

Hypocrisy Bridge Rebuilt :: Emily Townsend :: Nonfiction :: The Account :: Spring 2019

“A guy whose name is familiar messages you on anything physical with a guy’ and try to change Facebook that you’re pretty. No one ever tells the topic. John Marino persists. So you’re a you that. John Marino earns your trust. John virgin? So you don’t want to mess around before Marino asks for your phone number. You don’t marriage? Not even a hand job? After blocking

switch around the middle
digits this time. John Marino
asks you to come over to his
house. You say no, let’s meet
at Starbucks instead, to get to
know each other. It hasn’t
been confirmed that this is the
guy you remember from a
seventh grade home
economics class. There’s no
casual shift when John
Marino asks if you would like
to be fingered. You did not
expect the conversation to
verge into sexual questions.
Because this is literally the

first and only time a guy seems to have interest in
you, you answer ‘well not really I’d like to have
an emotional connection first before I consider

E: here’s a super old pic from four years ago

J: Omg you look so cute. Hey if you’re up for it I want to send you a few pics of pornstars I like and see which one you think looks the best. Sound like fun?

E: Sure

J: *sends pictures of women posing naked* What you think.

E: Idk. It’s hard putting myself in their position rn like thinking of myself like that

J: I just wanted to see which one you think is most appealing to you. Didn’t think of it like that

E: None look appealing to me right now. Idk why but I suddenly feel really shitty about myself

J: Ok. I’m sorry. Just delete the pics from our convo so you don’t have to look. I didn’t mean to make you feel shitty about yourself. I’m awful

John Marino’s number, you lay on your back and try to imagine a person on top of you. You try to imagine someone kissing the blubber of your stomach, the lightning bolts of stretch marks striking your massive inner thighs, you try to imagine their fingers tracing the atlas of veins in your wrists, you try to imagine them gripping your radius and ulna bones to keep steady, you try to imagine their eyes staring so closely into yours, you try to imagine their breaths hot on your chest as they thrust in and out. You shudder—it’s not sexy to think about that. It’s terrifying.”²¹

“Shattered Self-Portraits in the Process of Restoration,” *cream city review*, 42.1

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“Do you know what it feels like to be alive? It’s posting on your Snapchat story that you want someone to come over and maybe do something dirty, or to just hold you, you prefer to be held, actually, it’s trying to force yourself to be in the mood to masturbate so you can feel some relief but you know touching yourself means no one else is touching you, your fingers know every follicle of your body and you’re tired of it, you want to try something that every other fucking person in the world has done but you are claustrophobic and awkward and even if someone did like you enough to do that sappy rom-com shit with you, you wouldn’t even

E: No you’re not awful. I kind of realized the transition between convos half a second too late

J: No I’m sorry I shouldn’t have done that and should’ve thought more about how you’re feeling. I’ll try to be better from now on.

E: I mean I did say yes to them. But then I realized we went from looking at a picture of me to pictures of other girls and I started comparing myself. It’s not your fault.

J: Now I feel like a super shitty bf. I didn’t even realize that. I just thought it would be a fun game. I can’t say enough how sorry I am. I’ll do anything to make it right.

E: I’m not mad at you. The timing was off. And honestly I’m still working through this asexual thing bc I have like zero sexual energy today and I thought I could be in the mood but I guess not

J: Ok. Well I am tremendously sorry. I should’ve thought more before doing that. Next time I will ask if you’re in the mood or not. So is the stuff we’ve done so far starting to get to you? Or is it like a struggle of you being asexual and now feeling sexual urges? I just want to know more about it so we can talk about it more openly.

notice, you’re fucking oblivious and naïve and you don’t believe anyone would ever want to be physically, emotionally involved with you, it’s questioning why you label yourself asexual when every time you have a drop of alcohol you’re sexually frustrated, like some type of alternative for an abstract peace of mind takes you away from all your conundrums and paradoxes, like maybe if you have sex while drunk you would unusually enjoy having your barriers breached, but what if you regret it and you decide that you are definitely asexual.”ⁱⁱ

