

POSTROAD



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Art

Rear View

Rhiannon Catherwood

If I've passed certain landmarks on the path between genders—a handful of “coming out” conversations, the first time I shakily stepped in front of a classroom as *Ms. Catherwood*, the day I gave away all my old clothes in a giant blue Tupperware bin—then my father has hit a few of his own—the first time he introduced me as his daughter, the day he suggested the re-spelling that would become my new name, the time he saw me dressed up and “you look nice” became “you look beautiful.”

The little things came more gradually. Pronouns weren't a milestone so much as they were a thousand million pebbles that made up the road itself, the long, gradual path on which he occasionally slipped backward in the grit. In most cases, he would slip back because he was *looking* back, reminiscing about a faraway past. In the same breath, he might gesture to me and tell someone, “She probably doesn't remember this, but he would draw pictures on index cards before he learned to write, and he'd flip through them to tell you a story.” It made my partner cringe, but I couldn't bring myself to feel too bothered. He was seventy-five years old, and he was trying. I didn't correct him about the pronouns, though I pointed out that I *did* remember the cards. I remembered stacks upon stacks full of stories sketched in graphite gray, arranged meticulously in my dresser drawers. I wondered what ever happened to them.

I also remembered the story he told at a dinner party I threw, when I learned he'd finally reached the end of that road. We listened as he explained to the table that “Ree was three, maybe four years old when she got her first big bike, so of course it had training wheels on it. When I saw she didn't need them anymore, I asked if she wanted me to take them off, but she wouldn't let me. She kept them on so long that one of them broke off and the other one—it never even touched the ground when she was riding—it was hanging by a thread, probably wouldn't have even held her up if she needed it to—but she still wouldn't let me take it off. You remember that honey?”

“I remember, Dad.”

I scanned the faces of my partner, my sister, her boyfriend, and our other guests, all nodding along to the steady rhythm of his words. None of them noticed what had just happened. If they had, they might have assumed I would be gratified. Instead, I felt something else, something harder to pin down, as it hit me that my father had just told a story about a little girl who never really existed, and the boy who *did* disappeared like a forgotten dream.

It wasn't the first time I'd had to confront the slow erasure of the person I was before my transition and try to reason out just how I felt about it. Some months before that dinner, I was invited to give a spotlight lecture about transsexuality to a Women's Studies course. When I was done, a student asked a simple question: "Is there anything you miss about being a man?"

The answer came automatically. I told her that of course there were things I missed. I missed being comfortable leaving the house without taking the time to put on makeup. I missed knowing I could go to a public place confident that I wouldn't be leered at by hungry looking men or harassed on the street or hit on by drunks. I missed not having to plan my movements at night to minimize the risk of assault. But these things were privileges that men had, not things inherent to being one. I told her that I couldn't say there was anything I missed about *being* a man because I'd never really been one to begin with—just a woman with a strange body and a strange life.

I walked out dwelling on what I'd just said. The answer was simple, easy. And like all simple and easy answers, it was deceptive. Entirely correct and complete bullshit all at once.

It's true of most transsexuals that we have always known and thus in some sense *have always been* the gender that we finally work up the courage to reveal to the world. A great deal of conventional trans rhetoric revolves around this duality of gendered selves, one true, one false. I can't say I entirely disagree. But I do wonder—what becomes of the self I left behind? Does its "falseness" render it valueless? A shell to be discarded once outgrown?

I know many have thought exactly that. Certain transwomen I know are annoyed at so much as seeing a piece of junk mail with an old name on it. Decades ago, most specialists treating transsexual patients recommended that after surgery, we pack up and hit the road. Find a new job, start a new life, make new friends in a new place where no one knows us. Some experts even advised we invent a new history, a new set of stories to tell the world, to ensure that the people in our lives knew that we were *always* ourselves, fearing that if they knew what we had been, it was all we would ever be. Sometimes, I was afraid of that, too.

On the drive home, I thought back to a dream I'd had around the time I transitioned. In it, I found myself at a funeral, not quite aware of who was in the casket—don't they say everyone in your dreams is *you* anyway? I came appropriately; I wore a black dress and brought white lilies and spoke in hushed tones, just like you're supposed to. People still stared and whispered as I approached the coffin.

The man in the box looked nothing like me—he bore no resemblance even to any earlier version of myself—and yet in whatever way we make sense of dreams while we are a part of them, I knew that he was me. Me

with a different face and a short haircut and a crappy black suit and tie, but me nonetheless. The sight of him made me furious—I didn't stop to think about why. I opened my purse, took out my foundation and applied it over his face. Next some eye-shadow—purple. Lengthening mascara—tricky to apply at this angle. A little blush here and there. Finally, lipstick. *There. That's a little more like it.*

I wondered if anyone would try to stop me.

The dream came not long after I transitioned, and I took it as an expression of my fear that despite my new identity, in the perception and memory of the people closest to me, I would remain as they saw me before. But the more time went by and the more my mind wandered back to it, I wondered if it was a sign of a deeper, unspoken anxiety. Remorse for the person I was burying, the dead man I'd sloughed off like snake skin. Because yes, I might have admitted to that student, there were things about it I liked.

