

4. CONVERGENCE BY EMILY STRONG

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW

What makes you feel beautiful and what makes you feel empowered?

(Model 1)

"A worriless, clear mind with some free time to groom and take care of myself makes me feel beautiful and empowered."

(Model 2)

"I like this question. I think confidence; feeling confident in myself in my abilities makes me feel beautiful and empowered. Feeling physically strong also makes me feel beautiful and empowered. I do also in a more, let's say, feminine sense, feel beautiful when I put in a little bit more effort in my appearance and try to clean up and dress nice and have more polished makeup on and such. Then, I also feel beautiful in that traditional, but more down-to-earth sense, when I'm feeling self-confident in who I am, my abilities, and what I can do. When I feel like I've been successful, and I'm moving, and feeling physically strong as well, that's when I feel like I am my own person; I don't need to rely on anyone, I can do this, I have the skills. That kind of mindset makes me feel like a very desirable, capable, beautiful, and empowered person.

I was thinking about this earlier today. Over the past couple days, I've been in such a good mood, and I suddenly have drawn more than in the past couple years. So, I was feeling very good about myself, and that made me feel more self-confident and therefore a bit more empowered in my ability to do things. And, because I felt empowered, I also indirectly felt more beautiful and more desirable as a person, because I knew I could be my own person and stand up for myself."

FULL INTERVIEW:

(Model 1)

Age 35

Assigned Sex Male

Pronouns He/Him

Gender Identity Male

Race Turkish

What is your gender identity? Please describe

Straight male.

What does femininity mean to you? Masculinity? How do you relate to these terms? How do these concepts impact the way you present yourself?

I would put myself on the masculine side of the spectrum, but my feminine side might be a little bit more than average with a caring, considerate, and emotional characteristic.

What is your racial identity?

Caucasian.

Have there been times in your life when your race has influenced how others have treated you?

I can't say I sensed any clear discrimination.

Have you felt pressured to change your appearance by close family and/or friends?

No.

Have you felt pressured to change your appearance by people you know only casually or by business associates?

No.

Have there been times in your life where you felt insecure about your appearance?

Yes, mostly when I was a teenager.

Have you felt pressured to change your appearance by the media? What aspects of the media have impacted your self-perception the most? Commercial? Social? Other?

I don't think I am pressured to change by the media, since I don't consume it much. But, I might have been pressured to change by what I think the public's perception and expectation is, which is most probably affected by the media. So in an indirect sense, yes I felt pressured to change my appearance by the media.

Do you do anything to alter your natural appearance? (tattoos, piercings, hair dyeing, makeup, etc) If so, why?

No.

What makes you feel beautiful? What makes you feel empowered?

A worryless, clear mind with some free time to groom and take care of myself makes me feel beautiful and empowered.

How have your family and close friends been supportive of your appearance and self-perception?

Even though my parents had a bit of a hard time with a couple of my hair styling choices. Eventually everyone around has been supportive of what I do.

Have you had any positive experiences with casual acquaintances or business associates that impacted your self-perception in a positive way?

I don't recall any significant experience, except the fact of getting occasional compliments which have boosted my mood and self-confidence.

(Model 2)

Age 28

Assigned Sex Female

Gender Identity Female

Pronouns She/Her or any pronouns

Race Caucasian

What is your gender identity? Please describe

So, growing up as our generation with our parents' generation, gender identity wasn't much talked about. Or maybe it was, obviously it was, it's existed for forever - having multiple genders, gender fluidity. It could just be that I grew up in a middle class, suburban family that doesn't really talk about these things very much. I'm fine with these things, I've always been fine with being associated with the female gender identity. The fact that I am biologically female, it just makes sense for me just to use she and her and to be associated with a woman, even though if I think about it, going based on society and what they expect of 'female' and 'male' and all that, I guess I've never really felt too affiliated with women, or femininity, or females. I have a rather masculine, androgynous kind of appearance to myself, and I've always kind of felt that way. So, I've never really felt like I belonged in either bucket, because I have female genitalia, and I'm okay with that, but I've never really felt that I've fit into either male or female.

I didn't really ever think too much about it. I didn't really put it as a part of my identity to question this. I was just like, 'Oh, well, this is just how I feel and how I am. Why should I have society tell me otherwise?' I was never really bothered. I didn't feel the need to change myself, which I know a lot of people do. So, I guess that's part of why I didn't really question it, but since we've been talking about it a lot more and, maybe since I don't really fall into either, maybe that means I'm non-binary. When I think about how people define what non-binary is, I suppose that kind of resonates with me, since being female, strictly just based on society's definition of it, doesn't really feel quite appropriate to me, neither does masculine. So I'm like, maybe it's a day-by-day thing, then. But, even using the pronouns 'they/them' doesn't really sound right to me, either. So, nothing really feels good, because to me, they/them almost feels like an inanimate object, it doesn't really feel like it's assigned to anything, which I guess is the point. But, it still feels too vague and just non-existent, which is probably what some people want. I think it means that it's

kind of this androgynous pronoun, but it feels more like an 'it' to me, which I know that's not what it actually is supposed to be. It's like, how to not call someone 'it' so they use 'they', but to me, that's what it feels like.

