

# Wrongly Bodied Two

Clarissa Sligh 2004





1997 Clarissa Sligh

My looking for masculine women to photograph, in a small North Texas town, was how we met. Having come from New York City to attend a small women's college, I was astonished that such a tiny woman could puff up her chest and say, "I am really a man who happens to be in a woman's body."

Trying to avert my eyes so as not to stare, I thought, "If this chick is a man, then what in the hell am I?" But I kept my thoughts to myself. It was not until years after meeting Deborah that answers to my question began to emerge.

Now I was focused on photographing men. They hung out with their kids or cats or just tried to relax while I set up the shots with a view camera. My concept of men outside the stereotype of masculinity appealed to a number of guys. But my deceased father would be horrified. His picture of himself as a macho man pretty much destroyed our family life.

Other macho men said my photographs made men look feminine. But women liked the pictures. One asked if I had looked at masculine women. That was how I met Deborah. Looking for masculine women. Having lived in the Southeast, where vestiges of slavery still existed, I knew for certain that white could be black and black could be white; but that a male could be female and a female could be male was not something I had encountered in all my fifty some years.

Much later when I sat down to think about the things that had happened in my life, would I conclude that the only reality one could possibly begin to understand had to be related to one's own life journey and its series of often challenging chance encounters.



Fall 1996

The back of the borrowed 4 x 5 camera revealed a slim young white woman who spoke in a soft Midwestern drawl. How could she be made to look masculine?



Unsmiling in black shorts, she looked into the lens and mumbled, "I am going to have a sex change from Female to Male."

"That's cool," I said, struggling to be calm in the face of her curve ball.

A couple of months later, Deborah asked me to photograph her transition. I backed away thinking, "This is not my issue. My projects relate to who I am."

I knew nothing about Deborah. Who was she? Where did she come from? What would make somebody want to do something like this? Why would she want to be photographed?

She talked.  
I listened.

Photographing men connected me to my father. Exploring a man's choices, the way he saw his manhood, how he occupied his space, interested me at that time. A transsexual experience would challenge my worldview. Yet after a few weeks, I agreed to take the photographs but really did not have a clue.





The concept of changing one's identity  
Was not new to me.

Slaves had escaped to become "free" women and men.  
Light skin blacks "passed" for white.

"Whether you were born black or white depended  
On who your Momma was," is an old saying among  
Blacks.

Those born with dark skin had no choice.  
Some who could pass stayed black out of loyalty.  
But a person was seldom "outed" for their decision to  
Be white. We believed in living life the best way one  
Could.

Back when I was a young student at Hampton  
Institute in Virginia, a portrait of a white-haired  
White man sat with family members on my desk.  
When asked who he was, I'd say he was my benefactor.  
Explaining further, my classmates still looked  
Perplexed.

"He is my grandfather," I began to say.  
"Ohhh-OK," they nodded, with the insight that comes  
With being a black Southerner.  
Whether you were black or white  
Having a white grandfather was not unusual,  
And was, at one time, a real and fairly commonplace  
Fact of Southern life.  
Everybody knew who was what.



**Attorneys-at-Law**

**November 25, 1996**

Thank you for coming to visit me regarding your change of name and gender. We can join the gender change with the name change petition, which should not be too difficult, assuming you have no criminal record of convictions. Because of the lack of precedent in the courts of Texas, we will need your input on a number of issues as we move through this procedure. I anticipate attorney's fees to conclude these matters at somewhere between \$750.00 and \$1,000.00 and expenses of approximately \$200.00.

**Obstetrics and Gynecology  
Dallas, Texas**

Ms. McBee is a patient of mine, having undergone a total abdominal hysterectomy and bilateral salpingo-oophorectomy on 5/14/96. This was completed as one step in the process leading to sex reassignment surgery.

For any further information please contact the office.



Ellen's first master, Major James Smith, was her father; her mother, Maria, was his slave. Ellen's beauty and resemblance to the Major caused visitors to mistake her for a member of the family. His wife was unhappy about that.

At age eleven, Ellen was taken from her mother and given as a wedding gift to her father's oldest daughter, Eliza.

Ellen's husband, William, was raised in a different town.

While a young boy, he saw his mother, father, sister and brother sold to different people at different times in order to finance his master's projects. He, himself, had been apprenticed to learn cabinet-making in order to increase his value.

Eventually he was sold to the cashier of a bank to which he had been mortgaged, at age 16, for money to speculate in cotton.

Her first master her father  
Her mother his slave  
Her second master her sister



March 1, 1997

Last year Deborah had a hysterectomy.  
Now preparing for a double mastectomy  
She was to be called Jake.

After taking testosterone for a couple of months  
His voice deepened  
Sex drive increased  
Body hair on shoulders and  
Chest thickened  
Clitoris elongated and  
Outside walls of vagina enlarged.



My task was to document the physical change  
But I found it difficult to preconceptualize the frame.



Ellen and William met in Macon, Georgia where their masters had taken them. William fell for her like a ton of bricks. He wanted to marry. She was opposed, not wanting to have children as a slave. He agreed to assist her in planning an escape but each of their ideas seemed unworkable.

It was against the law for public transportation to take slaves as passengers without their master's consent. Slave hunters with bloodhounds were set on the trail of any slave who tried to leave without it. If caught, they were often killed on the spot or tortured, often to death, as an example to the others.

After a few years, they concluded that it would be nearly impossible to escape and travel 1,000 miles across the slave States. Asking for the consent of their owners to be married, they settled down into slavery but stayed open to possibilities of escape.

In December 1848, William thought of a plan that seemed to have the potential for working.

“It occurred to me that, as my wife was nearly white, I might get her to disguise herself as an invalid gentleman, and assume to be my master, while I could attend as his slave, and that in this manner we might effect our escape.”



March 25, 1997

On the day of the double  
mastectomy  
Jake greeted me with  
"I am so happy that they  
(the breasts) are gone."

My heart sank.  
Would I be able to continue  
to witness the destruction  
of a beautiful female body?



Memories of having breast surgery to remove a tiny  
Crystallization thought to be cancer raced through my mind.  
That a person would want to remove their breasts for  
Cosmetic changes was incomprehensible.



Some of the slaveholders gave their favorite slaves a few days off at Christmas. After much persistence on Ellen's part, she received a pass, allowing her to be away for a few days. The mistress trusted only Ellen, her sister, to do her hair, help her bathe and dress, and hated the inconvenience of being without her.

The cabinet-maker with whom William worked was very busy but gave him a similar pass, saying, "Come back as quick as you can."

Working a second job as a waiter in a Macon Hotel, William managed to save twenty dollars. It was against the law for a white man to trade with slaves without the master's consent. In order not to be conspicuous, he went to different parts of town at odd hours and purchased Ellen's disguise, piece by piece (except the trousers which she made).

Since laws prevented slaves from Learning to read or write, they Sat looking at words neither of Them could understand.