I like that as soon as I was old enough to trade my bicycle for a car, I began my career in urban exploration, seeking out abandoned places, trekking through the husks of forgotten factories and haunted mental institutions. I would steal into an abandoned shopping mall—the doors not being locked in any relevant way—that had been colonized by the drug-addled and the homeless and decorated with graffiti. I like that I would decide once or twice a year on a moment's notice to just *go*—to slip the grip of my day to day world and drive as far and fast as I could, until everything holding me back sank below the horizon in my rear view mirror.

If I hadn't been born as I was, I'm not sure I would have done these things. Of course, on this matter, I'm sure of very little. I confessed wondering about it to my best friend once, asking, "What do you think I would have been like, if I'd been born with the right body?" She scanned me for a moment and concluded, "If it looked anything like the one you've got," she shook her head like a surgeon about to deliver the bad news, "you'd have been a complete bitch." I couldn't think of anything in particular to do with this information.

For all I know, she was right. I can't say with any certainty who I would have been or what I would have done if my life had been different, if the little girl in my dad's story had been manifest from the beginning. But one thing that seems likely is that I might not have felt that need to escape, to *move*, to set out on all those strange, solitary, Kerouesque trips and see what life was like outside the lines. I might have just been happy where I was, and that would have been a shame.

Already, those experiences almost seem as though they happened to someone else. They exist for me as disconnected moments I try to string together, images scrawled on index cards, stacked too high and ready to fall. But I do remember them.

I remember the need to be away from my home, away from my walls and my bed, away from everyone and everything I knew. I remember flying down a long interstate highway with nothing but my music and my thoughts, all that endless openness of the fields and the sky, and how they made me feel free. Sometimes, far out where there wasn't any traffic, I would stop on the shoulder and step out of my car, just to feel the pavement beneath the soles of my feet and that strange awareness that in one way or another, through enough twisting and turning, this road connected to every other road throughout the country and even beyond. It made the world seem very big and very small all at once.

I remember spending half the day writing in diners with a coffee cup at hand and a cigarette smoldering in the tray, and the other half in my car, maps and laptop riding in the passenger seat in case I got lost, a blanket in the back in case I got tired, a gun under the seat, just in case. I didn't think about my destination any farther than the next wi-fi hot-spot, which I mapped out at each stop, hopping from one electric island to the next.

I remember chatty waitresses. The gas station clerk I spoke with for an hour in Nebraska. The incredibly tall woman at the pool hall in Missouri (whom I would have sworn was a transsexual—she wasn't) who took me home and introduced me to her friends. By the following evening, we were wandering through Cuivre State Park, guided through the woods by the sprites and spirits who are easier to see on mushrooms. I remember the girl who needed a ride in Vermont, and the Jolly Rancher taste of her mouth and the way my goosebumps trailed in the wake of her caress, rising as though trying to follow her lifting fingertips.

I remember sleeping in my car in Walmart parking lots among a collection of truck drivers and other travelers. Climbing an adjacent hill, watching the expanse of asphalt where semi-trucks drifted like derelict ships lost at sea, swirling around each other in a slow churn, finding a place to rest. I remember the cold sound of the ocean under the silver sky and the smell of saltwater taffy drifting from the chattering boardwalk. I remember driving far enough up the steep slopes to find snow in the summer, and the way it looked like a bit of cloud had snagged and torn off while the rest of it sailed by. *Don't mind me. Just passing through.*

I do not mean to suggest that all this aimless wandering is somehow a quintessentially male experience that I wouldn't have had if I'd been born a cisgender woman. In fact, on some, but not all, such trips, I presented female. Rather, these are experiences that I might not have had if I had been born a cisgender *man* either. It was my transsexuality itself that drove me to drive. If it weren't a part of me, I might not be able to look back on so many memories of the road.

Of course, by conventional wisdom, transsexuals are not supposed to look back. We're not supposed to *want* to. We are supposed to wish we had been born properly, to lament our old lives and the normal childhoods we didn't have, detach our rear view mirrors and imagine a different image in their place. To be transsexual is to want not to be transsexual. And sometimes I do. I might have liked to join the Girl Scouts, to not be ashamed of liking dolls more than balls, to shop for a prom dress instead of a tuxedo. But if offered the chance to have those things in exchange for the things I experienced beyond the borders, out on the highway, driven by a need to escape, I wouldn't make the trade. Even if my old self was false, it was not valueless.

I don't know what it says about me that I value my life before transition, that I wouldn't swap it for a different one, a normal one, a correct one. I might like to think it means I'm more honest, more in touch with my own experience, but maybe not. Maybe it means that unlike other transwomen who are capable of riding into a new life without a past to hold them up, I'm just scared to take the training wheels off. Even if they don't touch the ground anymore.

All I know is at this moment, I am not willing to bury the man in the box. Because I was him, and without him, I wouldn't be me. Whatever that means. 