

The Fat Truth

by Max Airborne

I thought I was over it. Fat Girl was going to be a celebration of fat dykes, a place to see ourselves in print, a place to bitch and moan, a place to organize. I had no idea what I was getting into. I knew it'd be a lot of work, and collectives could be difficult. But nobody told me what it would really be like; that I'd have to look at myself in ways I had never imagined, deal with feelings I didn't even know existed. There was no sign saying "Warning: Deep Shit Ahead." Perhaps some part of me knew, but I dove in head first, deluding myself enough to do so innocently.

My eyes opened as the collective struggled to define fat. How could we determine who was fat enough to be part of Fat Girl? We went around and around and around. Nobody ever really defined it, but the tension and fear seemed insurmountable. Everyone had feelings about it, most of us held back. I was afraid to admit I thought the line started with me, afraid to think about my place in the fat spectrum. If women much smaller than me are fat, what does that make me? Super fat? No, the proper euphemism is "supersized," I discovered. And what the hell is the line for that? Who's deciding anyway? I started feeling like there was no way someone who weighed a hundred pounds less than me could possibly share my experience of being fat. If they claimed the label for themselves my feelings were being invalidated, my experience being whitewashed. "Hey, I want control over my *own* identity. And yours, too, so you don't knock over the walls surrounding my fragile sense of self." Ick. What a scared and nasty me I discovered. The whole process continues to be painful, and I haven't really spoken about it until now.

Fat sensory overload

Like the sudden deep clarity of an LSD trip, all the thoughts and feelings I've always had about my body are now shouting at me full blast. The voices have existed forever, but I used to turn down the volume so their controlling effect was subliminal. (The killer part of the story comes when I simply realize the voices are in fact my own, and I control them. Ha! I guess I'll have to write another chapter when I reach that part in the plot. It'd be easy to write then, after the fact.)

I silenced my inner reality for most of my life. Not that I didn't have opportunities to listen. There was the time I started seeing a therapist (willingly for the first time) because I wanted to stop feeling suicidal, and needed help dealing with the memories and effects of my past sexual abuse. During the intake interview, the therapist asked me how I felt about my body size. I said, "Oh, I've worked very hard to accept myself. Yeah, I've dealt with that." I saw her for a year and a half, and didn't bring it up once. I think I actually believed myself. But the truth was I couldn't handle going that deep. Now it makes sense, because the depth of the fear and self-hatred that I am uncovering seems infinite. I guess I have enough moments of being ok at this stage in my life that I can handle it.

My intellect and my psyche have been at war forever over the fat truth. The first time I got angry about my childhood lifetime of forced diets I was 19. It was the day before I moved as far away from my family as I could get. My dad asked me—for the last time—when I was going to lose weight. I had spent my life in terror of this man for the violence he'd committed, but that question fueled all the fear I ever felt into one unstoppable projected flame. I screamed, nearly out of control, that I didn't ever want to hear another word about my weight from him ever again, that he had

fucked up my whole life by making me hate myself. I reminded him how he behaved with me when I was 4, going away on a trip and having me promise that I'd be skinny for him when he returned. "What kind of creep would do that?" I demanded to know. He was in shock, and denied everything. How easily we forget! We never spoke of it again, and a few years later I cut him out of my life completely. I wish that fire had pushed me out of my *own* fat hatred. Instead, the flame retreated and I went on with my life, feigning ignorance.

A year later I went to Nicaragua to help build a school. I became quite ill from parasites, and had bad diarrhea for most of my two months there. I secretly rejoiced that I was afflicted with something that would make me lose weight. The family I stayed with had no mirrors, and I became obsessed with the idea that I wouldn't look at myself until I returned to the US, looking completely different (thinner). My political consciousness was determined not to diet, but there I was, relieved and excited to be ill enough to lose weight against my will.

The volume of compliance

It has always been like that: My decision not to diet wasn't made out of self-love, but out of desperate rebellion and psychic survival (which I guess is a twisted, oppressed form of self-love). It has been a virtual "Fuck You" to the assholes who've tried to kill me all my life. Unfortunately it doesn't address the fact that I have continued doing their work for them. And, like most of life, knocking on the door is only the beginning. I've barely stepped through, and it's clear that most of my work lies ahead.

Now that I'm listening, my sense of my fat self is acute; every thought and action presents itself to me undeniably. It's much more difficult than just turning down the volume, but I can't go back. I need to find a way to address the voices, but I often feel like I'm hovering above everything, looking down at myself; seeing it all clearly, but unable to participate.

This awareness of my size comprises a good portion of my everyday brain activity. It always has. It's amazing to me that I was unaware for so long. Now I can't help but see how many things I do and don't do because I am fat. I sit down with a group of friends and I'm only comfortable if I sit on the outside, partly because I need more space than most people, but mostly because I can't stand to be in a position where, in order for me to get out, I have to ask someone else to move to make room for me. It's too painful to call that much attention to my size.

I have cut most of my biological family out of my life

for long periods of time. Even when we do talk I don't want to *see* them. I say it's because they were abusive to me, which is true, but what I don't say is that I am still ashamed of myself for being fat, and don't want *them* to see *me*.

Each morning I get to work around the same time as another fat woman who works in the building. I watch her take the long way around, avoiding the stairs at the back entrance. And I watch myself ascend those stairs each morning, determined not to look like I can't, determined not to show that I am out of breath when I reach the top. Desperately trying to convince myself that it's ok to be fat, that fat doesn't equal disabled. I tell myself that I'm out of breath for lack of exercise, but the truth is I don't exercise because I am afraid to find out. I see fat women who have a hard time walking, or don't walk at all, and it becomes all I can see. I forget about the women I know who are fatter than me who exercise and are in good shape. My fears take over, and as I get older and fatter, my fears grow. The longer I go, the harder it gets. I'm only 28. I am terrified of my future.

Redrawing the battle lines

Finding employment as a fat butch dyke in a city where I don't know anyone is close to impossible. I can dazzle anyone with my impressive resume, but when they see me in person for the first time I'm just too much for them. I see myself starting to feel paralyzed by my dependence on my already-established network of friends for employment. When I have to look for work I hear the voice of my father, who warned me nobody would hire me if I was fat. I desperately want to prove him wrong, but the reality is that employers (do) discriminate against fat people. The real challenge for me is not proving him wrong, but realizing that just because he was right doesn't mean I am to blame for fulfilling the prophecy. I need to love myself anyway, despite the fat-hating world.

Friends say their first impression of me is that I am secure and self-confident. They're surprised when I tell them it isn't true. I'm amazed to know that a fat girl can hide so well. I guess I've had to—can't let the enemy know you're down! My entire life is a war. How can anybody not see that? How could anyone not see what I do just to survive each day? I can't continue to allow such ignorance of my reality and the reality of every fat person in my culture. It may be all I talk about for the rest of my life, but I will not shut up until fat girls start growing up with the self-respect we deserve.★