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Chrysalis

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“We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.”
-Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night*

“it’s a yes or no question,” They say, impatience tapping Their feet and ticking Their watches. rinse, repeat, rinse, repeating but expecting different from the same. neither yes nor no, but barely a breath before “it’s a yes or no question.”

When a baby is born, doctors measure the length of a specific genital organ. If the organ is less than three-eighths of an inch long, doctors classify it as a clitoris and the infant is female, and if the organ is greater than one inch long, doctors classify it as a penis and the infant is male.¹ And so, western society has clung to a gender binary, to this day maintaining the validity of only two genders. Religion, though one of the most popular reasons is not the only one – people love to bring up science.

You’re at a holiday dinner, and discussion has once again turned to politics and other current events. What a joy! Your grandfather doesn’t believe climate change is real, even with multiple reports from scientists and countries all over the world confirming that hey, the earth is getting hotter – way too hot way too quickly. Your grandfather tries to claim it’s just another one of earth’s phases (haven’t we all heard *that* before?), but practically every report says industrialization is heating up the globe faster than it can cool off. Say the conversation eventually switches to other current events, such as how Tinder has now released an update

¹ Ricki Wilchins. *Queer Theory, Gender Theory*. New York City: Magnus Books, 2004.

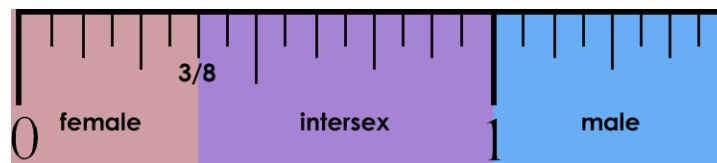
that allows users to choose from thirty-seven gender identities other than male or female.

Now your grandfather certainly has a lot to say about science.

“But there’s only two sexes!” You can almost see them trying to puzzle it out in their heads – a penis and a vagina blending together to create a cartoony purple question mark.

How can there be more than two genders if there’s only two sexes? What they don’t realize is that sex is just as much a binary as gender is – that is, it’s not a binary at all. Rather, sex is a spectrum, a “sextrum.”

portrait of the artist
as a young person
except the portrait doesn’t
exist, so does the artist?



Remember the birth ruler? That leaves five-eighths of an inch for that organ to be neither male nor female and for doctors to classify the infant as intersex. An intersex person, whom society previously and incorrectly referred to as a “hermaphrodite,” is someone born with ambiguous genitalia. They might have both testicular tissue and ovaries, secondary sex characteristics consistent with men but genitals more consistent with women, or infinite other combinations of genital aspects and secondary sex characteristics medicine traditionally associates with male and female sexes. Imagine it like a medical flipbook – sure, you have a vagina, but you don’t have breasts and your chest is broad and hairy.

Regardless, the length of this specific organ does not come in just two sizes, clitoris size and penis size. Rather, it comes in a spectrum of sizes to which medical society decided to arbitrarily assign gender, leaving a chunk of the population with genitalia that does not

match up to society's gender binary. Doctors usually operate and perform Intersex Genital Mutilation (IGM) on these infants to assign them a "proper" binary gender, thus forcibly shoving them into a gender identity that might not necessarily be theirs. Standard practice is if the baby has the chance of carrying a pregnancy to term in the future, they are surgically made "female."² This effectively reduces all people with a womb to simple baby making machines, leaving those without wombs to live their lives and do whatever they want, but we'll get back to that later. While intersex people can be cisgender, IGM still denies their right to choose their gender identity for themselves whether it is a binary gender identity or a non-binary one.

Adults really like forcing societal norms on their babies. Just walk through the infant clothing section in any store, and you're bound to find onesies for baby girls that read "Waiting For Mr. Perfect!" or ones for boys with "I'm a Ladies Man" embroidered in a cutesy font. Babies, who are nowhere near puberty and don't develop relatively clear eyesight until they are about five months old, already have their parents and various friends or family members clothing them in heteronormative messages. But finding clothing without these messages is still relatively easy to do – to make it really difficult, try buying clothing for your baby that isn't specifically gendered. That means no pinks and flowers and sparkles for girls, no blues and stripes and monster trucks for boys. Try sticking to colors that society deems "gender neutral," such as green or yellow. It's not easy. Western society really wants everyone who even catches a glimpse of your baby to be able to know what genitalia hides under the diaper.

² Ibid.

The western world likes to look down on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and call it barbaric and disgusting. A cultural practice in some areas, FGM has no medical purposes, but essentially removes all chances of pleasure from sex due to various ways of cutting off or restricting access to the clitoris or the vagina. What separates FGM, where the clitoris is cut off, from IGM, where the genital organ is sometimes cut down so far or cut off completely enough that the victim cannot experience sexual pleasure?

I thought I'd maybe talk about chromosomes but I don't really understand the science behind them. Or maybe I don't understand how people understand them. There are all sorts of chromosomal abnormalities that leave people with something other than just the standard XX or XY chromosomes. XXY, XYY, XXX, X – take your pick. This sometimes goes hand-in-hand with being intersex.