“I wasn’t going to tell you we did have a second date. I wasn’t going to tell you I dissociated the entire time, so far out of my body that I couldn’t say *no* each time he kissed me. I wasn’t going to tell you I tried to get drunk so I could possibly consent to sexual activities. I will never agree to let someone touch me sober. My body chars like chemical-induced gasoline spilled on an oiled canvas. I wasn’t going to tell you we trespassed into territories I wasn’t ready for. So I said he was boring and too tall and we never had a second date. You knew I was lying.”ⁱⁱⁱ

E: It’s confusing to me because all my life I never wanted to do sexual stuff and I hadn’t defined myself as asexual until I was 19. I knew I liked guys but only in the romantic sense. I do enjoy what we do but since it’s all extremely new to me I suddenly don’t know how to define myself when that definition is what I’ve been known as all throughout college, and everyone at school knows I’m ace. I’ve written about it a lot. And when I write about something it means I’m trying to understand it even more than I already do. So to experience things outside of what I never thought I would do will take me a while to accept it. And I’ve noticed since we started dating I’ve been sexualizing myself and it’s so weird to me because I’ve never felt sexy or wanted to do sex things. It feels like I’m betraying myself by doing such stuff.

J: Oh. I can’t say I understand the feelings you’re going through cause I never went through anything like that. But I empathize and want to do what I can to help. I don’t think it’s a bad thing that you’ve noticed changes in yourself. Human life is all about changes. I think it’s how you react to these changes and what direction you take that defines you. And I’m sorry if I’ve rushed you into all this without giving you time to process it. If you want to just do nothing for a while so you can think about things I understand. And I think you’re sexy and I want you sooooo

“Know that I was not a person whose habits involved inviting a boy to touch my body whether I was sober or drunk.”^{iv}

“I did not want sex. All I wanted was that movie moment where the main character, typically an Outcast Loser™, has that one glorious frame of feeling wanted by some Hot Guy/Girl and they are shown sneaking into a bedroom, maybe a few untouched touches here and there, and then it fades to black. That’s what I wanted. Falling asleep with someone in my bed, knowing that they’ll still be there in

the morning, and they’ll smile at me as the sun shines through the curtains.”^v

“When I think someone can hear oxygen flowing

out of my lungs, it cuts

off and red spots glitter

behind my eyelids. My

breathing abbreviates into

raspy gasps when someone

stands too close. How am I

supposed to deal with

another human torso on

top of mine?”^{vi}

“It took me a long time to

realize that I’m asexual.

An excruciatingly long

time of confusion and

beating myself up for not

wanting sex or even

intimacy, a long time of

people saying that

something was wrong

with me. I only want to

explore a person’s mind,

not their body.”^{vii}

“Yet I don’t want to hop on a dick. Am I grossed

out by a man’s phallic

member? I wouldn’t

know. It’s more the

intimacy that I fear.

Claustrophobia imprinted

its terrors in third grade.

Something snapped then,

either from a bicycle crash

because someone got too

close, or from being

squished in a cramped

elevator for too long. It

escalated into

aphenphosmophobia in

high school because no

one tried anything with

me. I cannot imagine

someone wanting to be

that close for however

long. No one has

attempted to break into my skin.”^{viii}

E: I don’t like change and it feels so wrong to change. I have days where I get so frustrated at how I see something sexualized every single time I’m online or in public and god I wish it would all tone down. And then I get mad at myself for not being like everyone else and accepting it. I like doing stuff with you and only you. Sometimes involving something else isn’t a good idea. Not saying we/you can never look at porn again but we should scale back on discussing it. Once I start comparing myself I just feel awful

J: Well I’m sorry. I didn’t know and I didn’t mean to make you feel that way. I honestly thought you were okay with this stuff now. If something starts getting to you tell me and I’ll try to make things better. Maybe we should wait longer to have sex.

