen. The waters had to be tested. There was oil skimming the surface of my glass and I needed them to mix. I needed a concoction of unique measurements. I chose to bleach my hair as if I'd just had my heart broken. I made two consecutive trips to my local Sally Beauty, too scared to ask the employees for help. I've never been a studier, and I didn't research my materials very well. I borrowed my oldest friend for an afternoon after school to perform the sacrifice on my scalp. She'd bleached her hair the summer before.

2. There is a lot to say about blondes: blondes have more fun, dumb blonde, gentlemen prefer blondes.

3. I can say the night the idea was planted in my mind was during a showing of *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), which is all too common in my household. Leonardo diCaprio is sitting on his trailer steps, in his exile from fair Verona. The setting sun washes everything in yellow. He seems old, he seems timeless, if not for the cigarette poking out of his mouth and the gaudy blue Hawaiian shirt, he could be some relic of the past, some Thinker on his stoop. Balthasar arrives with the news of Juliet's death, as a thousand Balthasars have said of a thousand Juliet and Romeo sheds his thousandth tear, but in this iteration they tussle. This time Romeo is stripped in his grief. The buttons pop open, revealing a bandage stuck to his side. He falls to the ground. But my focus was not on Romeo's loss, only his chest. It felt pornographic to me, that Romeo need not worry about the buttons of his shirt or modesty and that I could not have the same. I wanted to be Leonardo diCaprio in that moment more than I'd ever wanted to be anyone; not for his money, his power, his good

looks, but for the flat plain of his chest, golden in the sun. As I hated him, it ceased to be a tragedy at all.

4. I go to the same hairdresser as my mother. Every time I come in she says I should be a model and I have such pretty hair. She wants her tip. I was still thinking about Leonardo diCaprio. I studied the men I saw. I tried to determine what made them so clearly masculine. What were the little intricacies of the face, the differences in the body, that meant people knew I was a woman from even a distance? I showed my hairdresser a few photos of what I wanted, all men, all in the hopes that if there was some difference in how hairdressers approached women's and men's hair, she'd give me the masculine treatment.

5. There's a picture of me about a month after the cut, in a camp dorm room, my glasses tipped towards the end of my nose. I took it because I was bored. I remember looking back at that photo and feeling ashamed. *I don't look like a boy, I look like a mean lesbian*. It didn't matter that at that time I thought I was a lesbian. A cut wasn't enough to give me what I wanted.

6. I couldn't say when the weight loss began. But I can say for certain it wasn't immediately tied intrinsically to gender. I think it began with comparison. For my Physics final project, we calculated work and power for certain exercises we completed. We weighed ourselves using a Newton scale, so no one would know anyone else's weight. But I could see how many more Newtons I was than the other girls in our group. I felt ashamed by how much space I took up.

7. When something is repetitious, it becomes addictive. It was so comforting to count the calories, to make them add up to the smallest number. I felt so successful when the scale reported a lower

number than the day before, like I was really contributing something. It's impossible to unlearn. I still catch myself counting, running through the meals in my mind, to come in under budget. I have to remind myself I can order what I want, not the item with the lowest number, not the item I know I won't like, so I have an excuse to not finish it.

8. I'm in the car with a girl I once admitted to being in love with. She's telling me I'm "big." "I'm not telling you you're fat," she says. "You're just big." She points at my thighs. It's true, they're much bigger than hers.

9. The same evening she calls me big, the girl brushes her hand over mine. We're in an Italian restaurant. I'm trying not to eat more than her. We order the same meal. I think I called her beautiful because she leans over slightly. "This is coming from you?" she asks. "My Venus." She was consistently inconsistent.

10. When my mother first commented on me losing weight, I was terrified. I was afraid she'd believe I was unhealthy and take the bathroom scale away. I didn't know what I would do without that scale, without knowing my weight. I fantasized about where I would go, about purchasing scales in secret. When I came back from a camp, where I wasn't able to weigh for a week, the first moment I was alone, I reached for the scale. It was dead. I tore through the basement, looking for button batteries, with the frenzy of a smoker searching for a lost cigarette.

