

Essay: Menopause is Shit. Menopause is Amazing

On Unbecoming and Unlearning [Mona Eltahawy](#) Sep 19, 2022

In her essay on menopause, poet Mary Ruefle comes for my head. Literally.

“Because you no longer exist, you will do anything for attention. You may shave your head or dye your hair or wear striped stockings or scream at complete strangers,” [she writes](#). What the fuck, Mary. I feel seen in all the wrong ways, which is ironic given that Ruefle is writing about the ways menopause renders one invisible.

I did not shave my head or dye my hair nor do I scream at complete strangers for attention—although I’m a [big fan of attention](#). I did not shave my head or dye my hair nor do I scream at complete strangers because I feel menopause is making me invisible, or a ghost that people look through, as she writes.

I have done all those things not to be “visible” but rather to unbecome; to unlearn the ways I used to be, to clear my deck. To unbecome so that I can become.

It’s not because I no longer exist that I shaved off all my hair. It’s because I no longer want to exist in the ways I once did. I shaved off my hair to unbecome, to emerge, to unlearn.

I don’t remember what I used to be and I don’t know who I am becoming. But I welcome her!

I turned 55 over the summer.

How apt that in English we say “turned.” As if, were we to listen closely, we might hear the refrain “into what?” gently lapping at the shore of our beings, reshaping us, as ocean waves reconfigure coastlines daily.

Turning into what? I don’t remember what I used to be and I don’t know who I am becoming. But I welcome her!

I have been turning, fading, swirling, coming into focus and oops-there-I-blur again, as menopause kicks my fucking ass. It has been a great churner, menopause has; discombobulating all of me. It has taken whatever Mona I used to be pre-perimenopause and shaken her free at the seams.

Is menopause harder when you’ve ticked off milestones that have become reminders of how few of them lie ahead still; are they reminders, in other words, of how little time is left? Or is it harder when you eschewed those milestones and now you have less to show for your life, and perhaps even less to regret?

I am not married, I do not own a house, I am childfree by choice. [Three milestones](#) (determined by who?) deliberately unmet. Now what? For some of us this stage of our lives is not about acclimating to empty nests because we never had a nest nor did we want one, we wanted to wander.

We are not taught to unbecome. And we rarely learn to unlearn or that unlearning is wreckage—of patriarchy’s dicta as if smashing idols, of milestones as if shredding corsets, of “success” that holds your ambition hostage when your anarchist heart knows it should set you free.

What lies beneath my (rented) nest intentionally kept empty at a time when cis women contemporaries are reckoning with the mirror opposite and coming up with the same “now what?”

What is menopause for those of us who opted out of the milestones and is menopause the great leveler because we end up at the same place anyway?

Like an undersea volcano whose eruptions take time to bubble to the surface but when they do, you swear you thought you were done with that shit years ago but here it is, the past drenching you all over. Is that what hot flashes are, remembrance of regrets past?

Menopause is shit. Menopause is amazing.

I feel as if I’m almost there now. Deceptive perhaps (when your period returns after 10 months away, you understand menopause can be the great deceiver), but I feel as if I’m arriving somewhere, after feeling adrift on the waves of that refrain “into what?” for several years.

To get there, I look back at the years behind me as if reassessing a wreckage of sorts. A necessary wreckage. I don’t know who I am becoming but to emerge into her, I must unbecome.

We are not taught to unbecome. And we rarely learn to unlearn or that unlearning is wreckage—of patriarchy’s dicta as if smashing idols, of milestones as if shredding corsets, of “success” that holds your ambition hostage when your [anarchist heart knows it should set you free](#).

We were never meant to thrive in this world, built by (able-bodied, wealthy, cisgender heterosexual, white) men for (able-bodied, wealthy, cisgender heterosexual, white) men.

I never wanted it—the marriage (I left him after two disastrous years; confirmation bias? Perhaps), the house, the children (I had two abortions because I did not want to have children). So wreck it all. But tell me what I’m supposed to regret. If cis women who had children point at them as evidence of why they didn’t “do” more, am I—childfree as I am—supposed to explain why I haven’t “done” even more?

What if menopause is not a reckoning with losing what patriarchy had told us made cis women powerful—youth, fertility, motherhood—and that instead of feeling we have been rendered invisible because what made us desirable to patriarchy is now “lost,” we feel instead that we are finally visible? Visible in all the ways that during our youthful, “fertile” years, we most defied patriarchy and so patriarchy had tried its best to erase those of us who refused to obey, who refused the “power” of motherhood, and we know that we are now finally ungovernable?

