

New Nonfiction from Kristina Usaite: “Against a Cruel Society, I Came Out to Myself”

When I was losing myself, the only thing that saved me was immigrating to America. Only then, with great effort and sacrifice, I was able to come out to myself and do what we all have to do for ourselves – to be who we are. Condemnation, fear, physical injury, loss, death – these are the first words in response to the question of how L.G.B.T.Q.+ people survive in post-Soviet countries. Many of us have been beaten or killed in one form or another. Where I’m from, Ukraine, fear lives in every vein. When you are a woman who loves another woman or a man who loves another man, this is included in the category of things people don’t talk about. I grew up where the words *lesbian* or *gay* were not spoken, but other words were said I would not dare to say aloud. The traditional family was the only concept I grew up with, even though I can’t connect myself to this concept. From an early age, I realized I had unusual feelings towards women, which I couldn’t find a name for. The L.G.B.T.Q.+ topic was out of reach; I didn’t know what questions to ask to understand who I am. I didn’t know such questions could be asked.



In high school, others found me different. The stereotype that girls should wear skirts didn't leave my classmates, but it never took root in me. I was often asked when I'd look like a girl. I didn't know how to answer this question because I didn't understand it. I was already a girl. In my student years, the concept of my love was becoming clearer. But that didn't mean I could afford it. All my girlfriends lost their virginity, and I couldn't allow myself to be looked at differently. Even a bottle of vodka didn't help me to undress and go to bed with a man. After every unsuccessful attempt I had to lie to my friends. I had to carry condoms in my bag and show them with obvious visibility, so that no one had doubts creeping in. The fear that friends would start to despise me has always hung over me. There is a certain mentality of concepts and stereotypes that make you think that you should do the same as everyone else. In Ukraine, it is easy to surrender to society and miss the opportunity to discover who you really are.

In my second year at university, I had my first relationship with a girl. We hid in dark corners where we could finally

breathe. We could only hug briefly when meeting in public. Our hands met in places where there were no eyes. We often had to run away, to go to other cities where nobody knew us. Where we could look at each other and hold our gaze, not arousing too much attention with the smiles we exchanged. We loved loving each other, but we could only love in lies. We even lied to ourselves, saying these feelings have no life. I wanted to believe it was not so. But she couldn't help succumbing to society. She continued to love me, but at a distance with another man. I was sure this was the future that awaited me every time. There was no one who could tell me otherwise. No one who could talk to me at all.

At the time I met my second girlfriend, she was engaged to a man. Our relationship began soon after and a month later she had to get married. The fate of our relationship took the same turn as my previous one. We kissed behind the trees. We spoke words of love through messages and then immediately deleted them. We sent her fiancé to the store to find a moment alone, hugging each other, touching our hands. She wanted to leave him, but her attempts were unsuccessful. She said, "What am I going to tell my family? What will they think of me? I love you, but I have to marry him." I was maid of honor at her wedding. Kissing him, she kissed me too. Everything happened only because we believed these feelings had no place in this world.

Nobody knew I was a lesbian, including myself. I often denied my feelings and inclinations, and questioned if I was normal. Suddenly people began to understand who I was before I knew it. By deception, I was met in the courtyard where I was met by a few men to show me their strength in opinion. After regaining consciousness from beatings behind garages, I quickly came to the conclusion this was not my place to be. It was useless to go to the police, knowing they were not involved in such matters. They would've shaken the hands of those who beat me for who I am. I had no one to expect help

from. I no longer wanted to wake up behind garages. I decided to immigrate to America.

I had to study everything again after immigrating. I learned to speak openly. I learned to feel openly. I learned not to be afraid to feel. But it took a long time. I saw L.G.B.T.Q.+ communities in America and, at first, rejected them because fear lived deeper and stronger and didn't allow me to be touched by who I was. At my first job, an employee asked me if I was a lesbian. I immediately blurted out "no." It was the first time the word *lesbian* was applied to me in a positive form. For the first time, I heard in my head "I think I'm a lesbian." Later I found out half of our staff was gay. I didn't deny myself anymore.

My mother didn't know what I was struggling with. I couldn't lose her. In America I met many people from different countries, mainly Russia, who were disowned and abandoned by their parents. The pain the loss inflicted was unbearable. For a very long time I prepared to tell my mother who I was. She and I were very close, and in the absence of such large and significant information about me I didn't feel complete. On the phone, a year after I moved to America, the conversation happened. Having said I have a girlfriend, my mother's first question was, "Is everything good between you?"

No, you can't be silent. You can't give in, giving yourself up to people. You can't play by the rules and be convenient for others. I'm glad I'm on my side. It feels good to say – I am a lesbian. What is finally more important to me is that I feel. It took a large part of my life, and chasing a new one, to finally come out to myself.