

Q-Factor

By April Penn

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This digital chapbook is available at:
http://www.bbtp.net/april_q.pdf

Contact: pennapril@gmail.com

I really like reading poems and experiencing other kinds of media about queer issues. Throughout 2010, when I was working toward the challenge to write 365 poems, I found myself writing a lot of queer poems. Too much media about gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans issues is clichéd, stereotyped, misinformed, or just plain misdirected. I never meant to put together a book of queer poems, so this isn't the most well-prepared collection. But my hope is that it is a step in the right direction.

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Silenced Characters in Gay Suicide

"Rutgers University freshman Tyler Clementi killed himself last week after discovering that his roommate, Dharun Ravi, had secretly broadcast a Webcam video showing him having sex with another man in their dorm room..."

"In fact there is little or no chance that anyone will be charged with a hate crime or any other serious crime in Clementi's suicide. It's easy to jump to the conclusion that Clementi killed himself over anti-gay bullying or harassment, but there is no evidence that Clementi was bullied or abused because of his sexuality. The practice of secretly videotaping people having sex — homosexual or heterosexual — is hardly unheard of, and Ravi's motivation is unknown." By Benjamin Radford

If they video taped Clementi having sex with a woman,
Rather than a man,
Would he not be the new hero of Rutgers?
Would we not have a frat party talking about inducting a new
member
Rather than a suicide?
The American Pie sweetheart with a white grin?
Pride boasting from his chest like the beat of a drum?

Isn't our squabble over whether this case is a hate crime
Our own internal struggle over how to punish ourselves
For being shocked the first time we heard of gay sex?
Watched pornography?
Enjoyed something too much?
Let Clementi be. This is about ourselves.
The spiral staircase of everyone interested leading up to nothing
But two genderless bodies rubbing up against each other
breathing hard.

Now you are one of them,
The two voyeuristic students who disappeared from campus
And surrendered themselves to authorities,
But what of the other man caught in the video tape?
The same crime was committed against him, wasn't it?
No mention of Clementi's mate whatsoever!
Death has a way of overshadowing everything,
Even the fact no one would be talking about this case
If Clementi had been having sex with a woman.

And yet the article states, "there is no evidence
that Clementi was bullied or abused because of his sexuality."
The woman he did not have sex with: A silenced character
Her body mummured that death feels wet sometimes,
Other times dry as desert bone.

Exploring My Sexuality

In sixth grade, I notice a girl
In my social studies class
Boy, is she a social study

Her landscape already formed

My eyes trace the curves
Of her breast and hip

*I'm not the same species as her,
Am I?*

All the boys like her
She talks a lot
How do you find so much to say
When you're only in 6th grade?
If I ask her a question like that
She'll get offended
And it's too much of a girl thing
To offend the person you admire
I can't do that

So I run back home from the bus stop
And get my rollerblades
I am rollerblading in the tennis court when
A little blond haired girl comes up to me
And asks, "Do you have a boyfriend?"
And I say "no"
And she says "Good because
My brother thinks
You're the most beautiful girl
He's ever seen!"

Then a brown-haired boy skates by me
His face is full of freckles and smiles
Well, I guess he's my new boyfriend

Can I date his rollerblades too?
Can I pluck the freckles from his face?
My freckles are dark enough
So we'd know who's who

Who is that boy
Sitting across from me?
Whenever I see him I feel something
Stirring inside
His ass... wait is *ass* the right word
For butt, butt hole or both?

His butt cheeks squeak
In this really fascinating way
That makes my whole body tingle
Sometimes these tingles turn into trembling
When I stare at the only homosexual
In psychology class as we talk
About whether homosexuality is right or wrong
One guy raises his hand
And says he thinks it's disgusting
I stare at the gay girl
Waiting for some fierce anger in her eyes
But she just looks blank
Like she's heard it a million times before

I wanna kiss these two pretty girls
And feel all warm and fluttery
But I don't know what that means
Who that desire belongs to
Or how to make that a social reality

When I am a girl who likes boys
I have a boyfriend who makes me wet
Clearly, he turns me on
Clearly, I am not gay
Except as in happy, happy to be this way
Who am I kidding?
Every time I make out with a guy
I'm like where are the boobs?
And your sister looks hot!