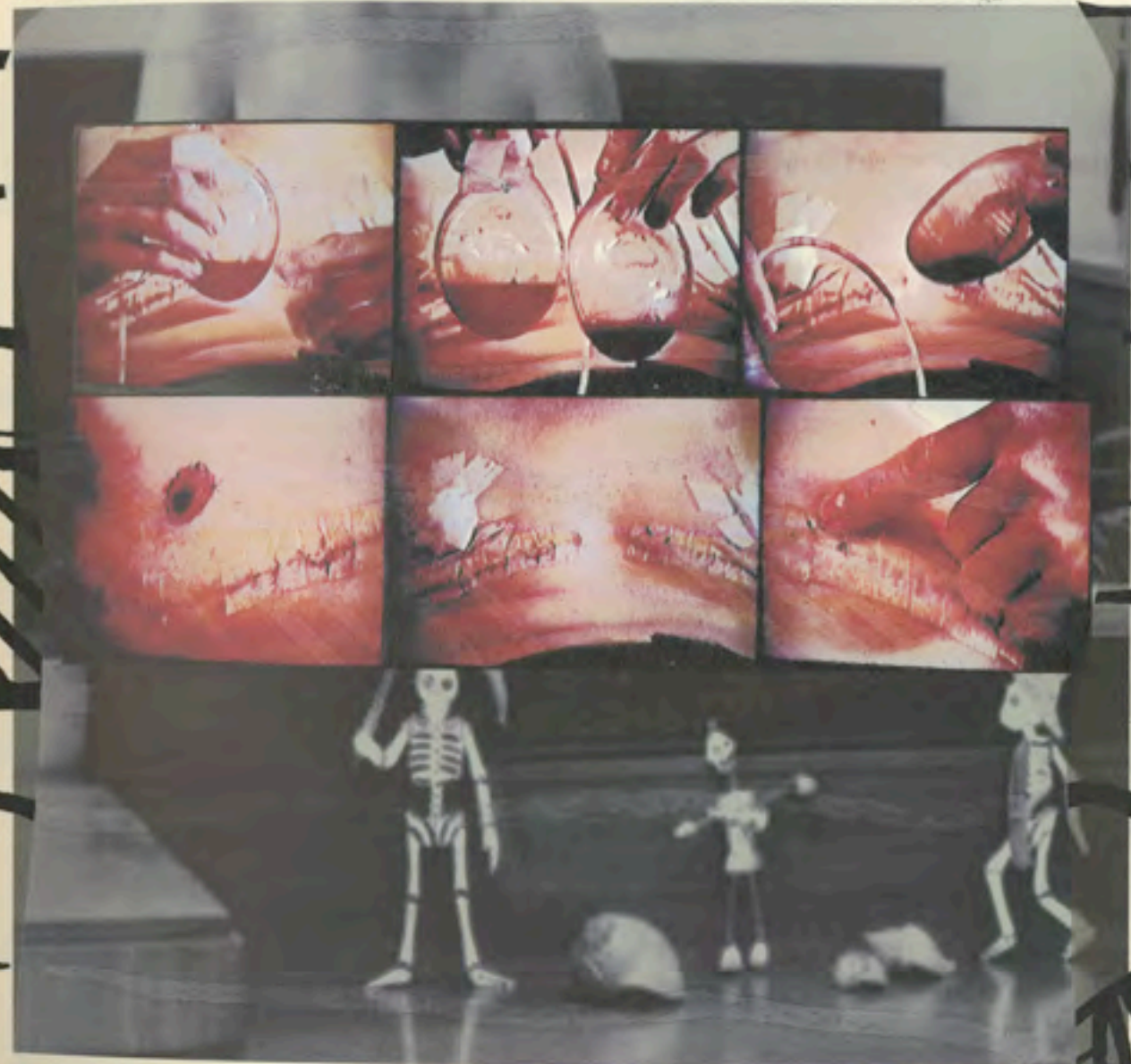
**Jake:**

I just couldn't wait to see what it would look like when they (the breasts) were gone. No grieving. No sad good-byes. I just want to be more visibly outside who I feel like on the inside. Taking these steps, people will see what I have been on the inside all my life and acknowledge that this is who Jake is.

Forcing myself to look, to see as the photographer, I saw my own terror, loneliness, and vulnerability when I was being wheeled into an operating room. Now long thin tubes protruded from places where Jake's breasts had been. Blood drained into little plastic bottles.

She was flying high as a kite.  
I struggled not to be swallowed into a deep dark depression.

March 25, 1997





They sat up all night making preparations in their little house, which was surrounded by trees.

Ellen was to dress as a slave master traveling to Philadelphia for treatment of rheumatic fever. Travelers were required to sign hotel registers and the Custom House book at Charleston, South Carolina. To keep from having to sign her name, which she did not know how to do, Ellen bound her right hand in a sling. A handkerchief containing a poultice was to be tied under her beardless chin, up her cheeks, and over her head to help hide her face. Green eyeglasses would hide her eyes.

When morning arrived, Ellen handed William the scissors. He cut off her hair in a straight line at the top of her neck. Having practiced walking and talking like a man, she dressed in her new clothes.

When the time came for them to leave, a terrified Ellen refused to step out the door. Pictures of what would happen to them if they were caught flashed through her mind.

Finally she got up her courage to go on. In the early hours of the morning on December 21st, they went in different directions to the train station. William went straight to the Negro car. His wife, now his master, went through the main entrance to purchase tickets for himself and his slave to Savannah, the first port, about two hundred miles away.

William, as narrator, assures  
The reader that his wife would  
Never have taken on the  
Disguise of a man had it been  
Possible to do as a woman,  
That since white women were  
Not allowed to travel alone  
With their black male slaves,  
She had had no choice.



Jake:

You don't wake up one day and say, "I'm going to do this." It's a long on-again, off-again process that started when I was young feeling wrongly bodied. I felt God had made a mistake. Could it be rectified? Growing up in the 60s and 70s, there were no options that I could see. You were a man or you were a woman. You were masculine or you were feminine. And they usually went together. Man-masculine. Woman-feminine. I never felt I fit.

It wasn't until recently that I began to come to grips with what I felt like on the inside. It was my deep dark secret that I never told anyone. I felt like I'd be looked upon as a freak. I went through a lot of depression, did a lot of soul searching and therapy to come to grips with "yes", this is what I am. What do I do about it? Is this something I can live with? Is this a real option?

Finally I began to accept that if what I had to do, to fit into this skin, meant that I had to move, get a different job, different friends, different everything, then that's what I was going to do.

March 30, 1997



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December 21, 1848 Macon, Georgia

Just before the train left the station, William saw the cabinet-maker for whom he worked on the platform looking through the passengers. He had had a premonition that something was amiss.

Expecting to be identified and dragged out, William crouched into a corner. But as luck would have it, the train began leaving the station before he got to William's car.

Meanwhile Ellen looked up to see a man, a friend of her master, sitting on the same seat as she. When he tried to talk with her, she pretended to be deaf until he finally turned to talk with other passengers. Close calls like this were to become part of the journey ahead. At every leg of the trip, someone challenged William's master on his lack of judgment in taking a slave into the North.

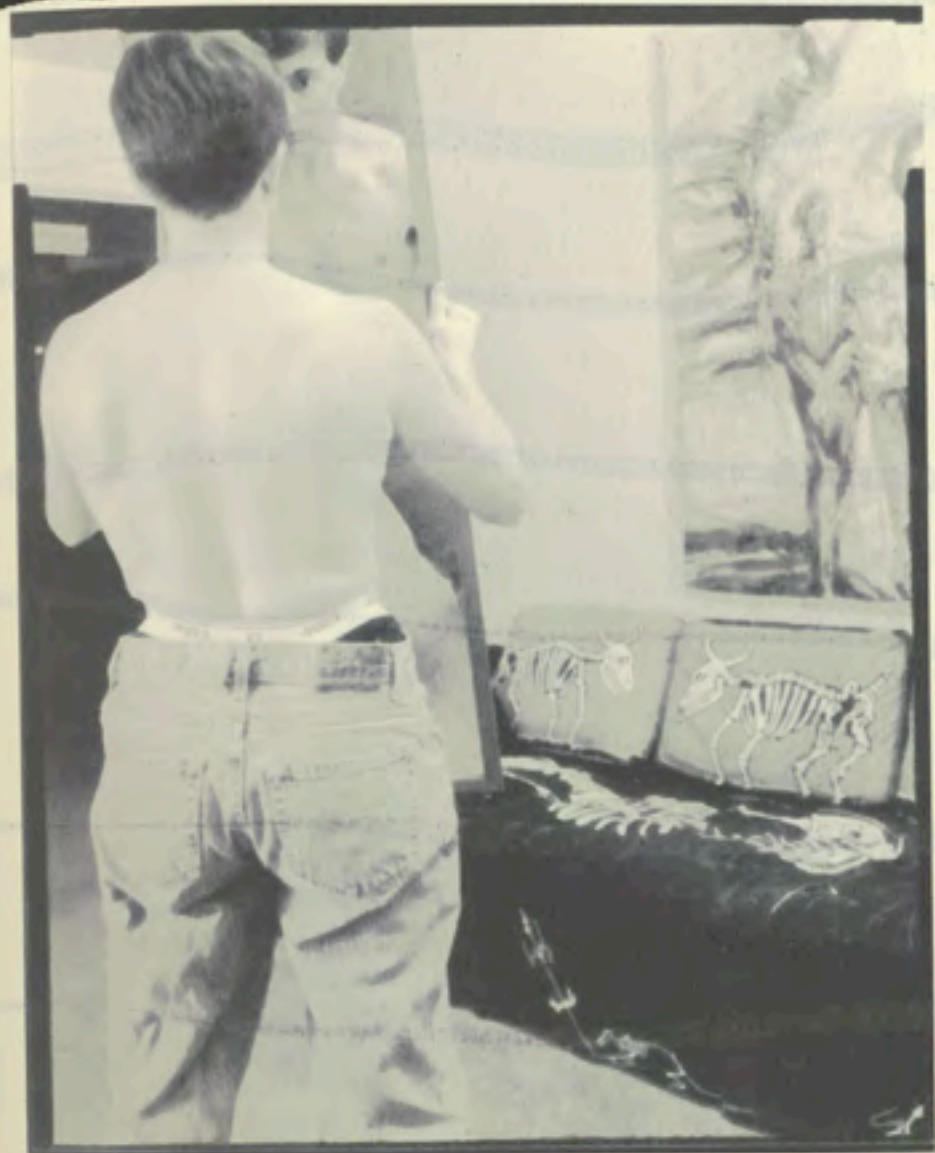
Niggers  
Cotton  
And  
Abolitionists  
Were the three main  
Topics of conversation in  
First class Georgian circles.



