2 Shower thoughts – of loss and queer love

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The hot beads of water hit my body as I relish the steamy shower, feeling every bit of warmth, seeking some sort of gentle comfort. I get lost in my lucid imagination and thoughts that offer beautiful distractions from the darkness that creeps on me. I'm in the shower for five to ten minutes before feeling that melancholy, though I try my best to put up invisible liquid barriers. I continue in the shower, losing track of my time in this blissful heat, though it's a steamy charade. The sadness begins to fill the void like clockwork, though the hot beads ease the feelings that are beginning to lurk in my mind. I think about how my sleeping schedule got utterly fucked during this pandemic. There are no rules for sleep, so I do what I think is reasonable in terms of these chaotic times. With no work or school to keep me in a routine, I sadly drift into a depressive state hovering above a quiet existence. My friends and family know me to be colourful, vibrant, and that sort. I'm always doing something, especially putting much effort into whatever job that I am holding or university that I am attending. But my world has gone quiet. Not even the crickets chirp, making the sadness in my soul rise up to tears listlessly stuck to the edges of my eyes. I go back to the warmth of my shower as I think about this pandemic, but other thoughts rise up.

I knew being gay was a difficult journey, but I found it even harder when dealing with my last relationship which exposed my deep-rooted loneliness knotted with loss and love. Yes, the relationship carries weight in both loss and love, but the issues go deeper than what I had encountered with my ex-boyfriend Ryan. As I sit in the shower, it comes to me again in a sad, wispy voice from the obscure corridors of my mind. I feel it as though clutching a wooden rosary in my hand, absolving whatever sins that I hold. I silently pray to divine spirits hiding in the downfall of water. I hope they hear me. The hot water continues to furiously beat down, and it's here in this glorious warmth of the shower that my mind slowly wanders to a black veil. I feel the lingering aura of death in my presence. The loss of my father creeps from the back of my mind. I am reminded that he will not be physically present for the rest of my life. I am reminded that he will not be around to meet my same-sex partner, meaning that he is not around to fully embrace my queer identity. I am reminded that he is gone. The shower thoughts come in

full force, leaving only the warmth as a shield in what feels like chaos raging in my mind.

My father's death cheated me out of fully coming out to him, and that opens deep emotional wounds that have been repressed. A flashback to me getting a call from my mom while I was living abroad enters the stage of my mind. She tells me that it's time for me to come home to say goodbye to my dad. He's on life support and there is talk of removing his breathing tube. I give a sad, hopeless sigh in response to the news. He was dying, and there was nothing that anyone or any medical miracle could do. Returning to Corpus Christi, Texas, was difficult. I don't know whether this place is a town or a city, it just sits on the coast. But thank god I left. There I was rushing my mother to be at the hospital by my father's side with my mind feeling heavier every second. The world felt like a blur in my eyes, a tunnel vision that only sought to be in my father's presence. I got to the hospital, which felt very familiar at this point given that my dad was in and out throughout the majority of my life. All the diabetic seizures, amputations, blindness, and kidney failure scares led to this final, tearful episode. It was nearing midnight when I finally saw my dad in his hospital bed. I remember the beeping sounds from machines indicating my father's vital signs. It became very real knowing that I would never fully be myself as an out, proud, queer individual to my dad. There was so much to say, but my dad was leaving us.

The shower blazes on with warm water hitting my face as though tears are forming. I can smell the peppermint from my Harry's shampoo wash over me, caressing my brown skin as it finds its way to the drain. I feel myself in my body with the roundness of my stomach feeling heavy. I embrace my curves under the lather of the soap in some sort of comfort, as though hugging myself. I feel the heartache as I continue to remember. It came time to remove his breathing tube, which caused a commotion of tears, pain, and sadness in the eyes of my family. The removal was quick and easy, but it made the air around my dad's hospital bed difficult to breathe. I was choking on my own tears and sobs. I stayed by my father's side till the very end, feeling this surreal trauma as though rose thorns were piercing my bleeding heart. I remember crying and chatting with him as if he was still there. He stared at me with such focus but couldn't utter any words. When I asked him if he could hear me and he responded yes with a blink, I broke down crying because I had so much to say before he left. My father passed early on a cool January morning with the sun shining gloriously over the glistening bay. I stared at my dad resting in eternal sleep. His body, the hospital bed, the blue walls, all became a portrait that sits in my mind. I still hoped that maybe this wasn't real – that maybe, just maybe, he would wake up. So much was left unsaid, but there was no changing the hard truth. It was a scratching thought that found a corner of my mind in which to fester. I had barely been comfortable with being out to my father, not fully knowing if he was accepting of my queer identity. Later, my mother would console me and say that my dad loved me no matter what. This made the sentiment even

