

Adolescence

On going through it in middle age

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The following is an excerpt from Inside Out: Confessions of a Woman Caught in the Act of Becoming, a collection of essays about my transition from living as a man to living as a woman. This essay focuses on my first summer living as myself, when I was caught up in the flush of loss—I had just moved out of the house where I had lived with my wife and three children—and growth.

Like a Dior fashion spread mutated by Robert Mapplethorpe, the tangle of sheer lemon fabric and not-quite-female flesh writhed in the mirror, struggling to separate flesh from fabric without disturbing the brown curtain that concealed it from the high-end consignment browsers on the other side. The writhing figure, of course, was mine, although a version of me I had never seen before. That was the point. The need to see what I could be was what had driven me to wrestle the demons of fashion in the dim glamour of a battered, forty-watt deco lamp. Not only did I need clothes—living full-time as a woman presented a whole different dressing challenge than doing three-hour stints a few days a week—but I also needed to stare at myself in the mirror, to learn (as we say in the basement of the fashion world) what was and wasn't me.

I was particularly drawn to dresses, the sine qua non of forbidden female outerwear. The man in a dress is a staple sight gag in our culture, and my wife scared herself and the children by conjuring the image of me walking in broad daylight in one. Dresses are designed to follow and flatter the specifics of the female form, to separate the girls from the boys; if I could look good in a dress, I would surely have managed to land at least one feminized foot in the Promised Land. Of course, many women, including most of my friends, consider liberation from dresses one of the advantages of adulthood. But I had never been forced to wear dresses as a child, and now, in my middle-aged adolescence, dresses were the stuff of magic, transforming me instantly into housewife or sophisticate, businesswoman

or bohemian, flirty college girl or asexual matron, upscale theater-goer or dressed-down earth mother.

The lemon dress was the gem of my morning's discoveries, an honest-to-god evening gown whose sweeping, simple lines would emphasize my slight figure. It had one normal and one spaghetti strap, an asymmetry that added flair to its classic severity. I had never wanted any dress more. Unfortunately, as I pulled it over my head, I realized that it was a size, or maybe two, too small. I twisted and turned and yanked to get it down over my tiny but suddenly too large breasts, ignoring the pain that shot through the tender nipples. It took a long time, but I managed it, and was rewarded by a vision of myself as ... well, someone else, a distinctly grown-up woman of poise and the sort of existential ease that is the birthright of nineteen-thirties movie stars and anyone else who manages to squeeze herself into a gown like that. For all her ease, though, the woman did have one little problem: an unzipped zipper, agape under the left arm. I pulled, I wrenched, but the zipper wouldn't budge. I lowered my arm; perhaps it wouldn't matter that the gown was open on one side. But no, the opening was wide enough for my left breast to slip out. The problem, I realized, was the breadth of my chest. I briefly considered surgery. If a couple of ribs were removed, the dress would fit, wouldn't it? Then I noticed how hard it was to inhale, even with the zipper open. There was no doubt about it. The dress was too small, or, rather, I was too large.

The too beautiful, too small dress was, if not a judgment from God, an externalization of my ill-fitting body image. The dress wasn't me, and that fact reflected some profound existential failure. Old Hollywood movies phrase this confusion of essence and appearance perfectly. "That dress is so *becoming* on you," one woman, always a distant second in looks and personality, gushes over the star. *Becoming* was exactly what I was looking for in these one-dollar designer clearance bins: clothes that would help me become.