Jake:

I was always a tomboy. During puberty you don't want to be different, you try to fit in. You can't figure out where you fit if you're trying to be like everybody else. I knew I was attracted to women. When I found out about homosexuality, I thought, "Oh, maybe that's what I am."

I tried to fit that and didn't realize that I didn't. You go on with your life because if you do this other thing who is going to accept it? Would I ever have a mate? Who would want someone who went through this?





December 21, 1848 Savannah, Georgia

They arrived in Savannah early evening and took the steamer bound for Charleston, South Carolina. William's master turned in to his berth early.

No place was provided for "colored" passengers, slave or free, so William walked around until late and found some cotton bags to sit on until morning.

The next morning he assisted his master in getting dressed. At breakfast the young master was seated next to the ship's captain and was drawn into conversation with a slave-dealer sitting at the table. He tried to convince William's master to sell his slave to him. Raising his voice, as if making a speech, he announced, "That slave won't be worth a damn once he goes North and becomes tainted by abolitionist ideas." The young master excused himself from the table.

Most Slaveholders  
Hating the free blacks  
Preached

"God made the black man  
To be slave to the white."



**Jake:**

**When it came out in my therapy that I was a misogynist, I said, "What in the hell is that?"**

**She said, "You don't like women. You have a hatred for women."**

**And I'm like, "Oh no, I love women!"**

**So when I hear guys say that, I'm like "Oh yeah, right!"**

**I wonder what I did in my last life to have gotten such a misogynist male head on a woman's body? I must have been a pervert and this is my penance. If I had been born a genetic male, I would have been a big pig.**

**I don't think I hated women; I hated the fact that I was a woman. I loathed myself, but I knew I was different. I was the youngest of three girls and my father raised me as a male.**

**In his own way he is culturally a misogynist. He believed that the wife was the wife and she had her place and he read *Playboy* magazine and that was OK. And I feel the same way. Women are not the same as men, not worse, but different. I wanted to be dominant. I didn't think I was misogynistic, but then if you ask a racist if he's racist, he'll say "No."**

**You don't know until you know.**

**Jake**





December 22, 1848 Charleston, South Carolina

A large number of people were meeting the boat at Charleston. Afraid that William might be recognized, they waited until the last passenger left the dock before leaving the steamer. William found a driver to take them to the best hotel in Charleston. There his master was assisted to his bedroom. At the proper time he came down and seated himself at a table to have dinner. Even though he was not very hungry, two or three servants were assigned to help him with his food.

William was handed  
His dinner on a broken plate  
With a rusty knife and fork  
And sent to the kitchen to eat.



It was one hundred and fifty years ago that the Crafts made their journey. Yet in 1996, their story resonates with me. Was it because my father's father's mother was born a slave? She would not speak of it, as if silence could make it not so.

Was it because Halls Hill, the Virginia community in which I grew up, formerly part of a slave owner's land, was still home to his light skin slave descendants who looked white? While Jake's motivation for a gender change was not clear to me; surgically altering one's appearance was not odd. It was "what" was being cut off, "what" was being changed.

Despite all the explicit sexuality displayed in the media these days, the degree to which sex, and women's bodies, are used to sell everything from automobiles to toothpaste, a tit or dick or vagina can hardly be looked at. But they can be medically and legally exchanged for something else.





**Jake:**

People are like, "Then you don't like being a lesbian."

No, it's not about me liking it - I'm not a lesbian. I like women, but I am a straight man. I identify with straight men. It was awfully hard to have a straight man mentality and be in the lesbian community. And it hurts me that people look at me now like I'm the enemy. Like I sold out. Like that was too tough so I'm going over here and do this.

I'm excited that I can finally build the body that's in my head. No matter what I did before, I never gained bulk. Taking hormones, I've already gained some muscle definition.

**Therapeutic Associates  
Denton, Texas  
April 16, 1997**

**Deb (Jake) McBee asked me to write this letter in support of legally making a name and gender change. McBee has obtained counseling with me for this issue since 1993 until the beginning of 1996 and continues on an as-needed basis during the sex reassignment process. It is my opinion that McBee is emotionally ready to have the gender reassigned from female to male.**



December 23, 1848 Charleston, South Carolina

The next day, William got a driver to take them to the Custom-house near the wharf where they were to purchase tickets for a steamer going to Wilmington, North Carolina. As the young master was paying for the tickets the chief officer asked him to register his name and the name of his nigger and to pay a dollar duty on him. After paying the dollar, he pointed to his hand in the sling and asked if the officer would register his name for him. Jumping up as if offended, the officer attracted the attention of the other passengers.

A young military officer, with whom the young master had become acquainted on the steamer from Savannah, stepped up and said he knew the young master's family and would vouch for him. The captain of the steamer then offered to register his name now given as William H. Johnson.

After they boarded, the captain told Mr. Johnson that he should not take it personally. That in Charleston they are generally very strict about transporting slaves-after all they are valuable property. William's master thanked the captain for helping him with the registration difficulty.

Register the name  
Of your nigger  
And pay a dollar  
Duty on him.



While Ellen crossed boundaries  
Eliza, in marriage  
Under the wing and protection of her husband,  
Lost her right to personhood, her own property,  
Earnings and her own body. As his property  
She could be raped and beaten by him at any time.

Today women are all deprived of equality,  
Yet our embodiments result in many different  
Experiences and perceptions depending on  
Our life contexts.

Jake, who hated being a woman,  
Understood the social patterns that  
Categorized men as dominant and  
Women as subordinate.  
No longer the property of husbands,  
Self-confident, self-assertive women still face social  
Censure and social limitations.

Observing Jake practice to pass as a stereotype of  
A white man brought to mind  
The history of passing,  
Its assumption of fraudulent trespassing  
And questions of authenticity about who is white,  
About who is American.





April 21, 1997

Jake:

Each surgical operation has been like getting a little more freedom. As I go through this I feel like I'm closer and closer to getting out of jail. To be able to walk down the street and not have anyone wonder who I am is going to be "the freedom." It is so hard to wait. I want it now.

April 24, 1997

Tonight I shoot Jake getting a testosterone shot. Do our sessions help keep his focus away from the future? There is a lot of physical risk and uncertainty about each step. His anxiety is hard to watch.

April 25, 1997





December 24, 1848 Wilmington, North Carolina

They reached Wilmington the next morning and took the train to Richmond, Virginia.

From Richmond they took the train to Washington, where they rushed to catch the train leaving for Baltimore.

Upon arriving in Baltimore that evening, they felt more anxious than ever. Maryland had a reputation for being particularly vigilant for runaway slaves seeking to escape into Pennsylvania, a free state.

William helped his master get into his car, but before he could step into his own, an officer stopped him, "Boy, get your master. It is against my rules to let any man take a slave past here unless he can satisfy the office that he has ownership."

William went to tell his master. Not knowing what else to do, they went to the office. The officer-in-charge repeated, "We cannot let any slave pass here without receiving security to show and satisfy us, that he is your property."

