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BECOMING BARE: A MEMOIR

by

Andrew James Romriell

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

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Logan, Utah

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ABSTRACT

Becoming Bare: A Memoir

by

Andrew James Romriell, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2021

Major Professor: Dr. Jennifer Sinor
Department: English

This thesis is the first part of what I envision to be a full-length memoir. I focus on multiple themes, primarily what it meant to grow up gay in a culture, state, religion, and society where others told me I was wrong to be such. I explore these themes linearly through extended metaphors such as clothing, outward appearances, nakedness, and literal hiding. Through an introduction and ten chapters, I explore my life between the ages of eight and eighteen as I struggled to understand the impact of religious, educational, and familial cultures on my own internalized homophobia, gender identity, perfectionism, and spirituality.

This memoir explores why I stayed closeted for so long when I was surrounded by a supportive community and a loving family. In illustrating the process of how barriers of internalized homophobia had built up from my earliest experiences, I hope to show the complexity of this experience and ultimately answer the question, “What does it mean to be naked and fully, authentically seen?”

(101 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Becoming Bare: A Memoir

Andrew James Romriell

This thesis is the first part of what I envision to be a full-length memoir. I focus throughout on multiple themes, primarily what it meant to grow up gay in a culture, state, religion, and society where others told me I was wrong to be such. I explore these themes linearly through extended metaphors such as clothing, outward appearances, nakedness, and literal hiding. I begin with an introduction before moving into the main content where I explore my life between the ages of eight and eighteen as I struggled to understand the impact of religious, educational, and familial cultures on my own internalized homophobia, gender identity, perfectionism, and spirituality. In illustrating the barriers of all these which I had built up from my earliest experiences, I hope to show the complexity of this experience and ultimately answer the question, “What does it mean to be naked and fully, authentically seen?”

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I would especially like to thank my brothers, my sister, and my parents for their continual and unparalleled love, help, and support. I give special thanks to my partner, Terrence, for holding me through the hard times and for being a part of the rest of my story. I am also grateful to my fellow writers and colleagues at Utah State University for their consistent feedback and support. Thank you all for being part of my journey.

Andrew James Romriell

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INTRODUCTION

On the mountains surrounding my home in northern Utah, warm colors cascaded down peaks like waterfalls. They dripped like sunsets: red into orange, orange into yellow. The clear, blue sky paled above the autumn colors, valleys below lying in stasis. In only a few weeks from then, that sunset of colors would soften and dull, leaves rusting as winter winds swept through the canyons. In only a few weeks, that blue sky would strike a contrast to snow-covered peaks and barren trees drawn like pencil sketches against the white. I was simply grateful for a moment of splendor.

In a valley surrounded by those mountain peaks, my feet brushed over crisping leaves, brisk air flowing through the yellow branches above. The path before me was golden, fresh fallen leaves like bricks I could follow in order to find a way home. I had walked the path of the Logan River Trail before. I knew where it began; I knew where it ended. I knew that neither direction really allowed for any escape. I wondered then if I could instead find the end there among the dying leaves, the ones both fallen and those still clinging to the dark branches above.

It was on that day, the day I was been diagnosed positive for HIV, I chose a riverside trail to sort through my thoughts. My friend Kylie walked beside me. She had come with me to Planned Parenthood to get tested. I hadn't wanted to go alone, fearing deep down that a darkness flowed through my veins, as if I could have known the answer before I asked the question. I was grateful that she had agreed to go with me. I was even more grateful when she chose to walk beside me among the cascading leaves, a perfect

time of autumn. Still, as those golden leaves broke from their dark branches, my vision cracked with tears and the path blurred.

“I’m so sorry, Andrew,” Kylie said. All I could do was nod. My voice seemed lost in the void of cold wind sweeping against my arms, bumps rising in response. I couldn’t say it was okay just as much as I couldn’t say it wasn’t okay. We both knew both of those things to be true. A disease that would have killed me thirty years ago just as it killed countless others, and also a disease that wouldn’t kill me now. It seemed simply by chance that I was born in a time in which medicine existed to save me. As the doctor at Planned Parenthood told me an hour before, on the surface, the diagnosis wouldn’t change my life much. Physically, she was right, and yet everything felt different.

We walked deeper into the forest and came upon a small bridge over a space where water would eventually flow in the spring when snow melted off the mountaintops. I stopped. Kylie took my hand, her palm pulsing a heartbeat against my own like a drum, like music. Wind whistled, animals moved in the bushes, birds fluttered through the branches. Tears stung my eyes again before dripping down my cheeks.

