

Reimagining Masculinity

By [Ocean Vuong](#)

“No homo,” says the boy, barely visible in the room’s fading light, as he cradles my foot in his palms. He is kneeling before me —this 6’2” JV basketball second stringer— as I sit on his bed, my feet hovering above the shag. His head is bent so that the swirl in his crown shows, the sweat in the follicles catching the autumn dusk through the window. Anything is possible, we think, with the body. But not always with language. “No homo,” he says again before wrapping the ace bandage once, twice, three times around my busted ankle, the phrase’s purpose now clear to me: a password, an incantation, a get-out-of-jail-free card, for touch. For two boys to come this close to each other in a realm ruled by the nebulous yet narrow laws of American masculinity, we needed magic.

No homo. The words free him to hold my foot with the care and gentleness of a nurse, for I had sprained my ankle half an hour earlier playing manhunt in the McIntosh orchard. We ran, our bodies silver in the quickening dark, teenagers playing at war.

The boy—let’s call him K—had helped me up, my arm slung across his shoulder as I limped toward his house, which sat just across the orchard. The war is still going on around us, the other boys’ voices breaking through the brambles, and the larger war, the one in Afghanistan (for it is 2005), amplified what was at stake in the outer world, beyond the feeble sunset of childhood.

No homo.

I look away, as if it isn’t an ankle, but roadkill, in his hands. I scan the room instead, the walls lined with baseball trophies catching the streetlight outside, which has just flickered on. Do I find him handsome? Yes. Does it matter? No.

“You’re really good at hiding,” he said to my foot, and though he meant at manhunt, he might as well have been talking about *manhood*. For isn’t that, too, a place I have hid both in and from at once?

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I was never comfortable being male—being a he—because all my life being a man was inextricable from hegemonic masculinity. Everywhere I looked, he-ness was akin to an aggression that felt fraudulent in me—or worse, in the blue collar New England towns I grew up in, self-destructive masculinity, or what we have allowed it to be in America, is often realized through violence. Here, we celebrate our boys, who in turn celebrate one another, through the lexicon of conquest:

You killed it, buddy. Knock ‘em dead, big guy. You went into that game guns blazing. You crushed it at the talent show. It was a blow out. No, it was a massacre. My son’s a beast. He totally blew them away. He’s a lady killer. Did you bag her? Yeah, I fucked her brains out. That girl’s a grenade. I’d still bang her. I’d smash it. Let’s spit roast her. She’s the bomb. She’s blowing up. I’m dead serious.

To some extent, these are only metaphors, hyperbolic figures of speech—nothing else. But there are, to my mind, strong roots between these phrases and this country’s violent past. From the Founding Fathers to Manifest Destiny, America’s self-identity was fashioned out of the myth of the

self-made revolutionary turned explorer and founder of a new, immaculate world of possible colonization. The avatar of the pioneer, the courageous and stoic seeker, ignores and erases the Native American genocide that made such a persona possible. The American paradox of hegemonic masculinity is also a paradox of identity. Because American life was founded on death, it had to make death a kind of praxis, it had to celebrate it. And because death was considered progress, its metaphors soon became the very measurement of life, of the growth of boys. You fucking killed it.

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Years later, in another life, before giving a reading, the organizer asked me for my preferred pronouns. I never knew I had a choice. “He/him” I said, after a pause, suddenly unsure. But I felt a door had opened—if only slightly—and through it I had glimpsed a path I had not known existed. There was a way out.

But what if I don’t want to leave this room yet, but just make it bigger? Pronouns like they/them are, to my trans friends and family, a refuge—a destination secured through flight and self-agency. They/them pronouns allow an interface where one can quickly code oneself as nonnormative, in the hopes of bypassing the pain and awkwardness of explanation or the labor of legibility when simply existing can be exhausting. Would I, by changing pronouns, appropriate myself into a space others need in order to survive?

As a war refugee, I know how vital a foothold as small as a word can be. And since as a cis-presenting male, I don’t need to flee he-ness in order to be seen as myself, I will stay here. Can the walls of masculinity, set up so long ago through decrees of death and conquest, be breached, broken, recast—even healed? I am, in other words, invested in troubling he-ness. I want to complicate, expand, and change it by being inside it. And I am here for the very reasons why I feel, on bad days, I should leave it altogether: that I don’t recognize myself within its dominant ranks—but I believe it can grow to hold me better. Perhaps one day, masculinity might become so myriad, so malleable, it no longer needs a fixed border to recognize itself. It might not need to be itself at all. I wonder if that, too, is the queering of a space? I wonder if boys can ever bandage each other’s feet, in friendship, without a password—with only passage, between each other, without shame.

No homo, K reminds me, as he bites off the medical tape, rubs the length of my swollen ankle. He slides my white Vans back on—but not before carefully loosening the shoelaces, making room for my new damage. No homo, he had said. But all I heard, all I still hear, is *No human*. How can we not ask masculinity to change when, within it, we have become so wounded?

“You’ll be fine,” he says—with a tenderness so rare it felt stolen from a place far inside him. I reach for his hand.

He pulls me up, turns to leave the room. “Kill the lights,” he says over his shoulder.

And I kill them.

I make it so dark we could be anything, even more than what we were born into. We could be human.