Because we understand that powerful and desirable are not always the same thing.

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I worry sometimes when I say stuff like that. I come from a generation of cis women who were socialized to leave everything that made us cis

women at home, under the mattress, in the bathroom cabinet, somewhere not too obvious, so that we could “make it” in the cis man’s world. Because if those things began to poke out from underneath the mattress, spill out from the bathroom cabinet, or become so obvious that they signaled we were not cis men, then we were not up to the privilege of being allowed entry into that cis man’s world, let alone “succeed” in it.

For nonbinary, trans masc, and gender expansive people going through menopause, those questions are compounded and further complicated by the silence and bigotry that renders their menopausal experience truly invisible. They are not invisible; bigotry has rendered their experience invisible.

Which is why the [menopause anthology](#) I am editing [includes nonbinary, trans masc, and gender expansive people](#).

Because menopause is shit and menopause is amazing; it is a great wrecker

Transphobes and “gender critical” types get upside down bananas when those of us who insist on being trans inclusive and who recognise a gender expansive world use phrases like “those of us who are non-men.” That phrase accurately captures what it’s like for so many of us who make it through the world at a distinct disadvantage because we are not cis men—specifically able-bodied, wealthy, cisgender heterosexual, white men.

And then everything starts to spill out. Because menopause is shit and menopause is amazing; it is a great wrecker.

“How can I compete with men when I can’t sleep?”

When I read that quote from a [perimenopausal woman who was struggling in a corporate world](#) that was built by (able-bodied, wealthy, cisgender heterosexual, white) men for (able-bodied, wealthy, cisgender heterosexual, white) men, I knew that smashing and shredding and wrecking were the way.

We were never meant to thrive in this world, built by (able-bodied, wealthy, cisgender heterosexual, white) men for (able-bodied, wealthy, cisgender heterosexual, white) men. “How can I compete with men when I can’t sleep?” The simple answer of course is you cannot. You never were meant to. That’s exactly the whole fucking point of it.

So wreck it all.

What if menopause is a dive into the self to explore the myths of what we're supposed to be at this stage of our life, what "success" is, what "milestones" to celebrate or regret. And to then wreck them.

I worry when I say stuff like that because “hormonal” and “unhinged” have made eye contact with my shaved head which is currently dyed neon yellow and together they are screaming at complete strangers. And so fucking what?

What if we just record the wreckage, and dive into it to ensure we smash and shred it all; as we dive, to greater depths than we had imagined possible, and there record the myths that Adrienne Rich writes of in her poem?

“I came to explore the wreck.

The words are purposes.

The words are maps.

I came to see the damage that was done.”

—Adrienne Rich, [Diving Into the Wreck](#)

In Rich’s poem, the dive is to explore and challenge the myths of patriarchy. Aren’t they the myths that have us thinking we must “compete with the men (even) when we can’t sleep?”

What if menopause is a dive into the self to explore the myths of what we're supposed to be at this stage of our life, what "success" is, what "milestones" to celebrate or regret. And to then wreck them.

A necessary wreckage.

The Mona I once was has been loosened, shaken free. It may be difficult to believe but there was a time I was good at obeying, many decades ago. She comes back to me, that younger Mona, during eruptions of those underwater volcanoes.

Sometimes, it erupts as I’m diving into the wreck and I know it is her rage at the fuckery that at times flummoxed her.

“I KNOW, I KNOW!” I tell her, and hold my breath longer so that I can further destroy the wreck before I come up for air.

There have been mornings when I am overwhelmed with an impending sense of doom. And I wonder if my anxiety—brand new, I was never an anxious person—is my despair at that fuckery that once flummoxed younger me.

I feel like running up to older women in the subway and yelling “I KNOW! I FUCKING KNOW!”

This was never going to be an essay about whether you should start HRT or not. That is a conversation for you and your health care provider. I am not a doctor. I am a writer. I try to fix hearts, metaphorically.

I feel like running up to older women in the subway and yelling “I KNOW! I FUCKING KNOW!” And what I know turns, fades, swirls, comes into focus and oops-there-it-blurs again, as menopause kicks my fucking ass. And so this essay will try to keep up. I will add to it, as things focus and as they blur; it is not static because I am emerging as I unbecome and unlearn.

Menopause is the hardest thing that has ever happened to me. And it’s the best thing I’ve ever gone through.

Menopause is shit. Menopause is amazing.