

Fishbowl

A collection of differences

Lewis Figun Westbrook

For Enan
the one who stuck

I am autistic

Asexual

Awkward

Everything I was ever taught to fear

For personal use. Do not put on paper

The scariest one to tell

You always tell me that I am your little girl. The girly girl. The daughter to inherit every piece of costume jewelry. And it's complicated because you aren't really wrong. Because *I'd believe it* if on the rare occasion I pulled open a chest in my fifties to find every glint of your fashion. We picked out brooches together every Sunday, like best friends. It was so easy to doubt, to *Maybe* the possibility of womanhood. I mean I loved you. Didn't that mean it could be as simple as wearing that soft red reindeer dress in an uptilt, a whirl go 'round. Couldn't I make myself the doll? And I wonder if you know how much it means to me giving up you to be myself. But I had to. Because I could show you any outfit, I could be anyone in front of you and you still wouldn't call me a boy, or autistic, or encourage me to get meds. You still would say the label is too much. Too easy to regret. Why box yourself in when cardboard offers no protection? Why when I could shrug on a coat and be welcomed home. I never knew how to break it to you. How *home* felt as much like a deadname as the one you gifted me. There is a sour taste in statements instead of questions because if I ask, I'd listen a little too hard. No, it felt like a secret password for me to guess. Womanhood and your love felt all too close. Or no, actually dependent on each other. An expiration date that comes with my freedom. The constant upkeep of being blank so you can easily glue on your sticky notes. I'd always be / *okay* / *your daughter* / *normal* Because I am still afraid of what it would mean if you told me No again. I listened once and I lost. It really was just you trying your best. I wanted to hold onto you, an impossibility while being just me

I am jealous of everyone who gets to know

What is it like? To have a grasp on exaggeration
To know fact from

Friction; jeans on thighs, a thin paper book in lap
I read it like a bible, words to become wise with
Or a mirror, a reference as I build an outward face
My friends tell me *it's just a joke*

I bring a research paper to a book discussion and wonder
in what exact moment the romance

Dives head first into an indulgent dream

Something warm and fuzzy, and to never be introduced to
Expectations. We talk about the white lies

we tell our children but not the pink lies we tell
ourselves (rose colored spectacles don't do much for those with eyes
closed)

I went searching for lightning bolts in every meeting of the lips, earth-
quakes in every skin to skin touch, and volcanos in every learned
glance

I thought disaster meant true love

A recipe for devastation but it's all

My fault anyway, I poured the glass

Brought it to my lip and expected the kind of spark

Stories are written about

Have you ever felt the desolation of someone crashing your reality in
three simple words?

Of getting lost in a timeline you don't belong in but

That's not real that's belongs in stories

And maybe that's why I always wished I was a main character

Every alt text I write starts with "Lewis, a white queer..."

I get told by a coworker that I am one of the "good transgenders"

Right after they misgender me and I explain

That people can use multiple pronouns

It makes me wish there was a word

Like Queer with a capital Q as in the political identity

For my trans identity

Trans with a capital T

Trans as in a fucking asshole

As in a bad trans

As in the one who quit that job 2 weeks afterward

Because I am not gonna fuck with transphobic people

Because I don't feel the need to be nice to you after you misgender me for the 20th time

I want to be labeled the difficult one

The one to go to when you need a no bullshit answer about

If something is problematic

Because honestly I love talking

I love discussing the words to use and how asking is the best practice

And the nuance of IDing with a term that is now labeled problematic

So I've started calling myself A Queer

Which in my mouth, feels like the best non answer, ungradable

But I think it'd probably feel like a hate crime in a cishe's sharp teeth

I call myself A Queer

Because I should get to yell too

Proclaim every report of unprofessional attire, a hate crime

a negative comment about my body

And maybe there is something easier about yelling Queer

But maybe, I just like the other people who ID that way too

Because at the next job a white gay man calls me *girl*

I ask him not to, politely, respectfully and

he tells me that my gender identity doesn't overpower his sexuality

I don't yell even though I want to, I just say

no

And then I walk away and don't look back

Queer Platonic Relationship

You are explaining romance to me (*Picnic, tall grass, slight breeze*)
And I am feeling the strongest kind of love (*an ocean lapping, sand on dry toes*)