harder because I also realised that my dad would never have the opportunity to meet a boyfriend of mine. It feels as though I have been robbed of some affirmation of my gay identity, knowing that my dad will not be introduced to any of my potential partners. I was closeted for the first 19 years of my life, barely feeling free when I had the chance to go to university in a different city. My father and I grew distant for various reasons, especially because of my fear that he would not come to terms with my sexual identity. Our Hispanic culture was riddled with toxic masculinity and machismo complexes that were harmful towards men if they show emotions or anything that hints at femininity. Not being a 'man' would ostracise me from my culture and have me ridiculed by my family and friends. It was only a couple of years before he passed that I could openly talk to my dad about my problems with dating men. It wasn't until after he passed that I met my first boyfriend in a country far from home where I could somewhat escape the reality of losing my father. But that loss left an impervious stain on my soul, and there is no removing that.

My dad's absence left a void in me and my queer identity. However, it didn't take away my chance to be vulnerable with someone and capable of having an intimate relationship with another individual. True, this was a painful loss, but I could feel something else enter the space as the warm shower droplets expressed past events. I find my ex-boyfriend in the mix of warmth and steam. My mind focuses on a guy who made my heart feel joy with his radiant smile and vibrant eyes. I know Ryan to be sincere and warmhearted with his delightful boyish manner. He is definitely the complement to my dark, witchy, vibrant self. Ryan brought balance as though we were the sun and the moon, creating remarkable feelings of euphoria. I can't help but get giddy whenever I'm around him. He was my second boyfriend that I had the chance of being with when I returned from living abroad. I had known Ryan prior to my departure, and a year later, he was still around. I left him with a kiss which was heartbreaking, but now we had a chance to be together. Things were fantastic during our happy relationship, but I could feel the distance between us growing. Our relationship was filled with much laughter, humorous sarcasm, academic wittiness, many lovely hugs, outdoor walks, and memorable dates. His passion for his field and future in his career were a driving force that gave him the undeniable spark to succeed. It was admirable to love someone who cared so much about their work. Then, Ryan told me that he was moving away from the city that we shared. This news shattered me and left me in an almost inconsolable state when I saw the text message.

Ryan and I began to grow distant at an alarming rate. One day I was utterly infatuated with him, and then the next I was planning on breaking up with him. It finally came in the form of a text message that I created. It was alarming for me as I didn't expect myself to choose to break up with my partner via text. I prefer to communicate in person regarding these personal matters, but Ryan was beyond distant from me. We didn't talk for

two weeks prior to my breakup message. It was a difficult time for me as it felt like I lost the air in my lungs. Breathing felt heavy when I thought about making contact with Ryan. I put off messaging Ryan with excuses, but the silence was growing into this monster that was strangling me. It was time to end the stillness between us and address the broken hearts. This was all horrible, even more so as the pandemic had just started isolating me in my apartment where I would sit with these thoughts of heartbreak and loneliness. The steam in the shower becomes heavy, just like my thoughts.

The COVID-19 pandemic was like Pandora's box being opened across the United States. I live in Austin, Texas, and wow, did things take a turn for the worse. One could feel the uneasy nature of fear and anxiety lingering in the air. There was too much noise on social media and from untrustworthy sources that only heightened the intensity of the situation. The world was not safe outside my cosy walls, yet my world was not inviting due to the venomous feelings that remained. I felt loneliness, anger, and so many other dark feelings when I broke up with Ryan. I was a mess because I felt like I wasn't enough for this person who I poured my heart into. I already have this self-conscious, self-loathing perception of myself that mostly focuses on my body image. This is especially true with my relationship to the gay community. In this context, I allude to the gay community that exists here in Austin. This occurs as I've had most of my experiences in gay culture in this environment, though this is not to say that these experiences have been limited to here only. Furthermore, I would like to make clear my use of the words 'gay' and 'queer' in relation to my gender and sexual identity. These words within my identity are fluid in adapting to where I find myself. It is okay to be me in the way that I see fit and feel comfortable with, depending on the space and place.