E: I’m getting used to it but then I overanalyze some parts of it. Maybe we just depleted my sex drive bc of yesterday. It was intense. I really enjoyed it though, so I don’t think I need more time to consider sex. I’m comfortable with the idea of having sex with you and doing stuff. I’m just saying there will be some moments where I get frustrated with myself about my sexuality and it has nothing to do with you, it’s the public and how they constantly shove it down our throats (in a nonblowjob way)

“This is the new year, and I hope, despite all my cynical beliefs, that I’ll find someone to experience and explore new things with, someone who will hold me in the dark as I tremble against the wall by my bed, someone who will know the map of my skin but not press their pushpins in places I don’t want to be pierced.”^{ix}

“On the Purple-Red Attraction Scale, I was B0, a dark magenta, and he was E0, a dark cardinal. Blue cannot be mixed in to make me match his red. It’s impossible to transform a secondary color into a primary shade.”^x

J: Ok. Well when you do tell me so we can talk about it. Cause I want to help. I just don’t want you to feel bad about yourself. When I bring that stuff up it’s only because I think you’ll enjoy it. I’m not trying to compare you to a pornstar. That’s just not fair at all. And it doesn’t matter cause I pick you. I want you and no one else.

E: I know it wasn’t intentional at all, but I sent a normal picture of me and all you said was that I was cute and then immediately brought up pornstars. Maybe I read too fast and said yeah I’ll look at them but then when I saw the pictures I realized it went from basically innocent to dirty and that hit too hard. So the timing was off. I think it was bc we went from a very personal thing to a dirty thing with no real good transition in between. So when we do this again just make sure we haven’t been talking about like my image or whatever immediately before inviting this kind of conversation.

J: Yeah that’s my fault. I just blurted it out because it was on my mind. I’m sorry.

“Before I knew what asexuality meant, but I definitely knew what sex entailed, eleven-year-old me decided that if my husband wanted to

have sex I would allow him to find someone only for that purpose.”^{xi}

“The antinomy of asexuality sucks. I crave touch but I fear it. Intimacy freaks the hell out of me. But I desire the physical proximity. I want someone to solder themselves to my fusible alloy. I must be emotionally melted in order to adhere to and connect my body to theirs.”^{xii}

“If I met a straight guy, I would feel like a massive failure for not owning up to his set of expectations. I would be a hypocrite in whatever relationship I fall into. Where I

expect him to do everything I would do for others, I don’t do the one thing he expects most of me.”^{xiii}

ⁱ **02.15.2017** I've been lying to people ever since I went on Tumblr during Pride Month when I was nineteen. But I've been lying to myself for much longer than four years.

The first time I came out—which, for asexuals, is hardly a big deal compared to gays and lesbians (it would be ironic for parents to disown aces for not wanting sex when parents spend all of their kids' teenage years frowning upon sex)—was to my professor during a meeting about an essay where I would reveal I was asexual. He didn't press for any explanation and I described how I wanted to use this sexuality as an angle to pair with a three-day train trip in southwest America. I went back to my dorm and realized I had finally admitted out loud what I'd been so confused about. There was a weird sense of relief pouring out of my exhausted brain.

Workshop for the essay went well. Rather than focusing on me personally being ace, my classmates were intrigued by the concept of asexuality itself—how could one want a romantic relationship without ever having sex? My professor urged me to divide the essay further and try a piece on asexuality alone. Since then, I'd written six essays that involved my lack of sexual attraction, and it had become a trademark topic of mine. Everyone knew me as the girl who didn't want to have sex, and I was okay with that information being public. It excited me to think I stood out in both the writing program and individual relationships. Being asexual was my thing, and I didn't have to share that title with anyone else.

ⁱⁱ **2008-2015** During my teen years I never sought sex, never tried to hook up. Romance was all I wanted. *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, *You've Got Mail* taught me the guy is supposed to pursue the girl with sweet gestures and end up with them. Sex scenes were blurred allusions of kissing necks and running hands up arms and blacked out in blinks. That's what I thought was normal.