Imagine you're a woman and your name is, say, Annie. You go to a conference or a convention or some other gathering, except when you get your nametag it doesn't say Annie. It says Dave, and it says you're a man. Everyone refuses to address you as anything but Dave, refers to you with male pronouns, and thinks you're hilarious because you're a man wearing a dress. To bring this home, the people at the conference who give you a nametag with the wrong name and gender are the doctors at birth. The other people at the conference, who won't listen when you tell them you're a woman and your name is Annie, are society. Nobody is "born in the wrong body," per say, society *makes* your body the "wrong body."

my body is not
wrong. i am not wrong
not to hate its shape,
its insides and outs
but you look and assume
semiotics.
your daggers upon
my form, drawing lines,

cutting off my toe,
my heel to make me fit
in an imaginary shoe, a fairy
tale. in my palace
i have no need.

If the sex binary is a social construct instead of a scientific reality, then why should the gender binary be any different? It's soil chemistry versus child sacrifice! Multiple ancient cultures performed child sacrifice because they thought it would make the gods bless their crops and ensure a bountiful harvest, but thousands of years later we now know it just boils down to soil chemistry. Child sacrifice was a tradition, one we now realize was cruel and ineffective. How long will it take for us to realize the sex binary is a tradition, and the "sextrum" is the soil chemistry?

Civilizations all over the world practiced human sacrifice, though some practiced it more frequently than others. Imagine you are observing one of these civilizations as they practice the ritual. This time, they're sacrificing a child. She's young, no older than twelve, and though she looks scared, she knows the spilling of her lifeblood will appease the gods and bring her community a bountiful harvest. The gods cursed their crops with blight the previous growing season, so last season's harvest was meager and left her people hungry. Her blood, spilled upon the earth, will rejuvenate their crops and bring the community prosperity once more. You watch as they slit her throat, then reach into her chest and pull out her twitching heart. Her blood mixes with the dirt at the people's feet, but no life springs forth. Suddenly, you're back in the present, observing as modern scientists examine a large soil sample. They can see the earth from that civilization's time, and deduce that the reason for poor crops was because her people planted the same crop one too many times in a row. They figured it out eventually, and realized the life of a child would not change the chemistry

in soil. It hurt their community to sacrifice a life, just as it hurts our community every time a life is lost from hate crimes or suicide. Western society has the tradition of a gender binary, one that they forced upon those they colonized. Science has proven that human sacrifice does not make the earth more fertile, so why do people still believe in a tradition that so many people kill in the name of or take their own life because of its teachings?

From the theoretical standpoint, a binary indicates the presence of two things or ideas that exist as total opposites to each other that have the same value and worth, just in reverse.

Black or white, good or bad, on or off, one or zero.

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01101001 01100001 01101101 01101110 01101111 01110100
01100001 01110010 01101111 01100010 01101111 01110100
01100010 01110101 01110100 01111001 01101111 01110101
01100110 01101111 01110010 01100011 01100101 01101101 01100101
01101001 01101110 01110100 01101111 01100001
01101100 01101001 01100110 01100101 01101111 01100110
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01100001 01100110 01101111 01110101 01110010
01110111 01101000 01100101 01101110 01101001 01100001 01101101
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i n f i n i t e

i am not
a robot
but you
force me
into a
life of
ones and
zeroes
when i am
a two
a three
a four
when i am
infinite

Society arbitrarily assigns value to these binaries. Just because white might be the lack of black and black the lack of white does not mean that there aren't associations with these colors. In western society black is the color of death and corruption, while white is life and purity. To be good is better than to be evil, and so on. These associations mean that oftentimes what we view as a physical binary isn't valid from a theoretical standpoint. If we value one half of the supposed binary over the other, then that means the two values are not equal, and thus the binary...is not a binary.



We are the stories we tell each other. I am telling you this story so I can be. Western society typically only recognizes male and female gender identities. It presents these aspects as opposites of each other with no gradation between them or possibility of existence outside the boundaries of definition. One would expect for a gender binary to reflect the idea of opposite but equal (and that sounds dangerously close to “separate but equal, doesn't it?”) in value, though Western history has shown otherwise. The ongoing struggle of feminism is testament to that. Intersections with race occur here, further proving a gender binary wrong. Women of color overall make less than white women, who overall make less than white men, and we haven't even touched on transgender women's wage gap.

Until relatively recently, men could put their wives and daughters in mental institutions just for being on their period! The “female hysteria” that women experienced both on and off their menstrual cycles was an actual medical diagnosis, one that many

women received.³ Imagine being a woman in Britain in the nineteenth century. You're on your period, and experiencing some of the standard symptoms – anxiety, irritability, lack of appetite for food, an increased sex drive, bloating – any of these symptoms could get you a diagnosis of female hysteria, of which there were a number of odd “treatments.”⁴ Moreover, during the first days of menstruation, when libido is typically increased, testosterone exists at higher levels than estrogen or progesterone.⁵ That is, doctors believed women needed medical treatment because their body chemistry had them acting more like men. Chemically, not economically. Think of people living in poverty – how many women live in poverty compared to men? 2015 Census data show that in almost every state there are a higher percentage of women living in poverty than men, except for a handful of states where there is an equal percentage.⁶ If men and women are so equal, why do so many more women live in poverty?

