

Jess Fahlsing

Jess Fahlsing is originally from Rock Springs but now calls Laramie home. In 2019, Jess graduated from the University of Wyoming with bachelor's degrees in gender and women's studies and psychology. They received the Rosemarie Martha Spitaleri and Tobin Memorial Outstanding Graduate award, a recognition based on their scholarship, leadership, and contribution to service. Jess has planned community-oriented events, such as Laramie PrideFest, and is on the board of Wyoming Equality, the only statewide LGBTQ advocacy group. They are passionate about building connections and coalitions and, increasingly, intersectional activism. But Jess's heart remains where the journey began: with the Shepard Symposium on Social Justice, as cochair of Matthew Shepard's twentieth memorial. In their spare time, Jess likes to travel, explore, spend time with friends, mountain bike, and enjoy the world's beauty. Jess's writing reflects love and hope, and the togetherness and community that have supported all they have accomplished.

From "To Matthew"

I grew up in the desert of Rock Springs, Wyoming. My body is meant for the wide open spaces. My heart is in the dust that would stick to my skin as I biked under wide blue skies, skin still vulnerable to being torn by rocks and by wrecking, even with the sunscreen. I think of the gears and chains of my bike, of mining into the earth. I think of my dad, who works for Jim Bridger power plant. I think of the height of the smoke stacks. I think of fossils, left from when the land was an ocean, and how my mom's dad collected rocks. I think of the college where she works, how it displays bones and fossils and taxidermied animals. I used to weight my pack down with fossils, collecting them on my bike rides.

A little over twenty years ago, it was a mountain biker who found Matthew Shepard. Sometimes all I want to do is just hop on my bike and follow the path that came before me.

Other times, I cannot bring myself to confront both the joy of my bike and the trauma connected to it. With Matthew Shepard, we have focused so much on that loss and trauma. As an activist who lives in Laramie, I constantly come up against a sense of guilt if I take the time to simply exist. I am often brought back to a quote by Hannah Gadsby in her comedy special *Nanette*: "I identify as tired. Just tired." Like Hannah, I identify as tired and queer, along with non-binary, white, and disabled.

"You learn from the part of the story that you focus on," she also says. Too often, I focus on the losses I experienced, growing up queer in an old mining town that did not



This essay appears in *Democracy Under Construction* (<https://thinkwy.org/programs/democracy/>) written by Jess Fahlsing and edited by Wyoming Humanities. The work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

recognize my existence...and all that I have gained moving to Laramie, even as it is the town wherein Matt was murdered.

I was told to watch Hannah's special when walking in the prairie with a friend whom I met through various queer-centered spheres in my life. A friend, who I listened to as she talked about Matt Shepard and the pain the community of Laramie experiences surrounding his murder, a pain that is not often soothed by the university, a pain that perhaps, sometimes, we over-focus on. I held space for her, as I was in so much pain in my own life at that time. The cycle ebbs and flows, in a way that is not linear.

Many queer people's first thought upon hearing "Wyoming" is Matthew Shepard. While I do not blame them, I think of the difference that it has made for me to come to Laramie from Rock Springs. I think of the way in which I almost did not survive the town that had no visible queer spaces, that erased my existence like deep ruts carved into the desert land from rain. I think of my mental illnesses that stemmed from such erasure. Yet I also try to think of the rainbow and trans flags that we have displayed for pride celebrations in Laramie, and how one person who recently joined our planning committee for Laramie PrideFest told me, "I was very nervous before moving to Laramie, but then I saw the flags displayed all over town last June. I felt a whole lot better after that."

I do not own Matthew's story. Whenever I am asked to write or speak about him, there is a moment of impostor syndrome, behind which hides my exhaustion. The weight can become too much, and I fear that we idolize him in some ways. Matt was a person; more than a legacy. More than trauma. I often carry him with me, and I cannot forget that queer lives and bodies are targeted today, across the country, across the world. In Matthew's legacy lies a representation of queer bodies that have been harmed, erased, murdered, silenced, including transwomen of color, whose average life expectancy in this country is currently thirty-five years.

My own body remembers the fear that I carry. In my tense muscles is the caution that I cradle so closely. I have learned to ignore calls from trucks, and the sometime stares from when I walk in downtown Laramie. When people gasp to see me in certain gendered restrooms. When I am near a partner. When I am near my queer and beloved friends. My body responds to fear and to love, both. Sometimes, it is easy to forget the difference, especially when my own anger factors in.

There is a reason—or, perhaps a few—that I had remained alone and single for so damn long.

When faced with my loneliness or emptiness of the Wyoming lands, I often prefer to instead think about the time that Dennis Shepard tied my tie; or when Judy Shepard hugged me at a dinner where she received her honorary degree and I was recognized as one of the two outstanding graduates at the University of Wyoming. I think of how I have



This essay appears in *Democracy Under Construction* (<https://thinkwy.org/programs/democracy/>) written by Jess Fahlsing and edited by Wyoming Humanities. The work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

always claimed again and again that the only reason I am where I am today is because of the people in my life. I think of how I have repeated “We are stronger together. Now, and always. We are more than our trauma. We are more than the worst that has happened to us.”

I return to the questions, What does it mean to have grown up in the state where Matthew Shepard was murdered? What does it mean to have gone to college in the town where it happened?

Every day, it means to challenge myself to become more inclusive and more aware of the intersectional overlap of the identities within the queer community.

Some days, it means turning home early from a bike ride, my thoughts too much and the intensity of a place too stark.

Some days, it means standing in front of a crowd and speaking, when all I really want to do is run away into the mountains and remember what it is like to simply breathe; breathe, and not have to speak.

Some days, it means I forget to be afraid, and then I am reminded, and am left wondering why I should remember to be afraid in the first place.

Many days, it means finding the miracle of love every day, in both small and large moments. It means texting my mom whenever I am back from a bike ride with the words, “I love you.” Remember this—tell the important people in your life how much you love them.

Increasingly these days, it also means not waking up alone. It means greeting the day with someone whose smile brings me joy, and with whom I can rest when the weight gets to be a bit too much. A queer body, safe next to mine as we weather the night’s darkness together. Someone, who often goes biking with me.

You learn from the part of the story that you focus on. It is a hard, exhausting, constant fight, and sometimes it is a fight that we lose; sometimes it is a fight that we forget why we are fighting, but it is a fight always focused and centered on togetherness and on love.

To Matthew. We miss you. We will keep missing you. We will always miss you. To Matthew. To Wyoming. To love.



This essay appears in *Democracy Under Construction* (<https://thinkwy.org/programs/democracy/>) written by Jess Fahlsing and edited by Wyoming Humanities. The work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>