

Pip Baitinger

Bologna, Italy – February 2023

I lay in my cavernous Italian apartment, staring at the lofty industrial ceiling spouting nothingness back at me. Tired and in a stupor from the previous night's excitement at my school's café (three euro spritzes will do that to you). I glimpsed at the sun peeking through the Bologna sky, lost in anxious thought. A pigeon landed on my windowsill. What I would give to have the brain of a pigeon right now, no identity crisis-laden existential thoughts rattling around in my silly little pigeon head. I closed my eyes, breathed, and came to conclusions. "When I go home in four months, I am going to begin hormone replacement therapy and start transitioning," I assured myself.

Before

I never expected to have such a ground-breaking identity revelation in the middle of northern Italy, in a graduate program that hinges heavily on how you present yourself, no less. Or did I expect it? Admittedly, one of the reasons I chose this program and to study in Italy was the opportunity to take time away from my part-time job serving in the Air National Guard. I had spent four years in the active-duty Air Force and three in the Air Guard at this point. Never knowing an adult life truly detached from such a rigid structure of gendered expectations. In Bologna, I had a chance to explore myself outside the walls of such an institution. And I did. I grew my hair out for the first time since I was 18; no more medium fades. I expressed myself in ways I had always wanted to. A kind of expression that quells the "identity crisis-laden existential thoughts" that I now realize I've had for a large chunk of my existence. By the time I came to my realization in my cramped and well-designed Italian student apartment, I had four months of excruciating waiting until I was back in the US and had access to gender-affirming hormones (accessing such care through Italy's healthcare system was virtually impossible for an international student). The wait between my realization in Bologna and my existence was grueling. I persisted.

Right Now

Fast forward to right now, at this very moment (or whenever you are reading from in relation to me writing this), I'm sitting in my spacious and bright DC apartment. My Studio Ghibli tapestry of Totoro is strung aesthetically upon my wall. I look up for a second at it and absorb my contentment fully. I have been on hormones for three months now, precisely to this day. I have never felt fully myself until this very moment, and that same sentiment will be true for every day I am alive after this. I exist and can see my existence spreading out in time before me.