**“Free” blacks were required  
To carry stamped papers  
To certify that they were the  
Rightful owners of themselves.**



**FINAL COURT ORDER  
DISTRICT COURT DENTON, TEXAS**

**ON THIS THE 7th day of May, 1997, came onto be heard the above-entitled and numbered cause appearing, Deborah Ann McBee, Petitioner, in person and by attorney of record, and announced ready for trial. The Court after reviewing the pleadings, evidence and arguments of counsel, finds that it has the jurisdiction of the subject matter and the parties to this action and is of the opinion that the Petition should be granted; The Court further finds that Petitioner has successfully undergone sex-reassignment surgery from female to male. IT IS HEREBY ORDERED, ADJUDGED AND DECREED that Petitioner, Deborah Ann McBee's name is legally changed to Jacob Douglas McBee; IT IS FURTHER, ORDERED, ADJUDGED AND DECREED that Petitioner is granted a gender designation from female to male; IT IS FURTHER, ORDERED, ADJUDGED AND DECREED that Petitioner shall notify any and all State and/or Federal authorities and agencies of the Petitioner's change of name and gender so that they may take such action as it is necessary to accurately record**

**Petitioner name and gender. All other relief not expressly granted herein is denied.**

**SIGNED this 7th day of May 1997.**



Putting on his first shirt and tie, Jake went to court and was legally declared a man.



The conversation attracted the attention of a large number of passengers who seemed sympathetic to the plight of the invalid gentleman slaveholder. But the officer was adamant, "You will not be allowed on the train unless a gentleman in this area can vouch for you and your slave property."

When the bell rang for the train to leave, every eye turned to them and the agitated officer. They knew he had the power to put them in prison. Afraid that he was making a mistake, he told the clerk to run and tell the conductor to "let this gentleman and slave pass;" adding "As he is not well, it is a pity to stop him here."

After getting his master into a first class car, William jumped into the baggage-car as the train left Baltimore at 8 p.m. on Christmas eve.

An exhausted William went to sleep as soon as he sat down. He did not know that when the train reached Havre de Grace, the first-class passengers would get out, walk to a ferry-boat going across the Susquehanna River, and take a train on the opposite side.

While asleep he was tumbled  
By workmen into luggage vans  
That were rolled onto the boat,  
Then off onto the dock on the  
Other side.



Jake's co-workers at the women's college observed his physical transformation, but said very little about it. After the court declared him legally male, he immediately changed his driver's license, bank and credit cards, and employment documents. His boss issued a memo. While most of his colleagues did not understand the concept of gender dysphoria, they congratulated him on his new status.

As Deborah, Jake had been a member of the lesbian community. His transition caused a rift in the small formerly close-knit group. Now their conversations about him ignited heated arguments.

Jeanne B. felt betrayed:

The relationship I had was with Deb.

As far as I'm concerned, she has killed the person I knew. I have no relationship and don't desire one with this person Jake.

Robin, on the other hand, wanted to know the "whys and hows": My initial reaction was, What's the deal here? What's going on? You're born with this certain package. How come the outside doesn't match the inside? For me he is basically the same person that I always knew but his masculine side has come out all the way. You catch a lot of grief being a woman and acting masculine. It's more acceptable in a man. I have known a lot of very gentle men. While a young tomboy does not catch nearly the grief that an effeminate young man does, being a gentle male does not make a him less masculine. He is still a man.





The young master left the train in the dark and cold drizzling rain. His slave, always at hand to assist him, was nowhere to be found. Terrified and disoriented, he asked the conductor, "Have you seen anything of my slave?"

He replied, "No sir; I haven't seen anything of him for some time. No doubt he has run away and is in Philadelphia, free, long before now."

Knowing that William would never leave him, he asked, "Can you please find him?"

Walking away in a huff he answered, "Everybody must look after their own niggers."

As the cold rain seeped through Mr. Johnson's clothes, violent thoughts went through his mind. Had someone kidnapped William back into slavery? Had he been killed on the train? Maybe he should stay here to see what he could find out. But he had no money. To avoid pickpockets, they had put all their money into William's pockets.

But he had the tickets. Maybe he should get on the boat and go on to Philadelphia.

**"No doubt  
He has run away and is  
Free in Philadelphia  
Long before now!"**



Jake's mate, Alice, moved herself and her son out of Jake's house soon after he had breast surgery. While 12-year old Max did not understand why there should be a problem if Jake wanted to become a man, Alice did not like his changed personality. To her son their disagreements were the same as that between any other couple.

Alice:

I've never felt there were definite lines between male and female and I questioned why you had to be one or the other. That Jake was both genders was perfect for me.

Not a lot changed after the hysterectomy because she was on female hormones.

But a week after the testosterone started, "he" emerged. From that point on, our relationship took a big turn. He became very self-involved and could not understand how I felt and did not want to hear about it.

One of the things he said to me (prior to us breaking up) was that I was not straight enough for him. This blew me away since I had lived my life open-minded but straight as far as sexuality is concerned. And he had lived his life totally differently. So it was funny to hear him say that. But he was probably right.





After the train had traveled over an hour towards Philadelphia, the guard came into the luggage car and yelled at William, "Boy, wake up!"

As William jumped straight up into the air, the guard said, "Your master is scared to death about you."

Afraid that they had been found out, William asked meekly, "What is the matter?"

"He thinks you have run away from him."

"Oh no, he couldn't think that of me!"

Every man slave is called Boy  
Until he is very old, when  
He might be called Uncle.  
A woman is called Girl.  
When she is older, she might  
Be called Aunt.  
To many she has wet nursed  
She is Mammy.

Texts often refer to older slaves  
As Uncle Tom, Aunt Jemima or  
Something similar.



Jake's three-bedroom wood frame house, located in a working class neighborhood seemed an unlikely place for a transsexual experience to occur. As I loaded, unloaded and reloaded my car with heavy cases containing 4x5 camera, tripod and light stands, plastic blue toolboxes of lights, film holders, assorted stuff, and heavy-duty orange extension cords, I imagined his neighbors' quizzical eyes looking through their Venetian blinds. What did they think? Would they attack the house or us? Knowing that Jake and his cowgirl roommate, Renee, had guns and knew how to shoot them, helped me relax a bit.

Jake, who had felt ashamed of his body, was now fully focused on it. The camera became a safe space in which he could reflect on his transition process.





William immediately went to see his master, who sat looking scared and confused. Upon seeing his slave, he uttered a deep sigh of relief, "I just wanted to know what had become of you."

On the way back to his seat, the guard, the conductor and several other men encouraged him to escape while in Philadelphia. He was even given the address of a boarding house owned by an abolitionist.

When the train pulled into Philadelphia, William hurried to help his master. He got him into a cab, placed the luggage on top, and off they went to the boarding house of the abolitionist to whom he had been recommended.

After arriving at their destination, the young master was shaking so hard he could hardly stand up. Propping him up against his body, William got him into the apartment that had been assigned to them.