As I contemplated my mismatched reflection—the sleek lemon lines on my right side, the gash of pale, hair-flecked flesh on my

left—it was obvious that I wasn't becoming anything but sweaty, short of breath, and late for a therapy session I was clearly going to need. With a martyred sigh—Saint Joy, patron saint of dreams that die in bargain basements—I grasped the hem of my ideal of feminine beauty and hoisted it over my head. Unfortunately, the dress was even more reluctant to come off than it had been to go on. I managed to squeeze one arm through a strap, but that didn't help—now it too was trapped inside the dress. There were people right on the other side of the curtain, a male customer and a woman whose voice I recognized—one of the salespeople. I thought of asking the saleswoman to help me out of my sophisticated straightjacket, but a glimpse of my exposed underwear—frayed, pink and not looking at all the way panties should on a woman's body—convinced me otherwise. There are some battles a transsexual has to fight alone. I worked my trapped arm back up through the strap. The fabric was thin; I could rip it a little, just enough to free myself—but I couldn't bear to destroy something that so beautifully realized the femininity of smaller, more authentic women. I considered buying the dress—it was only a dollar—and wearing it out of the store, then thought the better of walking through town with my left breast exposed.

No matter how painful or humiliating it was, the figure in the mirror wouldn't let go of the ideal of femininity the lemon dress promised it could be. No doubt about it: She was me.

Growing up as a boy who hated being a boy, who hated being visible at all, clothes had descended on me from above—from my mother, to be precise, who had to force me into them, and would ask, futilely, over and over, whether I liked them, when it should have been obvious that I was doing my best not to look at them at all. Whatever they were, however they fit or didn't, they were not me; they were aspects of the interminable not-me my body made me.

My mother was disappointed but not surprised. That's the way boys are about clothes.

I surrendered my exterior completely. My mother could dress me, the male world could claim me as one of its own, anyone who met me could make what he would of me. My body was a movie screen. When no one was projecting the boy he saw onto it, it was nothing but blank white space.

It's hard for children to achieve that level of surrender. To maintain my male façade, I had to teach myself to resist the childish impulses that zigzagged through me like lightning. I envied boys who would just do things, burst into laughter or tears, tear off down the street, grab toys from each other, throw themselves into mothers' arms and throw temper tantrums when they got there, dance with inexplicable delight, engage, as if by telepathic consent, in swirling, chaotic games whose rules and rhythms I could never follow. By the time I had figured out what game they were playing, the game had flowed into something else. I taught myself to imitate their spontaneity and their joy—but never to let myself experience them. Such impulses would express me, the real me; like the zipper on the lemon dress they would expose to the world the gender-twisted thing I was.

I got so good at self-suppression that I stopped feeling impulses at all. As the fountain of desire and invention that constantly overflowed in other children trickled to a halt in me, I not only had to teach myself to act like a boy, I had to teach myself to act like a child. How did other kids do it? I would ask myself, playing the day's interactions over as I lay in bed, breaking them down the way coaches analyze films of opponents' games, critiquing every way in which my performance as a child had been lacking. But no matter how carefully I analyzed, the next day I was just as awkward. While I sat stiffly observing on the edges, or threw myself with the fabricated spontaneity into their midst, other boys felt and acted on their feelings, without forethought or reflection. They were real children. I was—something else, something hollow, a façade not just of boyhood but of humanity.

Decades later, I realized what I had done to myself—or rather,

what living in fear of being myself had done to me. We become who we are by bursting out, leaping the track of convention and forcing our unruly selves on the world. I never did that becoming, so now, as I told one of my friends, I was literally making myself up as I went along, practicing the impulsiveness I'd suppressed, descending the narrow consignment store stairs to hunt for one-dollar clothes in the basement. I would paw through every bin, seizing on dresses, skirts, and blouses like a bear scooping fish from a stream. With a heap of clothes overflowing my arms, I would push behind the curtain of the dressing room to face the dim, hermaphroditic reflection in the mirror. Too recent to recognize, too transitional to embrace, this was me, the real me, the me stripped of the magic of feminine fabric.

A few months before, the sight of my body would reduce me to tears. Now a different body faced me, softened, slightly narrowed at the waist and slightly swollen at the breast. Dark curls dangled above my shoulders. Hints of woman were visible through—no, in—the skin I had always hated. Behind the curtain that separated me from the world of real women, I would pull clothes on and off in a guilty frenzy. I was getting away with something, many things—not only clothes that were, as they say, a steal, but also with the impulsive freedom I had been determined never to taste, freedom to buy clothes I wanted, freedom to want, freedom to imagine myself wanted, freedom to imagine in the mirror a figure I could recognize as mine.

