

This is a love letter.

This is a love letter to [The Girl Who Used to Braid My Hair Whenever She Could and I Would Let Her, Linking Thick Strands of Beautiful, Familiar Black Down My Back] from choir, freshman year, a pansexual girl who, on multiple occasions, wore kigurumis like jackets to school.

In its pages, you will find a reminiscence of November of 2013, of a bus ride to an audition site. She sat next to me, and I thought she was so cool because she was a *senior*. We talked about girls, and she told me she had her first kiss when she was sixteen—kissing a girl quick in the library. She complained about wanting a girlfriend, and when I jokingly offered myself (before I knew I wasn't a girl), she laughed and patted me on the head and told me I was too young.

Freshman year, she used to tug me along when I didn't yet know I needed tugging—she took me to her lunch table with her and hugged me when she saw me in the hallway and complimented me in choir when no one else was going to, even when I definitely deserved it, always making unconscious efforts at uncurling my fingers snapped shut and afraid from middle school. She was the first friend I made in high school, and she was silly and vulgar in a way that was attention-grabbing and just right for me at the time. Everyone had an opinion on her—no matter what they *thought* of her.

This is a love letter to [The Boy Who Hugs His Friends Every Single Day and is Always, *Always* Laughing or Smiling; the Boy Who Acts Like He has Never Known Pain in His Life] from choir, senior year, a gay sophomore with a great taste in button-down shirts.

If you flip through its pages, you'll find writings about a few months ago, about a practice session after school for choir. While we waited for our teacher to come back into the room, he and I talked about singing and being LGBTQIAP+ and their connections; I told him that my friend and I have this theory that you have to be at least slightly gay to be able to sing well, and he struck me by surprise by telling me that gayness and the arts go hand and hand, that every gay struggle is a source of artistic inspiration. I wanted to take all of his gay struggles and absorb them into myself, keep them in my strong, sturdy, older ribs. I wanted to pat him on the head and tell him he deserved the world.

I might call him my acquaintance, but if there's anything I know about him, it's that he can make anyone laugh at any time. I know he's kind and proud and bass section leader in choir. I know he has a shirt with narwhals on it and another with lobsters, and I know I have never thought anything remotely bad about him. He is bright and interesting and wiser than any other fifteen-year-old I've ever known.

This is a love letter to [The Girl Who Knows the Most About Me, Who Sees My Soul in My Voice and Words and is Always Listening When I Cry Over the Phone, Spilling Something That Feels Like It Contains My Skin, My Blood, My Organs Out of My Mouth in a Hysterical, Turbulent Panic], for eight years of my life and counting, a lesbian from Washington who loves plants and mollusks.

There are a lot of pages in this love letter about her.

This love letter is to her for helping me through so much of the way to finding myself, and this is a love letter to her for the summer of 2016, when we watched *Brokeback Mountain* together with our phones and laptops, three hours apart. Afterward, we spent three days straight talking about the movie, though we had both seen it before. We had new things to offer each other. We *always* have new things to offer each other, and it amazes me because it never once feels like we've run out of things to say,

even when we've been texting for hours, and it's four AM my time, and she keeps telling me to go to sleep (as she sends me yet another thing that makes me laugh).

She's one of my best friends, and at nine years old, I thought she was the coolest person in the world. She was a year older than me—not even—, and I aspired to handle myself online the same way she did. We've been through a lot together, and she's the first person I turn to when I'm having a bad day. She's the first person I've known who has loved me the way I'm supposed to be loved.

This is a love letter to me and everyone like me—to teens getting the best of high school and college and not; elderly former, current, eternal warriors smiling at acts as simple as handholding; kids hiding themselves in the darkest of places; mothers and mothers and fathers and fathers braiding their children's hair; those who curse biology; those who curse what we are *told* to think because of biology; those who would much rather prioritize their own magic. This love letter is dedicated to [The Girl Who Kisses Her Girlfriend in Public and Hears *All* of the Whispers but Never Loses Her Fire, Her Poise, or Her Fashion Sense] and [The Girl Who Cuts Her Hair Short, Short, Short and is Always Laughing and Finding Fun in the Most Boring of Places], who blatantly and shamelessly hold hands and kiss in the hallways of our school, and to [The Girl Who Calls Herself a Fat Mermaid and Embraces All Parts of Herself and has an Incredible, Innate Way of Being Supportive] and [The Nonbinary Person Who Never Stops Being Proud of Who Xe is and Presents Xemself However Xe Wants, Whenever Xe Wants], a couple consisting of a girl and a nonbinary person who have been together longer than I've known them. This love letter is also dedicated to Marsha P. Johnson and Magnus Hirschfeld, and, yes, Laverne Cox and Amandla Stenberg and George Takei.

This is a love letter to my *community*.

People in my community have made me laugh and cry and smile and gnash my teeth. They have both welcomed me with open arms and told me to stay far away from them. I have had the privilege of knowing fairly many LGBTQIAP+ people across the course of my life; they span across many times, places, experiences, demeanors, and lifetimes, and I have never known two LGBTQIAP+ people who were exactly alike.

Nothing universally unites the LGBTQIAP+ community. There is no LGBTQIAP+ puzzle: there are only LGBTQIAP+ puzzle pieces, all mixed in from different places and not all fitting together perfectly. No matter how boxed we are by people looking in on us, there is no such thing. I see that truth every day in my life, and for every moment the words 'homophobic' and 'transphobic' slip from my lips with fire, there's five other people in the community whose words stick thick in their throats, fearful of searing burns. Every time I write snatches of poetry across my hands and keyboards and notebooks, there's another person in the community whose hands are much better suited for engines and numbers than words and paper. For every time [The Girl Who Kisses Her Girlfriend in Public and Hears *All* of the Whispers but Never Loses Her Fire, Her Poise, or Her Fashion Sense] comes to school in high heels, there's a time I eye the heels in my closet, consider the number of stairs I have to walk up that day, and leave them there.

I have lost count, every day, of how many times I feel proud of being LGBTQIAP+. I have lost count of how many times I feel glad and how many times I feel secure in myself and grateful.

I can't tell you what the LGBTQIAP+ community means to everyone. Not to [The Girl Who Used to Braid My Hair Whenever She Could and I Would Let Her, Linking Thick Strands of Beautiful, Familiar Black Down My Back] or [The Boy Who Hugs His Friends Every Single Day and is Always, *Always* Laughing or Smiling: the Boy Who Acts Like He has Never Known Pain in His Life] or even [The Girl Who Knows the Most About Me, Who Sees My Soul in My Voice and Words and is Always Listening When I Cry Over the Phone, Spilling Something That Feels Like It Contains My Skin, My Blood, My Organs Out of My Mouth in a Hysterical, Turbulent Panic]. But I can tell you what it means to me.

Being LGBTQIAP+ means that I am something beautiful. I am something strong and sturdy—something rare and graceful and knowing. I am the first butterfly of spring, and I am the one stubborn sprout that grows through the snow.

I am the fish, one memorable winter when I was rounding out my first decade and on the verge of essential discovery, who swam unfazed underneath layers of ice thick enough for my walking, dancing, stomping feet—a colorful, moving stained-glass painting.

I am a puzzle piece unlike all others.

I am a love letter.