Think of occupations and practices typically thought of as feminine – cooking, fashion, makeup. Who are the top experts in the field, the top CEOs, the ones who make the most money? Usually, they're men. Gordon Ramsey, Anthony Bourdain, Bobby Flay, Ralph Lauren, Alexander McQueen, Giorgio Armani, Jean Paul Agon (CEO of L'Oréal), Fabrizio Freda (CEO of Estée Lauder), Tim Warner (CEO of Urban Decay)...the list goes on. Think of the devaluing of jobs that become predominantly female – secretary, nurse, teacher.

³ Churchill, Lindsey. *Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality*. “Hysteria.” 1 vols. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Hormone Imbalance.” *Women in Balance Institute*, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://womeninbalance.org/about-hormone-imbalance/>

⁶ “Nonelderly Adult Poverty Rate by Gender.” *The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation*, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://kff.org/other/state-indicator/adult-poverty-rate-by-gender/?currentTimeframe=0>

Women cannot be dominant in fields that exist to deliver services specifically to them, and the fields they do dominate lose social value over time.

Imagine you're on Instagram. You're scrolling through the profile of a popular makeup brand, and you see they've reposted an image from a man showcasing his makeup for the day. Bold eyeshadow, sculpted brows, perfectly winged eyeliner, expertly applied lipstick, and highlighter that makes his skin glow. His makeup is better than just about any makeup job you've seen in real life – but the comments are mostly negative.

“Would you let your son out of the house like this?”

“omg makeup looks so weird on dudes take it off”

“This is just wrong, makeup is for girls and no one else!”

Men hold most of the top positions in the most prominent makeup brands, but people still look down on how he chooses to present himself. He's not trans, he's not gay – he just wants to use makeup like women use makeup. So what makes some colors and product smeared on your face so inherently feminine?

Moreover, a binary indicates no overlap between the two opposite values. There is only one or zero, no half. The one cannot take on aspects of the zero, just as the zero cannot take on aspects of the one. There is only black or white, no blending of the two to make gray. Societal constructs once again come into play with masculinity and femininity. Society believes that women should only have feminine aspects and only participate in “feminine” activities, while men should only have masculine aspects and only participate in “masculine” activities. A woman should not hate high heels and play football on a team by these standards, and men should not wear skirts and enjoy makeup. Except, these people exist. Thousands, even millions or billions of them exist in the world, defying social constructs and

crossing between borders of the gender binary every day. A man staying home to take care of his baby while his wife goes to work is a defiance of these social constructs.

Plus, people who are genderfluid or bigender exist. A genderfluid person might feel male one day and female the next, while a bigender person might identify as both male and female at the same time. It is possible for them to identify as non-binary genders, but many do identify with binary genders, constantly ignoring the supposed boundaries of this binary. When people who exist within these supposed binary identities but ignore the boundaries between the two, the binary is not a binary.

Knowing that the binary isn't real allows the need for discourse.

It's the blobfish in the room. It's the thing no one will talk about – transgender issues. But it's also the thing a lot of people don't know *how* to talk about.

First, some definitions. To be scientific, “transgender” refers to identifying as a gender other than the one assigned to you at birth, while being “cisgender” refers to identifying with the gender assigned to you at birth. You've probably heard the “born in the wrong” body narrative, which is actually pretty inaccurate. It's more accurate to say that no one is born cis or trans, but society prescribes these identities to us based on whether or not we fit into the gender mold doctors *assigned* us at birth. Assigned is the key word here. Just because the gym coach puts you on the yellow jersey team doesn't mean yellow's your favorite color or even a color you like at all. To bring back our earlier example, just because someone gives you a nametag that identifies you as Dave doesn't mean your name is actually Dave. The transgender person is the one who gets the nametag that incorrectly identifies them as Dave, while the cisgender person is the one whose nametag is accurate.

how can i mold
my body into a shape

no one has ever seen?
why should i want to?

Transsexual an older term, quickly becoming outdated, that is not synonymous with transgender. It's kind of an "all squares are rectangles, not all rectangles are squares" situation. All transsexual people are transgender, but not all transgender people are transsexual. The difference lies in transitioning. Transsexual people are those who want to transition or who have already transitioned from male to female or female to male. Not everyone wants, is able, or can afford to transition, and transitioning only between binary identities excludes non-binary identities, so it's not a good umbrella term. "Transgender" is your safest and easiest bet when it comes to discussing trans issues.