So, that's why I say all the pronouns. I'm just all of the above, depending on how I'm feeling that day, or whatever people decide to call me based on what I look like. I feel like that's kind of what I've been thinking about, in that I just see myself as who I am, and I don't feel like I need to identify or prescribe myself to a gender, just because society's asking me about my pronouns or how I identify. I'm not offended by it, but I am me. I happen to be masculine one day and I happen to be feminine another day.

I like that I'm growing more to accept the fact that I like being androgynous. Since I was little, I've always wanted to be more of that delicate kind of female that has really soft, round edges and has this really lovely, feminine look to them. I'd always have these ideas of, 'Oh, I'd love to do this kind of photoshoot or with this angle or with this lighting' and then when I try it, I did not turn out how this softer version of myself looked like in my head and be like, 'I'm not happy with these'. So, I'm trying to change my image of myself, since I've been kind of subconsciously rejecting the fact that I am less feminine than I want to be.

I feel like I'm kind of contradicting myself here, because I will say that I don't really care, but I guess sometimes I do care. I think I'm trying to come to terms with the fact that it really doesn't matter what my gender is and how I identify as I think that's a bit more freeing than trying to fit yourself into a box of being male or female. I probably have more to say on that, but that's kind of what I've rambled about so far. Does any of that make sense?

It does, and we'll kind of cover some of this stuff in the following questions. You talk about wishing that you could engage with a more feminine aesthetic. Do you ever feel like that with a more masculine aesthetic, since you're kind of in between everything? Or is it mostly just the femininity that you wish you could embody more?

I'm not too sure why I've always resonated more towards wanting to be more feminine, as opposed to more masculine. I want to guess that maybe it's because I'm not like that, so I'm trying to compensate and I want to be more feminine, because I grew up thinking, 'I'm a female, I need to look more feminine'. Subconsciously. I did go out of my way to try and look very pretty or cutesy occasionally, but I was very, 'comfort matters over beauty'. So, I'm wondering if it's because I felt like I wasn't good enough as a female, just based on what society was saying; that I wasn't pretty enough, that I needed to be more sparkly - which I do love sparkles, don't get me wrong.

I think another subconscious thing is that I am attracted to women who are like that, whether it's appreciating from a distance, sexually, or any form of that. I enjoyed that aesthetic artistically, and I think I wanted to be able to look like that as well and do it for myself, because I admired it so much. So, I think it may be a combination of things. I really do like that kind of airy, soft, round kind of aesthetic, as far as art goes. I tend to imitate that in my art, regardless of what I do, anyway, so I may have just been drawn to that naturally, and then I wanted to become that, and

since that's not physically how I look all the time, I think I was just struggling with the fact that I have higher contrast, sharper features. I have a toned, more muscular body, and I think if I just learned how to use those attributes and highlight them in a different way, then I'd probably be more happy, more successful with how I look.

It's hard to figure out, because I think I'm a little late to the game as far as figuring myself out. Most people do that in high school. Maybe it's a constant process, but you grow up being told a certain thing, and you accept that as the world. Then, as you get older, your world just kind of crumbles around you. You realize a new reality because everyone thinks differently and there's more to the world than just your neighborhood where you grew up.

So, I think it's undoing and unlearning things that you used to know, which is really hard. Breaking a bad habit of any kind is really difficult. You know, how you see yourself and how you see others. We're just trained and conditioned to think a certain way. But, it seems like a lot of people are coming out of their shell and being more supportive of that lately, which makes me so thankful and so excited for future humanity and people who want to be more self-expressive.

I don't think you're alone in being further into adulthood and still trying to figure things out. I think a lot of people are. Especially because things have changed and become more open and the dialogue has been more prevalent, people are starting to question things more. That kind of leads into our next question, which is, what does femininity mean to you? And what about masculinity? How do you relate to these? How do these concepts impact the way that you present yourself?

Now, I was trying to think about that earlier, because I was like, well, what does femininity and masculinity mean to me? There's the textbook version of it, which I think is a boring answer. There's society's version of femininity, at least what pops into my head, which I was describing earlier as generally very soft features. I'm saying generally, but I realized this probably is not actually everyone's, it's just one of the versions. But usually, I think of either petite and small and kind of delicate, or I think of very curvy and very voluptuous, which is slightly less popular now, but let's say like, 10 years ago, that was more popular in advertising. Um, generally, long hair, and more submissive. This is kind of, like, those very trope-y, stereotypical versions of what femininity I've heard, at least growing up.

And then the complete opposite for masculinity, you know, big strong guys that need to be dominant and stand up for themselves. And, um, I find all of these pretty exhausting, because there's more to people than just those two things; those two stereotypes. So, I find it hard to answer what femininity and masculinity means to me, because I at the moment feel like that's almost putting people into a box and that they need to be masculine or feminine, no matter what their gender is. I don't know if that's really the right way to think about it, but it seems like it almost shouldn't really matter. Like, we should maybe use different adjectives instead of masculine, instead of feminine, because by definition, if you were to actually go to the dictionary and look up "feminine", I think it probably says something like, 'of the female variety with certain chromosomes' and whatnot, or whatever, or it could be like 'petite' or 'small and delicate' or 'submissive'.