I have to lie about drooling over her curves
While kissing his face
I'm afraid I might cease to exist
As I hear myself admit I am a woman
And not just any woman
But a very feminine looking one
With a name like April, I gotta stuff
A hollow cock full of flowers
Gotta imagine bruises like faces in the clouds
Drifting silently by the words straight people
Don't have to use all the time
That's why I wanna be straight
Because you can just be
I wanna just be unannounced and informal,
Assumed and normal
The more I gotta be this sex defined thing
The more I find myself a woman
But the whole reason I started down this path
Exploring my sexuality
Was because I didn't want to end up
Like the girl I was attracted to in sixth grade

Is my desire to be a different species than her
Just my heterocentric notion of attraction

Distant from the truth of my body
Or a genuine reflection of who I am?

Red as Love

I have been killing her a long time
Picking out knives as casually as colored pencils
I have been drawing her in the red
Prints underwear leaves on my waistline
She is beautiful
The way a child collects spiral pencil shavings
The way anybody's eye is meant to trace
The universe a dizzy spell
A mummy costume in reverse

As I cry frivolous tears over a fight about
Whether peanut butter is healthy or not
I want her to
Hold my hand before we embrace for a hug
I want the noisy interstate to awaken
A mystery that cars themselves cannot contain
A mystery I lived by when I was stuck in nowhere
Without her by my side
I want the love I injected into my lonely world
The before and after
The first time we had sex
The blood dripping down her thigh like a tear
Fallen too far

The First Time

The first time we have sex
I forget to feel
So pumped full of getting my experience
I don't know what is real
When it's over, you pass out
And I go back to my dorm room

Where I sit with myself floating around the ceiling somewhere
I reach my arms up
And shake my body out
Like I've just taken NyQuil
And forgotten the position of my limbs
I'm so lonely
I want the air to care about me
Scrawl hearts with dust bunnies and such
The way I feel I am almost nothing
This mutilated tongue must learn how to speak again
The pieces of my memory puzzle never fit together again
But let them branch into my future experiences
Not for the sake of experience
But for what I most desire
To be a man
Walking on the moon for the first time
Though the inside of you teaches me
I am just one in a series of paper dolls
Fumbling to find the art in the gallery
I can't take any more of this rush to universal places
Outer space is inner space
With fresco's waiting inside your underwear
If you ever want to define

What we do as sex
Go ahead
Death cry your
Trembling cobra back
Come, come hither
Like you mean to say

Rainbow Belt

Back when we still got along as roommates,
I gave her my rainbow belt,
A hand-me-down relic from another queer friend

She wore the colors proudly around her waist
You could tell gay things excited her
She bounced around the apartment
As if walking was a new dance she'd just learned

I was proud of passing on the spirit
Like when I brooded in my late adolescence
And retrieved a forgotten memory:
An adult asking my pre-school self,
"What's your favorite color?"
And me responding, "rainbow, of course."
I like to think I was a gay child
Singing a worse rendition of *Just like a Woman*
"And she makes love just like a woman..."

But a child's preference for rainbow
Shows she hasn't tried to define everything yet
And a girl singing an older man's sexy part
Shows that we all have many roles to play

There are so many colors in the rainbow
So many colors in the morning sun
So many colors in the flower and I see every one

But they didn't or at least she didn't think they would
I found the rainbow belt like a snake skin
Shriveled and folding over itself
In the middle of the rug in my room

Her parents are coming over to visit
She thinks they don't wanna see that she's gay
They will go away soon enough and then she'll ask
For me to give her gift back, I'm sure

My Last Boy Crush

We're in the weight room when you slide
Your sweaty fingers over the bench press
You have trouble looking me in the eye
Wrestlers bellow in the background
I barely hear you say
We were never really dating
You're not breaking up with me
You just met a girl at a party
And now "you can't take care of me anymore"

I am unusually calm and clear headed
Unlike the stereotype of a sixteen- year-old girl
Losing the boy she fell head over heels for

I walk home down a dirt path underneath power wires
I think of how I'm not in your car
Which has suddenly become your heart
I don't remember if you gave her a name
But the woman's body stands out
The Maxim spread tacked to your wall
Reveals something about me you don't know yet

Some girls have cute boy stickers on their planners
Announcing their budding sexual prowl
At least their willingness to be seduced
But I am not attracted to most male bodies
I long for her feminine curves and her long white bite

Even though you are the boy I tell years later
Did you know, you're my deviation from lesbian?