In my perception, the gay culture that surrounds me in Austin seems to heavily focus on body image in an almost unhealthy, toxic manner. This does seem universal when I see social media posts regarding the issue from various other perspectives, and in this case, I am sharing my own experience with my own voice. I scroll on gay apps such as Grindr and Growlr that are centred around the various body types of gay men. The applications themselves let you advertise your body type in order to draw attention from other men that are attracted to what you have to offer. There are even labels that help define gay men from 'twink' to 'masc' and from 'otter' to 'bear' (with the likelihood of the whole animal kingdom in between). There are so many labels and cliques that I can clearly see the divide in the community. It's the divide that I feel uncomfortable with, as it pressures me into creating and finding a gay label that will define me. But I don't want to be defined by those labels. I am myself.

I think about how exhausting gay dating apps can be for a person like me. Gay apps reinforce men to be highly superficial in selecting a guy as though they were a prime choice of butchered meat from the market. I would suggest picking candy, but I see many of these men dare not touch the sweetness

for the sake of glorified fitness. Yes, innumerable gay men are obsessed with ripped bodies with glistening abs as the hard-driven sex appeal gives them a boner for the thoughts of physical activities engaged in bed or wherever their pleasure can be met. It reminds me of my investigation into sexual objectification that gay men encounter, where our bodies are objects in the eyes of men. It's almost as though our lips are shut, our voices are silent, our thoughts are ignored, and our eyes stare vacantly. The gay culture surrounding me craves the sweat of the dripping hot body of an Adonis thinking only of the physical aspects of the man, leaving him nothing more than represented as a piece of meat. They all want that hard succulent meat. This objectification reminds me of a grand marble statue, smooth to the touch and beautiful to gaze upon, but not offering much of the splendours of the soul, or perhaps a mind, to connect with. I also sadly think that this sexual objectification of gay men leads us to being boy toys that can easily be tossed when our usefulness has met its end. I want to break this cycle. I want to break this negative thinking. But then, I wonder if this was true of gay relationships? Did Ryan find me useless as our relationship came to an end? Was I expendable? I feel my heavy breaths in the heat of the shower as my mind sinks. It's a thought that haunts me, given my low self-esteem. I want to be validated for my presence and how much I matter to this person, but it's hard thinking that way when I feel that I am not worthy to be in a relationship, given my own doubts of body image.

I'm tired of debasing myself for the sake of forming an attachment with a man. It feels as though my gorgeous brown love handles were a big fat 'no' in a community obsessed with looks. I would be defined as a chub, and in some cases, that is too fat for chat – or even friendship – in the gay culture around me. I wasn't some beautiful chiselled gym rat with a six-pack. I wasn't some beautiful, blue-eyed white boy. (Oh yes, racism also exists in the gay community.) The shower feels intense as my thoughts rage on. Shockingly, I thought Austin, Texas, would be more at ease and liberal, but the gay community was just as harsh. I've been beaten by so many words that it's hardened me to where I don't seek to fit in. I sadly avoid the community because I don't want unnecessary battles, especially living in a world where so many other issues call for my attention. I know what I've felt and experienced. It leads me to feeling othered by the gay community. This isn't necessarily bad, as I've been inspired to find my own following, my own love, my own circle, my own culture, and my own family. This path has allowed me to explore my own queer identity where I feel comfortable. Despite the lack of connection with the gay community, a part of me identifies as gay, in that I want to be with a man. And that man was Ryan.

The heat of the water feels like the fire that I have for him. I yearn for Ryan's warmth and love as I didn't think I would find a guy to love me for my body and my winning personality. I remember being intimate with Ryan and I was afraid of showing him my body as I told him, 'I'm fat'. Ryan looked at me lovingly and responded that he didn't care. He wanted me.