I'm actually curious what the dictionary definition of feminine is. That's not very helpful, 'Pertaining to a woman'. Well, thank you, great. 'Female sex; effeminate, having qualities described as sensitivity or gentleness'. That seems a little antiquated actually, which is kind of funny. And then masculinity, "Strength and boldness'. It's really interesting to see what a dictionary defines them as. So, strength and boldness for masculine and then gentleness and sensitivity for feminine, which, okay, I can buy that. But, I guess it's funny, because someone who is technically a female can have, you know, the attributes of being strong and bold, but I wouldn't necessarily call her masculine, I suppose. But, you know, definitions change over time.

So yeah, I wouldn't be surprised if definitions did change in the very near future.

Yeah, so depending on how you want to define what you consider masculine and feminine - going by those simple adjectives that go by personality first, or explaining it more as far as physical attributes. I find it a little hard, but I guess, sometimes things like this help people define themselves and maybe it is helpful to actually have the words feminine and masculine exist. If there is a male who's trying to identify more as feminine, because he likes that aesthetic and he feels more comfortable that way, then maybe it helps him use those words to communicate that to other people. So, I guess femininity is with that kind of delicate, gentleness, and sensitivity, and masculinity more so reflects this strength and boldness. However, I don't think it means that males need to only be masculine and that females need only be feminine. It doesn't matter the gender.

I feel like I have masculine features. Sometimes, I think if I dressed a certain way I could pass for a male if I didn't wear a bra or makeup. So, I feel like it depends. I guess for me, I want to say that I can relate to both of them. Even since growing up, I've kind of felt like a tomboy, back when we used that word, not super feminine. So, I associate myself as a tomboy when I was younger. I feel like that I've always kind of felt on the boyish side, but I still liked trying to be feminine and girly, I suppose. So, I'd like to say that I kind of agree with both of them, depending on how I'm feeling that day and how confident I'm feeling depending on you know, do I want to be extra pretty today? Or am I feeling extra confident? That would be a little bit more masculine, I suppose. So for me, I guess it's fluid. It depends, but I do associate with both of them.

As of right now, I'm not really being super social or around a whole lot of people, like most of us. So, I haven't really been able to act on what kind of person or personalities I want to have based on my gender. I'm sure that'll be more entertaining once I move on and do something else with my life, but it's just kind of who I am. I guess it isn't really a question that pops into my head. Sometimes it's like, 'Oh, well, I know I'm a girl, but here I am taking on some kind of boyish features and outfits and stuff like that, which I used to kind of shy away from a little bit. But now I'm trying to be a little bit more open on wanting to dress differently. I don't want to say that I'll ever completely be a tomboy, or wanting to dress in men's style clothing, because I do love a lot of really feminine clothing as well. So, I think it's a weird question to answer, because I feel like it depends on how I'm feeling that day. It's a very fluid thing. But, I'm trying to be more accepting of the fact that I don't only have to be feminine, and that I can be masculine.

The last guy that I dated was very positive and supportive about this kind of stuff. So, he also helped support me in new things like this that I'm not used to asking myself.

When you're thinking about whether or not you want to be more masculine or feminine presenting, do you feel like it depends on the situation? Or the event that you're going to? Or who you're going to be around? Or is it more internal?

I think both, and that both of those situations feel familiar. If I'm going around other people for a purpose - not just like the grocery store - if I'm meeting up with someone, or it's a professional setting, I think I err on the side of pleasing them more than I myself. So that sounds a little manipulative, but I will please others and do what I think will make them comfortable to get what I want out of the situation. I think I'm thinking more professionally I would err on getting a better outcome than being myself.

I think when I'm more comfortable around a person, then I'm more expressive and more lenient to try, 'Hey, I'm actually feeling a bit masculine today, so I'm not going to try to be more feminine'. But, if I'm not used to people, I tend to err on the side of what society expects of me, because I know how to be that way, and it doesn't bother me. It's not like I feel like I'm hiding a part of myself; I think that is also a part of who I am, because I do feel comfortable playing the more female, let's say, role. I'm doing what society expects of me, because I know how to do it. I think it suits me and it's still my twist on it, I suppose. But I think it does depend. If it's just me, and I'm going out for the day or I feel like staying in the house or I'm going to see a close friend, then it does depend, like, 'Do I feel like putting on makeup and feeling a bit more pretty today? Or...?' I guess that is what makes me feel masculine or feminine is wearing makeup or not, and the outfit I'm wearing. But yeah, I think it does depend on the situation a little bit.

Have you ever felt pressured to change your appearance by family or friends? As you were growing up, or even now; pressured to be more feminine or more masculine?

I think this reminded me of another question that you were asking - I think this is going to kind of tie into 'Have you ever felt insecure about your appearance?' I'll kind of tie that into the same thing, because I feel like we all can kind of relate to that. I mean, I think everyone at some point in their life has experienced feeling insecure about their appearance and having someone pressure them into being who they aren't, or just something different than what they felt like being that day. Maybe it's still them, but it's not what they want it to be at that moment. I've definitely felt that for my family and some friends, whether it's intentional or not.