People struggle with labels, and that's okay. Not all labels can accurately describe an aspect of a person, but they still have use. On one level, imagine you're a fan of Superman. You tell this to people you meet, using this identifier to find other fans of Superman online and in your local community. Now, you can gather together and discuss the latest editorial decisions that affect Superman's character and story, and share theories about how these editorial decisions might affect plot down the line. On a more serious level, imagine you're half Black, half Latinx. Your Latinx parent isn't in the picture for whatever reason, and your Black parent didn't find it pertinent to inform you that you're half Latinx until recently. Now that you know this, you can find communities of other Afro-Latinx people and share your struggles, experiences, and achievements. You can exchange tips on how to deal with those ignorant of your heritage, and you can begin to learn about your Latinx heritage. This would not be possible without knowing your racial identity. This applies to gender identities too; with the discovery of a gender identity that fits you comes the ability to join a larger community of people who share this identity, enabling discussing, learning, and growth.

there was only one tree
when it mattered
[beč]
one tree until
another burned
[æš]
and set itself apart
and of course there was more
than just [beč] and
[æš] in the world
but the people divided all
the trees into two uses
and then three,
and then four,
and so on.
the trees did not.

The LGBTQ community is a rapidly growing and swiftly changing community, one where some terms come in and out of use before popular media catches on. Others start out as acceptable, non-offensive terms, but over time become offensive. Protip: don't call gay people "homosexuals" anymore. Queer is another problematic term – though many people have tried to reclaim what was once a slur against the LGBTQ community as a whole, many more are not comfortable with it, and especially not with it being used as an umbrella term for the LGBTQ community.

But what words *are* okay?

cunt dyke ape greaser kike tranny slut bitch chink faggot gook queer 539 gypsy retard terrorist beaner coon 925 paperbag flip rag-head mule spec whore rafter oriental WOP butterhead rat

As always, the place to begin is to ask the people in the community. You don't ask a white person if it's okay to say the n-word or a corporate CEO if an "affordable" new product is really affordable for those living in poverty – they are not the community affected. Likewise, don't ask straight people what's okay and not okay to say about non-heterosexual identities. In this specific case, don't ask cisgender people for authoritative advice on transgender issues.

The only way to get an authoritative answer is from people who are in the community themselves and who are living an experience you can never truly understand.

Elevate trans voices. Or, don't raise trans voices to the same shouting level as cisgender voices, but rather lower the shouts of the cis voices to match the regular speaking level or even whisper of trans voices. Either way, make trans voices just as audible as cis voices, but make sure their voice is the one being heard when it comes to trans issues. Let trans people decide what is okay and what is not okay to say. Don't let cis people speak authoritatively on trans issues. Give trans people the position of authority with their own issues, instead of an outsider, instead of their oppressors.

Listen to trans voices. When a trans person tells you to stop using the word *tranny* because it's a slur, listen and obey. When a trans person tells you to use different pronouns than the ones they were raised with, than the ones you think might match their appearance, use them. When a trans person tells you to stop using the name they were given at birth and to use the one they chose for themselves instead, use it. Anything else is an act of violence against them and their wellbeing.

Look at mental illness and suicide rates for transgender youth. Look at how they are significantly higher than rates for non-LGBTQ youth. When a trans person tells you how you can help fix that, how you can help lower those numbers, listen. Do what they tell you to do. Saying "it gets better" means nothing when you aren't making any efforts to help *make things better*. This means getting involved. This means calling your local representative to tell them you oppose that house bill that specifically targets transgender youth and punishes them for expressing their identity. This means speaking up when you hear people say cissexist things, such as assuming that women and vagina are synonymous or making jokes

about a man's perceived penis size. This means not assuming all your friends, or all your children, or all your students are cisgender.

When you are cisgender, when you are part of the oppressive group who benefits from your cisgender identity every day, it is your job to listen to the voices of the people who you have directly or indirectly oppressed, to act as a platform for them so that others can hear. The only way to fix, or at least begin to attempt fixing the issues and struggles transgender people face on a daily basis is by listening to them talk about their own struggles.

You're in court, watching the proceedings of a high-profile trial. A major corporation was caught dumping massive amounts of toxic waste illegally, and a large percentage of a town's population had developed medical conditions as a result. The prosecution brings forth a local doctor, validating her as an expert witness. She's in charge of treatment for many of the cases, and has extensive knowledge about what causes these cases. The prosecution also brings forth an ecologist who has lived and worked in the town and the area surrounding it for his whole life. He is also validated as an expert witness. Both testify extensively about what effect the toxic dump has on the earth and their community, ultimately saying that in their expert opinion, the damage done to the earth and to the community's health is a direct result of the illegal dumping. Now, the defense brings forth a witness. He's in charge of environmental impact assessments at the company, but not validated as an expert witness. He testifies about how he looked at all the data, but just doesn't find it possible that the toxic dumping caused the health problems in the community. The judge and jury ultimately find that the company is not responsible for the health problems of the local community, favoring the non-expert witness who is on the company's payroll over the community who has to live

with and endure the effects of the company's decisions. The judge and jury, then, gave the oppressors the voice of authority over those they oppress.

