

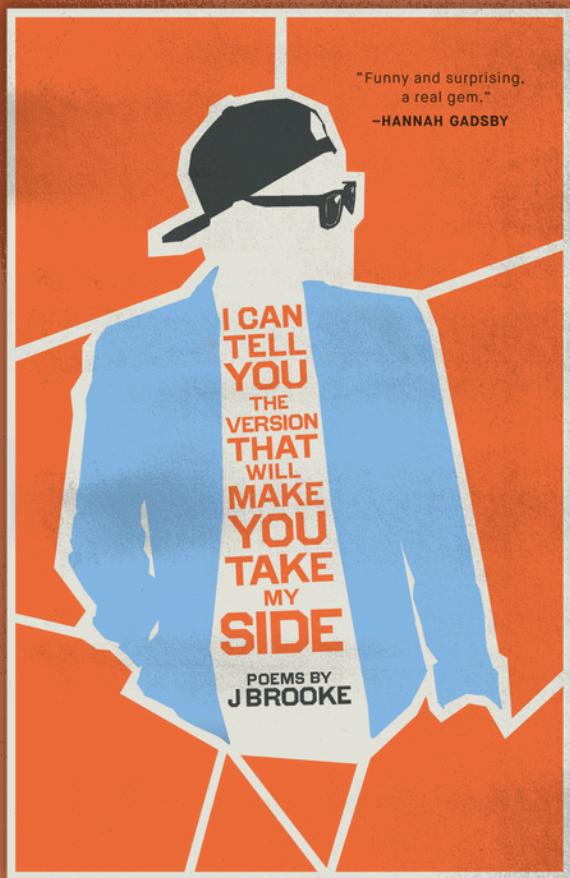


DRIFTWOOD
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I CAN
TELL
YOU
THE
VERSION
THAT
WILL
MAKE
YOU
TAKE
MY
SIDE

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J BROOKE'S I CAN TELL YOU THE VERSION THAT WILL MAKE YOU TAKE MY SIDE

begins in a rich and specific New York City childhood full of binaries, then catapults into a fully realized, self-aware adulthood where the speaker experiences parenting, a breast cancer scare, and the complicated questioning of top-surgery.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J Brooke's work is known for exploring gender, family, and the incendiary combination of the two. With this, their first book, they deliver candid commentary on a unique gender journey. Born intrinsically male, assigned female at birth, and raised in affluent dysfunction in New York City, their gender expression attempted male, cis straight female, and cis gay female before embracing a nonbinary identity. Living without surgical or hormonal interventions, their struggle to find authentic place traverses female anatomy, friendship, suicide, family, testosterone, politics, packers, social media, motherhood, royalty, natural phenomena, cancer, marriage, and the pope. Brooke is Prose Reviews Editor at The Rumpus, and lives in New England with their beautiful spouse Beatrice.



ADVANCE PRAISE

“A beautiful book of poetry following one human’s journey towards themselves, illuminating gender identity and the culture that surrounds us all—insightful and inspiring!”

— ROSIE O'DONNELL,
PERFORMER/ACTIVIST

“Funny and surprising, a real gem.”

— HANNAH GADSBY,
COMEDIAN/WRITER

“The poems found in *I Can Tell You the Version That Will Make You Take My Side* are as intentional and full-bodied as the poet who penned them. J Brooke is a truth-teller with a gift for precise storytelling who walks the reader through the dark and light spaces of a life evolving, becoming anew.”

— AMANDA JOHNSTON,
61ST TEXAS POET LAUREATE

“J Brooke’s *I Can Tell You the Version That Will Make You Take My Side* is a book of rare courage—one that refuses performance, explanation, or any version that might win easy sympathy. Instead, these poems stand in the full, contradictory glare of memory and body, and say: I am here, I will not simplify what I carry. What lingers isn’t a neat resolution but the stubborn dignity of survival—the daily, unspectacular ache of choosing to live honestly, with humor and care, even when the world demands a tidier answer. This is a collection that trusts the reader with what is unfinished and unfixable, and in doing so, offers something like hope—hope that we, too, might live inside our own contradictions and be seen.”

— MORGAN TALTY,
AUTHOR OF *NIGHT OF THE LIVING REZ: STORIES & FIRE EXIT*

ADVANCE PRAISE (CONTINUED)

"J Brooke's poems absolutely blew me away. They are wise, angry, loving, gentle, and ferocious. I often had to stop as I read them to catch my breath, or to shake my head in wonder. Luminous, loving, and illuminating."

— JENNIFER FINNEY BOYLAN,
AUTHOR OF MAD HONEY (WITH JODI PICOULT)
& SHE'S NOT THERE: A LIFE IN TWO GENDERS
PRESIDENT, PEN AMERICA

"With a humorous warmth that recalls Frank O'Hara, the speaker of J Brooke's *I Can Tell You the Version That Will Make You Take My Side* takes us down intimate streets along which we meet: a terrifyingly dysfunctional mother, many loved-ones the poet loves hard, negotiations of transness and self-acceptance, the pleasures of marriage. All while managing to offer up a wicked-strong dose of hilarity, Brooke's immaculate and intuitive lineation reminds us that the intensity of poetry, as a medium, acts as a sort of blood transfusion, helping us to feel our own veins out, so that we might better see ourselves in order to better see others."