I know, almost for a fact, that this is not the same (*a full moon through a wooden window*)

And I think maybe I am lucky (*sit on opposite sides of the couch, feel so close it's natural*)

The lucky one, because I get to love you in my own way (*drives that always feel like the best part of a road trip*)

It's the only kind of joy I have a physical description for (*a calm that smells like a pinch of citrus, a hug from every molecule*)

I could talk to you forever (*words like touch, a caress of my chest, the newly flat spot*)

I curl into the sound (*the softest stuffy, throwing away the sheets for a comforter*)

Thank you (*I never thought this love would be real*)

Sometimes I still can't even believe it (*the way fantasies become reality in your hands*)

I've always struggled with telling fact from fiction

I think that's why I prefer a mix

They call it slam lies, the ones that function more like a short cut

It's about telling a narrative

It's about making it fit in under 3 minutes

It's not like they'd expect you to include if you were standing on a
hardwood or carpeted floor

—I'm sitting on a bed, rocking myself with a hunched back

It's not like you need to count how many windows are in a room

—2 and only one opens. The other faces the road. A safety issue only
when glass is visible

It's not like every detail is important

—my nails are painted. I'm staring at a commission that my ex got of
me. I am wearing a shirt belonging to the partner I don't go on dates
with. I have six stickers on the inside of my laptop and orange sheets.

It's called

—Tegan and Sara call each other liars on a late night talk show.

Something about it being said stretched my bones. No guilt, just this
bubbling laugh. This

(Better story)telling. I convince myself that every fictional book I've
read holds truths

Shifted underneath details that are not because

All my stories are tales for my younger self

The ones that teach a lesson I'm still trying to practice

And maybe this time, when I put it to keys and computer screens

I'll finally be able to perfect it

A Fun Fact

Did you know fairy lights are a safer extension cord than most extension cords in america? It's because each bulb functions like a fuse controlling the electricity. And that we say bless you because we thought sneezing exposed you to demon attacks

These are the kinds of facts I could spurt out at any given moment

An obsession that started with tales my dad told me like how cheese was invented by a traveler storing milk in an animal hid // but that's not actually proven, it's more a theory // I remember my dad telling me, I remember begging for him to repeat it, to remind me, to go over it again and again. I remember My friends tell me they already know that so I find a new audience to hear my stories like how baby pandas are smaller than rats

Articles compare the tiny hairless creatures to a stick of butter

Pandas start out smaller than rats.

Isn't that wild? Doesn't that kind of break your sense of reality? Just for a moment? A rat, something that could hid in your walls, is bigger than the giant panda when first born, an animal literally with the word giant in its name

I love it, I am obsessed with it

Like a child, I stick my finger in the crack and feel it // Like a reckless teenager, I grab the loose thread and pull // How could a baby panda be smaller than a rat? How is that possible?

I love fun facts. I collect them like stuffies, recite them every night like a bedtime story, roll them over in my head like a fidget toy. Because they are breaks in your precious reality. Because a beaver can make a dam and be natural but if I do, it becomes manmade. Because I am somehow able to commit the unnatural

Frolic in transness like a predator // let the neurodivergent drip from my lips like a cannibal // the homosexuality stain my hands like a murder How amusing it is, the ability to be a person means that I have the unique pleasure of my humanity being stripped

I've read the history books, I know what these laws will lead to. That I will be deemed a failure in a system of 'well meaning intentions'. But at least I know that most things we call berries aren't actually berries according to scientific definitions I am not a person worthy of being safe in public spaces according to southern law **But the myth of carrots improving your eyesight comes from propagan-da we served ourselves to hide the invention of radar // how a need-ed strategy can become one of the most believed myths in a matter of years.** I am the target of a war to protect values which actually just means white supremacy

But

But fairy lights are a safer extension cord than most extension cords in america and I am healthier, happier, and more natural than the lies prideful politicians gorge themselves on

Because the line between natural and unnatural

Is our ability to impact the world in the way that echoes past us and did you know that we are the only known species to try and outlaw behaviors?