Slipping my hand out of hers when we
Are not alone in the park at night
I think of how easy I had it with you
People loved to see us in love
Now I swallow my fears
And wonder how I got here

My Idol, Michelle Tea, & What Being an Artist Means

When she no longer has her own bedroom,
She becomes immersed in people and events and
refers to her old life as
a phantasmagoria of ideas and dreams.
She even stops writing poetry.
She used to write 1-2 poems every day.
Now she focuses on prose.

She used to carry the heavy burden of fragments,
Like how prepackaged her food,
How awkward her bathing suit posing as a leotard,
How perverted her Step Dad.

Once she started writing memoir,
She taught everybody that
Before she was a story,
She was a person.
As she learned to listen to herself,
Other people lost themselves in her muse.
She was so wildly entertaining
Others forgot the way commenters paused
Before they asked about her past as a sex worker.

As a writer of memoir,
A former poet who no longer has a bedroom of her own, and
A former sex worker whose tattoos came to symbolize
Her rift from that line of work,
She has become something of an idol to me.

There are nights I lie awake
Burning with the temptation to know
If she'd take any interest in my company,
If by some chance we met.

I care a little too much what she would think of me.
But don't we all want our idols to be capable of loving us?

Sometimes I worry that I am too different from her,
Even though I know it's absurd to worry
About being too different from somebody else.

I went to college on almost full scholarship.
My GPA is good enough to put on a resume.
I coughed after I smoked my first and only cigarette.
I have only had sex in long term committed relationships.
I have one intellectual tattoo that takes knowledge of
American Transcendentalism AND Gertrude Stein
to fully explain.
I don't feel rebellious enough of the educational establishment.
Curious enough about drugs.
Spontaneous enough with sex.
Covered enough in ink, to be the artist of my dreams.
But these are just my narrow ideas of what being an artist means.
Besides, the best artists don't try so hard to mean anything
anyway.

"She's a Man" (?)

"She's a man," they gossip behind our backs.

Her spiky hair makes her too big and bad for gender.

"No, she's a fucking stegosaurus!" I yell back.

She slides 3 of her fingers in and out of me
in the most ordinary places. In the grocery aisle,
She thinks I feel like soaked paper towels still on the role:
delicate, spongy, layered.
On the trolley, she finds the accordion connector
Between cars and orders me to sit down.
The vibrations add to the experience.

Wake up!
Pieces of potential pleasure wait all around you!
This is what she teaches me:
You need only to recall your most repeated thoughts or feelings,
Jot them down or speak like
you've never known these things before,
then you will be a woman presenting yourself--
a caricature with pencil marks poking out from under the ink
stamping your "exact" potential to feel.

Do not be alarmed that
Your sexuality often doesn't feel like your own.
You will find pieces everywhere.
"A shattered mirror is but a collage mirror's supplies,"
Or so they would say if they knew
She's not even a different kind of gender than them.
She's exactly what we've got right here inside us.

Having Male/Female Roles on my mind during sex

When she touches me under the sheets,
I squirm away. She asks,
“What’s wrong?”
I reply “It’s too intense.”
I wonder if this makes me female--
This intensity I don’t automatically
Know how to put myself through.

After I attach a strap-on to my waist,
She spreads her legs, ready.
We thrust and slap, grind and reinsert.
A pale liquid from my body
Showers her insertion point.
I wonder if this makes me male—
This ability of my cum to get inside her.

actions taking place inside her cunt

The man puts his hand inside her cunt.
He thinks her cunt is special because she's a lesbian.
"At least he thinks my cunt is special!" She announces mock-
joyously.

A child puts her hand on her hip and yells,
"I need my space, you know, sometimes I need to be alone!"
This child does not know what she says.
She mirrors the adults in her life.
They have gotten heated at home,
so she comes to school and repeats it,
Snatching up humanity like a short tree reaching for the light.