But then as I got older, I became more curious about sex. I occasionally watched porn and felt disgusted before I turned it off. Watched women bend their bodies in half, in splits, in bondage. Watched men growl and choke their partner and appear possessed while ejaculating into mouths and vaginas and asses. I couldn't put myself in their place. It wasn't romantic. It wasn't pretty and slow and tender like the movies.

I searched for calmer, more realistic videos, where there wasn't any dirty talking, where the people looked like they genuinely liked or loved each other, where at the end of the clip, they seemed settled down and content. Through these videos, I gradually recognized that sex wasn't always rough and foul. I still wasn't going to actively find my own version of this, but I was growing frustrated that I couldn't be like everyone else and just try to do a simple thing.

The bridge between asexuality and heterosexuality was burned in the first place, until I met him.

ⁱⁱⁱ **07.27.2018** My mother, who didn't know I had labeled myself asexual a long time ago, who didn't know I was scared to have kids for many reasons, came to my apartment the weekend after my boyfriend and I had our shitty second date, and I had told her we never got past the first date. She sat on my couch (in the exact spot where he and I awkwardly sat) while I slumped in the chair across the room, trying to keep my cool, knowing she was going to start trouble, and she asked me if I was okay.

"You were so excited about this guy," she said. "What happened?"

My friends told me I should've told her, should've come out. "He was boring."

"I don't believe that."

I almost told her. I almost told her. How could I have been so comfortable letting everyone else around me know I was asexual, when I couldn't even admit it to my mother? I didn't want her to think I was broken—the common stereotype for aces. I didn't want her to think I'd never give her grandkids. I didn't want to disappoint her.

"Promise me you're okay."

I lied again.

^{iv} **07.09.2012** My senior year in college, when I wrote this essay, was all about defining the confusion that shrouded my fear of intimacy. My first attempt at intimacy happened when I was seventeen, massively drunk at my parents' high school reunion party at home. Of course, I didn't want sex. I wanted a classic makeout scene, even though I had never been kissed. I wanted to feel like the movies. I wanted a story to tell my friends. I wanted to feel like I was worth getting intimate with.

The boy brushed me off because I was too intoxicated. I shouldn't have been disappointed the next morning, waking up on the floor by my bed in a pink tutu. Even if we did have sex, I wouldn't have remembered it. So why did I feel empty? Because he decided I wasn't worth it. To not feel desired, even without proper consent, made me feel invisible.

^v **2010-2018** In my mind everything is glowy and starry-eyed and scintillating with the sappiest fantasies. Problem is, I never physically place myself in these dream worlds. I target the emotion and squeeze all the comfort out of secondhand acknowledgment through films. I feel settled for a few moments, half-tricked by these illusions, half-content with only experiencing what I want through an imagination, and then I get annoyed that I don't have someone to complete these unfinished daydreams. Even worse, when I actually experience what happens in the unrealities, it never quite adds up—something always feels like it's missing. The electricity from a finger brushing over the veins in my wrist, the graze of his hand while he holds my jaw, there seems to be a colossal lack of connection between corporeality and ethereality.

^{vi} **11.10.2017** People are always scared to try something they're afraid of. It's inherent, it's torture. What happens when they're scared to try something they really want? I used the label of asexuality as a cover for my fear of intimacy. I constantly told people that touch was something I couldn't handle—I'd shake, stop breathing, panic. My friends would go for a hug and then retreat, saying, "I forgot you hate touch."

The first time a guy held me, we had blacked out in my bed. I faded awake and felt him pressed behind me. My body became an earthquake and didn't stop shaking for twenty minutes. When he left, I was an empty vessel craving for someone to glue in the fractures that clefted overnight. I needed that touch again even though it destroyed me.