Impulse, of course, is not a very careful shopper. I bought a sheer negligee I mistook for an evening gown, a marvelously textured blouse whose cut made my shoulders look even broader than they were, a flower-sprinkled velour dress that qualified me as Victorian furniture. Fatally attracted to every black skirt I saw—black is inherently sophisticated, I thought, and skirts imply a waistline and hips—I soon amassed a monochromatic collection whose individual items I couldn't even tell apart. But the mistakes didn't bother me; in a way, I was proud of them. For the first time in my life, I could afford to make mistakes. No one ever had to see me in those clothes;

even the worst buys made me look like a hopelessly frumpy woman rather than a guy; and at one dollar a piece, I could see my failures as part of the price I paid for my finds. The sophisticated little black dress with a double row of big white buttons, the long leather skirt, the v-neck black sweater that came as close as anything could to making me look like a French girl—I recounted each purchase to my long-distance friends, consciously ignoring their boredom in the name of showing them that slowly, decades late, the girl who had never seen herself in the mirror was growing toward them.

My impulses became stronger, more frequent, clearer. One day, after hearing that a friend was having her hair cut, I found myself making an appointment at a hair salon, telling the hairdresser that I wanted to try a style that would push me beyond androgyny. My lifelong fears screamed dire warnings about my wife's, my children's, the world's revulsion at an unmistakably feminine me. My junior-high-school-girl ego cringed at the thought of trying to look cute and failing. Impulse whispered that it was time, that some buried piece of me would emerge beneath the stylist's shears.

Impulse was right. The cut was exactly what the woman I was growing into needed, a mass of curls that made a virtue of my natural inclination toward chaotic couture. But no sooner had my hair style come into focus than my gray hair, which I'd cringed over since a woman asked me during intermission at a local play whether I was the mother of one of the middle-aged actors, became intolerable. For weeks I had put off doing anything about it, brushing my hair this way and that, plucking white strands, worried that coloring my hair—the obvious solution, my friends assured me—would estrange me from my children. But a few days after my haircut, as I passed a cosmetology school that a friend had recommended, I found myself walking in, making an appointment, and signing a release holding the student and school harmless for any damage done to my hair, my self-esteem, or my standing in the community. Blond, red, orange—what color would I walk out with? For two hours, my heart pounded in terror. Impulse laughed at me. When the rinse and dry

were finished and a little product massaged into my scalp, my hair was all one color—a slightly richer version of what it had been before I went in.

My wife said nothing. My older daughter said it was too dark. My reflection gave me a self-satisfied smile through a tumble of dark brown curls.

There are a lot of downsides to going through adolescence in middle age. The odds of being the only one you know with acne are greatly increased, as are the odds of making fashion mistakes uncamouflaged by the glow of youth or a bevy of equally ill-acquainted friends. The rejection fantasies that accompany the hormone surges and visible bodily changes of adolescence are more likely to come true the second time around. The first time, you are surrounded by peers surging and swelling and worrying that no one will ever love them. The second time, you find yourself envying the relative ease and sophistication of junior high school girls.

But transition wasn't my first brush with belated adolescence. In my early thirties, adolescence arrived at my doorstep in bulk. On one of her biannual visits, my mother brought me a huge green plastic trash bag filled with remains of the life I'd left when I left home. I didn't open it until she left. It gave me an illicit thrill of excitement that I didn't want her to see, as though the bag were a polyurethane version of Proust's madeleine and my youth would come rushing back to me as soon as I undid the twist tie.

