

Men wear boots. Men drive trucks. Men go mudding. Men hunt. Men kill. Men shoot guns. Men drink. Men are stoic. Men do physical labor and have tough hands.

Not me. I don't do any of these things. They're a part of the confusing and frustrating Southern paradigm of social expectations for men that are so outdated and so toxic that the lengths some men go include refusing to wipe their own ass because they think touching themselves between the cheeks might make them gay. Wow.

I've always felt out of place within these masculine ideals; I didn't enjoy Nascar and big trucks, I didn't have football in my blood, and I most certainly would Not rather be fishin'. I learned to navigate this landscape by adapting, mimicking and camouflaging myself within the culture, while still allowing myself to pursue my own antithetical interests. It often felt like a split personality, like performing, and it was scary—becoming ostracized meant becoming a target; for bullies of all ages and genders, even adults, teachers, those in authoritative positions. “Man up,” “Grow a pair,” “What did you expect?”

However, I enjoy my fair share of boyish mischief, dangerous good times, and the thrill of pursuit. Can these not co-exist with poetry, filigree, sensitivity, love? Connecting with people beyond their façade is rather difficult, as those I'm searching for are also wrapped in this illusion for survival. There is a struggle finding people who are not afraid of themselves or their self-expression, who are not afraid to love unabashedly, who in fact are comfortable and encourage exploration, experimentation, learning and growing.

I love being in love, falling, tumbling through it like warm fuzz, slowly, peacefully, you can close your eyes comfortably and just soak it up. This comes from friends, family, lovers—who seem to be too far and few between these days. Our political landscape has caused tumultuous rifts, given confidence to the toxicity, and burdened us with fear, paranoia, disbelief. There is a social madness, and therefore caution must be exercised: be careful to whom you disclose yourself. There it is: I can see you, and control whether you see me or not. The trouble is, we're all hiding. We're all wearing camouflage, and it makes that pursuit and love of each other that much more difficult.

But whatever — I ain't no faggot.