The one that stands out the most is my mom. Not with ill intent, but multiple times throughout my life growing up, she would try to get me to dress differently and look a different way, because she thought that whatever I was doing wasn't good enough or not suitable for how she thought I should look as a middle schooler or a high schooler. I was more bothered by this in those early to mid-teen years. I didn't care when I was, like, 10 and younger, because she dressed me and I just ran outside. But I do remember, it was definitely more of a comfort over style kind of thing. I didn't really have that kind of confidence. It was definitely a more casual, punk, graphic t-shirt. I don't know if it was because she was in the fashion industry for so long that she did kind of have this New York expectation of what style should be, but it rubbed off on me in a way that, in my head, portrayed as I don't look good enough, and she's not approving of how I'm choosing to dress. It could just be because I didn't care and I didn't think to look any better. I don't know, I

just didn't put any effort into wanting to look nicer, I was so comfy. But, I remember my mom saying that a lot. It was never really mean, it was more like an aside, but I would take it too personally.

And I guess sometimes I would have classmates or peers or friends - I don't remember anyone ever saying anything directly to me in, like, a mean sense. But, you know, you learn from other people's mistakes. So, if you see someone making fun of someone else, how they look, then you'll think, 'Ah, I have done that', or, 'What if I do that, so I better not do that'. So, I've definitely been in those situations where I've felt insecure, or questioned myself based on someone else's opinion of someone else, not even just me. So I mean, it's hard - school is brutal, people are brutal, the internet is brutal.

For some reason, I can't get over the fact that it's okay to post photos of yourself, whether they're artistic or even just a selfie - I don't know if it's a moral high ground, or if it's an insecurity for me - but it feels bad, or weird. Like posting too much of myself or even if it was going to be more artistic, then it feels like I'll be judged for being vain. I don't know if you've ever had that kind of comment thrown at you, but it kind of seems like that fear of being judged for how you're choosing to show yourself, and how frequently, and in what situation, and in what way. But I want to be able to do that, which is why it's so nice to work with you, because it's like working with an artist almost gives me an excuse and a purpose and a reason to do that with my body. Or if it was just on my own volition, then it's like, 'Well, you're choosing to do this out of vanity, clearly'.

Are you just worried that people would consider you vain? Or is it that you're worried that they would have other negative feedback in general?

Probably both. I think this kind of ties into when you see people make those side comments about girls that post vanity selfies, like those being a thing, and then kind of making that into a spin on anyone who decides to post too much of their face, and then suddenly people throw out dumb things like, 'Oh, they're insecure', which yes, I guess so, they're right - but I mean, really, it doesn't matter. I know that technically, other people's opinions don't matter. I'm just such a people pleaser, so it's kind of hard to just get over that illogical knee jerk reaction to people's reactions of me where I shouldn't care. Part of me doesn't, but part of me does. So it could be anything, it doesn't have to be vanity, but just general negative comments on choices I decided to make.

That kind of ties into another one of the questions that I had, which was, have you felt pressured to change your appearance by the media? What aspects of the media have impacted your self-perception - commercial, versus social, versus other - and it sounds like you're talking about just not showing yourself at all to avoid potential backlash, is that something that you've experienced?

You're right in the sense that my reaction to it seems to be, 'Well, if I just don't show myself at all, then I won't have to deal with anyone'. I feel like there's this weird line for me, at least between, 'I should look like this' and being inspired by how someone looks. So, sometimes I can't really tell the difference in time to say it. Let's just say I have a Pinterest board of fashion ideas that I really

like. To me, it's like, do I feel like I should look like this? Or am I actually inspired by the outfits that they're wearing? And maybe it's a bit of both, maybe it's one or the other. I think if it's coming from a good place, and you feel happy about it, at the end of the day, it really shouldn't matter, but sometimes, I do feel like I need to look a certain way. Which is kind of why I default to my comfy look, because I can't make up my mind. So I just end up with my default, Well, I'm just going to exist how I am and not do anything, because I don't know what I should be. So, the easiest answer is to do nothing, because I get overwhelmed. So I'm like, I don't know how I'm supposed to look, I don't know, I don't want to put in the effort to figure this out, because I can't make up my mind, so I'm just going to not do anything.

So, anytime I find that I make a decision or make any progress towards carving out something for myself, like finally getting an undercut, which I've wanted for like 10 years. Or, I guess changing my fashion sense or style. I find that I am very indecisive when it comes to making up who I want to be and experimenting with different versions of myself, just because I'm like, well, is this what I should be doing? Or am I actually inspired by this? So, it's a bit of both. It's hard for me to tell. But, for example, a lot of bi girls just seem to have the stereotype of having short pixie cut hair. So I felt like, 'Well, does that mean that I should go in this direction? Or am I actually inspired by this haircut? Or maybe it's a bit of both?' So yeah, it's hard. It's hard to say, but I am definitely influenced, I think, more on a subconscious level. But, it's kind of hard not to be influenced by marketing, ads, and media when you see it so much. I mean, if it's the only thing you end up seeing, it's kind of the only thing you have to get off of.

Yeah, I would imagine the only way to be fully disengaged from it would be to literally be off the grid. Otherwise, how do you avoid it? How do you avoid affecting you?

