

*I am eternally the shy girl with the sad smile.*

She was always present, an archetype of many forms. Before I understood my gender, I always drew her, though I didn't know she stood for me.

The smile, sad and awkward, seemed out of an unrealised resignation to myself. My own face, my own body, felt more and more empty and an affront as my teen years grew longer, and wonderful genderless childhood faded away. But all these feelings were transformed when I exercised them into the ownership of a fictional girl. They became ... a sense of determination, however fragile, against the odds. She, I, became the protagonist of a story, someone I wanted to cheer for despite faults and missteps - someone whom I wanted to succeed. I was only able to do so through my characters. Much much later, it finally hit me that I could transform myself, and not have to hate myself anymore.

I used to look at myself in the mirror and feel very little - disconnected, less present. My body was something I put up with rather than owned. But there was no specific thing I disliked enough to want to change. Even in the midst of my self loathing, I wanted to stay true to myself. I never wanted to feel false. Today, those senseless accusations by conservatives and TERFs about trans women "pretending to be women" still hit hard. The only pretence I've had was to pretend to be okay or happy, to pretend to have something to offer with my old sense of self. It's such a change now to look at the mirror and make faces, bounce around, be connected with my expressions, to actually recognise myself.

Selfies are something magical. To be able to capture a celebration of yourself, whether just for yourself, sent between loved ones, or publicly with the world, is so needed today. When one's self-esteem plummets drastically in between girlhood and womanhood; when body shape bullying and weight loss glorification still goes unchallenged; when non-white features are either fetishised or made to feel like they should be erased; when trans bodies are policed or barred from acceptability or normative beauty: being able to hold this face or body with pride for however a small moment is priceless.

It took me awhile to warm to them. I'd internalised a lot of the vile social messages that slandered any display of feminine self-esteem as "vanity", that dismissed selfie culture as vapid and empty. But gradually I saw through to the power it gave us back. In hidden Facebook havens, I see women and nonbinary people of colour, AMAB femmes and trans women, lifting each other up in comments over self-snaps, across vulnerability and fierce pride alike. Searching for promo photos of myself recently, the happiest, bubbliest ones were from casual messages sent to my lover, capturing me in my most genuine and relaxed. And with my partner, in the long months we spend apart overseas, I frequently ask, "Can I see you?"; the replying selfie from her a reminder to me of her essence, an immediate physicality to bridge the space between us, and a catalyst for me telling her all the ways she matters and is beautiful, in the face of the societal messages screaming otherwise.

I still hold a place for the girl with the sad smile. In my art and writing, she's always there, wrestling with those deeper musings of fragility, loneliness, and belonging. But where I once only had her, I now have my own, happy smile in the real world to hold onto.

All people deserve the self love to be able to smile gladly as themselves. As feminists, let's raise our selfies high and fight for it.

I'd like to acknowledge that these words were written on the lands of the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation. I'd like to pay my respects to Elders past and present, and to give thanks to the Aboriginal creatives I share this space with. As a migrant artist and performer, I stand in solidarity with Aboriginal sovereignty of this stolen land, which was never ceded.