Do not let cisgender people speak authoritatively about transgender issues.

-X-X-X-

Trans*

*Terms and conditions may apply.

At some point, people began shortening transgender to trans. Easy, more conversational, and more inclusive in some ways. But some people tacked an asterisk at the end. *Trans**. Why? Is it an indicator that you're talking about transgender issues, not a translation of an ancient text? Is it a way to show that there is more than one way to end that word?

No.

When you add that asterisk what you're saying is that you mean *all* transgender people. Nonbinary and third gender and genderfluid (and so on, and so on) included, not just the traditional trans man and trans woman. That is to say, all people who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, which is literally the definition of transgender anyway, so why make a distinction?

Why create an imagined binary between binary-identifying trans people and people who are not binary-identifying trans people? What does this do except further exclude those who are not binary-identifying, pushing them to the outskirts of a community they have just as much right to exist in as a trans man or trans woman? The asterisk devalues the non-binary trans identity.

Using it screams, “You’re only valid when we acknowledge you!” It says to non-binary trans people that their identity is not really a trans identity, when, by definition, it is. It’s the blue square and red circle ganging up on all the other colorful shapes that don’t fit into the square hole or the circle hole, telling them that they’re just imagining that they’re a different shape and that they can fit into the holes if they try hard enough, deny hard enough.

colors scattered
across the floor, a shape
for each one. a child’s

hand groping,
grabbing, grasping
a yellow triangle.

the block of wood has
two openings, a square
and a circle. but the triangle

does not
cannot
will not
fit. the child’s tears

demand
a reason,
a solution. an adult’s hand

grabbing, grasping
a blue square. and the blue

square slots
easily
smoothly
willingly
into its opening. an adult’s hand

grasping
a red circle.

and the red circle slots

effortlessly

but the yellow
triangle
doesn't.

-X-X-X-

“My fiction beats the hell out of my truth.”
-Blake Schwarzenbach

-X-X-X-

a riddle
what am i?
five faces, but thousands
of voices, millions of hands
doing my bidding

“Victoria, please solve problem number five up on the board.”

River heaved a quiet sigh as the substitute interrupted their poem writing, picking up their notebook and walking to the front of the classroom. They hadn't bothered to explain to the sub that they didn't go by Victoria anymore and that they weren't a girl – it didn't matter, they'd never see this woman again – but it still twisted their gut every time she said something that implied that was the case. What was the point, anyway? Mr. Knudson, their normal Calculus teacher, never listened to River's (repeated) requests anyway, even though he called Christina by *her* preferred (middle) name of Rosie.

“That's correct, Victoria, you can return to your seat. Tim, please solve number twelve.”

“At least *it* can still do math...”

River ignored the whispered comment and sidelong looks from their classmates as they returned to their seat, absently comparing their work to Tim's as he wrote it out on the board.

the first face has sticky
fingers; one hand cannot release
the whip it uses while the other
cannot stop taking from those
the other whips.

Whispers when people thought they weren't listening (and even when people knew they were) and being called an "it" had become commonplace since coming out as agender, but that didn't mean it hurt any less. People had a hard time wrapping their heads around pronouns other than "he" or "she," and most didn't even bother trying to call them River instead of their old name, Victoria. The teachers were pretty much the only exception, but even that was only some of them. At best, people were awkward and uncomfortable around them when they'd previously been greeted mostly with kind smiles and friendly conversation. The only real blessing was that none of it had reached their parents yet (only an explicit note from the school counselor had stopped the teachers from trying to contact home), though their mom and dad were certainly wondering why their only child suddenly had far fewer friends.

the second face pushes, shoves
to the side. has no eyes
but rather one
large
gaping
mouth
that echoes an unending
shattering
"but what about me?"

Bethany, who'd lived two doors down from them as far as they could remember, actively avoided eye contact with them now. Andi went out of her way to ignore their presence, even when River talked to her. Nancy was still talking to them, but it was a stiff and formal relationship now that River could tell would be less than a memory by the end of the year and graduation. Sofia was the only one that stayed by their side – even though she didn't really understand the whole “not a girl *or* a boy” thing, she understood the alienation, being openly bisexual herself.

the third face hides
under a heavy, gilded
crown. tarnish and age
mar its imperfect metal
that weighs down so
heavily that billions
of hands must support it,
must keep it from crushing
its wearer.

If not for Sofia, River thought they might've killed themselves before midterms.

“Victoria! Victoria, class is over; you can leave.” River blinked, suddenly becoming aware of their surroundings. Indeed, most of their classmates had packed up and were leaving the classroom to catch the bus home. Shaking the cobwebs from their head, they stood and put away their books before heading to catch the bus as well.

“River! Over here, I saved you a seat!” Sofia waved from a spot towards the middle of the bus, a friendly grin on her face. Some of the weight of the awful day lifted from their shoulders and River smiled back.

“Sof!” they said, quickly sliding into the open seat. “How was your English test?”