To me, in that moment, HIV felt like another closet, similar to all the ones I had chosen to come out of over the previous decade: my homosexuality, my separation from a childhood religion, all the ways my internalized homophobia had taught me to hide away my wants and my personality. Closets were a thing I had become used to, and then, here again, HIV had become yet another choice of when and how to come out. Even so, when Kylie told me, “You don’t have to tell anyone yet. Or even at all. Not many people actually need to know,” my answer came simple.

“No. I don’t want to hide it. I don’t want to ever feel like I have to close off again.” Though I understood it would take time to really grasp what being HIV-positive meant, I also knew that I needed to tell the story, that I refused to hide myself away again.

This refusal, this fervor for truth, began years before, during my first creative nonfiction course, a class focused on creative form and how to write those stories too painful to speak. That day, my professor asked me to write the top ten things I was too afraid to write about, and after creating the list, she said to choose one of those ten things and write about it. She then quoted Mark Doty, a memoirist I would quickly come to admire. “No way to go, but through,” she said. “The way isn’t over. It’s through.”

What expanded from this singular moment would turn out to be years of difficult, painful, and ultimately beautiful work. I tackled subjects like sexuality, morality, spirituality, abuse, family, and addiction. As I crafted fiction and poetry, I wrote about what mattered most to me. Alongside each one of these stories, these words stuck with me: *The way isn’t over. It’s through.* And I wrote through it. I wrote through whatever pain, whatever anger, whatever bit of fear and joy rose from my words. It was from that expansion, from that work, that I discovered my need to write truth, my need to tell stories that matter.

This thesis is the first part of a memoir focused on what it meant to grow up gay in a culture, state, religion, and world where so many people told me I was wrong to be such. Using metaphors of clothing, outward appearances, nakedness, and literal hiding, the memoir explores why I stayed closeted for so long when I was surrounded by a supportive community and a loving family who had already accepted and supported my

oldest brother's homosexuality. In illustrating the process of how barriers of internalized homophobia were built up from my earliest experiences, I hope to show the complexity of the experience and ultimately answer the question, "What does it mean to be naked and fully, authentically seen?"

My thesis is the first part of what I envision to be a full-length, three-part memoir. The genre has allowed me to unfold my past experiences in their actuality while also discovering each one's significance in my life. In Patricia Hampl's book, *I Could Tell You Stories*, she writes, "Memoir is the intersection of narration and reflection, of storytelling and essay writing. It can present its story *and* consider the meaning of the story" (33). In *The Art of Memoir*, Mary Karr writes that memoirs are held together by "the sheer, convincing poetry of a single person trying to make sense of the past" (xiv). Memoir creates a bridge between art and truth and is therefore a genre I fundamentally connect to. As I have spent so much of my life lying and hiding, and especially because the theme of both physical and metaphorical nakedness, memoir has allowed for me to tell my story while simultaneously reflecting on what it meant to go through the hardships I did. Because of that reflection, those reading are allowed into my story and invited to reflect with me.

My thesis includes eleven chapters, mostly exploring my life between the ages of eight and eighteen. In first chapter, I explore a moment in high school when I wasn't given a part in the school play while all my friends had. While watching from the window of the theatre classroom, my teacher, the director, told me I wasn't allowed to be there, and I needed to leave. The first chapter ends as I cry in a bathroom stall, wishing someone would find me and hold me. While the rest of the memoir is written from a first-

person point-of-view, the first chapter is written in second. Using “you” as the main character, I pull the reader into the story so they can feel the gravity of what it meant to be told I didn’t belong.

In chapters two and three, I illustrate my relationship to my childhood religion, my toxic understanding of sexuality, my desire for righteousness and acceptance, and my fear of imperfection. Through opposing experiences of discovering my homosexuality through pornography followed by my own baptism, I show the complexity of my early childhood. Following this, in chapters three and four, I illustrate my refusal to accept my homosexuality. I do this by describing the ways I processed specific experiences around the first two men I felt attracted to during my early teenage years.

In chapters four and five, I explore the complexity of my family and how I learned to hide my desires, my fears, and my homosexuality from them. Chapter six then follows my senior year of high school when another boy’s reaction to my emotional state resulted in being cut off from my friends. This chapter begins to illustrate the true hardship brought by my late teens, which would eventually drive me to attempt suicide.