Do you know how it feels to be wanted like that? I feel like it's hard for someone trapped in a body like mine to find romance and that real love that makes your heart rightly skip a beat. I felt undeserving of love given that I didn't care about my body like all those Instagram male models posting their thirst traps of their rock-hard bodies in sensual poses. In all honesty, I find pleasure going through Instagram hitting the 'like' button on these very sexual and seductive photos. It's captivating, as these men are horribly attractive, but it comes to my realisation that all these 'likes' are for validation and even for monetary gain to have people support them, such as on OnlyFans (a job marketplace that has emerged for social media influencers during the global pandemic). I give these men my validation that their bodies are beautiful and worthy of my attention, but I wonder if the reverse would be true for me. I then think that this type of validation is stupid as I begin to unfollow the Instagram pages belonging to these men. It's unhealthy and toxic. But I find myself following new pages and giving new 'likes', as I am stuck in a cycle of worshipping men. My depression beckons me that I will never have someone because I don't have the muscles, the six-pack, nor do I post my efforts in the gym on social media. I feel truly and utterly hideous at times, but then I show a goofy, carefree smile in the mirror or in my frontal camera on my phone to show that a part of me still has life to give. In that, I find comfort, and I feel the love that Ryan once gave me.

A month and a half into quarantine, I finally reach out to Ryan as the pandemic seems to spin in a very dangerous direction. I worry about Ryan, as my love for him did not waver. He responds to my text that he is elated to hear from me. We set up a date to talk in person in a safe socially distanced manner. The day comes and I have butterflies in my stomach. I kept thinking if I looked cute enough for Ryan. I hadn't seen him in person for months. Would he still like me? Would he still care? When he arrives, it's as though nothing had really changed when things were good. My nervousness fades in the warmth of his aura. We were back to being our goofy, lovable selves before the breakup. We have the healthiest talk we ever had in expressing our feelings. No longer fearing the emotions that came from the breakup, we became reconnected in a way that strengthened our relationship with each other.

Communication is vital to a relationship, and we both failed that aspect towards the end of our relationship, but now we are able to use our words to be there for each other in this moment. The loneliness faded when I was in Ryan's warm presence. Truly, I was giddy once again when I saw the flash of his eyes and heard his laughter. I didn't feel any of the toxic nonsense that came from the standards or pressured norms of the gay community. All I felt was Ryan in that moment, and that felt eternal.

Nothing is ever truly perfect, but the feelings are euphoric in the moment. It's like a drug that keeps you wanting more and more till you can't feel anything but the high of happiness. I wanted to stay in that high. My connection to Ryan is blissful, though it is not impeccable. Sometimes, I don't

get responses from Ryan, which makes me feel inadequate and less than myself. Silence hurts. Though I know he is busy, and we have our own lives to live. He's not my boyfriend currently and he may never be again, but our bond does have warmth and a cute, queer love. My thoughts circle back to Ryan meeting my mother. This was the first boyfriend that my mum met. It was truly a happy moment for me, but in my mind, I still wished that my dad had been around. I don't know if wanting my dad around is to help me validate my identity, or to have him around because I miss him, or a mixture of both. It's hard to process these feelings and thoughts because the interpretations are lucid at times, but then they are muddled in darkness at other moments. This is even more relevant now as I deal with higher levels of loneliness inspired by the current pandemic. This state of isolation has become a mirror of facing hard truths, tough self-reflections, and ugly thoughts that have been repressed due to the distractions of life that were present before COVID-19 decided to wreck 2020. I grow weary of the once-pleasurable shower. I still smell the peppermint from my shampoo. It's time to get out.