The only one to be

Can you remind me what exactly makes me unnatural?

Excerpts from the spreadsheet where I keep track of my emotions

Electric itch—I want to do so many things—Slight
Ache in chest and neck—[My brother] did say he loved me last
night—Just like
Bummed or bland—Slutty or a tease—my body is bubbling
On and off—I've noticed talking gives me more joy than listening—
Mostly
Just limb sensations—Watching fleabag and being scared of the
Living room—My brain has soft ridges—My
Nerves are mist and floating around
My body—Click—*Click*—*Click*—Brain
Clicking back into place

On bad days I feel like I lose my humanity for the differences

Can I tell you a secret? I hate dogs

And not with a fiery passion but in the same way

I hate cishet white men like please, stop showing me photos of them
(they all look mediocre)

And unless they earn my trust, I am going to assume they are an asshole. I've had too many try to smell my crotch or touch my butt
And just so you know, making an excuse for their behavior doesn't help

I don't care that another dog got them riled up

And if you've ever been seen

as a prize,

you'd know this really isn't hate but a neutral feeling with a strong dislike of how much praise they get

A disdain for the overhype. A

'so happy they are in your life and bring you joy

But I'd prefer to have a warning before I entered your house'

and I'd really love for it to be

the norm for me to shrug instead of searching

my brain for compliments that aren't full lies. A world where somehow, a mild dislike of dogs that started from a fear, is a not life threatening secret that will come

Out if I ever try to be a public figure

A smear campaign of all the dog poop I never wanted to be responsible for

On bad days I feel like I lose my humanity for the differences

For not knowing what to say about your dog or how to show affection without a smell sticking to my hands. It makes me an asshole because the worst part about me is that I don't ever want pets

On good days

I tell myself I am proud for knowing I should never be responsible

for a dog. I am proud of myself for knowing the things I won't enjoy

failing at and letting someone else

take the lease

You are not a good person, You are not a bad person, Because there is no succeeding or failing at being a person

My brother nods

And then he asks 'but doesn't that imply that failure is bad and success is good'

Fuck!

The mantra I repeated for almost a year, ripped apart in one question

I love it

I dive headfirst into the implications

Is failure bad? Is failure possible?

I've never failed at art. Deleted files moments after I am done but I still made something, still meant something, sometimes the things that burn in flames allow you to let go

I grew up in an unlimited redo curriculum

The first time I took a test, history class, sat in a square, windows behind me and I got 14 out of 15. I cried in the car 'til mother explained that 93.33% is good actually. The next week I bragged about getting a 12 and I couldn't comprehend her disappointment.

I think we might apply the idea of failure and success

In the capitalist way. A misstep here isn't the same as falling off the curb, inches down, a competition with all your siblings, something to laugh at. I explore the line, find the wrinkle that grew into danger

To things we shouldn't, to things impossible to fail

but then again, I watch a TikTok video and with a bright smile, kneeling on the ground, they announce, stains are just an excuse to make your clothes cooler

And maybe failure is just spilling frosting on your hand, an opportunity to lick yourself clean

Because if I am honest, I love the possibility of being wrong. I love shifting through facts and implications like a child searching for gold at a carnival, brimming with unwarranted belief

I love the rocks with no worth all the same

The thing is, I love myself

A gentle rebellion, like the first sun of Spring, the one to make you pause, to be still with your face tilted up

My therapist calls me a perfectionist and it doesn't feel right, because I like my creations either way but I work on the defensive, I build excuses

Known in texts as a bundle of affection (*I prefer agglomeration, a collection or accumulation. If you really need, then a truss*) and its funny because I think I am overflowing with emotion, my friends just bring out the joy and the joy brings affection

I change my phone background, a page in a comic, *From now on, no waters shall drown you. no fires shall burn. I will see to it that you never know fear again.** A promise from a demon. How apathy can be a punishment. I only fear that I do not fear.