“Good, good,” she said, “And your Physics one?”

River winced. “We’ll see,” they said. Sofia laughed, sharing their sentiment. River let the rhythmic bouncing of the bus and Sofia’s eager detailed rundown of her day lull them into a sense of peacefulness. This year sucked; they and Sofia only had lunch period together, leaving River alone in a hostile environment for all their classes.

“- And River, oh my god, did you *see* Joanna today? I think she’s the most beautiful person to ever walk the face of the earth, no lie. If I kissed her – If I just *held hands with her* – I would probably ascend to a higher plane of existence.”

“Then why don’t you ask her out? Graduation is coming up soon,” River said with a giggle. Sofia’s crush on their classmate Joanna had been going on for almost a year, but she still had yet to make anything resembling a move.

“I’ve told you already, River, she’s *so straight*,” Sofia lamented, burying her head in River’s shoulder. “I don’t stand a *chance*.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” River said, patting Sofia on the head.

“Yes I – “

“Will you queers shut the fuck up already?” Pat McCrory, a boy River remembered as being Bethany’s unreliable lab partner from last year, turned around in his seat in front of them and glared. “Some of us are *normal* and don’t want to listen to freaks like *you*.” He sneered, and suddenly the warm, happy feeling River had felt in their chest disappeared, becoming cold and sinking to the bottom of their stomach. The smile faded from their face as they curled in on themselves.

the fourth face stares
from a poster. it is the model
face, the ideal. the eyes of god
staring, staring, staring.
watching to ensure all who do
not resemble it cannot prosper.

“Bisexuality isn’t contagious,” Sofia sneered right back, used to this kind of behavior and quite capable at dishing it right back out, “Unlike your *stupidity*. C’mon, River,” she said, standing and pulling them to their feet as the bus came to a stop. “Let’s get off here and walk the rest of the way so we don’t have to deal with more morons like *this* asshole.” They weren’t too far away from River’s home, but it would probably take a good half an hour to make it back on foot rather than ten minutes on the bus. Still, considering the growing look of rage on the boy’s face, River would rather risk hypothermia than deal with the repercussions of Sofia’s retort or continued verbal abuse just for how they expressed themselves. This wasn’t the first time one of the meaner kids had almost gotten violent with them. They grabbed their books and followed after Sofia’s rushed footsteps.

the fifth face wears makeup
of blood and bruises. a smoky
eye adorned with the delicate
touch of an angry fist.
the classic red
lip using internal bleeding.
what a look!

-X-X-X-

River almost ran into someone just standing immediately outside the bathroom door.

“Sorry!” they said, stepping back to allow the person to enter the bathroom. They stopped, however, when the person only snorted and didn’t move from their position. River looked up and felt a sinking sensation in their stomach.

“Rhonda,” they said, trying for a smile and probably failing.

“Vic-tor-i-a,” Rhonda said back with a scary smile on her face. “Oh, I’m sorry, you go by...what is it, *River* now, right?” Rhonda was on the varsity basketball team, and at six

feet four inches she towered not only over River but almost everyone else in the school as well. To put it lightly, she could probably snap River in half without even blinking.

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out,” River said, still smiling weakly.

“Oh, don’t worry, I won’t,” Rhonda said, “because I won’t be using it.” River went cold as Rhonda leaned forward and poked them firmly in the chest. “In fact, I won’t ever call you by that fake name ever again, or call you anything but a girl, or use anything but female pronouns. You’re a girl, Victoria Atwood, and you need to stop pretending like you’re not!” River swallowed, trying not to show how terrified they were. “You’re a traitor to the female gender if you think you can just waltz around and say you don’t have a gender. Bullshit, girly girl. You’re a girl whether you like it or –“

“Rhonda Banes! Are you antagonizing a fellow student?”

Ms. Davies, the guidance counselor, marched down the hallway, looking impressively terrifying considering her small stature. She was tiny, even with the stilettos, but the Red Sea of students parted before her as students rushed to get out of her way. Rhonda looked like a deer in headlights, straightening and taking a large step away from River.

“No, Ms. Davies,” she said, abashed.

“That better be the truth,” Ms. Davies said, wagging a finger at her. “If I remember correctly, one more detention will get you kicked off the team. We wouldn’t want that to happen, now, would we?”

“No, Ms. Davies,” Rhonda repeated looking scared. Everyone knew Rhonda was trying to get a full ride to some impressive school up north on basketball. Getting kicked off the team would effectively ruin her dreams.

“I didn’t think so,” Ms. Davies said, then seemed to perk up when she spotted River. “Oh, River!” she said, smiling widely, “I wanted to talk to you about a scholarship opportunity – can you join me in my office?”

-X-X-X-

They walked in silence for a few minutes after the bus pulled away. Most of the snow from the storm earlier in the week had melted, but temperatures were still low. Sofia angrily stomped in any patch of snow she could find and slid on every ice patch big enough, while River carefully danced around them and caught her whenever she almost fell. Their sneakers were red Converse, new from Christmas to match their baggy buttoned-up flannel (they were going for as much of an androgynous look as they could get away with given they weren’t out to their parents yet), and weren’t very waterproof, cold-proof, or slip-proof. It was best to stick to the bare sidewalk.