^{vii} **01.14.2018** There are people who won't admit their deception, who will seem like they don't understand their faults. Maybe they fool themselves and genuinely believe their flaws are suitable and normalized. I've always felt like a fraud, the kind that knew I was a poor imitation of who I really wanted to be. I borrowed the label of asexuality to cover my fear of intimacy and to stand out in the crowd of other common sexualities. I used this identity to submit an interesting essay to workshops and magazines. About one percent of the world's population is asexual. It gave me this sense of total individuality within my community, and a sense of community in an even smaller community within larger communities. It made me special, I suppose, to belong somewhere I could easily categorize my perplexity. But it still seems to me that I've been plagiarizing this title to come off as someone who integrally never wants to have sex. When I'm drunk all I want is physical intimacy, whether it's simply holding hands or sweeping fingers on one's arm. When I'm nearing a blackout I need to be held and wake up hungover and cold. Intoxication makes me shove this abstaining sexuality to the side and fulfill some need I never have when I'm sober. Hence the reason why I swore I would never allow physical intimacy unless my veins were swimming in hard liquor.

^{viii} **10.12.2014** About two years after I learned the definition of asexuality, I found what autochrissexuality meant: to be aroused by content that would normally arouse one and even enjoy masturbation, but having no desire to have sex with another person. This is a subset of asexuality. Porn became easier to watch once I figured which channels had the least offensive scenes, but masturbating took a lot longer to become comfortable with. Towels over underwear, then towels under underwear, then towels without underwear, then fingers over underwear, then fingers without underwear, then fingers without clothes, then fingers without blankets over my naked body. About a year doing each method. After finishing I would immediately shut my laptop and rinse off, repulsed by the viscosity I had produced. I felt I made too much and that would turn off someone else. I felt gross and ashamed.

^{ix} **08.20.2018** When we tried again, my boyfriend gave me complete control over the pacing of our relationship. He would ask if I was okay when he put his arm around my shoulder, would make sure I wasn't hyperventilating after a hug, would wait for me to make the first move. I had to verbally say "we can try kissing." I had to tell him to slow down when he moved from lying next to me to on top of me. I had to separate myself from our embrace when I felt a panic attack rising. He was always respectful after each command, apologizing for making me uncomfortable. I

wish he knew my anxiety was not personally about him, but about my unwillingness to physically receive what I'd always dreamt of. There were times I was disappointed I couldn't feel the happiness or even the manifestation I should've felt when he touched me.

^x **09.10.2018** Unfortunately to me, I've realized I did, in fact, revert to a primary color. Maybe I was never magenta in the first place. Once my boyfriend and I started doing sexual activities, I began yearning his touch. Sometimes as simple as a finger grazing my jaw, sometimes as seductive as a brush against my breast. Now that I found hands who wanted me, a body who shared chemistry, a person who only desired myself and no one else, I didn't want to stop being touched. Twenty-three years without any tactility leaves skin unblemished.

And once I figured this out, I knew I lied to everyone. I was cardinal this whole time. I mixed my colors to hide what I'd been scared to admit.

^{xi} **11.28.2018** It's interesting how much of a prude my younger self assumed I'd be as an adult. It's also interesting how my younger self assumed I'd be married in the first place. Perhaps what's most interesting is that even though then I'd believed I could share a woman with whoever I ended up with, I definitely cannot consider that option now.

Here's how it happened: one weekend while I was three hours away at my parents' house, my boyfriend suggested we looked at porn gifs and texted which ones we liked. I told him it seemed he's always the most horniest when I'm out of town. "Because I want you back," he said. Rather than gifs of women posing toward a camera, they were gifs of positions. That was okay with me since I could figure out what he thought was doable when we did eventually have sex, and it helped me implant the idea that I could maybe get in that position someday.