There they were, all the notebooks and papers I had amassed during my turbulent teens. I was staring at my origins as a poet. From the smell that rose from the notebooks, some of them carried for months in sweaty hip pockets, it seemed my adolescence had provided fertile ground for mold; alas, it hadn't proven nearly so fertile for poetry. The writing in the notebooks, which had seemed dazzling to me at the time, was—adolescent. I saw flashes I hadn't known how to revise into poems, and ponderously self-conscious revisions in which I smothered any poetic flash. For a teen who had

done as many drugs as I had, there was distressingly little imagination.

Like an archaeologist who has discovered an unusually banal civilization in what had seemed a promising dig, I forced myself to keep going, unwilling to believe I had left nothing of value behind. In one notebook I stumbled on a series of letters from a girl I hadn't thought of in years. She'd been a freshman when I was a sophomore. She was physically very young, with a small, slender body that seemed to recede under her protective curtain of fine brown hair. She had flattered and terrified me with her assumption that, as the more advanced poet, I would understand her opaque, highly compressed utterances and respond in kind. I did the best I could, falling back on condescension when her attempts to engage me in abstruse discussions of poetry and life threatened to expose the fact that I had no idea what she was talking about. She had talent, I thought, but was very young, unlike me, who had talent and was very advanced. Reading the exchange of letters showed me that I was wrong on both counts. At thirteen or fourteen, she had been a brilliant young poet—a brilliance so far beyond my crafted but pedestrian work that I, like a teenage Thomas Wentworth Higginson confronting an even younger Emily Dickinson, had utterly failed to recognize that she was by far the better poet. The letters also revealed something else I had been too obtuse to see: She had been in love with me, and she had taken my inability to respond to what she said as deliberate rejection.

Gender dysphoria or no, I had done a marvelous job of acting like a real teenaged boy, buoying my narcissism with sexist dismissal when a girl's talent threatened my self-importance.

I wished I could speak to her—not the woman she had become, but the girl who had tried so hard to find in me a kindred spirit. I'm ready now, I wanted to tell her. Your letters arrived at last. I'm finally old enough to understand what you were saying. For a moment, I wondered if, unbeknownst to myself, I had been in love with her. Then I wondered if I still was. But I had as little romantic interest in

her as ever. I was grieving for the loss of her friendship, a friendship that gender would have prevented us from having even had I been ready for it.

I peered through the loft's small, dusty window, staring down at the people on the street, people I would also never know, overcome by longing to be down there with them, strolling through the summer dusk in a different body, a different life, a life I had turned away from as I had turned away from the girl who sent me those letters.

I piled the notebooks back into the bag and twisted the tie around its neck. A few days later, I hauled my adolescence to a dumpster, heaved it in and walked away, muttering, "Thank God I'm done with that."

Adolescence must have snickered. It wasn't moldering in a dumpster. It was still sauntering toward me, not a discarded past at all but a future I refused to imagine.

Before hormones, before laser treatments, before friends had given me clothes to wear, my second adolescence began with walking. At night, after I'd put the youngest children to bed, or during the day, when they were at school, I would walk alone down the rutted road. When I walked, my body seemed unimportant, ancillary to the consciousness that bobbed sixty or so inches above my feet. My isolation, my difference, seemed as natural as that of anyone who walked alone.

The pines, the stones, the stars, the flashes of goldfinch and bluebird, cardinal and oriole, the swell and sink of land whose hills had been Everests in Cretaceous times, the crunch of snow and the suck of mud—the world didn't care who or what was walking through it. The gender on which so much of life seemed to depend meant nothing here.

