

*Intro text for the anthology Written on the Body: Letters from Trans and Non-Binary Survivors of Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence (ed. Lexie Bean)*

**We're In This Together**

**Dean Spade**

We are alone. We are connected and accompanied. These two truths return to me again and again in my own processes of healing from trauma.

On the one hand, I am the only person who will ever know or experience my internal experience. I am alone in it. I am uniquely positioned to observe and appreciate it. I am the person best qualified to care for myself. I am the person whose regard for my being and my body is the most important. Recovering from a culture of social control that requires us to attune to the expectations and opinions of others, this relationship to self is powerful to feel and appreciate.

On the other hand, no matter how abnormal, stigmatized and degraded we feel, we are not alone. We can hear our experiences echoed in the accounts of others. We can find connection, even across differences. Where humans connections feel out of reach, we can connect to plants, animals and celestial bodies. We are accompanied. We are not alone.

This beautiful collection brought these two truths to me in new ways and deepened my experiences of them. The authors in this volume offer so much for relating with ourselves and feeling connected to others. How does anyone survive the violence and dehumanization that are routine conditions of existence in contemporary social and political arrangements? We survive by having brilliant bodies that hold, hide, express, contain, freeze, abandon, act out, and restrain. These poems and essays honor that exquisite labor and the scars it leaves.

These letters stir deep feelings and memories, and we can pay attention to what we need while reading. Maybe it means only reading a little at a time, or only reading when there is someone nearby for support. Maybe it means only reading at certain times of day, or sober, or after having eaten, or when well-rested. Maybe it means asking a trusted friend to read ahead and help us skip parts with content that would not be right for us right now. It is worth going slow and planning for support.

For gender rule-breakers, finding words and images about our bodies and sexuality that ring familiar is a matter of survival. We need different words, different images, different frames for understanding ourselves and our parts and reclaiming what is stolen by meanings that have been forced on us. We are projects of reinterpretation. This book is a gift to us from our siblings, generously sharing their hard-won meaning-making so that we might live with a new light, a new sensation, a new pulse running through our parts. Their wisdom and vulnerability offer a perspective from which we might regard our bodies again. The possibility of compassion for ourselves, of gratitude, maybe (conditional?) acceptance lives in these pages.

I love other trans and gender non-conforming people. I love your outfits, your self-fashioning, the way you spell your names. I love it when you change your name again and again. I love it when you break rules I did not even realize were there until I felt you free me. I love how you do not fit, how you expand what is possible, how you make room for each other and for me to imagine that we are allowed to exist. Where self-love feels inaccessible, reading others' accounts of their own navigation of shame, self-hatred, resistance, pleasure and healing makes new things possible for me. Seeing freedom where I feel rigidity and shame frees me. Witnessing others holding all the complexity of our survival inside brutal systems gives me relief and strength.

I am deeply grateful to these authors, and to their bodies for keeping them moving toward integrity, connection and aliveness. May this book support all of us to dismantle all the norms that strangle us and feel our deservingness to be alive in our bodies, alone and together.