

[TED Talk: "A Powerful Poem About What it Feels Like to Be Transgender"](#)
[By Lee Mokobe](#)

The first time I uttered a prayer was in a glass-stained cathedral.

I was kneeling long after the congregation was on its feet,

dip both hands into holy water,

trace the trinity across my chest,

my tiny body drooping like a question mark

all over the wooden pew.

I asked Jesus to fix me,

and when he did not answer

I befriended silence in the hopes that my sin would burn

and salve my mouth would dissolve like sugar on tongue,

but shame lingered as an aftertaste.

And in an attempt to reintroduce me to sanctity,

my mother told me of the miracle I was,

said I could grow up to be anything I want.

I decided to be a boy.

It was cute.

I had snapback, toothless grin,

used skinned knees as street cred,

played hide and seek with what was left of my goal.

I was it.

The winner to a game the other kids couldn't play,

I was the mystery of an anatomy,
a question asked but not answered,
tightroping between awkward boy and apologetic girl,
and when I turned 12, the boy phase wasn't deemed cute anymore.
It was met with nostalgic aunts who missed seeing my knees in the shadow of skirts,
who reminded me that my kind of attitude would never bring a husband home,
that I exist for heterosexual marriage and child-bearing.
And I swallowed their insults along with their slurs.
Naturally, I did not come out of the closet.
The kids at my school opened it without my permission.
Called me by a name I did not recognize,
said "lesbian,"
but I was more boy than girl, more Ken than Barbie.
It had nothing to do with hating my body,
I just love it enough to let it go,
I treat it like a house,
and when your house is falling apart,
you do not evacuate,
you make it comfortable enough to house all your insides,
you make it pretty enough to invite guests over,
you make the floorboards strong enough to stand on.
My mother fears I have named myself after fading things.

As she counts the echoes left behind by Mya Hall, Leelah Alcorn, Blake Brockington.

She fears that I'll die without a whisper,

that I'll turn into "what a shame" conversations at the bus stop.

She claims I have turned myself into a mausoleum,

that I am a walking casket,

news headlines have turned my identity into a spectacle,

Bruce Jenner on everyone's lips while the brutality of living in this body

becomes an asterisk at the bottom of equality pages.

No one ever thinks of us as human

because we are more ghost than flesh,

because people fear that my gender expression is a trick,

that it exists to be perverse,

that it ensnares them without their consent,

that my body is a feast for their eyes and hands

and once they have fed off my queer,

they'll regurgitate all the parts they did not like.

They'll put me back into the closet, hang me with all the other skeletons.

I will be the best attraction.

Can you see how easy it is to talk people into coffins,

to misspell their names on gravestones.

And people still wonder why there are boys rotting,

they go away in high school hallways

they are afraid of becoming another hashtag in a second
afraid of classroom discussions becoming like judgment day
and now oncoming traffic is embracing more transgender children than parents.

I wonder how long it will be
before the trans suicide notes start to feel redundant,
before we realize that our bodies become lessons about sin
way before we learn how to love them.

Like God didn't save all this breath and mercy,
like my blood is not the wine that washed over Jesus' feet.

My prayers are now getting stuck in my throat.

Maybe I am finally fixed,
maybe I just don't care,
maybe God finally listened to my prayers.

Thank you. (Applause)