11. I first felt shame when I came out of my room in a bra and my mother sighed. She said I needed new bras. I didn't understand. "Your boobs shrank," she said. "They did?" "What do you think happens when you lose weight?" It was a bittersweet moment. If my chest was shrinking, that was better, that was what I wanted, but the half of me that was still feminine began to cry. She was unhappy with the loss of my curves, with the shrinking of my chest, she felt as if her femininity was being stripped away. Why? So I could be happier sometimes? When I felt masculine, I could never be satisfied because I would never have a man's body, and now I felt dissatisfied as a woman. There were some days when I didn't want to tear off my breasts, when I was happy with

them.

12. When I realized I would still not be happy, were I born a man, the war within myself truly began. In my dreams I was a man, but he was always seeking femininity, he too wanted both, and he too felt his masculinity was suffering in the grasp for an unreachable goal.

13. I'm in the car, I've pulled into a Lidl parking lot so I can cry on the phone to my best friend about how I hate my chest, about how I wish I was a man, even though I know it would fix nothing. She tells me she can get me a binder. That's too real for me. That's something to hide. That's me accepting this wouldn't just go away on its own.

14. The girl from before, the one in the Italian restaurant, was the only person I knew who could understand how I felt because she was going through the same thing. The only time we ever discussed it in depth, I was wearing a full-length skirt and a full face of makeup. I felt like a liar. I'd begun to dress like a liar. I'd dress like a girl when I felt like a boy, either because I feared someone would notice or because I was trying to trick myself. We were the same. The problem was we weren't outside the gender binary either, we were ricocheting back and forth across it.

15. What does any of it mean? "Like a girl?" "Like a boy?" What's the difference? The more I try to peel them apart the more they stick together.

16. The girl from the Italian restaurant was my first kiss. She was lost when it came to her own sexuality. She told me months after the kiss, while we ate Wendy's Frosties, that the reason she kissed so many girls was because she felt like she ought to be into women. All her friends were gay. She felt like there was something off about her. What else could it be? When she kissed me, she repeated again and again "This isn't a mistake. This isn't a mistake." only to call it a lapse in judgement a few days later. I told her she was so pretty. I remember the streetlights reflected in her eyes. "So are you," she said. When she dropped me off at my house, she kissed me again. It was the first time in years someone told me I was beautiful and I believed

them. I had her kiss as a testament. She lied about so many things that night and I couldn't stand the idea that she lied when she called me pretty. I know when she told me all this, with Wendy's Frosty sticking to her fingers because she was trying to apologize for her kiss without apologizing. I accepted her explanation. I couldn't explain that the kiss and following rejection didn't hurt near as much as the months where she refused to talk to me.

17. As the day my best friend was going to leave for college crept closer, I realized I was going to lose my one chance to get a binder without my parents knowing. I was out to my parents, I had been for years, but even I didn't understand how I felt about my gender. It's difficult to explain something you don't understand. I turned to trans and nonbinary creators online. I learned about the restrictions of using a binder. They could only be worn for so long and they could damage breast tissue. I didn't want my breast tissue damaged when half the time I liked my boobs alright. I settled on tape designed for binding. My friend made the order, and I promised to pay her back. It was stressful, waiting for the package to come, knowing that my friend was leaving for college, that the order was delayed, that there was a possibility I wouldn't get it at all. But it arrived just in time. I took the package and hid it in my closet for weeks before I was willing to try it. Now that I had it, nothing felt so urgent.

18. Binding was not as natural as I thought it would be. The tape had to be laid correctly. The first time I did it, I tried to move the tape after I'd already stuck it, which destroyed the adhesive. I wasted so much tape. I was scared to do too well, to become so flat my parents would notice. I was trying to keep up a precedent and have what I wanted at the same time. I wondered if I even needed anyone else to acknowledge the difference. Maybe it was such a personal expression, that I was the only person who needed to notice the flatness of my chest. And because it was personal, I didn't feel ashamed. And because it was so personal, I was worried about the unnecessary drama that would ensue, were it to be discovered.

19. I tore myself away from the weight loss when I realized it was never going to end. The mantra of five

more pounds just five more pounds just five more pounds and you'll be happy this time was cyclical. I hate how it feels like I have no control now. But I had less control then. I was letting an idea consume me. I wasn't eating and I let myself be eaten.

20. I'm standing in the crummy Dilliard's dressing room, throwing various dresses at my body, hoping one will catch. My chest isn't bound. I can see in these dresses how little cleavage I have. I feel like I'm less of a woman. I feel utterly feminine. So feminine, I wonder why they hell I did all this.