The next weekend, I sent him an old throwback photo and then he sent me pictures of pornstars posing for the camera. My body immediately went numb and I curled up in bed, crying at how the transition between myself to sex workers was much faster than I could process. Though I did say yes to the pictures, I shouldn't have. And though I knew he truly didn't have any bad intentions, it frustrated me that he didn't predict how the timing was beyond inappropriate. His apologies discouraged me—I couldn't stop being annoyed at myself for not being okay with what happened. I couldn't accept how normalized sex had become in society. How women's bodies were always enlarged in all the sexualized places, how poses were meant for attraction, how innuendoes popped up in scripts and commercials and improvised conversations. Some days it made me absolutely sick to see a woman in an ad with "the perfect body." Almost every TV show I watched had some sort of sex joke in their episodes. My friends kissed and told. PDA electrified in hallways and crossing streets and sitting at tables. It's overwhelming to never uphold society's expectation that you must tolerate a hypersexualized nature.

And what bothered me most was that I began feeding into those expectations. I browsed lingerie websites almost daily, added lacy briefs and laser-cut thongs to a virtual shopping cart, measured my bra size with a trial-sized tape, visualized what a velvet teddy would look like on my chunky body. Only a small handful of items actually got paid for. When I tried them on and stared at myself in the mirror, I couldn't find any sort of sexiness in the tiny strings strapped around my shoulders or the lace barely covering my ass. I wasn't like any woman ever portrayed in the white background studio shots. I wasn't sensual or attractive. I was still my boring, plain self, foolishly swathed in material meant for other bodies.

^{xii} **11.29.2018** Each time my boyfriend texted me the next day, I responded with a short message. I was already stressed from my own fiction workshop with a shitty story, rushed to find a presentation topic, and I had woken up late from being up all night torturing myself. He kept saying "I hope you're not still upset from yesterday." The issue grew worse: my turmoil spilled into focusing on him rather than my problem with society. I wondered why he didn't call to talk about it instead of just texting me, or why he didn't come see me, knowing I always perked up around him, or why he didn't try harder to figure out how to cheer me up.

Because I'm petty toward people I love, I detached myself and played the silent game. My diction changed in those texts—I spelled out words I normally abbreviated, I didn't try to be funny. He noticed but didn't offer much solace. I don't really need space if I'm mad at you. I need the space I obviously created to be invaded for me to see you care.

^{xiii} **12.30.2018** For the two weeks that I was 900 miles away for the holidays, we sexted. He drew up scenarios of fucking on couches, kitchen counters; I told him what I'd be doing to him right this very second had we been together. We were tormented by our distance. Some of those days I started the conversation, but only because I felt like he was getting tired of initiating it. I had to change my underwear almost three times a day.

We had planned on having sex for the first time on New Year's Eve. "It'll be romantic," I said. "It needs to be romantic." When I returned to my apartment the day before, he asked to come over. He'd bring condoms just in

case we found the right time, but he wouldn't expect me to give him the greenlight. He hugged me at my door for three minutes, constantly saying he loved and missed me. I led him to my room, where my new pink salt lamp glowed over white covers, where it all looked like the indie aesthetic of a movie where someone loses their virginity, and my favorite candle burned. Nerves were nonexistent. I was surprisingly completely comfortable, even after I knew our making out was heating up.

He stopped kissing me. "Sorry. I know you only wanted to cuddle."

"Do you want to just do it?" I asked, my hand on his jaw, my heart steady.

"Are you sure?"

"Really sure."

I had zero thoughts when he reached into my side table to grab a condom. I watched him put it on. He held my waist and pulled me closer. He moved inside me, and I felt that nothing had changed. I was not a new person. I was no longer seemingly innocent, but I wasn't longing for more. It felt good until it felt like a marker shoving in and out. He finished in thirty-five minutes.

We lied together, said *I love you*, and he told me to go pee to avoid a UTI. As I sat on the toilet, I remembered keeping my eyes shut the whole time, holding onto his elbows when in missionary, stretching my arms out and grasping the sheets when my ass was in the air. I couldn't watch him ejaculate onto my stomach and breasts. I couldn't acknowledge the fact that I just had sex. My nineteen-year-old self would've screamed at me *this isn't what you wanted! How could you have let this happen? How could you let him do this to you?*

I changed my mind, my twenty-three-year-old self would've argued back. *I think I can be allowed to change.*