Chapters seven, eight, and nine follow my first year of college and the specific experiences during that time that led to the night I wanted to take my own life. Through these chapters, I explore my struggle to understand the emotions inside me and the battle I fought to keep my own homosexuality hidden and controlled. When I was unable to do so, I became numb instead and, by the end of chapter eleven, want to end my life. Though by the end of the final chapter I have not come out or left the Mormon religion, I do show that I couldn’t stay unseen any longer. I connect the final moment to the end of the first chapter when I sat on the floor wishing for someone to take my hand. In the final

chapter, I take my own hand, conveying I had becoming willing to claim my own identity and pain. This is immediately followed by my choice to step back from the edge of the bridge.

Moving through the experiences of my life in a chronological way isn't an effort to simply document what happened. Like Mark Doty's memoir, *Firebird*, I hope to balance chaotic nature of my past by threading through chronological history. That chronological line becomes something solid for readers to grasp onto as they enter into the murkiness of the past. I am also not trying to deface any person throughout my personal history, including members within the Mormon religion. Rather I am interested in the complex, emotional truth of the experiences I had. My hope is that by telling my story, I can illustrate a path through the pain of feeling unworthy, impure, and hopeless. I want to shine a light on what it meant to walk as a closeted gay man within the culture I inhabited. My hope is that someone reading may simply not feel so alone in their own journey. As Mary Karr suggests in her work, *The Art of Memoir*, "writing... means celebrating beauty in an often ugly world" (158).

While I'm still working through the meanings and connections of these things in my life, I feel it was of vital importance that I transcribed this experience now. Much of Mark Doty's memoir, *Heaven's Coast*, was written at the time of his partner's death. Doty states in his preface, "Almost eighteen months after Wally died, I know a little differently... But something's gained by allowing the voice of those hours... to have its say" (ix). This idea resonates with the words of Judith Barrington in her book, *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*, where she tells, "The memoirist need not necessarily know what she thinks about her subject, but she must be trying to find out; she may never arrive

at a definitive verdict, but she must be willing to share her intellectual and emotional quest for answers” (29). Though I may not know exactly where this work will end up, though I may not yet have written its full conclusion, this space of healing seems like the perfect opportunity to create it.

I hope this thesis can contribute to the ongoing and ever-present conversation surrounding coming out as gay in cultures where doing so is complex, difficult, and, in many cases, even life-threatening. With topics of homosexuality, mental health, suicide, religion, and family being so prevalent in history and today’s culture, I feel this is an important and timely topic—one that can’t wait. I survived the trauma of my own story by listening to the stories of others, and I plan to use my voice in this same effort. Rather than just telling how I dealt with religion, family, culture, mental health and the coming-out process, however, I attempt to connect to a greater theme in the exploration of the appearances we present to those around us and what can be gained by allowing oneself to be authentically seen.

In many memoirs, perhaps especially in coming-out memoirs, the past is illustrated as a warzone—a place barely survivable—while the present and future are shown as exemplary and filled with enlightenment. Both Dustin Lance Black’s *Mama’s Boy* and Mark Doty’s *Firebird* embody the experience of breaking free from a sometimes-overbearing religious family and childhood. In these memoirs, I was inspired by the way they each describe their sexual squirming, conformity, and the eventual release of the authentic self. Adversely, in Ryan Van Meter’s memoir, *If You Knew Then What I Know Now*, he destabilizes this format. Van Meter writes about how he grew up, moved away from home, came out, fell in love, and how the relationship fell apart. His

“happily ever after” illusion is shattered, but he also depicts this as not a bad thing on the whole. The truth, irony, and hardship of memoir lie in the knowledge that a story is never truly over. In telling my own story, I have worked to understand my past trauma while also illustrating the continuation of a journey—one in which healing, beauty, and pain are always a part.

A large portion of my work studies the implications of having a body that has betrayed itself. In Martin Moran’s *The Tricky Part*, he investigates his own sexual awakening and the abuse he suffered from another boy because of this. In another memoir from Mark Doty, *Heaven’s Coast*, he tells the story of how his partner, Wally, died of AIDS. While Doty’s experience and my own are very different, there are some key pieces of his work resonate with me. The most important aspect of this is his depiction of what it meant for his partner to walk the world as HIV-positive. With my own recent diagnosis alongside past abuses, the seeming betrayal of my body has been on the forefront of my work. Because of my oldest brother’s positive HIV diagnosis, I hope to, like Moran and Doty, help others understand the implications of what these experiences can be like.