Nothing, that is, to anyone but me. On that empty strip of road, I first practiced swinging my hips the way the trans-advice websites I surfed assured me that men who wanted to walk like women should. When normal thirteen- and fourteen-year-old girls learn to walk

like women, they translate the ease and sprawl of childhood into the self-assured sway of maturity. I was trying to translate decades of self-repression into a gait that had no relation to my hipless, waistless, breastless body. The birds, the squirrels, the trees didn't practice their motions; they simply moved according to their natures. But I had no nature. Neither my genes nor my instincts nor the laws of physics could teach me to be who I was. I had to learn it from the outside in, braving the gauntlet of silent jeers I couldn't help but imagine in the windy silence of road and sky and tree. Sometimes, their silence entered me, the imaginary jeers died down, and my hips fell into harmony with the ineluctable template of femininity that had set me walking. For two steps, or three, sometimes for a whole stretch of road, I would feel—who knows if it was true?—that I was walking like a woman.

When, in Fall 2006, I began walking the streets of New York as myself, a friend who had grown up in the city gave me a talking-to. "Be careful," she said. "You walk as a woman now." Masked by masculinity, I had rarely walked with fear. I felt invisible, ignored by a world that I knew couldn't really see me. But I soon learned what my friend meant. It was a cold October night. I hadn't yet figured out how to change safely from male to female, so I walked east after work to a large movie theater. By sheer luck, I arrived between showings. The concession area outside the bathrooms was deserted. A bored salesgirl eyed me idly as I walked with what seemed to me transparently false nonchalance to the men's room. I started shaking the minute I'd locked myself into a stall. I knew I was making a terrible mistake, a mistake that could cost me my job, my reputation, the livelihood that was all that stood between my family and homelessness. Being trans is not against the law, but the law is often against being trans, and trans people are routinely harassed, humiliated, even beaten by police who consider patrolling gender norms part of their beat. If I was arrested and my employer found out, it wouldn't matter whether I was charged. I would stand convicted of the crime of publicly being myself.

It's hard to get dressed and put on makeup when you are imagining a SWAT team preparing to blow open the door of your bathroom stall. It's even harder when the stall next to you is suddenly occupied by a man who is clearly not there to change genders. The more I hurried the longer it took. Finally, though, I managed to button what needed to be buttoned, smear still-unfamiliar cosmetics across the regions my tiny compact mirror suggested needed to be covered, and brush out my still-short hair. It was time to open the door. I waited until the bathroom sounded empty, slid open the latch and dashed in skirt and sweater into the hallway shared by both the men's and women's rooms. The popcorn girl eyed me coldly as I walked past; I wondered if she noticed that I was only swinging my hips every fourth or fifth step. I made it up the stairs and out the door without being screamed at, arrested, or beaten. I was on the street—I was safe.

But as I walked along, clutching my thin hand-me-down jacket tight against the wind, I didn't feel safe. The avenue was getting darker, the close-packed rows of shops giving way to housing projects. Some streetlights were out, some flickered. Shadows thickened, and the young men who moved in and out of them seemed predatory, hungry. When a homeless man asked me for money, I jumped. I fumbled some change out of my purse—"Thank you, honey," he said—and ducked into a doorway. One of my earrings had come loose, and my fingers were shaking too hard to screw it back on. There was no doubt about it. I was scared. But was I scared that I would be attacked because I looked like a woman, or because I looked like a man trying to look like a woman? The familiar fear—fear of being seen as transsexual—calmed me. The world and I were on the same terms after all. I tightened my earring and walked from the block of darkness toward a block of light.

When I left my home to live full-time as a woman, walking became my major activity. For my first week, I didn't walk alone. My friend Nancy had flown in the day I moved out. We walked and talked for hours, rambling and ruminating about teaching and

transition and girls'-school novels and good shoes and the ethics of flowers. The day before Nancy left, I was seized with an impulse to walk down the nearby college town's main street in a dress. When my wife contemplated my moving out to live as myself, that was the specter she conjured to give shape to the horror of transition: the fact that I would be seen walking down the main street in a dress. "You *want* people who know you to see you in a dress?" my wife had asked me incredulously. It seemed like a reasonable question at the time. I had never seen myself in a mirror, never put on makeup; my face still felt naked from having recently been shaved. But once I began walking the streets of New York in mascara, lipstick, and skirts, my wife's fears began to diverge from mine. The more eyes passed over me without a second glance, the more smiles I exchanged with women on the way into or out of a restroom, the less I felt like an object of derision and the more I felt like—myself. Many women, most women, live at least part of their lives compensating for deficiencies of face and figure. I didn't have to look beautiful or sexy or young to relieve my gender dysphoria; I just had to walk in the world as a woman.