— CATE MARVIN,
AUTHOR OF EVENT HORIZON

"In their courageous debut poetry collection, *I Can Tell You the Version That Will Make You Take My Side*, J Brooke examines the thorny question of gender. These deeply personal yet painfully relatable poems (to anyone with a body) are crucial to read in political moment when the rights of marginalized groups are being eroded and trans people are being targeted and demonized for being themselves. Brooke's collection is testament to the way art renders even sadistic executive orders—that fly in the face of the constitution, the courts, and all compassion—impotent. Although Brooke is known for their nonfiction and filmmaking, they are a new and singular voice in contemporary poetry."

— JENNIFER FRANKLIN,
AUTHOR OF A FIRE IN HER BRAIN

LETTER TO THE READER

DEAR READER,

You may think we're strangers, but I've been writing to you my whole life. When I was young enough that I spelled the synonym for trousers as "pance", I'd pencil draw a stick figure likeness of myself as the boy I knew I was, scribble my address below it, and then stuff that note into an empty glass bottle and cork it. By the time I was old enough to ride without training wheels I must have slipped, hurled, tossed, and launched over fifty such bottles into any body of water bigger than my bathtub; The Duck Pond in Central Park, the East River, Long Island Sound, the Gulf of Mexico... Did you never receive any of these messages I sent you?

In middle school I'd dial seven random digits on the gold rotary phone behind the piano in the living room, pressing the receiver so tightly to my ear it suctioned itself on, and counted the rings until someone would pick up on the other end. "Hello?" "Hello?" the voice would say. Was that you on the other end? Did you ever receive one of these calls? If you did, that was me trying to tell you something.

Oh yeah, I also left you all those messages etched with my Swiss army knife into downtown NYC bar bathroom stalls, remember?

You probably noticed the verse I Sharpied onto the painted pillars in train stations... Be honest, it rings a bell, doesn't it?

Well, here I am. Again. Trying to grab your attention with these thirty-one poems about, well...

Usually I write about gender. My own and other people's. Also, I write about families. Sometimes I write about where these two subjects meet in a hallway and size each other up.

In my head I have never felt like an oddity, like something different from the cis hetero norm, because my base line of normalcy is just me and whatever I'm experiencing. It's only when the outside world intrudes that I'm reminded I'm different. When I was a kid and had to keep putting my shirt back on. When they had the boys' and girls' lunch lines in kindergarten and asked me to line up in the wrong one. That was the odd cognitive dissonance that became my familiar. When I couldn't play high school football, it meant I would never play college football, which meant I had no chance of an NFL career... how was this possible? Why didn't the world recognize me as who I was?

LETTER TO THE READER (CONTINUED)

All these years later I still go about my life at peace in my own head, until a server in a restaurant gestures towards the table where my wife and I are dining and says to the bartender, “those ladies need refills.” That’s when I’m undone. Unmoored. Still. Surely, he can’t mean me ...

So really, I wrote this book for you. Whether you listen to Chappell Roan and are fluent in packers and T or listen to Dave Chappelle and think of a binder as something with three rings and lined paper.

I wrote this for any adult who sees themselves as the kid in “Exit Strategy.” Whether it’s that child’s queerness or their mother’s awfulness that’s causing them to consider ending their life before they even learn to tie their shoes doesn’t matter. Sometimes things that have one truth have more than one reality.

That’s this book: the journey from my youngest self when the world didn’t recognize me, to my oldest self when the world who recognizes me attempts to erase me.

Of course, it’s still an incomplete journey because, as Sartre said, “You can only know a thing by its aftermath” ... So, there’s room still for grace. Thank you for being on the receiving end of my message. I really appreciate it.

SINCERELY,
J BROOKE
(THEY / THEM / E)

ON MY MIND

Denny having top surgery
the day after tomorrow is all
I think about. Simply nothing else

I can entertain. Not my writing
deadlines, hot water leaking
and the plumber rescheduling,

an inspection for the pickup
plus an oil change. I need to change
leftover candescent bulbs to LEDs

(harsher light, less energy) pick
wild asparagus before it grows
any taller— the cucumbers before

they grow bigger— rarely better
in vegetables— too thick, too sinewy,
too tough to ingest without spitting out,

small refusals balling up on the corner
of my plate. A lot like back when they
called Denny my “niece” though we

knew better. Denny, eating white food,
spitting out, rejecting their parents'
attempts back then to feed them,

not the eating disorder it was billed as,
more a control more a wish more like
I wished at three and five and eight

and twelve and sixteen and never again
after twenty until again after forty once
my parents were dead and buried, I tried again.

Dressing as a—moving as a—through a world
not wanting me changing, me finding change
too hard, the world too harsh. We all are too harsh.

To become ourselves, we must be brave
enough, strong enough, endure long enough
to be Denny two days from now. Chrysalis!