“I hate assholes like that. I don’t know where they get off thinking they’re better than everyone else just because they’re *straight*,” Sofia finally said, voice dark. She spluttered as a frigid burst of wind blew her long, dark hair into her face, which then caught on her glasses and in her fresh coat of lip-gloss. “Stupid wind!” she griped. “But seriously, half of the kids at our school are too rich for their own good and wouldn’t know prejudice if it kicked them in the face.”

River let out a quiet laugh, their breath rising in clouds above their head. They tucked a strand of their own hair, a brown so light it was almost blonde, behind their ear, absently noting that it was almost time for a haircut. Their bob was starting brush their shoulders, and that was unacceptable. Maybe this time they could convince their parents to let them cut it into a pixie and maybe even dye it.

“I’m starting to get used it,” they said quietly, exuberance from earlier stifled. “It still hurts, but it’s getting easier to brush off, I guess.”

“There shouldn’t be anything for you to get used to,” Sofia huffed, a deep scowl on her face. “This shouldn’t be a problem for you or for me or for *anyone*. And really, I wish they would stop using slurs like *queer*!” She didn’t tell River that it would change or get better eventually, though, and they appreciated her honesty.

“This is why I don’t get why people insist on using ‘queer’ as an umbrella term,” River said. “I’ve tried bringing it up before, like with Jamie at the LGBTQ club meetings, but you know how she is –“

“*Ugh*,” Sofia groaned. “Talk about white feminist! She makes all these assumptions about my sexual activity just because I’m Latina – like Carly is bi, too, but she’s *white* and Jamie never asks *her* how many people she’s had sex with. It doesn’t surprise me that she won’t listen to people who’ve had the word used against them as a slur before.”

“Why is she club president, again?” River asked, sighing.

“Because Darrel was the only other one who ran and he’s got the biggest case of internalized homophobia I’ve ever seen. At least Jamie doesn’t hate herself for being a lesbian and try to tell us we’re all dirty perverts who need to control our sexual impulses.”

River rolled their eyes. “Yeah, I’m not about to forget *that* conversation any time soon. I don’t know why he thinks I’m some nasty scoundrel who wants to harass everyone in the bathroom. I just gotta pee, everyone *else* is harassing *me*!” They huffed. “Honestly, I would kill for unisex bathrooms just at school. I’m not faking it and I’m not just doing this for attention, I’m doing this because *this is who I am!*” Cheeks flushed from the cold and from their emotions, they continued, “They all stare at me and give me snide looks every

time I use the women's room, like they think I actually have a choice, but we all know I'd get in trouble if I used the men's room instead. I've *tried* just holding it until I get home, but that shit's just not healthy, and I can't help it!"

"Mm, that too," Sofia hummed. "Seriously, it's like these people don't realize that every single bathroom in their house is a unisex bathroom."

"Yeah!" River agreed, waving their hands.

They continued to rant, not caring how loud their voices got, and by the time Sofia waved goodbye to continue walking home on her own twenty minutes later, face flushed from the cold and hair tangled from the wind, River had mostly pushed the bus incident from their mind.

"See you tomorrow!" they called from their doorstep, and then turned around to walk inside. Both of their parents' cars were in the driveway, which was unusual for this time of day. They wondered what the deal was, feeling a pang of worry when they stepped into the kitchen to find their mother holding back tears and their father with a furious scowl on his face.

"Sit down right now," he said, his tone leaving no room for argument. Heart suddenly racing, River dropped their bag by their seat and sat down, fingers fisting in the oversized sleeves of their flannel shirt.

"Bethany's mother called us today," their dad said, and River felt their stomach drop. No, oh god, no, it was way too soon for this to be happening. "She had some...*things* to share with us, specifically regarding why we don't see her daughter around her anymore." His mustache twitched as his upper lip no doubt trembled in fury. This was exactly why they hadn't wanted to come out to their parents until it was absolutely necessary. Their parents

weren't physically abusive, but they'd made their opinions regarding anyone who wasn't like them – straight, cisgender, middle class or above, and so on – abundantly clear, so much so that they hadn't felt *safe* coming out.

They weren't homophobic, they just didn't think gay people should get married or exist in front of them in public. Call me Cait? Nope, still gonna be Bruce. And goodness gracious, the nerve of poor people wanting to be able to afford food for their families! Really, more people should just be like them, life would be so much easier that way!

River didn't want to deal with constant “pray it away” comments they knew they would get, being dragged to therapy for a problem that wasn't really a problem, maybe even stuck in something like conversion therapy, and an emotionally hostile home environment.