While my memoir is a coming-out story, it also explores family and religion. My story is one of entrapment, one where I locked my own authenticity away in order to be accepted by the religious culture surrounding me. As Tara Westover describes in her memoir, *Educated*, the divergent beliefs of those within a religion and those without can be nearly impossible to work through, “but from the ashes of their dispute I [can] construct a world to live in” (239). Like her, I would eventually escape the narratives I

forced upon myself, but, in this thesis, I am viscerally honest in the struggle and pain I had to endure through the process.

When crafting my memoir, I wanted to emulate a firm grasp on writing microaggressions, or brief, commonplace behaviors that communicate hostile, negative, or derogatory prejudice. Growing up in Utah where I generally had a sense of physical safety, much of my trauma came in the way of passive-aggressive behaviors and uninformed commentary about homosexuality, spirituality, and hypermasculinity. While very different in content, a work that intricately and powerfully investigates the effect of microaggressions is Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Rankine's depiction of the way microaggression has an effect on a person is handled in a sophisticated way, which is something I tried to emulate in my work. I hoped to illustrate how small, seemingly mundane things can build up to become traumatic events over time.

To study a linguistic style, I focused on Maggie Nelson's memoir, *Bluets*, and Ocean Vuong's book of poetry, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. *Bluets* describes moments of grief and hardship in concise, poignant ways, and uses an extended metaphor to do so. This style results in powerful, sharp prose that is both clear and stimulating for readers. In an effort to avoid getting bogged down in too many details and vague descriptions, I attempted to emulate her same capability. Also, the intrinsic, powerful nature of Ocean Vuong's poetry entranced me from beginning to end. He uses specific, creative metaphors in new ways that are intriguing, painful, and fascinating to behold. As my memoir centered on a metaphor of clothing and nakedness, I used that poetic, metaphoric style as inspiration.

In an effort to build on these styles, I looked to Cheryl Strayed's *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar*. A collection of real columns from Cheryl Strayed's pseudonym, Sugar, this book shows the insight and advice she gave to all who wrote to her. What makes Strayed's advice so different from many other columns of the time is her willingness to include anecdotes from her own life. In this way, Strayed gives readers vulnerability and honesty. She refuses to shy away from the hard things. She tells these stories with a wide variety of sentence structures. In a controlled way, Strayed breaks up long paragraphs with powerful, short sentences. Not only is the variety exciting, but it also creates power in those places. A perfect example of this comes within the final column:

One hot afternoon during the era in which you've gotten yourself ridiculously tangled up with heroin, you will be riding the bus and thinking what a worthless piece of crap you are when a little girl will get on the bus holding the strings of two purple balloons. She'll offer you one of the balloons, but you won't take it because you believe you no longer have a right to such tiny beautiful things.

You're wrong. You do. (Strayed 353)

Strayed's language and use of precise details such as this illustrate a control of language and structure, which I attempt to craft in my memoir.

When I began this thesis, I planned to focus on clothing very specifically as my main metaphor. As I wrote, however, I found this diverging just a little. While outward appearance still crafts the metaphors I need, I realized the metaphor arising in this portion of my memoir was about hiding. As I began editing the work, without meaning to I had begun over half of the chapters with hiding. I hid behind a coffee table, in a shower, in

the bushes of a yard, in the locker of an abandoned hospital. I found then that there were two metaphors intertwining throughout the memoir: being seen vs. hiding and being naked vs. being clothed. In my edits, I worked to bridge these metaphors and create a more solid foundation from which to tell my story.

Similarly, in the beginning, I expected to explore much farther into my adulthood, into my coming out, my marriage, my divorce, and possibly my recent HIV diagnosis too. The scope of the project was large, but I was determined. As I began writing, however, I was surprised to find just how many moments created a lasting impact on my attempt to closet my sexuality and hide myself away. I recognized just how much I wanted to dig into my childhood and understand what that time really meant to my story.

Now that I've written this first part to my memoir, I hope to take this thesis to the MFA program at The Ohio State University in order to complete it there. While doing so, I can expand on the religious implications of accepting my own homosexuality and the battle I fought (and eventually lost) to bridge Mormonism and my queer identity. I will also be able to explore the ways I still hid myself away even after coming out as gay, the struggle to make sure I could still exist as the "good gay son" to my parents. Similarly, through all six years of my marriage, I feared that to show my whole self would drive my partner to leave me. In this way, I had three total experiences that I would describe as "coming out." The first was my acceptance of being gay. The second was my decision to reject my own internalized homophobia. The third was my decision to not hide away my HIV-positive diagnosis. These three "coming outs" will be the pillars of the memoir as I show the eventual decision to fully become naked, bare, and honest with all around me. I

look forward to all the work and writing I will create for this and many other works in my future.