Yeah, it's hard, because sometimes it is inspiring, but a lot of it does feel like pressure if it's not something you want to do. It's like, 'Oh, no, I don't want to be this thin skinny model, but is that what I should be?' But then sometimes you see other stuff that is marketing and you're like, wow, this actually resonates with me, and this is something I want to be as opposed to what I'm interpreting as I should be, and now it's what I want to do, so that's why I feel like marketing is a little bit hard sometimes. And how you perceive it, because it is all about the perspective of the viewer I suppose. Whether the intentions of the original marketer is a 'should' or a 'want' is a different conversation.

I mean, obviously marketing is to sell you stuff, but I like to think and hope that there's more meaning sometimes. Actually I should share this with you, because I actually like this one marketing tactic.. Their 'should' is, 'You should feel good about yourself and it shouldn't matter what we say'. Like, that's their version of it, which I guess works. Slight tangent here, but they're an underwear company called Parade, and their manifesto is fantastic. They're all about body positivity of all shapes and sizes, their models are of all different colors, and widths, and varieties. It's fantastic. And they're very supportive. Their message is not, 'You should be feeling bad about yourself'. It's more, 'We want to inspire you to feel good about yourself, no matter who you are'.

So, I think it's perspective and the messaging which gets really tricky. I think this is why people are confused all the time about who they should be and what should happen, because nothing's clear.

Yeah, I'm familiar with that brand and similar brands. I think it's definitely a step in the right direction, but there is still always the underlying fact that they are trying to sell you something. So, I think it's a good message, but it's still paired with, 'buy this thing. You'll think you're good enough, because you bought this thing'.

I see what you mean. For some reason, it doesn't bother me, because I'm more of the business mindset where they need to make money to be there to support us. So, that's why it doesn't bother me that they're trying for me to give them money, I guess.

I understand, and I still think that it's way better than like, you know, say Victoria's Secret where it's like, if you buy this, maybe you can be one step closer to being liked and skinny.

Yeah.

So we're going to go off in a slightly different direction for a moment. What is your racial identity?

Um, I'm pretty basic. I'm a white 20-something-year-old. I am a very standard, privileged individual. I feel like I do not have a lot of depth to talk about. As far as my race goes, I've been a very fortunate individual, and I've not had the struggle as far as that goes. Which I guess in a way I'm obviously very thankful for. At the same point, I haven't had a lot of experience with this, so I don't have a lot of opinions on it, because I've been so comfortable. So, I don't have a lot of depth or dynamic emotional responses to this, because it doesn't affect me as much. I mean, I'm not a white male, where then I would need some more help understanding this, but even as a female, I haven't had that much of an issue. As a white female, even as a bisexual, white female, I still somehow avoided having any issues with all of those above. I mean, I've just grown up in a middle class, suburban family, and moved around the country. My life has been mostly around people like me. I wish that I had had more racial diversity, so I could understand people more and be able to empathize a bit more. I don't know what you want to talk about with this, I just haven't experienced a lot of strife because of it.

Have there been times in your life when your race has influenced how others have treated you? You already kind of touched on the fact that you've led sort of a comfortable life because of your race and been treated a certain way, privilege-wise. Was there anything else that you wanted to say about that?

I mean, just that I've been very lucky and very fortunate. Though at the same time, I find people who have struggled far more interesting than people who haven't. When I lived in New York City, it was lovely to be around people who were very different from me. I got to see who they were as such a colorful type of person. Not that I wish that I'd struggled through and had bad

experiences, that's a strange thing to wish, but I mean, I at least wish that I had been around more people. Moving forward wherever I go next, I hope to keep educating myself as far as the different kinds of people that are out there. I can't experience what they're going through, but I'd like to be around more people who are different than I am, so I can indirectly live through what they've been through. I guess my awareness is that I'm different - I'm trying to make that into a positive thing, so that I can empathize and sympathize with people who are different than I am. I think it's just trying to be more aware that I'm in a good space, and that other people need to be appreciated, I suppose.

Do you do anything to alter your natural appearance such as tattoos, piercings, paradigm makeup, etc? And if so, why?

I wish I did all of the above, but I have not done a single one of them. I love people who dye their hair, have all these piercings, have tattoos, anything of the sort; fancy makeup. I think they're the coolest looking people. I just don't do anything. I wonder if it's the effort?

Um, no, actually, that's a lie. For me personally, and I don't project this onto other people, but for me personally, I'm a bit of a purist. To me, how I was born and how I exist is how I'm supposed to be, so why should I change it? I should be happy with who I am. So, in that train of thought, to me, if I put on, let's say, too much makeup, I'm hiding my natural face. I want to try to appreciate my hair color for what it is like, why should I change this? Tattoos are a whole different story because I think health-wise, my body will hate them and I'm afraid of what will happen if it tries to reject a tattoo. So, I'm just terrified about getting a tattoo.

Skin-wise, I guess it's the same: I'm a blank slate. I tried to have piercings, but my body rejected them. So, apparently my body just doesn't like me doing things to it, either. I had cartilage piercings, but it was like, nope. I'm surprised to have even one piercing anymore that my body is letting me keep. But I think, just for me, it just feels good to not alter myself too much. It feels fake, like I'm trying too hard to be something I'm not. That's just who I was born as: I have this color hair, my eyes are this color, this is what my skin looks like, I leave it. When I think of it objectively, that sounds so boring because I love people who get all artistic, and change their hair, and have all these tattoos. I think they're the coolest looking people and I fully support anyone doing that. I think it's just for me, like how I see myself, I suppose, which feels very vanilla. I do put on some makeup when I want to feel a little prettier, more cleaned up, and I do like how it looks. I enjoy putting on a very light amount of makeup, but I like my hair color. I probably won't dye it until I'm a silver fox, and even then maybe I'll keep it that way.