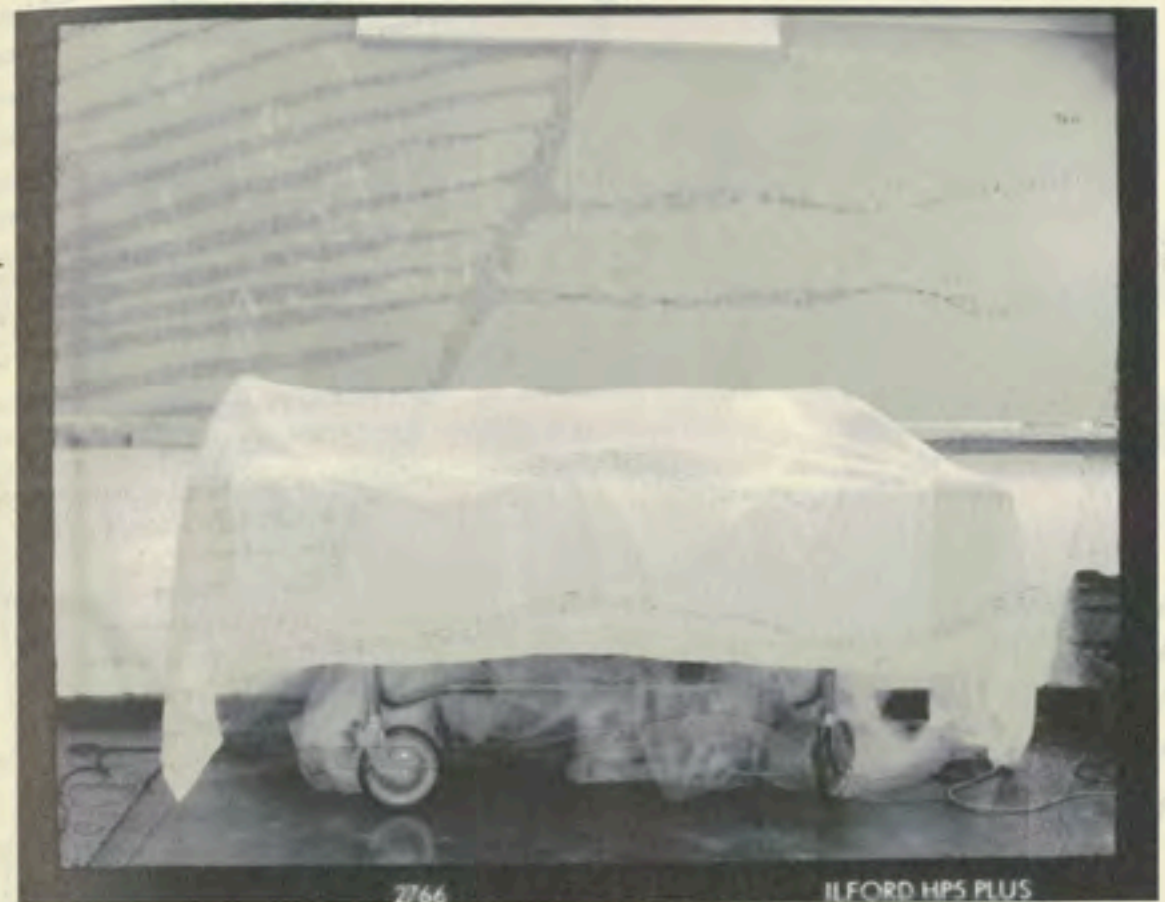
As they left the train station  
The young master grabbed  
His slave's hand and  
Burst into tears.



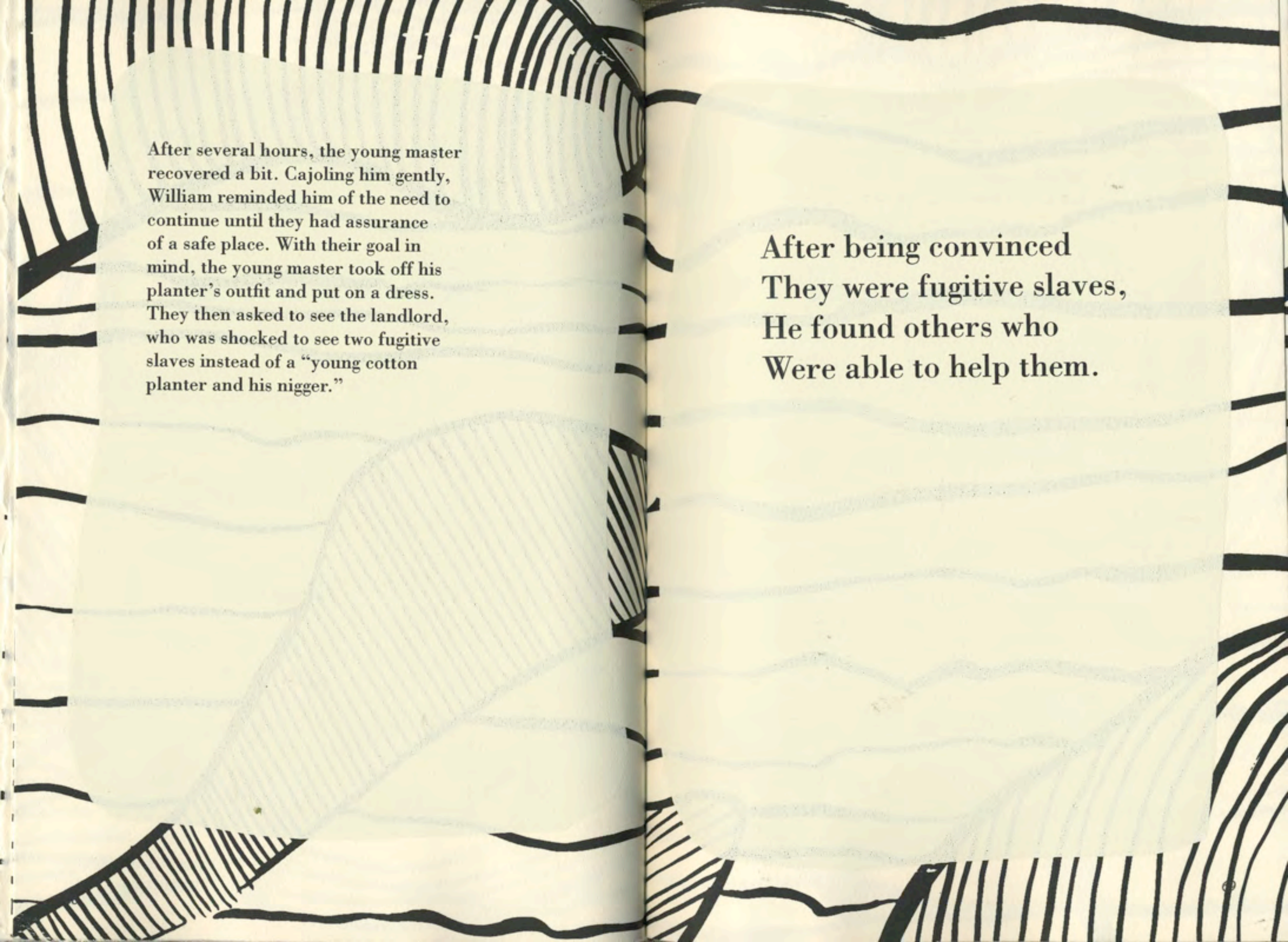
Wednesday, June 25, 1997

Jake went in at 5 a.m. this morning to have surgery on his clitoris, to have silicone balls inserted into what had been the walls of his vagina. I cooked vegetable soup and took some to his house. He lay there, very still under a blanket. Finally I understood the intense physical pain a person endures with these invasive and expensive surgical procedures. He told a lot of jokes about becoming incontinent, but I knew he did not think it was funny.

These surgeries were not to be taken lightly. From June to October 1997, Jake was in great pain. One of the implants had split, its edges stuck into his skin from the inside. When the ball was replaced, the sutures would not heal. Again and again a ball was removed, another inserted, the skin stretched, until successfully implanted in the problematic area in the fall of 1998.







After several hours, the young master recovered a bit. Cajoling him gently, William reminded him of the need to continue until they had assurance of a safe place. With their goal in mind, the young master took off his planter's outfit and put on a dress. They then asked to see the landlord, who was shocked to see two fugitive slaves instead of a "young cotton planter and his nigger."

After being convinced  
They were fugitive slaves,  
He found others who  
Were able to help them.



Dreamed about Jake for the first time.  
He was still Deborah.  
At least he looked like Deborah.  
We were in his apartment.  
He kept going out the window to fix something,  
to make it right.  
I kept thinking he was going to fall  
but he never did.

Inside the house, there was a fish, a porgy,  
in a glass of water. It kept jumping out.  
And I kept putting it back in.  
Then putting in more water.  
But it kept jumping out.  
And I kept putting it back in,  
Then putting water in.  
Finally I put it in a bigger container,  
an aluminum pot with water.  
But it jumped out again.





One of the Quakers, a farmer who lived in the country, invited them to stay with his family until Ellen recovered well enough to travel on to Boston. To get there, they took a steamer up the Delaware River to a place where they were met by the farmer, Barkley Ivens. He took them to meet his family. Observing Ivens' olive complexion, Ellen thought he was of mixed blood like herself, but when she saw his wife and three daughters, she realized her mistake. Turning to William she whispered, "I cannot stay among enemies. They will sell us back into slavery."

While William tried to explain that the Ivens were part of the antislavery group, Ellen grabbed his arm more tightly and continued to shake her head, "No!" It was only after seeing their two colored domestic workers, who brought them tea, that Ellen relaxed a bit, but still felt defensive about the situation.

At dinner it came out that the Crafts could not read or write. Taking the Ivens up on their offer to teach them, the Crafts learned to spell and write their names by the end of three weeks.