The day before Nancy left, I put on heels and the fanciest dress I owned. It was a flawless late June afternoon. Day was spilling into evening, summer stretching into a boundless dazzle of possibility, transforming the tired, after-work crowd into leisurely flâneurs. Everyone was strolling or shopping or licking enormous ice cream cones.

It didn't bother me at all that I was the only one on that mile-long street in high heels and a dress. Grinning like a delinquent intoxicated by her first shoplifted cosmetics, I made Nancy walk all the way down the street and all the way back. When the scene my wife had dreaded was over, I am happy to report, everyone had survived without a scratch.

After my friend left, I repeated that walk, albeit in more casual clothes, again and again. The path was the same, and I was almost always the most over-dressed person in the area, but the experience

was utterly different. Reflected in Nancy's eyes, I felt my new self unfurling. Now I had no one to smile at, no one to reflect my identity back. The fact that I attracted no attention slipped from being a point of pride to a form of loneliness. People who had known me for years would pass without a flicker of recognition, and I would let them pass, trying unsuccessfully to take their obliviousness as an identity-affirming form of success. As a woman, I had no friends here. By becoming myself, I had traded one form of invisibility for another, but now the person who was looked past and looked through was not a persona. It was the closest I had ever come to being me.

My solitude was like an emotional echo chamber. It reverberated with griefs and longings, anguish and excitement I couldn't share with anyone. I was stunned by the intensity of my feelings. Did people, real people, feel *all* the time? Did they feel so much about everything? Feelings had always come to me singly, over great distances, arriving like dusty messengers exhausted by the effort of reaching the distant country in which I lived. Now there was no part of me that didn't feel.

I felt too much to read, too much to write, too much to do anything but feel. "How do people function with all these feelings?" I asked Nancy, in one of our daily phone calls. My roommate was away for three weeks, and on days when I didn't see my children, speaking to Nancy by cellphone was often my only human contact. She was sympathetic and amused and perhaps a little wistful over my belated entry into the normal flux of emotions. From a thousand miles away, she was watching me fall to earth.

I started to blank my mind while I walked, to let go of everything but perception and feeling, to trust the waves of my own emotion. My body moved, the world moved, sights and sounds and colors and smells and textures surrounded, entered, and passed through me, mixing with the terror and loneliness and awe I finally, with some justification, could call "I." I began to be familiar with my new emotions. I got used to being overwhelmed with pain, I became

accustomed to moments when every brick on every building was saturated with significance, I realized that feelings are not natural catastrophes: They are how human beings give life to the world that's given life to us.

The yellow moon waxed visibly in the humid August night sky, ripening, as everything was ripening, in the final flush of summer. Insects chittered in the branches above my head. Their rhythmic rattle seemed to swell inside me as I headed toward the lighted windows of Café Evolution. It was Saturday night, jazz night, and as usual—this was my third time—I was done up for the occasion, even though I knew I would look silly in a hippie vegan café in the heart of this otherwise sleepy town.

I was wearing a new—from the one-dollar designer clearance bin—early-afternoon-blue chiffon skirt rimmed at the bottom with iridescent beads, and a plain black t-shirt. The shirt set off the West African turquoise necklace I had bought on the street in New York on my way to giving my first poetry reading as myself. A phone conversation with Nancy dissuaded me from topping the skirt with a new pink t-shirt—“Pink and *blue*?” she asked, exquisitely balancing horror and tact—and reluctantly, because I love wearing my newest clothes, I had settled for the safer combination, though I kept thinking that if Nancy could only see the way they looked together, she would bless my inner urgings.

