

On Growing Up Between Genders

An essay in propositions

Stephen Burt

1 I don't want to be one person; I don't want to be one thing.

2 “What is the use of being a boy,” Gertrude Stein asked, “if you are going to grow up to be a man?”

3 In second grade I wanted A. to be my best friend, or to marry me, or to play with me, or to let me stay in her bedroom, with its white Legos and lacy hearts, but she was a girl and I was a boy: I was not permitted to spend the night.

4 I wanted to be a princess and a prince; but I would never have said so, then.

5 In third grade the popular friends of E. came to me on the blacktop and asked very seriously what it meant that she now had her period; I was delighted to learn that my reputation as a child scientist trumped my status as an uncool boy. I think I offered useful, calm advice. (The whole thing may have been a deadpan prank.)

6 In sixth grade I was often sad because boys had started to go out with girls and none of the girls whom I wanted as my friends, whose handwriting I wanted to copy, would go out with me.

7 What did “going out with” mean?

8 I wanted the girls' companionship, their approval; I would not have said that I wanted to be one of them, but I was sure that I did not like being a boy.

9 I learned that I could befriend some girls by playing the piano, accompanying the songs they liked to sing, an especially useful talent when auditions for the musical came around. I was not a boy but a

semi-professional accompanist, neither boy nor girl but head, arms, hands.

10 I wore striped cotton short-sleeved shirts with button-down collars, blue jeans or corduroys, and sneakers that fell apart.

11 Other boys all had crushes on girls they said they had pursued; I admitted, when asked, to my crush on M., who wore striped cotton short-sleeved shirts with button-down collars, blue jeans or corduroys, and sneakers that fell apart. (She would take no interest in me.)

12 In summer camp, after eighth grade, I dated J. She did take an interest in me; she wore striped cotton short-sleeved shirts with button-down collars, blue jeans or corduroys, and sneakers that fell apart. (What did “dating” mean?)

13 “Androgyny is sexy,” writes Marjorie Garber, “when it is the vehicle (the physical form of performance)”—so that there seems to be something else “underneath”—“and not sexy when it is the tenor,” i.e. when a boy might as well be a girl “all the way down.”

14 It should not matter how other people see me if I can dress to suit myself.

15 It should not matter how I see myself if I can dress for other people; but for whom?

16 Children today who say that they are transgender may take hormone-blocking drugs to put off puberty until they have decided how they want their bodies to be.

17 How do I want my body to be?

18 For most of my teens I thought I was in love with T., who was

chatty, approachable, kind, and good at math too. T. dressed as if her body had not yet developed very much, even after it had: striped cotton short-sleeved shirts with button-down collars, blue jeans or corduroys ...

19 T.'s younger brother built Lego towns, Lego palaces, Lego airports for Lego planes, backlit with tiny lights like Lego moons. Their Lego people were sometimes marked as women by their trapezoidal skirts, but otherwise they were just people, with king-or-queen crowns or hard hats on round heads, casting their squared-off shadows over the bumpy Lego ground.

20 Desire as light, the body I have as itself, the body I want as a cast shadow.

21 The sexual encounters of my teen and young adult years usually involved a moment when I asked to try on a girl's bra. The answer was always yes. Usually it killed the sexual arc. (Jennifer Finney Boylan, née James Boylan, reports nearly the same experience in her memoir, *She's Not There*.)

22 Sometimes I yearn (present tense) to wear a training bra, since I don't—or don't yet—need a real one.

23 Reading, last year, Boylan's chapters about childhood and youth, I wrote in the margins, repeatedly, "Yes" or "Me too" or "Yes, but not that much"; and, sometimes, "No" or "Not quite," "I wouldn't" or "Not me."

24 On weekends in high school at science fiction conventions my friends and companions included the costumers, who dressed as sorceresses, or dragonriders, or robots, for forty-eight hours at a stretch. (They did not want, much less expect, to become these things.)

25 Looking again at my own journals from college I find a record of a night spent fully clothed in bed with N.; “I would as usual be happier dressed in women’s clothes,” I wrote that morning, “but I would certainly still be sulking.”

26 Much of those journals comprise verbatim quotations, from poets, from critics, from friends, as if I were most myself when dressed up in their words.

27 N. (it says there) had figured out “the girl I’d like to be,” her demeanor, her visual style, her age: perhaps fourteen. She and I dated, after that night, off and on, sometimes seriously, for a year and a half.

28 Were I now a woman I’m sure I would dress inappropriately, too young for my age and station; I would look wrong. (But that’s what I do now.)

29 Recorded in those same journals: a night, back from college, at T.’s house, watching a movie with E. and then falling asleep in her parents’ guest room, in her old wooden bed, feeling safe in her floral nightgown.

30 I don’t want to be one person; I don’t want to be one thing.

31 I thought I could handle such intimate, “warm,” embarrassing material most adeptly in the “cool” space of numbered propositions, as in one kind of modern essay or prose poem.

32 Such essays or poems swipe their form from philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, who are sometimes accused of neglecting the body, of ignoring material bodies in favor of ideals, those tiny lights.

33 Other minds have other bodies, with breasts or no breasts, round

hips or no hips, broad shoulders or none; some people's bodies may never develop.

34 With long striped socks, with folders of sheet music, with ruffled capped sleeves, with striped cotton short-sleeved shirts, with fine leather shoes, with a bra, with a black cocktail dress ...

35 According to the philosopher Marya Schechtman, our sense of continuous selfhood in time, of agency, of something to call "I," depends on an approximate congruence between the stories I can tell about myself and the stories that other people can tell about me.

36 In other words, I want other people to see me in the way that I see myself.

37 Almost everyone wants that; very few get it.

38 Can it be true that sex takes you out of yourself? Why does it have to bring you back?

39 Sometimes I think that my un-, sub-, or pre-conscious mind divides the world, absurdly, in four parts: girls (the aesthetic, the beautiful); women (the ethical); men (temporal power), and boys (nothing wrong with them but I don't want to be one).

40 Such things we believe, without knowing we believe them, by the time we turn fourteen.