**"This was the first act of  
Generous and disinterested  
Kindness we ever received  
From a white person."**



August 23, 1997

Continuously horny and hardly able to sit still, Jake says, "It feels odd going through puberty at age thirty-eight."

His hair looks like a military recruit crew cut. As a female soldier he had been in the Persian Gulf War of 1991. Now the skin on his face was thicker, pimply, craggy with lines (wrinkles), his voice a high pitched, cracking sound.

I shifted my camera from 4 x 5 to 35mm. Pulling out the camera makes him pose. Will I capture more of what he is going through? Lights are still needed in a house made dark by lowered window shades.





After Ellen was strong enough to travel, they went to the safer city of Boston. Their story, however, was printed in newspapers all over the country. To capitalize on this notoriety, the abolitionists invited them to speak on their lecture tour, where money and new recruits were raised for "the cause." Beginning to fear for their safety, they left the tour after a few months.

William set up shop as a cabinet-maker and Ellen as a seamstress. Becoming active in the political and social life of the black community, they learned that their neighbors were committed to protecting the fugitives who lived in their midst.

No other escape from slavery  
Had been so well thought out  
And so precisely executed.



August 31, 1997

Jake had an argument with his father. He was surprised to learn, through his mother, that he was against his transition. When Jake asked her why they had accepted his being a lesbian, his mother said, "We felt we could accept or take almost anything except you bringing home a black."

Learning that I would not be welcome in his parents' home was a shock to me although he had obviously warned me when referring to them as "West Virginia hillbillies."

That night, Top, a retired Army Sergeant, invited a few of us to dinner at a restaurant to celebrate my birthday. Jake went too. Afterwards he talked about being terrified of "getting caught in the men's room. His body is changing rapidly but he still looks ambiguous enough for a person to take a second look.

It is taboo, however, for one man to look too closely at another one taking a piss.



We could take almost anything except you bringing home a black.



Two years later, in 1850, the United States Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, requiring, under heavy penalties, that inhabitants of free states refuse food and shelter to suspected fugitive slaves and assist, if requested by the authorities, in seizing and returning suspected fugitives to slavery.

William and Ellen began to feel anxious. Their suspicions were confirmed upon learning that their old masters had sent agents to Boston to bring them back to Georgia. Warrants for their capture were placed in the hands of the United States Marshal. The Vigilance Committee of Boston and their neighbors in the black community forced the slave-catchers out of Boston and helped William and Ellen to escape.

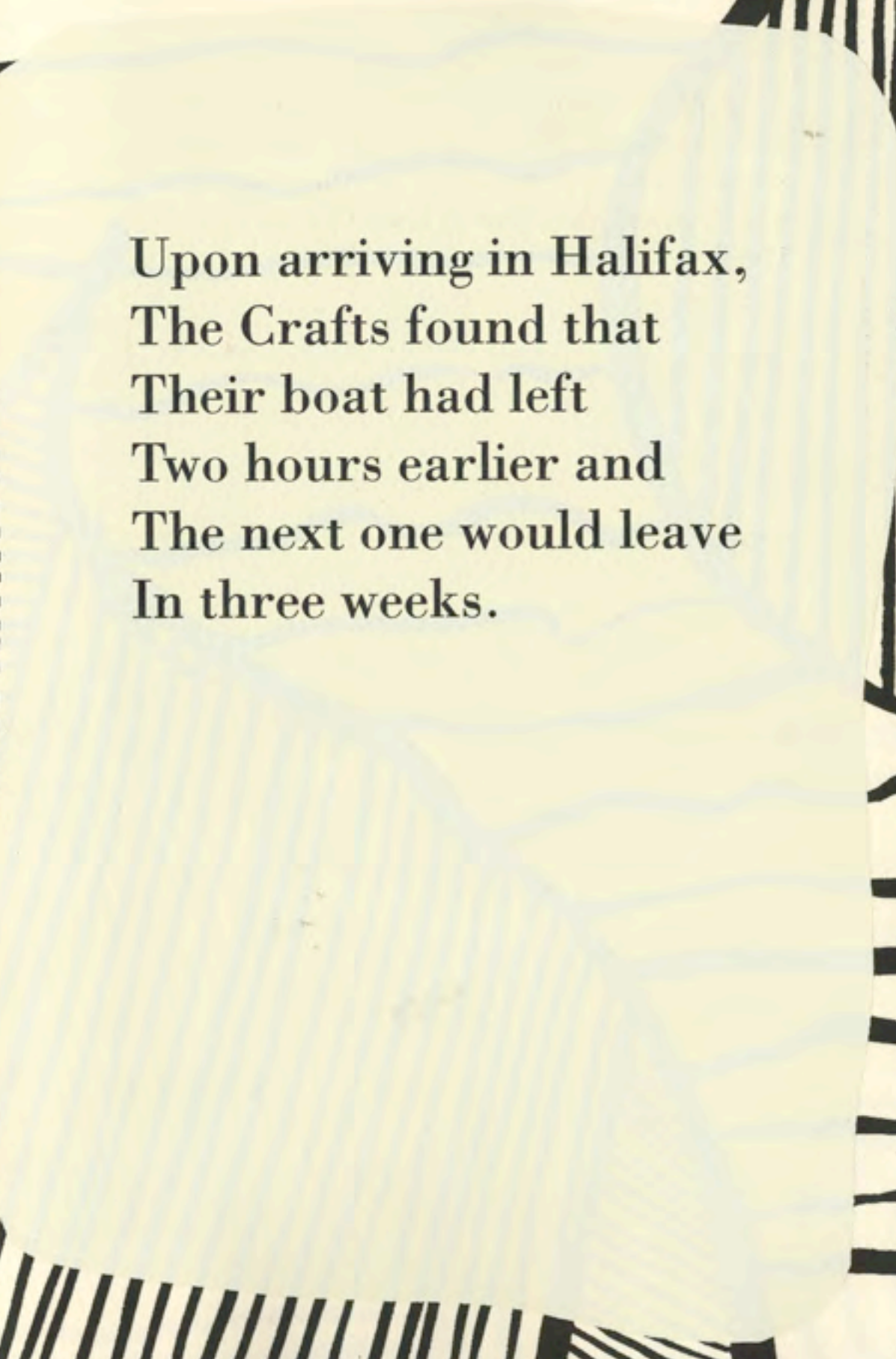
In 1850, the United States Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law.



Metoidioplasty is the transformation of one's female external genitals into the male counterpart. The technique releases the actual clitoris so that it may grow somewhat longer, uses the labia minora to form the urethra inside the penis, moves the labia majora so that it may become the scrotum when testicular implants are inserted inside. It may be a suitable alternative if testosterone (male hormones) has significantly enlarged one's clitoris and one is satisfied with one's sexual life. With this procedure, one may elect to have one's vaginal cavity closed and/or urethra connected.







Ellen and William made plans to go to England, but every boat in Boston Harbor was being searched. In order to catch a ship going to Liverpool, they had to travel overland to Halifax, Canada. England had harbored fugitives from America for many years.

Train to Portland, Maine (110 miles).  
Wait three days for the repair of a boat.

Steamer to St. John, New Brunswick (240 miles).  
Wait two days for a boat to Windsor.

Steamer to Windsor and  
Coach to Halifax, Nova Scotia (159 miles).  
William was forced to sit on top of the stagecoach in the rain. Seven miles from town it broke down and turned over in the mud.

Upon arriving in Halifax,  
The Crafts found that  
Their boat had left  
Two hours earlier and  
The next one would leave  
In three weeks.



