

I Am A Man

Jay Hulme

Introduction

by Ingrid von Rosenberg

Jay Hulme, born 1997 in Leicester, is an outstandingly talented young performance poet, who started his career with a spectacular success: in 2015 he won SLAMBassador UK, the biggest youth poetry slam (for the 12 to 18 years old) in Britain, run by Joelle Taylor on behalf of the Poetry Society and judged that year by Anthony Anaxaragou. In the following years he successfully took part in several poetry slams, becoming a finalist in the Roundhouse Poetry Slam in 2016. By now Hulme has self-published two collections of poems, and several of his texts have been included in anthologies like *I Can make You Laugh* (Bloomsbury) and *Rising Stars* (Otter-Barry Books). Hulme is also involved in educational work, for instance contributing to Amnesty International's teaching project *Words That Burn* and giving advice against fear of exams on YouTube. Hulme's poem "I Am A Man", which proves his special feeling for speech rhythm and won him the SLAMBassador, speaks impressively of the pains and difficulties involved in realising and owning up to a trans identity as a young person in a social environment which – as also pointed out by Rainer Emig in this issue - often is still hostile despite all the official acceptance of Trans rights. We are very grateful to Jay Hulme for allowing us to print the poem. If you want to feel its full impact, go to YouTube and hear and see him perform.



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I AM A MAN

By Jay Hulme

I am a man.
A touch too short
In children's clothes,
Rows of yellow teeth
Open like doors into nowhere
To correct a pronoun - or twenty.
Plenty of mistakes are accidents.
Plenty are not.

I hold my head bowed
In public places,
Feeling so strongly
The gaps and the spaces
Where parts of my body should be,
For though the man within
Belongs here,
He belongs in fear
Of the actions of others.

Brothers.

I stand in fear of you -
Of the fists you hold beside you.
Of the fists you hold inside you.
Of your pistol lips,
Issuing words like pistol whips,
Swear words crack
And the pretence slips,
And I am always falling.
One syllable at a time.

The line is always the same:

I'm not a man
They say.
I tell a lie
They say.
I'm a freak
They say.
I should die
They say.

Words.

They never quite leave you.
My life is traced in scar tissue,
Along the paths these shrapnel syllables
Have scorched into my history.
The symmetry of my skin
Is broken by the past within
And I cannot begin to name
The cause of every wound.

But here is birth,
And here is worth,
And here is fear,
And fault, and earth.
And here is girls PE class,

And gendered groups,
And bras, and pants,
And shirts with scoops
For necklines.

And here are my fault lines,
Rewinds, first times.
Here are long hairdos,
And women's loos,
And how to choose
A knife or noose.

And here is self-hatred,
I created a hedonistic horror show
Out of my own torso.
Tore my skin into cobwebs
To capture my demons,
Bloodied fists in fights
About rules and regulations,
And tried to hide
The scars upon my skin.

I was born to never win,
To never sin,
To quietly sit
And never sing.
Never express myself,
Never search for wealth,
Never care for health.

I was born to be a blank canvas
For my parents failed dreams,
And it seems to me that I
Have failed in that duty,
And the beauty of it all
Is I don't care anymore.

My fists forget my own face.
When, out of place,
I erase my morals
In a fight for morality.
The shattered skin of me
Is draped on every shaking tree,
Like the breaths I take,
Breaking when no-one can see me.

I left my family.
In the shadow of that skin,
In the shadow of the person
That could never let them in,
In the shadow of the person
They could never see the truth within,
I left them shouting.

Pitchforks raised to chase away
The man I have become.
I left them, on a hurricane Tuesday.
When the weather broke against me
Like the wrath of a God
Others told me existed.

I left my family without hesitation,
Without breaking my stride,
Without breaking my pride,
Without looking back.
Because the lack of regret on their faces
Would have written my gravestone.

I walked alone
Into the alleyways of life,
Knife tucked into my jacket
To fight for my future,
Palms pressed bloody

Over scar and suture,
Wishing my mind
Was as easy to fix
As my skin.

Sometimes I think of a world of lies,
Of family, and brevity,
Of lightness, and of levity,
A world where I can stand as me
Unburdened by this mask you see,
It sends me down to purgatory
And hides my shining soul.

But whenever it breaks.
Is less than whole.
I fix it.
For it hides more than me,
You see,
It hides a bullet shot
The moment I was born,
Worn smooth
From years of probing,
It says,
A word
That has never been
My name.