“She said you've been going around school telling people you're *not a girl*, and that they should call you some bullshit name like *River!*” His voice steadily grew in volume, and River flinched, not daring to speak up. Their vision was beginning to tunnel and they struggled to breathe past the invisible weight on their chest. “Victoria Grace Atwood, is this true?” Distantly, as if they were far away and not in control of their body, River felt themselves nod, and their mother promptly burst into tears.

Their father rounded on them and slapped them upside the head. “Look at that!” he yelled, pointing at their mother, who gasped, while River struggled to process what had just happened. It hadn't been done with the intent to harm, rather with the intent to reprimand, but they still hadn't been slapped upside the head in years. “You've made your mother cry, telling her you're some kind of *tranny*. Apologize to her right now, young lady!”

River flinched at the slur and blatant misgendering, but gathered enough courage to ask, “What for?”

Their father's face grew even redder, if that was possible, and for a fleeting second River worried if the situation might actually become *really* violent.

"For breaking her heart," he said, his voice deadly soft, "For lying to her, to us, about where all your friends went. For mortifying us, embarrassing us in front of everyone we know. For thinking you could get away with lying about this and purposely telling *everyone* not to talk to us about it! Do you realize how much it hurt your mother for her *best friend* to tell her that her daughter's 'needs serious help' and she 'doesn't feel comfortable' with you being around Bethany? How embarrassing it is that *everyone* knew before us?"

"I...I'm sorry," River stuttered. Took a breath, steeled themselves. Tried to maintain their strenuous grip on reality instead of totally disassociating. "But *this*," they gestured at their still-weeping mother, at their father's rage-filled form, "is exactly why I didn't want to tell you! I didn't feel *safe!*" They didn't want to constantly feel like their family was tiptoeing around a giant elephant named "Gender" every time they were in the same room or talking to each other, didn't want to worry about their parents judging them every second of every day, didn't want to think about what their parents were thinking about. Was that so bad?

"But you told everyone at *school*," their mother finally cut in, blowing her nose. "Why is school any different than here?"

"Because I don't *live* at school," River said. "My teachers don't feed me and house me, *you* do. And I was afraid...afraid you would kick me out if I said anything."

"Kick you out?" Their mother gasped, horrified. "You may be *confused*, but you're still our daughter! We would *never* kick you out!"

“I’m not confused!” River burst out, struggling not to cry. “I know who I am, I know what I am, and I know that my name isn’t Victoria Grace and that *I’m not a girl!*”

“You have a vagina and two X chromosomes,” their father said. “I was there when you were born. *You are a girl.*”

“My body doesn’t define who I am!” River said, and now they were definitely crying. “Why can’t you just accept that?”

“Because it’s a load of bullshit and you’re just too confused to know it!” their father yelled. Instead of responding, River fled upstairs, slamming their door and collapsing on their bed to sob.

“Victoria!” their father yelled from downstairs. “Victoria Grace Atwood, if you don’t get back down here in the next ten seconds, you’re in *deep shit!*”

Scrambling, River retrieved their phone from their pocket to text a quick “parents found out, situation FUBAR” to Sofia before their father could make it upstairs to confiscate all forms of communication. Sure enough, his footsteps thundered up the stairs moments later and he slammed their door open, not caring that the doorknob dented the wall.

“Give me the phone,” he said, snatching the phone from their hand. He grabbed the laptop from their desk, too. “If you need a computer to do homework, you’ll do it on the desktop computer downstairs. You’re grounded indefinitely, maybe until graduation. No texting, no social media, television, no hanging out with whatever friends you have left. You’re going to stay in this house and do nothing but homework and chores until your mother and I think you’ve been punished enough for this kind of behavior. Understand?” River gave a shaky nod. *“Understand?”*

“Yessir,” they said. Their father stared for a long moment, as if trying to inspect them for any hint of insincerity or lying, then nodded and slammed the door on his way out. River was silent for a moment, hands fisting in their blankets. They still felt like they were a million miles away, like all this had happened from a distance and none of it was actually real. Then the tears came again, and they buried their face in their knees and resumed sobbing as their father went back downstairs to exchange words with their mother in raised voices.

-X-X-X-

River hadn't meant it to come out, at first. It had just been something she'd been pondering to herself for a while, then gradually they realized that they weren't comfortable being called a girl and being referred to as *she*. Her name, which she already hated, dug under her skin like ivy, pushing and spreading and itching until she couldn't take it any more, she realized she had to find another name.

Grace was out of the question. It was pretty, but it wasn't her. They didn't have grace, they didn't bring grace, and most of all it was still...too feminine. They'd tried out different names. Tyler, Jordon, Alex, but despite their gender-neutral status they still felt too masculine. They tried Robin, but that was the name of a popular sitcom character, which they just couldn't take seriously. They'd hung onto Ivy for a while, longer than all the others, but eventually decided that one was too feminine too.

River, though...River fit. It spoke of change and adaptation, of flooding banks that could destroy or fertilize, of hidden depths. It stuck, and suddenly they were doodling signatures of their new name in the margins of their notes and struggling not to write “River Atwood” at the tops of their tests and homework assignments.