His fingers inside her reach up and up.
He thinks her body resembles the fluidity of her sexuality,
Endless and pliable, bouncing and shaped by straps,
Though his strange hands succumb to plain
Rivalry among siblings vying for the spotlight.

He grows backwards, sheds layers of importance and pain.
His grandparents walk out of their cemetery plot
And demand to be let into their old home on Mountain Road.
A lesbian couple has just moved in.
A rainbow flag waves from an elbow mast in the siding.
A fat, ripe baby with almond brown eyes rolls in the grass.
His grandparents look so young they have become his parents.
They scoop up this adorable baby,
Walk into their home so old it is tired of being new.
The inside walls sigh from within an exhaling lung,
See who's come home and will never explain.

He Saved My Day

I was on the wrong side of town
I ran up to a stranger and asked
Do you know the number of a Taxi
He looked up every Taxi number he could find
When the first two didn't work in my phone
He handed me his phone
The Taxi cab people thought I was crazy
I said, "I'm on 15 Belmont Street
I need to get to 15 Belmont Road."
"Wait what?" said the woman on the other end
Then the stranger stepped in
He said what the heck
How about I give you a ride
I almost cried he was so kind to me
I told him this is the nicest thing
Anybody's done for me in a long time
And I meant it
Later when I explained how I got there
My girlfriend's eyebrows raised
"You got in the car with a strange man?"
I could not explain the miracle of the moment
I could not tell how great a man he was
How incredibly he came to the rescue
I hated that stranger and man
Meant something awful to women
I wanted to share the strange beauty of his heart
Without my gender getting in the way

Queer Factor

I watch YouTube videos about queer life by queer people
I get mad at the queers for looking so hot and
Being WHO KNOWS WHERE, all over the globe and
In my bedroom at the same time.

Could she have imagined me watching her
like a flock of geese just stormed over my head?

By watching her she begins to exist
Media clips of only dolled up feminine women start to fade
I get scared, though
She's not looking at me
I'm looking at myself looking at her
And something about this indirection
This watching in pitch black looks back

Late in Life Lesbian

She said they were more independent
Than the others she knew
They didn't *need* a man

By marrying a man she had sacrificed her will
She had trouble with reality
Tumbling down

She didn't know how to believe
In anything if she acted like herself
She hated herself

She came to the Ellen Degeneres website
And made sure to post anonymously that
She was confused about her sexuality

She said I am married to a man
But I fell in love with a lesbian
I broke it off with her
When my husband felt threatened

But she still thinks about the woman obsessively
She knows it will never work out
But who is she?
A bisexual?
She certainly feels divided

I'm not religious enough to pray
So I think of her standing alone
In a rugged landscape
After all wild animals go extinct
The only wild things remaining are:

1. The end of the Earth
2. Her sex dreams

My goal is to make her feel
The power of being the center

She stands up suddenly and shrieks
No, I wanna be the top!
Then, ashamed of her own outburst,
Her flaming cheeks hide
How she swallows flakes of ash
Tasting of her own cremation

Snipping back her desires
Like a castigation of words
As the life of hers
Teeters on the edge

No I wanna
No I
No

Femme

He dipped down the deep well of his soul
And brought up a drink we couldn't resist
Yet it would only make us thirsty
What he learned from suffering
A poor man from Brazil
Who loved the mind and bodies of men
The hearts of women too

I'm still learning what he tried to teach us
About silence and getting lost
In other people's secrets
About hostility in what we see
And avoidance of what we don't

He had us read *Stone Butch Blues*
Afterwards I thought a lot about butch and femme
While reading the book I pronounced *femme*
Like I did in French class, *femme*, a woman

But the queerness of femme added flavor

Like strawberry
I licked my lips
Yearning for more body and woman and body
Other times that flavor begged me to write a note:
Do not eat again EVER!

A male-identified woman said don't worry
You're femme so they won't think we're together
We weren't together but just the mere suggestion
That I would never be assumed gay
Sent femme spiraling out of control
Falling down the well of his wisdom

And cur plunking at the bottom

Maybe that's why I'm still linking miles of straws
One day I'll get to the bottom of the root beer brown
That shimmers in her eyes when she asks
How I know I'm gay and how long has that been

She sounds like a lone road asking me
Where's the next intersection
Not realizing not everything intersects
Sometimes you just stand there casting shadow
And it's not like you just do this for effect
You are not a movie
And you will not soon see your life in one
You are a stone at the bottom of his well
And you have a soul that will be reborn
As wood floating
After she chops your trunk from the side of her road

My Awkward Sex Joke

Fruit Roll Ups
Taste like strawberries
Flattened into sheets

She licks them
Over and over
With her tongue

I lean over
And ask her
Like dental dams?