What makes you feel beautiful, and what makes you feel empowered?

I like this question. I think confidence; feeling confident in myself in my abilities makes me feel beautiful and empowered. Feeling physically strong also makes me feel beautiful and empowered. I do also in a more, let's say, feminine sense, feel beautiful when I put in a little bit more effort in my appearance and try to clean up and dress nice and have more polished makeup on and such. Then, I also feel beautiful in that traditional sense of the way. But, I think in a more down-to-earth sense, if I'm feeling self-confident in who I am, and my abilities, and what I can do. When I feel like I've been successful, and I'm moving, and feeling physically strong as

well, that's when I feel like I am my own person; I don't need to rely on anyone, I can do this, I have the skills. That kind of mindset makes me feel like a very desirable, capable, beautiful, and empowered person.

I was thinking about this earlier today. Over the past couple days, I've been in such a good mood, and I suddenly have drawn more than in the past couple years. So, I was feeling very good about myself, and that made me feel more self-confident and therefore a bit more empowered in my ability to do things. And, because I felt empowered, I also indirectly felt more beautiful and more desirable as a person, because I knew I could be my own person and stand up for myself.

How have your family and close friends been supportive of your appearance and self-perception?

I think generally, they've been pretty accepting. My parents don't really remark on how I look. Or, I don't really have friends or anyone that really comments on how I look or anything like that. So thankfully, I guess that means that generally, they're fine with it, or they've just learned to keep their mouth shut if they don't like that I look like a pajama slob one day or something like that.

Because I am so neutral and I don't do a whole lot of self-expression. When I talked earlier about me being a purist and not doing piercings, tattoos, makeup hair - a lot of that could also be the people-pleaser, so that could be part of it as well. I do think my answer was still true, but a part of me also wishes that I was okay with being more self-expressive with my appearance. Maybe one day I'll get to that. I think I don't have a lot of feedback from my friends and family because I look rather neutral, so there's not a whole lot of offensive things about me that would have people be like, 'You should change this', aside from "wash your hair" or something.

You mentioned that one of your partners was being very supportive of your exploration of self. Did you want to talk at all?

Oh, yeah he was very supportive. It was kind of a new thing for me just because, as a relationship, I'm used to being with a standard guy - like, a straight male. It's kind of self-explanatory what happens in the relationship. The last guy that I was dating, he was a more feminine, bisexual male, so it was neat to get a different perspective on how he views relationships, and people, and himself.

He's also a bit younger than me, so from a slightly different generation. So, we were around younger people who had different thoughts, and therefore more unusual perspectives on how to view oneself. So he, in general, was very sex-positive, very body-positive, so he was just awash with compliments and reassurance and just saying, like, 'This is fine', or 'Hey, would you consider these things?' Or like, 'Hey, it's okay'.

We're still good friends now. We're not dating, but we talk amicably. I'm able to talk to him about how he wants to try more feminine clothing and I give him suggestions, and then he's like, 'I think you would look really great in men's clothing'. He dresses really well, really nicely, and I'm always complimenting him, because I think it looks really cool. He's like, 'I think you could

pull it off, go try on my pants, wear my shoes'. He's always trying to encourage me like, 'Hey, it doesn't matter that you're a girl. I think you'll look good in this anyway'. And occasionally, he'll send me something like, 'Look, these boots are for females, but they're styled like men's shoes'. Or, 'look at this Pinterest photo of this girl who has kind of this masculine, tomboy chic' - which is a new genre of clothing that I've discovered, and I love it.

He presents conversations and topics that I haven't really had with any other guys that I've been romantically close to. So, we kind of support each other in trying out the different gender sides of, so I've tried to encourage him like, 'Why don't you go try dating a guy sometime and embrace your more feminine side?', and then vice versa, 'Hey, you should go date a girl' or, you know, 'It's okay to be masculine. Here's some ideas on how to do that'. So, he's been very supportive, as far as stuff like that goes.

Have you had any positive experiences with more casual acquaintances or business associates that impacted your self-perception in a positive way?

I'm almost better and more comfortable at putting on a good face and a good show for people I'm not close to. I have this persona that I fall easily into, it's a professional persona, usually when I'm around either new people or people I don't know, or business related situations. So, I usually hear good things from that. I've trained myself to figure out how to talk and act a certain way that gets a good result. I'm pretty pleased with how I figured out how to do that and that generally, if I do well, and I work hard, then I hear good things from my boss, from peers, and from people I barely know.

So generally, I find that if I present myself well, and I work hard, and I'm a polite, kind person that listens to them when they talk, then I'll get good feedback. That just continues to help me continue to do that again in the future. And it always feels good! It's not like I'm like, 'Oh, of course I know that I'm gonna be praised'. I'm always hoping that I'm doing alright, I'm not that cocky. But yeah I have this professional persona that I put on when I'm around people that I'm not close to. I'm a lot more awkward and less put-together whenever I'm with people I actually am close to. So, it's almost easier to interact with humans when I don't know them, because I have this default that I go into, and I usually know it'll give me a good result.