21. Back to Leonardo diCaprio. He's running through the streets. He's wild in his grief. Now he's beside the false corpse of Juliet. Romeo dies right as Juliet opens her eyes. Their eyes meet like Orpheus and Eurydice. Romeo's heart stops. Thank God, I think. Thank God he's dead.

22. Romeo continued to haunt me. A frequent ghost throughout everything I did. I thought about what made him a man. What made that man a man, not just any man. I noticed his hair, dirty blonde in color. An objectively ugly haircut, on any other head. Somehow, I had the idea that if I changed something obvious, I could look at the rest of my body through new lenses. I bought bleach.

23. I could see how nervous my mother was about the bleach. I could see how nervous my friend was, who I had roped into doing my hair. They hid it well. It was an hours' long metamorphosis. We were on the phone with the girl from the Italian restaurant, the entire time. She'd just settled into college. For a time, she sat on the phone in silence, as if she too were afraid to hang up. We haven't really talked since.

24. I was invited to the movies during the bleaching session by a boy I didn't know well. On the drive to the theater, I got lost. My predominating thoughts were:

- a. The blonde has already affected me. I can't drive anymore.
- b. Why do I care so much about this guy? Why am I driving around at 10 o'clock at night to go see him?

25. I watched Cabin in the Woods with this same guy a few weeks later. In it, the “dumb-blonde” archetype is literally having her IQ lowered by her hair dye.

26. That boy, of course, became my boyfriend. I learned I was wrong about being a lesbian. When I didn’t look at men with only envy, I realized there was desire there too.

27. I admitted I was once in love with the girl from the Italian restaurant during a late-night game of Truth or Dare at the last night of a summer camp. It was probably about 3 o’clock at night. I was so tired I felt like I was drunk. I was 3 o’clock drunk. A girl turned to me for Truth.

Truth: Have you ever been in love?

“Yes.”

Truth: What was her name?

“How did you know it was a girl?”

Truth: You had that look in your eyes.

I think that was when I knew I was finally over her.

1. My grandparents were oh-so-pleased I was blonde. I think they thought it made me beautiful. They were oh-so-pleased that I lost weight as well. I looked “good,” they said. I’m a bottle blonde. Does that mean I’m false?

2. One of my favorite book series of all time is the Vampire Chronicles, by Anne Rice. There’s a lot to say about Anne Rice. She used to say things during interviews that made sense to me, about how the main character Lestat became representative of herself. About how she got to live vicariously as a man through him. Lestat’s mother, Gabrielle, is a minor character in the series. In the second book, she is turned into a vampire, to save her from death. She cuts her hair, she dons men’s clothes. As a vampire, she’s finally removed from a society that made her feel unwanted. But vampires cannot change, they are stuck exactly as they died. Every night, when she rises from a coffin or the earth, her hair is returned to the same length it was before. If she wanted to pass as a man, she had to cut it, again and again, every night. There was such a simple tragedy in that. What does it matter, if she’s a vampire, if she’s already removed from society, to look masculine? Because she has the freedom to.

Because she has to see herself in the mirror. Unlike Dracula, Rice’s vampires don’t lose their reflection.

3. I call myself a woman, I define myself as a woman. I don’t believe that binding my chest makes me less of one. I don’t see those ideas as contradictory. I see it as a personal expression of the masculine parts of my identity. I think the issue is I was taught that femininity is the absence of masculinity and masculinity is the absence of femininity.

4. Twelve hours before a party where I’m planning to wear a low-cut dress, I’m sitting in front of my mirror, using the tape to give my breasts a slight lift. It wasn’t made for this purpose, but it works in a pinch. It feels like using makeup to look more masculine. It feels like a conversation between aspects of gender.

5. Peeling the tape off is painful. It feels like ripping away my own skin, no matter how much liquid I use, to destroy the adhesive. I walk away from it, burned and rashed, a physical reminder that I am unhappy with my body. I’m trying not to think of me and my body in war. I’m trying to think of us as allies, who know sacrifice is sometimes necessary.

6. I want to confess. But my feelings would cause consternation. I feel like I’m lying to my straight boyfriend, but I’m so scared of how he’ll view the binding. I wish my parents knew. What is there to say? Maybe nothing. But it’s the restriction that bruises. I have no secrets, except the ones too complicated to explain. ■