Getting Ready for Queer Prom

An old newspaper article
Hanging in a frame on the wall at Keezer's
Explains the history of this men's formal wear store
You learn that JFK donated his gently worn clothes here
And now the place is part of the Harvard tradition

"I need to rent a Tux," a tall curly haired woman says
"For when?" asks the nice man behind the counter
"For tonight," she replies
"Oh!" the man says starting to pep up for the rush
He helps her find the right tux
He asks, "What is this for?"
She says, "um... for a prom."
"For prom!" he seems surprised
She hesitates to tell him it's a Queer Prom,
Then she lets the cat out of the bag
"A gay prom," she says looking a little flushed
An unanticipated emotion she masks by arching her strong
shoulders
"Oh!" The man says very okay with the idea of a Queer Prom

In fact lots of people I can't quite gender walk around the store
I can't help but look up at the water damaged ceiling
And see a collage of swollen bellies
The tiles warped like silent stomachs unable to beg for your
attention
Look I'm up here

And I'm looking down at my feet
To make sure they're out of the way
There's very little room to walk with boxes stacked to the ceiling
I start reading their old shipping information
All from Baltimore

They're boxes like us
Brenda and I moved from Maryland to Boston

We're still shedding our gay shame
Which seems silly when so many people here are so accepting
Even excited to help Brenda find a tux!

When Brenda and I, with our friend Jasmine,
Walk down a side street in Brighton
A couple dogs behind a fence startle us with their barking
An angry man cries out from the house across the street
"Get them motherfuckers! Get them motherfuckers!"
He cries like he wants to kill us himself, fuck the dogs
We feel the energy of his angry body in our bones
His words are the air the ceiling fans in our throats keep cutting

Brenda and Jasmine wearing tuxes for the first time
Strutting proudly
Feeling how classy the most ordinary movements become

We keep walking
We're gonna make it to Queer Prom

Sweet Hearts

Kindergarten

On Valentines' day in Kindergarten,
Ms. Robinson handed out sweet hearts
She went around the room and asked
Each of us, "What color do you want?"

My mind swarmed with possibilities
Not about all the different color hearts
But how many reasons I could pick
For not choosing pink
The reasons themselves were their own hearts

Because I want to be different?

To capture a special moment
Between myself and Ms. Robinson?

The extra effort she will take
In picking out a heart that isn't pink or blue
Will show how much she loves me

Ah there's the heart! The fact
That I knew I was supposed to pick pink
I either knew I was a girl or
I was expected to do as the girls

College & Recovering from High School

Flashing forward to first year of college
Is it the word, the body or both
I have no immediate connection to?

Am I getting dizzy with unknown attractions,
Disconnecting from my flesh
Or both? Again, I don't know
When I hear the word "clitoris"
In a rendition of the *Vagina Monologues*
Because sex ed, which I had to call "health" class
Left out everything but the graphic birth video
(We all saw the same 70s version of)
And a testimonial for why premarital sex is wrong
A 20-year-old girl saying
She wished she never got pregnant in high school
Somehow using condoms and being on the pill
Just didn't do a thing to prevent
Her desire from wrecking her life

"Remember ya'll abstinence is the only way
100 percent effective, just learn from my mistakes."

Not one mention of the word clitoris
That later appeared floating like an unrealized idea
A thought in your head
Scrawled on paper or launched out of your mouth
Not really anywhere on the body that spills
"You"s everywhere, a distraction
From a splitting self
Ah there's the heart, the reason
I said,
"I want yellow."
And Ms. Robinson, taken back, said
"Really"?