I wondered if you wanted to talk about any of the struggles that you've had health wise, and if that has impacted your relationship with your body at all?

Yeah, it's been a roller coaster. I think at the end of the day, I have a stronger relationship with my body. Because I have been forced to pay attention to it so closely for so long, I have become very intimate with the inner workings of what my body does and what it means, which I think is a rare gift to be able to have. It's taken a lot to get there, and it's been quite a struggle. There's been a lot of pain involved with it just based on what I've gone through and how much I've abused my body and the process of what got me to this point in the first place. Like, how I got sick in the first place, just by not taking care of myself and more or less abusing and neglecting it. And then the healing process, which was difficult in that it was just hard and the treatments were difficult and painful.

But, I now know what it feels like to feel better, and I think my standard or my tolerance level for what I can and can't take is at a higher level than other people, because I now know what it feels like to feel crappy, and what it feels like to feel really good. I feel like, I want to always feel really good, so why should I do this to myself, because I know that it'll feel crappy, where other people, maybe they just accepted that form of crappy is just normal and how life is. But, I know what it feels like to be better than that. I don't want to do worse things to myself now.

I feel that the perspective I have now is better for me. I think I will be a healthier person, and I don't think this will go away. I don't think this is something that's like, okay, I'm better now, and then go back to doing what I was doing before. This is okay, I'm better now, let's keep it this way. It's something that I think I'll be practicing in different forms for the rest of my life. I don't think it'll always be the same form of healing and self-care, but more or less something. I think it's a very valuable thing that I learned.

Do you mind just saying a little bit about what you did go through and describing like what brought you to that point?

Yeah, so let's see. There's a lot, so I'll just say generally what kind of happened. It was a multitude of things. I think the thing that kind of kicked me to go home and really hit rock bottom in the first place is when I was in New York City. It was a combination of, I wasn't eating nearly enough. So I was unintentionally, like, anorexic and unintentionally gave myself an eating disorder. I was probably eating less than 1000 calories a day, and on top of that, I was running around the city all the time. I was afraid of food, so I had mental insecurities as well. So, I was afraid of eating, I had depression, I had anxiety. I had some toxic work relationships, and I had some very complicated and dramatic personal relationships that were all happening at the same time. Then on top of that, I was drinking a lot. I mean, I was happy through the entire thing, but it was bookended by toxic self-behavior and relationships that I wasn't handling very well, and not making the best choices for my mental and physical health.

There was one time I thought I had ADD. I still may have ADD, but they ended up putting me on some very common ADD medication, but I responded so poorly to that medication. Well, I took Adderall first, and it just felt like I was on speed for, like, a month. So I stopped that. Then I tried another one, but I responded so horribly to it that I slowly, without realizing it, sunk into the worst depression of my life. It was very scary. I didn't do it to myself, this medication made me that depressed, and even though I stopped it, I never fully recovered.

So, I was just kind of in this emotional shambles and physically couldn't do anything. I was malnourished, I was drinking too much, I had really complicated, emotionally-taxing relationships. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I hated my job. My boss was horrible, blah, blah, it was just like this whole explosion. I, like, imploded, and I was just like, I'm done, I quit. I sold almost everything that I owned, I left in the middle of my lease, and then I moved back home. I was just at this breaking point of like, I don't have the mental energy to even go to another job. I hate what I'm doing, I need to reset.

That's kind of how I ended up back home and why I'm still here. That was kind of like the breakdown that pushed me to completely reset my life. That's why I'm home and I spent, like, six

months not talking to anyone. I didn't touch my phone, laptop. I could only think about the next, like, 10 minutes of my life. Anything past that was overwhelming and it was just like, I'm going to think about literally one step at a time. I would sit on my front step in the sun for like 30 minutes not moving, I was just very vegetative and slowly getting back to a normal person. I slept a lot, still figured out how to eat. A lot of that time, I was going to acupuncture, chiropractor's, herbal doctors to try and kind of figure out what was wrong, or how to get myself back to normal, or if I had any other underlying things.

It turns out that a year after I came here, I figured out that I had a Lyme disease co-infection called Babesia. So, that probably explained a lot of what I was going through. Babesia affects your emotional state and your physical state and how you process what you're eating, and also emotions. It makes you unbalanced in general. I also may have had a small version of Lyme disease at one point. It was just the past three years that I've been here, then this health journey of figuring out, okay, this is what's wrong with me now, how do I fix it? And what do I do? And then also, what do I want to do with my life? Which is the current part that I'm in now, but when I found out that I had Babesia, the treatment that I had to go on was exceptionally hard.

Those were the longest three months of my life, the three month treatment of two different types of medication. It was a really strong antibiotic and then an antimalarial kind of medicine. The thing with Lyme and these diseases is that when you try to get rid of it, there's like this thing called the Jarisch–Herxheimer reaction, where all of all of the symptoms that you have are amplified, because the creature in you that's causing this problem is slowly dying off. So, all of the problems that it causes are amplified as it explodes out of you basically. That's kind of a dramatic way of saying it, but, okay, maybe it gives me depression, cool, it's gonna be super bad for like a month, and you're just gonna have to sit through it, but it eventually will go away. Oh, your joints hurt? Well, they really hurt now. And oh, you're nauseous? Well try not to throw up every time you eat. I would have panic attacks in the fetal position on my kitchen floor after taking this medication.