It's nearing 4 a.m. and I'm staring at myself in the bathroom mirror. Steam covers it from the hot shower where I've been getting my warmth. The shower did help to alleviate and ease my emotions in turmoil as I often find myself feeling the pressure of my anxiety encircling my head as though it was being poked by a crown of rose thorns. I feel all right, but I see something that wouldn't indicate that. My eyes are red from crying. I look at myself loathing my body image because of the toxic stigmas that gay culture feeds me. But that's not completely it. I harbour pain from feelings of loneliness and being unwanted from my last relationship. But no, I dig deeper. Tears well up in my eyes. I feel it now. I am haunted by this void that pierces my soul. I feel the loss of my dad as well. To lose my dad was to lose a part of myself where the connection has been severed. There is an unexplainable emptiness that I can't grasp that has an inexplicable power to muster all the negative emotions. It becomes a faint stabbing in the heart. The tears are streaming down again.

I look in the mirror with my brown irises and skin. I sweep my hair to the side instinctively. I see myself broken, staring at this reflection. But at least I see myself. Loneliness, depression, anxiety, and loss are one hell of a cocktail that causes a lot of harm if left unchecked. It doesn't help that a pandemic is existing at this moment. The world I know is changing, but in these tears, I find hope that maybe something good will come from all this unprecedented upheaval. Despite feeling the daily exhaustion of my dance with loneliness, love, loss, and pain, I know that I will persevere. Even if this fearful darkness surrounds me, I am a fire not easily extinguished. I have resilience in my bones. It also helps that Ryan is still in my life with regular communication that combats loneliness and aids with some self-affirmation. That thought warms me. A little smile appears on my face in this mirror. I'm reminded of those good feelings of love with hints of laughter. Caught

in this moment of bliss, I find the strength to look at this reflection of myself and see that maybe I am enough.

Making sense of this experience

This writing process was a reflective journey that captured pivotal moments of my life, along with the emotions intertwined with those events. It took time to envision the course of connecting these events together. One night I had an epiphany before a shower. In this moment, I was drawn to discuss the loss of my father along with my relationship experiences during the pandemic. The shower became my safe space to connect my various episodes and emotions while being at ease when discussing difficult topics.

The focus on my father's passing is significant to me as it allows me to connect to my culture. Death is honoured in my Hispanic traditions through holidays, festivals, and shrines where the dead are celebrated and remembered (Desai, 2020, p. 775). Personally, death has become easier to cope with in the respect that my lost loved ones are still being kept alive in spirit. Research has shown that Mexican-American families maintain a bond with the deceased through 'dreams, storytelling, keepsakes, a sense of presence, faith-based connections, proximity connections, ongoing rituals, and pictorial remembrances' (Doran and Hansan, 2006, p. 206), where there is no mention of closure or moving on from those lost. I resonate with these findings, as I still dream about my father and find myself asking for his spiritual guidance on decisions. He still feels very much here in my presence, allowing me to connect with that loss.

Culture also influenced my gay/queer identity through the lens of being out to my dad and dealing with *machismo*. Traditional *machismo* marginalises queer Latino men (Duran and Pérez, 2017, p. 1151) with threats of non-acceptance and negative reactions from the family (Gattamorta et al., 2019, p. 157–158). This was a fear that I had, with my father potentially rejecting my queer identity leading to this coming out crisis and the dread of not having him meet my partner. This is a fear that lived with me until his passing and still has a hold over me.

Beyond the scope of loss and culture, I discuss my feelings of being othered in the gay community where I find myself disconnecting from the scene where gay apps glorify sex and labels (Zervoulis et al., 2020, p. 97) and encourage sexual objectification (Kane, 2010, p. 315). This leads into my relationship with Ryan, where exploring the queer love between us felt invigorating in that it was a first for me discussing a personal relationship with such intimacy in writing. The work by Harris (2016, p. 34) helps me explain how genderqueer experiences such as mine break out of the traditional mould and 'surrender to unfixity' whereupon I transcend beyond the binary with my queer love for Ryan. It's like seeing myself adapting to spaces with my identity, shifting to what is comfortable at the moment and feels appropriate to me.

In conclusion, the process of writing this piece was surprisingly refreshing, as I was able to reflect deeply about what had occurred. Throughout the development, I acknowledged that my feelings gave me inspiration to write and view this journey as a self-portrait that according to Nuñez (2009, p. 57) is a ‘particularly powerful way of expressing feelings and emotions’. With reflection, I allowed myself to let my emotions guide me in seeing that even a simple shower could turn out to be so much more.

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