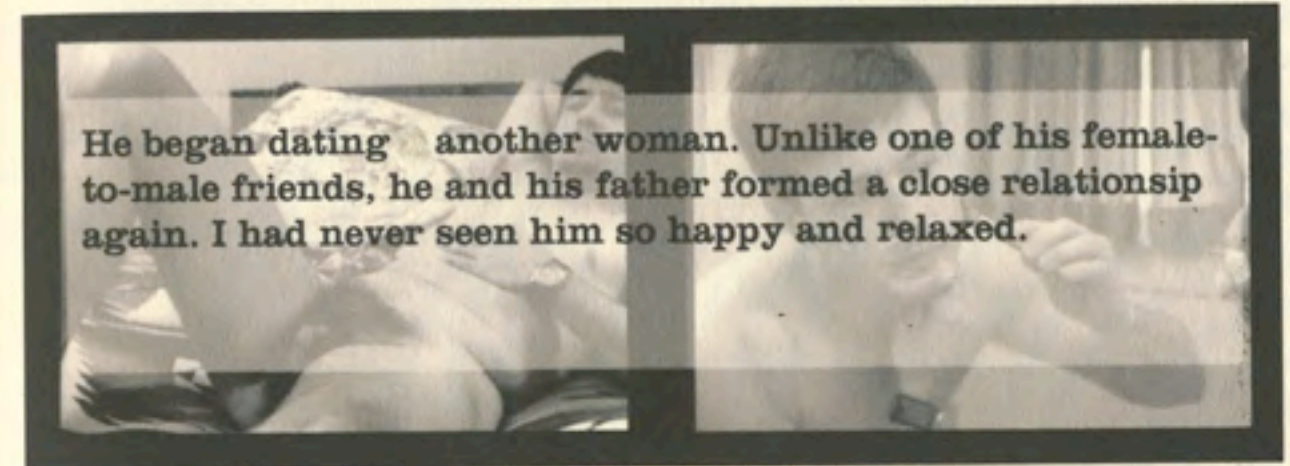
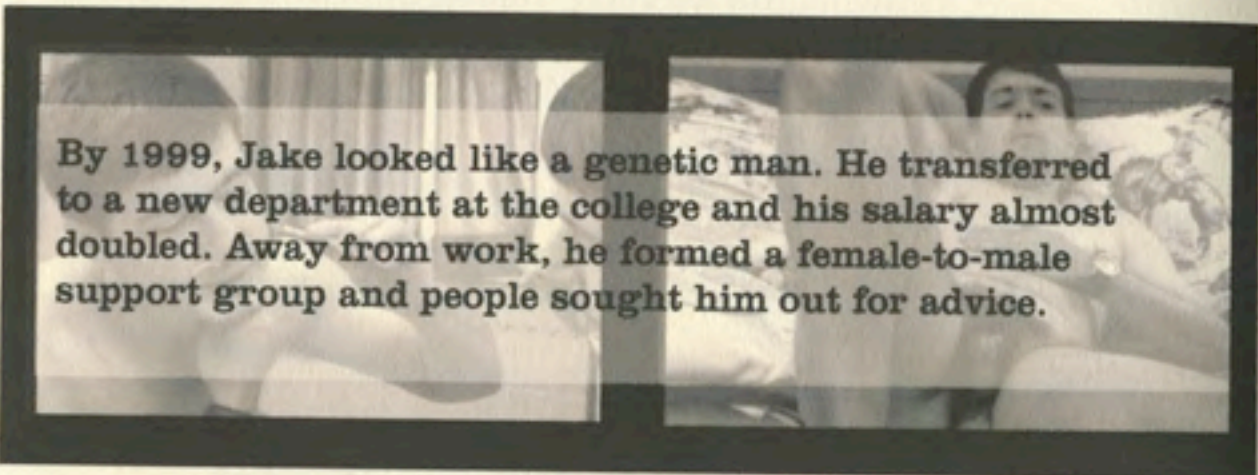


Me as voyeur and Jake as performer seemed to intertwine us more and more. Neither of us was conscious of it. His loneliness and isolation mirrored my own. We both pushed ourselves past our awkward and uncomfortable places.



I grew to respect his passionate, intense commitment to himself as a sexual person. Leaving Texas, I saw him only once in 1998, but returned to visit in 1999.



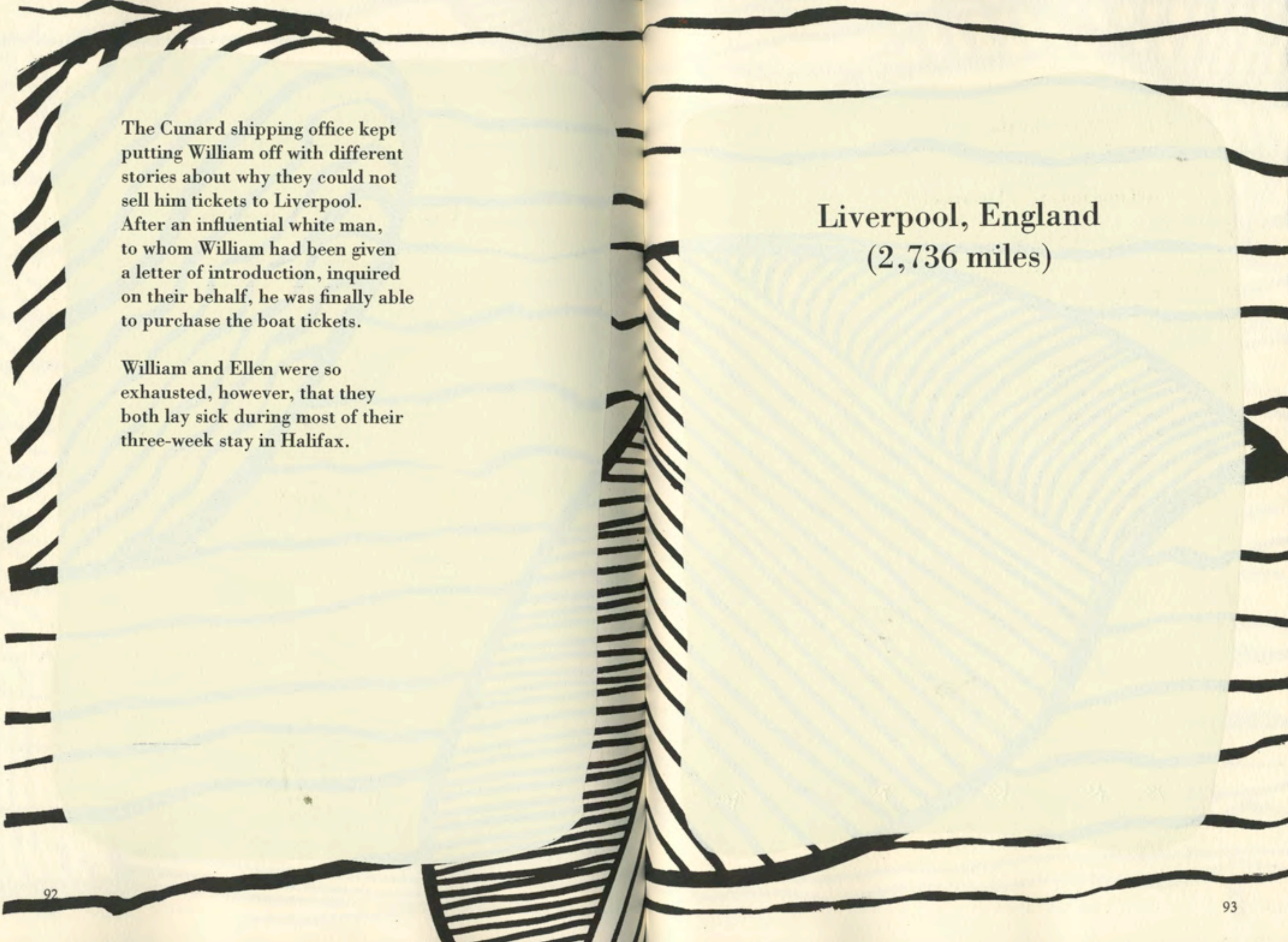




After learning that public accommodations were racially segregated in Halifax, Ellen went into the inn to get them a room. When the management discovered that they were together, they asked them to leave. But William and Ellen refused to budge. After a few days, the landlady gave them addresses of some "respectable colored families" who lived in the town. William contacted them and they welcomed them into their small community.







The Cunard shipping office kept putting William off with different stories about why they could not sell him tickets to Liverpool. After an influential white man, to whom William had been given a letter of introduction, inquired on their behalf, he was finally able to purchase the boat tickets.

William and Ellen were so exhausted, however, that they both lay sick during most of their three-week stay in Halifax.

Liverpool, England  
(2,736 miles)



March 28, 1999

Jake:

People tell me that I've done so much in such a small period of time, but it seems to me that from the time I decided to begin the process, it took me forever to get to where I am now on the other side of it. A lot of people were worried that the testosterone would make me angry and enraged, but for me it has had the opposite effect. I am really happy and will do anything for you.

The violence against transgender people is really scary. I've been really lucky. I'm one of those people who looks somewhat normal. I can pass. If I didn't pass, I probably wouldn't get the opportunities I get.