But no one could object to black and blue.

Café Evolution—the name seemed chosen with me in mind—had become the closest thing I had to a favorite haunt. Resisting the urge to sit alone at a distant table, I would settle into a rocking chair, near the couch that was always occupied by one couple or another. They would look at me now and then, they would say hello or smile, and I would say hello or smile back, holding myself, I hoped, like a woman who knew what she was doing, who was so secure in herself and her appreciation of the music that she needed no one to sit with. I would sip my tea and cross my legs and close my eyes and

nod into crystalline musical spaces. For once, the time dilation that had accompanied my gender crisis was an advantage. No matter how complex the musical conversation became, I had the leisure to untangle it, to consider each line individually and in relation to each other. The moment I closed my eyes, it was all laid out before me: the swoops and self-reflexive spirals of improvisation, the prismatic shifts in harmonic coloration, the laughing, affectionate echoes of long-dead giants, the competition or concord—at best it was both—among the musicians.

Of course, my appreciations were always interrupted by thoughts of how I looked to the people sitting a few feet away from me. I told myself I looked like a woman who knew how to listen to jazz, or who loved jazz too much not to lose herself to it, and not like a woman who had dozed off, or was afflicted with a slight rhythmic tremor in her neck, or was pretending to lose herself in the music while in fact she calculated the impression her apparent absorption was making on those around her.

I told myself they weren't looking.

Sometimes I told myself I looked beautiful. With my eyes were closed, I could almost believe it.

The first two nights the jazz had centered on a slender young pianist whose eyes looked closed even when they were open. His hands would flutter as his blind fingers fell on keys he felt rather than saw. It was as though he were dreaming, or as though the music were dreaming him. One night he was anchoring a trio, with an earnest but plodding upright bass player and a drummer who crackled poly-rhythmically in the darkness beneath melody and harmony like the insects in the summer night. Once he teamed up with a saxophonist, a shy woman in her fifties with a Russian accent and a habit of looking off to the side, as though the café and the people in it were a backdrop for a not-too-interesting play, and she was looking into the shadowy wings, toward the reality behind the stage. That reality, for her, was music, and the fact that she always felt like she was spying on it from afar gave her solos an intense humility that sang through

every note of her tenor. She played with deep, sonorous emotion, in tones that summoned ghosts she clearly revered.

She was there tonight, but my pianist—that was the way I thought of him—wasn't. She was teamed instead with his opposite, a smiling gargoyle of a man, broad-chested, pot-bellied, shirt vee'd open to reveal a tuft of curly black hair, a virtuoso for whom every song was an occasion for whimsical and sometimes brilliant reconfiguration that left no room for emotion. He treated songs like decks of cards to be shuffled without regard to their lyric integrity, smiling at himself and nodding to the audience as though he expected us all to appreciate his subjection of music to his analytic imagination. The saxophonist's humility led her to respond to his lead as she had responded to his predecessor's, and gamely she followed him beyond feeling into splashes of sound that represented thought cleansed of emotion.

Though I found myself smiling at his audacity and invention, I was angry with him for what he had done to the music and I was angry with her for following him, for not realizing that while he had the greater technical facility, she was the greater musician. I sipped my tea and bobbed my head and smoothed my skirt impatiently. It seemed like I was witnessing a musical parody of heterosexual courtship, a woman warping herself around a self-delighting man, losing her own identity while bringing his into ever-sharper relief. Was anyone else angry at the way his solos drained the feeling, the very possibility of feeling, from hers? I wanted to tell the couple on the couch exactly how I felt, to lean toward the man sipping the wine he'd brought in a brown paper bag and explain at great length what I disliked about this musical relationship. When I was a teenage boy, nothing could stop me from detailing my opinions about music to anyone in the vicinity—a shame, since at the time I knew nothing about music. Now I was once more swelling with the helium of adolescent self-righteousness, but I remained silent, nodding with my eyes closed, putting my lips demurely to the paper cup now empty of tea.

