

bring on the waves

TRANSITIONING IN TROUBLING TIMES

BY BETHANY GRACE HOWE

It would be cliché to say that transitioning is no day at the beach. It would also be wrong.

I went to Maui once. What I remember most was the sand, the finest I'd ever encountered.

I remember it most in the breaking surf. Omnipresent, it surrounded me, pummeled me, though I refused to acknowledge it. I love the surf, and I was having fun.

Nevertheless, that sand was working its way into the pockets of my bathing suit. When I walked out of the waves, my trunks fell down around my ankles. And let's just say I wasn't the only one that noticed. It's a terrible thing to be stripped bare in public.

That's how I feel about transitioning these days. Seven months in, I feel like I just walked out of the surf, only now noticing what's been swarming about me all along. Stripped bare and I never saw it coming.

I began my transition on January 1, 2016; an easy date to remember. "Easy" would come to be a term that I'd use again and again in the months ahead.

A doctoral student in the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and Communication, I was transitioning to womanhood in a liberal school, on a liberal campus, in a liberal city, in a liberal state. What could be easier?

Indeed, if people asked me if transitioning was hard, I'd tell them of all the things in my life that were stressing me out: Divorce, parenting, studying, working or transitioning. There was a reason that transitioning was listed last.

My friends and family were supporting me. On campus I was getting far more positive feedback as my feminine self than I ever did as a male.

Sure, I sometimes felt in Eugene and other places that people might be staring at me or whispering behind my back. In the news, transgender people were being legislated out of bathrooms. But I dismissed all of these things; they were not my problem.

But they were — I just didn't know it. For as surely as that sand was piling up in my pockets on that Maui beach, the constant stress of being different, of wondering who was talking behind my back, of questioning where I was safe, was piling up on me.

On June 12, it all came crashing down. Four dozen of my LGBTQA peers were dead in a Florida nightclub. School was out, my support network of friends and faculty gone. I ended up being a mere spectator at my own daughter's birthday party the day before; my wife in charge, she didn't even let me say "goodbye" when the party was over.

For the first time in my life I wondered if it might not be easier to just end it — all of it. It was a fleeting moment, but a moment I'd never had before. It scared me, and when I sat down with my doctor just a bit later I began to cry, and I could not stop.

Things got better from there, but I am still not who I once was. Anyone who reads my writing knows that; my sense of humor seems to have fled for the moment. I am loathe to admit this, just as I was loathe to admit that none of this was easy.

Before I decided to transition I was happy all of the time and now I'm not. Does that mean it was a mistake? No; it simply means that this is not easy. Neither is running a marathon, but no one tells the runner to quit.

A psychiatric study published in *The Lancet Psychiatry* last month found that the stress of transitioning isn't caused by being transgender; it's because of the way we're often rejected by the rest of society.

Those stares that I talked myself out of seeing. The whispers I pretended not to hear. The friends who are more distant of late. The politicians that degrade me. All of these stressors are there, as surely as the sand in the surf.

By not acknowledging the reality of the life I'd chosen I was destroying myself. No longer. And while I may not be as easygoing as I was, I will be honest with others, and myself. I won't lie; that scares me a little. I hope I like the new me.

Ironically, I'm writing this while sitting on the beach in Maui. The sand is just as I remember it.

I'd hoped ditching the trunks for a women's one-piece would keep the sand out. Nope, now it's just piling up in my breast cups. My problem is as real as it was the last time, though this time I'm ready. I've made sure to tighten my shoulder straps so everything stays in and up. It helps to be honest about what's coming.

Bring on the waves.

Bethany Grace Howe is a doctoral student at the UO, working on journalism pedagogy and transgender communication issues. Her work can also be found on the Huffington Post.

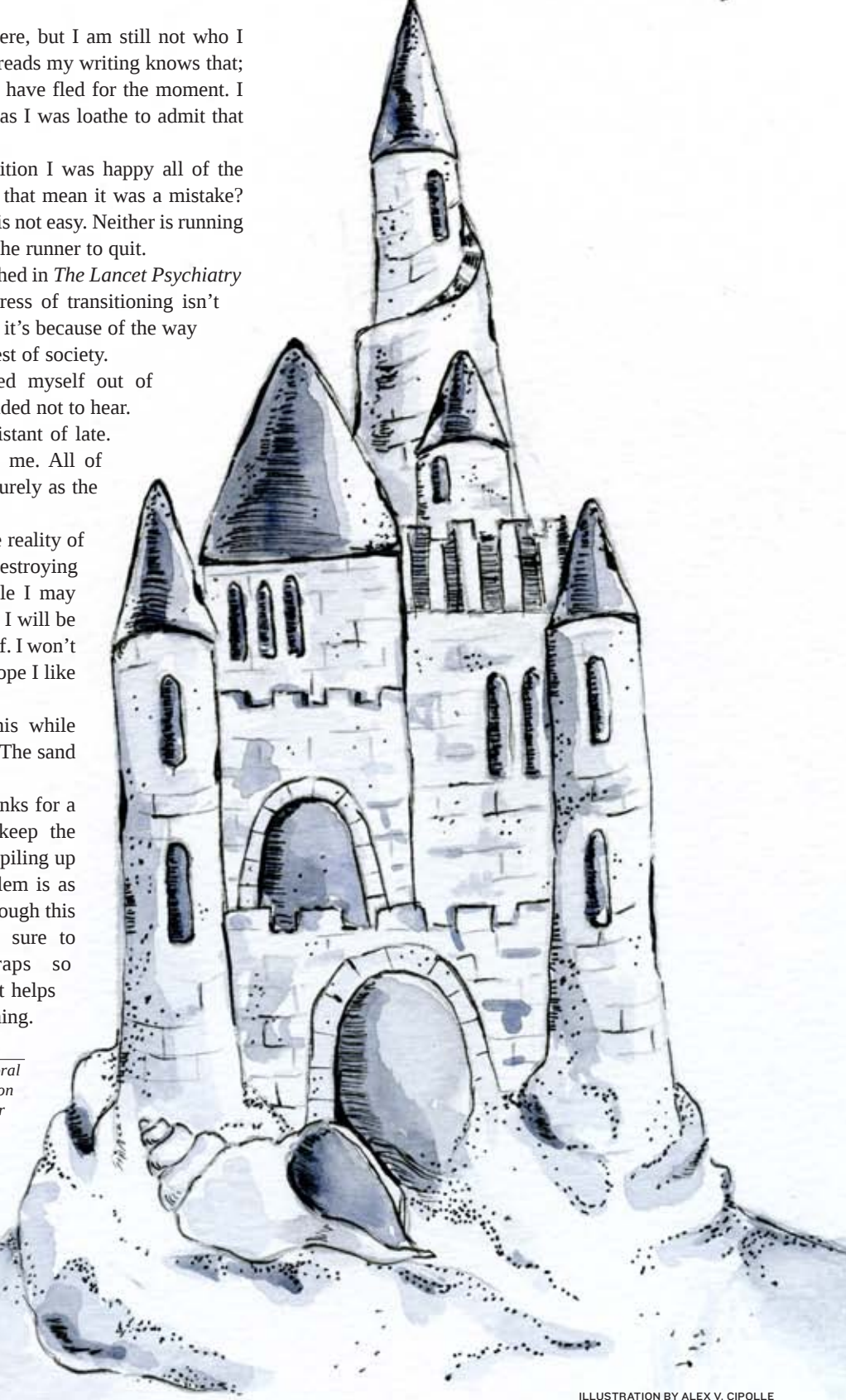


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