I'm just kind of venting at this point. I don't really know if there's a substance to this, except for just what I went through. It was just a lot of really strange healing methods, but I figured it out. I stuck through the treatment all the way through, well I quit like a week or two early. I was like, I'm done. I don't want this anymore. But, it was just a lot of me saying, okay, I — up. How do I fix it?

And then talking to these really amazing doctors. I'm in the functional medicine world. No one in the Western world of medicine that I went to was able to help me. Not that I disagree with the Western medicine world, but I really think they're severely lacking in more specialized and unique forms of illness, so I did not have any faith in them. So, I went to more functional medicine, Eastern practitioners, Eastern medicine.

So yeah, it was just really about tough it out and working your way through it. I don't think there's an overarching moral to my story of getting through that. It just sucked, and then I got over it. It was just a lot of perseverance, and waiting, being patient and listening to myself and what I needed. I wasn't really on my phone very much, but being away from people also really helped. Because, you know, social media can definitely change how you view yourself and yourself in the world. I find that being away from it has also been very helpful.

I'm really just trying to understand my body functions. It's still a little hard to eat food, sometimes. It's significantly better than it used to be, I'm able to actually absorb nutrients and gain muscle mass, and I'm not almost 10 pounds underweight. So, I feel a lot more normal and I can think more clearly. I'm a lot more normal, and it feels good. I guess I could do a big sigh and be like, 'I've made it', but at the end of the day, but really just okay, I'm here.

So, what's next? What should I do? Like, how can I keep moving forward? I probably should do some more reflection on what I've been through, but I just keep moving forward. I know through the depression and anxiety that I've been through, if I keep thinking about the past that I will just sit in this spiral, and it's so hard to get out of. I just don't want to put myself in that position. If I wallow in it - I know how to wallow. I wallow plenty, but like, really?

You've been through a lot and it's pretty amazing that you never did give up hope. I think that more people than you might think could probably relate, on maybe a less drastic level, to not taking care of yourself and not listening to your body. That's not really held at a high importance in our society the way that it should be. I think that your extreme example is a perfect reflection of the fact that we could all do a lot better.

Yeah, I agree that it is really sad that mental, emotional, and physical health is so brushed under the rug. Well, actually slightly less for physical, more the emotional and mental. But, I think because I've had this perspective and I've had this experience, I now have the perspective on how important it is. Not that everyone needs to experience something as traumatic as this, but it is kind of hard to have that perspective if you haven't really been through it and haven't really talked about it. So, I guess it's kind of hard to believe and understand if I don't talk about it. I do wish that we had more support, and I think we are slowly heading in that direction. I do see little snippets here and there of people trying to be more empowered about mental health and emotional health. There are some people in the bigger companies that are trying to speak out and advertise it a bit more as a thing that people need to pay attention to, which is a step in a direction.

I think down the road, when I'm a bit older, I would like to do something that supports or helps people mentally and emotionally or assist those that have gone through stuff like this. I don't know if it should be professionally, or just in my personal life, but I don't know. I just feel like people go through a lot, and we don't really talk about it. It's one thing that really resonates with me.

Was there anything else that you wanted to add that we didn't already talk about?

I briefly mentioned, just because it kind of fell into gender identity and all that... Is orientation a part of what you talk about at all?

I don't have a specific question for it, but if you want to talk about that, please do.

I kind of mentioned it and kind of tied in a little bit with my gender identity. I think I'll just briefly reiterate that I'm bisexual, potentially pansexual. I haven't really thought much into that part yet. But at the very least, I'm bisexual. If you want to put a name to it, I will say that I just like people for who they are. It doesn't matter to me if they're male or female if I resonate with them as a person. I've never officially dated a female, so I would like to experience that, but it doesn't really matter to me if you're a male or female, or somewhere in between, or figuring it out, who you are as a person. Just be a good person. Anyone can be good or bad.

I don't even know if it was worth mentioning, but I felt good about myself knowing this fact: when I worked in New York City, one of my coworkers was a transgendered female, and I didn't know that, because to me, they passed so well for a female that that's just who they were. I didn't even know. So, they had a big crush on me, and they wanted to get to know me more, and so we went on a date. They kept telling me, 'I have this big secret, I hope it'll be fine', and I was fine with it. I was like, 'I didn't even know. I just took you as you were, that's just who you are. I didn't judge you or question it or anything'. Their mouth fell on the floor, and I was like, wait, but that's the most normal thing to say? And I was very flattered that my nonchalant responses, just accepting them as they were, was exactly what they needed to hear. I felt flattered that they were so moved by what I'd said. So I was like, if I just keep doing that to people, and I just keep treating them and think of them as they are without question or judgment, then I guess I'm on the right track of accepting people as they are. I felt glad I made them happy. So, I guess that's how I would like to try to keep approaching my relationships with people. I just like people for who they are, and accept people.