It was lonely, sitting there. Half the tables were occupied by people who looked my age but were functionally much older. It had been decades since they had fretted about how and whether to cross their legs, or had fought the impulse to rush to the bathroom every few minutes to check their hair. The rest were occupied by twenty-somethings whispering or laughing together, the girls bathed in a glow of fertility that lent glamour to whatever they wore, the boys hulking, awkward, wondering how to make themselves felt. They hadn't yet learned that it didn't matter what they said or did; the girls tipped toward them like flowers toward the sun. The heliotropism of heterosexuality. Blossoming in the glow of the girls' attention, the boys became handsomer, more confident, vying to keep the girls smiling in their direction. I was too old to be that young and too young to be this old .

Midway into the second set, I had had enough. I stood, smoothed my skirt, and swayed as gracefully as I could between the close-set tables. No one paid any attention, but these days I always felt as though a spotlight were shining on me, picking out every flaw in my performance as a woman and ensuring a rapt audience for anything I did right. It was a level of self-absorption so intense that I often felt utterly drained, incapable of spending another moment in the unblinking, albeit indifferent, public eye. I read editorials into a woman tightening her lips as I walked past, I glowed like a small-town beauty pageant winner when a grizzled man with an adult son with Down syndrome glanced my way.

I wove my way among the tables—was everyone looking at me? was no one? which was worse?—to the restroom, avoided the mirror as I washed my hands, dropped a five-dollar bill in the musicians' box, and opened the door.

It was quiet outside. In the humid black air, even the isolated cars seemed hushed, rolling along the small main street. I turned away from them, toward a block overhung with enormous leafy branches. No streetlights there, no hushed cars, only the sound of my heels and the cicadas and crickets and insects I had no name

for, all in a frenzy to reproduce themselves in the last warm nights of summer. Things were growing in the darkness, gourds swelling, grass lengthening, flowers gathering strength for late-bursting buds, vines creeping upward and branches reaching down and roots stretching themselves a little further through the soil toward veins of underground water. I too was growing, swelling, gathering, stretching. Tricked by the hormones I took every morning, my fortysomething body had embarked on an adolescence that would continue into my fifties. My cheeks glowed like a young girl's, my waist—or what would be my waist if I had the proper hipbones—had thinned enough for me to be able to figure out where my skirts should sit, and after weeks of aches and stabbing pains, my breasts had visibly sprouted. In clingy t-shirts, they even cast a shadow. They were growing, though I could never catch them at it. For days, for weeks, I would notice nothing, and then the fall of a blouse or a bobble as I walked confirmed that they had expanded, fulfilling the potential that had slept in them for decades.

“You sparkle,” said an old friend. “You’re sparkling,” my therapist confirmed. “It’s like a layer of pain has fallen away,” said a rabbi who was seeing me for the first time after knowing me for years. “You’re beautiful,” my mother had said when she first saw me as myself. I couldn’t see it—I felt too awkward, too raw, too grief-stricken—but I knew what they meant.

I had seen that glow in my friend Robyn a couple of months after her surgery. I had just started taking progesterone and barely started laser, and my hair seemed like it would never grow out. I was a man, and she was a woman. She had always been charismatic, a natural leader in the trans community, but now there was something else about her, something that arrested and dazzled me, as though the lines of her face and form had leapt into focus. “I’m sorry,” I said, wanting to apologize for the unbegun person I had dragged into her presence. “Don’t,” she said. “I’m already living my life. You’re still trying to imagine that yours is possible.”

Light poured from her face. It was more than the sunlight slanting through the café windows, it was more than her heavy blond hair. After a night that had lasted decades, the sun was rising inside her.

That sun was also rising inside me, and though I couldn’t see it yet, I could feel it smoldering under the dark skin of the August night, where everything, it suddenly seemed, was like me: lonely, and growing, and determined to kindle new life before it died.