In a local bookstore, across the table, a simple insult of one's own short term memory. I say things before I think about them *That just means you are too strong for Pavlov. Could never become his dog.*

And I am reminded why I love myself. How being positive, using 'politically correct' language, can still be so funny. I laugh about it days later.

I remind myself to move slowly on my walks. Listen to music and dance whenever I get overstimulated. I jump from foot to foot in the safety of my own home and let myself exist. What a gentle, loving, rebellion.

I love myself. I love my own art. I love my body. This face. And I am no longer afraid that to enjoy existing with myself is a self-absorbed transgression

*lines from the teaser of Ties that Bind webcomic by @samzalong

A lesson

You are explaining romance to me

This reminds me of something // a failed relationship // started by explaining hookups

That time I had a dream of fulfilling the tale like I was secretly receiving a mission in the McDonalds

This time

It's in my own house // it's with you // no expectation

I like learning

We both have so much information

You tell me about domestic actions // A drawing energy

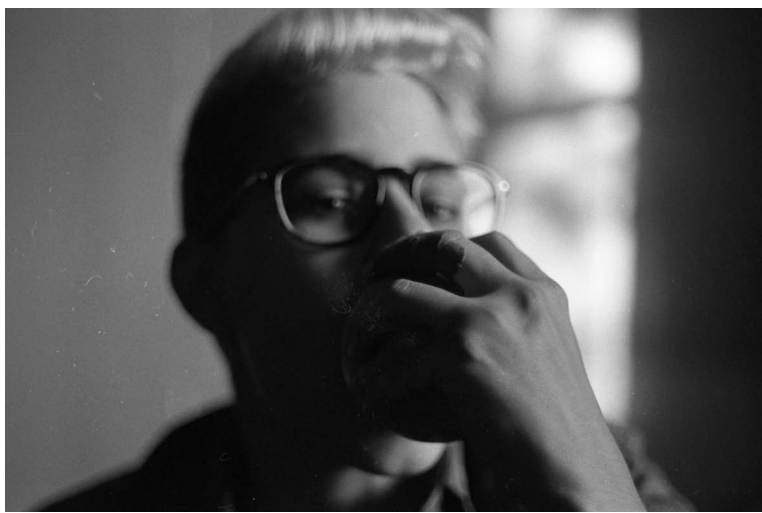
And I get to call you bae // boyf // the one I've known the longest

I do not kiss you goodbye

The [redacted] one to tell

You always tell me [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] *I'd believe it* [redacted] on the
rare occasion [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] *Maybe* [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] in an uptilt, a whirl go
'round. [redacted] And I wonder if you know
how much it means to me [redacted]
Because I could show you any outfit, I could be anyone in front of you
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] shrug on a coat and be welcomed home. [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] There is [redacted]
[redacted] No, [redacted] secret
password for me to guess. [redacted]
[redacted] no, [redacted] expiration date
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] just you
[redacted]
[redacted] just me

Everything I fell in love with



Lewis Figun Westbrook (he/they) will always prefer their bio be some kind of joke but apparently that isn't professional. They are a queer writer of too many genres and artist of too many things. Lewis grew up in New Jersey where the trees are thick enough to inspire fantasies of magic and a suspicion of secrets in the most mundane places. They now live in Utah with their partners and found family. There, the buildings are short enough to remind you that an adventure is always closer than you expect. He is currently published in *Love Gone Wrong*, a horror anthology, and *BarBar*, an online literary magazine. They've also printed many different zines. Find them on most social media @lewisrllw or look for them in local queer shops (bonus parts if they have books or art!).

Back Cover

[this was supposed to be a placeholder and then I decided I love it]