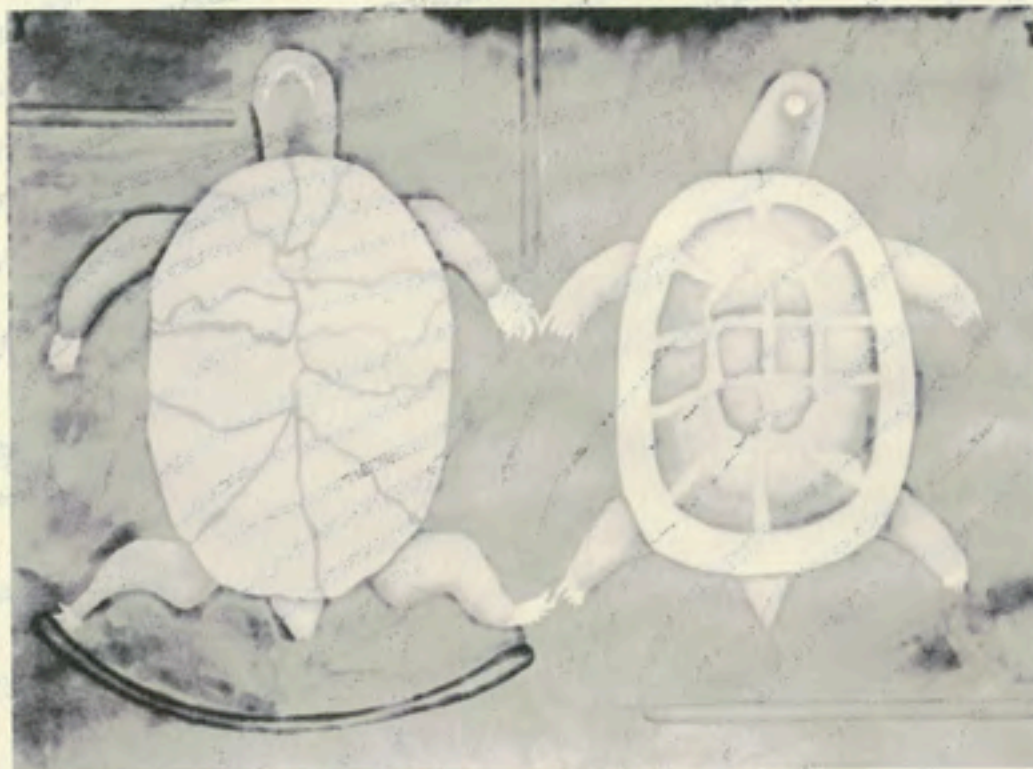
Going through all that pain, all that hard growth was such a big ordeal. Now it seems anticlimactic because at the end of it, all you are is a normal guy. That's all I ever wanted to be - some middle-class guy who maybe was going to get married and who had a truck, a dog, a house and a wife. I am so happy to be in my skin.



In 2000, Jake and his new girl friend married. Only their closest family and friends were invited and both of his parents were there. Not too long afterwards, they moved to another town.



During the trip to Liverpool, Ellen became so sick, that William thought she might die. After landing in England, he contacted an English abolitionist to whom he had been given letters of introduction. They took them in and nursed Ellen, who was very ill, back to good health.





In the summer of 2001, Jake received a notice to return to active duty in the United States Army. As Deborah he had taken a leave of absence from the Army Reserves. Now they wanted "her" back. He went in and said to the officer in charge, "There have been some changes in my life."

They checked with higher ups and told him "The Surgeon General says it is not a problem." This was before September 11th.

Returning to the United States Army as an officer, Jake was now categorized as a man, but in his past records he was to remain the woman Deborah. After his assignment to a Florida command, he told his immediate commanding officer, a black woman, that he was transgender. She agreed to keep his secret, for his safety, and was the only person in his unit who knew.





Once Ellen was on her feet again, the Crafts attended a private school, where they quickly learned to read and write. Soon, they, again, began to lead productive lives.





In 2003, Captain Jake McBee completed his tour of duty in the army. He returned to civilian life as a straight white man.







Was it by mere chance that Jake chose me to document his transition process? On social justice issues, we were on opposite sides of the fence. I was a child of the modern Civil Rights Movement. He had been taught that organized protests were wrong and didn't change anything. He felt if people got to know you as a person it would undo their prejudice against your kind. Four hundred years of tokenism had taught my kind that being accepted because you could pass, or were considered an exception, would never eliminate systemic prejudice against your people.

It was meeting Jake that brought back to mind my Southern roots and memory of the Crafts. Their story of courage, perseverance and love is also a narrative of crossing boundaries and borders, of trespassing and passing. It begs the question of what is authentically white and what is authentically American. Recent genetic tests have identified some black people as being of European origin and some white people as being of African origin. In a negative way, to defend the purity of race, the terms "mixed blood" and "miscegenation are often used." The violence against transgender people brings to mind the lynching of black men. It speaks to a fear that "white man equals masculinity equals power" is a crumbling artificial construction.

Many transgender people prefer to gender blend, blurring the line between female and male. Jake, like many, do not want to walk down the street and have people wonder, "What in the hell is that?"

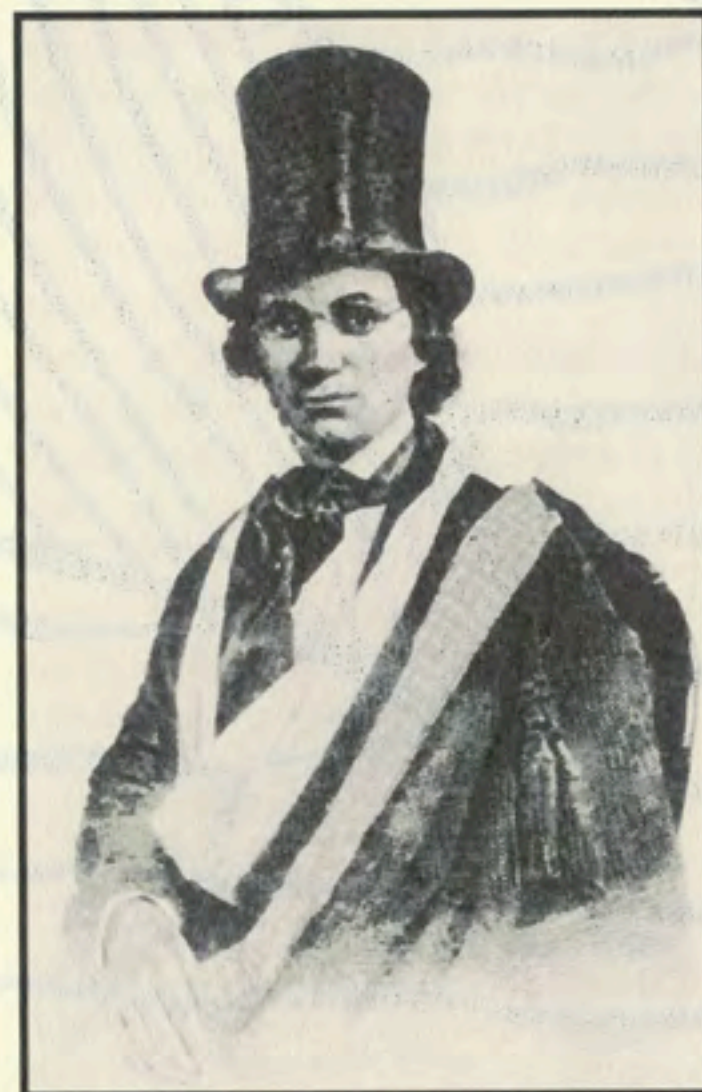




Jake came from a conservative background in which he found it excruciatingly painful to not fit in. Was "fitting in" his priority? Was becoming male a means to that end? Even though his family didn't want him to bring home a black, a white could be black and a black could be white and they would never know who was what, just as most people don't know a male can be female and a female can be male.


Today I really look at white male bodies, noticing the face, the hair, the nose, the teeth, the lack of boobs, the lump in the pants, the gestures and interactions between those bodies and other bodies. Had they all started out that way? For me the suppositions had changed.





From an etching of  
Ellen Craft in her disguise.





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*Clarissa T. Sligh*  
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