Questions

Does this mean anything?
We are constantly being attacked

For viewing ourselves differently
Than we either appear or can prove to be

Heart becoming breathing
The bitter after taste of cheap sugar
Swooshed around in the neurotic impatience
You have entering a dollar store that sells sweet hearts
With words like "Be Mine" and "Valentine."
In my dreams, the words are "Penis" and "Clitoris"

And someone I can't identify keeps saying
You won't forget what makes you remember
As I respond, "Remember what?"
"That the world is gonna be there when you wake up
So you have to accept people the way they are
Whether they identify as man or woman, neither
and both, sometimes at the same time
Sometimes throughout the course of their life
You have to accept that, okay?"

But this plea for acceptance disagrees with you
With you staring up at a ceiling gum
Pretending it is a band aide
You really ripping off your skin
Like admitting what was make believe
Never helped you understand what was real

You could spend your entire life confessing
What you were made to believe
Without ever tweaking out any new idea
The question is how to separate your heart
From the plastic bag it got stuck in at the factory
How to write the jolting genitals for such a casual tongue
Twisting impossible longing into an accepting nonsense
So you might recognize your body parts

Lesbian Llama

You'll never have as much skin as the room I live in
Paint peeling off the wall like a perpetual sunburn
So my roommate's father snarls,
"Looks like ya'll need a sandblaster"

But these days when I open my eyes
I am proud to live in Boston
I awaken with warm blankets
And scurry off to sit on a clean toilet seat
I catch a ride with a coworker who sings to the radio
While I stare at road lines
Getting dizzy thinking
About where they end
And where they begin

I crack a smile
And she turns to me as she grips
The steering wheel like a map of the world:

"What are you smiling about?"

I reply with a story about my cousin
Sending me a Facebook message
The title of the message
"Ahem, Missy" sounds like Trouble
My cousin asks,

"Do you have me on some sort of limited profile view?
Come on I'm your cool cousin
I promise that if you post that you had sex
With a llama, I won't tell my Dad."

Now the idea of having sex with a llama

Makes my coworker's eyebrows raise
She almost laughs but it's too early
Wobbly grey morning stunts our sense of humor
So I stumble from dashed line to dashed line
Tracing the outlines of green signs
Until Massachusetts cities sound as familiar as family names
Taunton, Stoughton, Brockton

Miss Stoughton, please report to the front office
Intercoms make life feel real
They're like the voice in your head
Unless they already are
I was caught in my head like this
With a hand over my heart
Breathing deep
I was a nineteen-year-old
Who just told her mom
She feels attracted to women
I was terrified
I could never tell my Dad I'm gay

Yeah, you won't tell your Dad if I had sex with a llama
But what about sex with a woman?
Would he find out then?
I don't mention this question
Because I am a lover of lesbian llamas
Speaking in displaced hoof prints
Risking the loss of familiar tracks to the wind tunnels
Of place names and high ways

Queer Girl's Proud not ADD

I space out a lot
I stare at the air
and something carries me away

I forget to see or hear
You have to yell at me
"Hey, you, wake up!
Are you in there?"

When I was a child
I'd watch the little dots
Change the picture on the TV
I would never catch the plot
Words and images stumbled out
Disconnected from the language box

As I grew up
I journeyed from hopelessness to pride
I started with a horrible despair
Was I the one not human?
A speaker of stones?
The open sky itself
Forced into a body against my wishes?

Through my struggles,
I began to realize
I AM POSSIBLE!

The trouble I have paying attention
Says something about who I am
Queer & Proud
Because what engages people
Is some version of sex and desire

And whatever version I saw growing up
Did not entice me into listening
So I built bodies in the movies of my mind
Played roles I craved on gum flavored floors
Scribbled
And found a picture in the mess
Outlined the rest and called it
Outrunning ADD meds
Slight run in with Prozac, though
Threw it outta my head
People thinking I can't comprehend
Can't experience culture
What is culture if you aren't in it
Trembling
What it's like to doubt
Your humanity
To muse so far from hope
Your own arms detach and lay out
Ready for hanging rope
But the muse must come
And draw her attention to a child
Whose same struggle is the culture
Whose body grows
Beyond our peripheral vision
She demands your attention
When she says "It would be better if I didn't exist"
She has become a part of me
The I in you
The possibility love saves when she says listen
I am the reason you have trouble with patterns
But I'll never throw you out of my house
Let me help you see where you belong