

Who I Am

BY PATRICK SKATER

In my own existence, there is no hesitation, no lack of understanding that would cause me to not know that I am alive, as much as the trees, the plants, or the dog that lies next to me, her chest falling and rising as her breath moves in and out of her warm body.

In my own existence, I am quite simply as real as I will ever be.

That I was born with incongruence between the gender of my brain and the gender of my body is of absolutely no consequence to the joy I feel as I walk with the dog through the trees, gazing at the new green of the plants.

That I was born in a quandary has had nothing to do with my happiness or lack thereof.

That other people have insisted on defining me has had everything to do with my happiness or lack thereof.

I always knew just exactly who I was and I was prepared to set the course of my life in a manner fitting. From the start, that course was interrupted at every turn. Every interruption damaged more than the one before. That I ultimately sustained a level of damage that would seem irreparable is yet to be seen.

I was born a male child enclosed in a female body. This became apparent to me at a young age. I knew who I was then exactly as I know now. I am quite sure I spoke of it. I lived it. The adults called me "tomboy." Good enough for me at five. In tomboy I heard only "boy," which meant something very right to me.

But I was also "girl". This was something I learned to endure, much like unfamiliar and particularly loud relatives on holidays, the dentist, teachers who did not like me, and uncomfortable clothes. A bright child, I learned about powerlessness, hidden danger, and secrets. The secrets were not all about me. Alcoholism, sexual misconduct, cruelty, and hypocrisy swirled around my neighborhood among the smiling faces and fresh baked pies. That my secret was other made no difference in the larger spectrum.

I made my world inside of myself and wore a mask like all the other masks. No matter how my gut wrenched and tore at the shape of my existence, I endured. Although I did not succeed the way many might have hoped, that I moved through the days unnoticed and grew older year after year, mingling at the birthday parties and

at football games, laughing and playing and seeming fairly ordinary, attests to some sort of success.

I had no language for self. Boys were boys; girls were girls; I was not, I knew that always, regardless of appearances. Given no option to flourish, I didn't.

When I began to menstruate, to grow breasts, to smell a horrible odor between my legs that I knew was not only unfamiliar but incorrect, I chose to rage rather than succumb. My rage was not discussed. Eventually, I was hospitalized and given fancy diagnoses, one after the other, each psychiatrist more brilliant than the one before. But though I clung to the concept of "crazy," gladdened for an explanation of my inability to know the beginnings and endings of me, I knew I never was, never truly fit amongst the ones who were. Even in crazy, I was the odd duck, and deeply ashamed that I was a failure in this as in all else.

College, marriage, a baby, jobs and new jobs, and life goes on no matter what. But in the night, after everyone else has long fallen asleep, I move through a darkened house and out the door to stand on the lawn and look up to the sky and think, "horribly wrong. Something is horribly wrong here."

I have no one to collaborate my truths. No brother willing to stand up and say, "I always wondered, or, it all makes sense because..." no mother or father alive to say, "I saw some things, I wondered..."

In truth, gender is completely assumed. People see signs of homosexuality or of emotional distress, hyperactivity, brilliance or delay, but gender is completely assumed. The body says boy or girl. There is no discussion, and absolutely everything is interpreted within a blindness so complete it seems a part of us as integral as taste or sight. When I see an apple and take a nice big bite, I do not question but eat absent-mindedly as I ponder greater things.

That those of us not born in an ordinary gender state are unable to convey our situation to others and in many cases for many years even to ourselves makes all the sense in the world. It is not a matter of sudden change, as many suppose: "He used to be a woman. She decided she wanted to be a man." It is a song sung in the deep dark woods. It is the gut-wrenching sobs of a terribly unhappy child cried alone under the covers and forgotten by dawn.

We all live mostly in secret places, alone. Some of us have to tell our secrets eventually in order to survive.

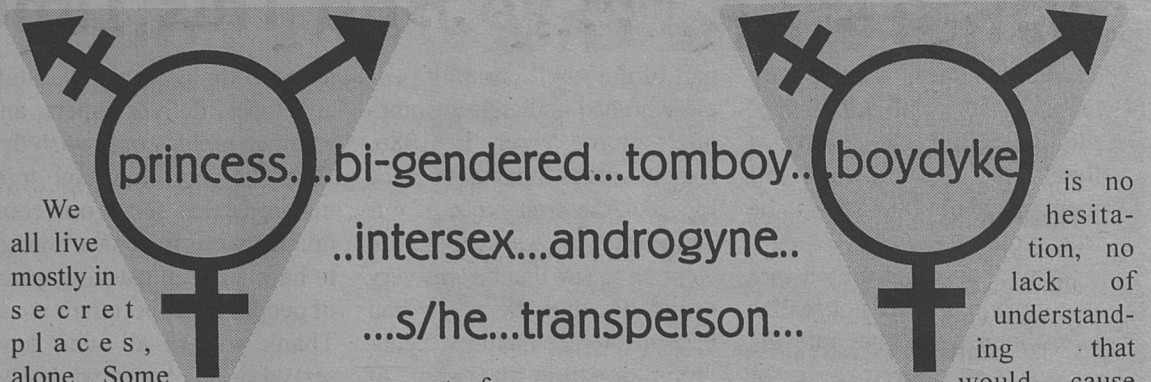
It's the telling that sets the world asunder. Secrets are expected. Truth is not.

When I lived in silence, I was the only one who suffered. When I began to speak, many began to suffer as well. As a result, my healing has always come in bits and pieces. It is difficult for me to understand why there is so much resistance in this world toward the suffering. I have spent much time in institutions and so my view has become unusual. The suffering does not scare me, and yet the secrets cause me to tremble and to want to run and run and never stop. Every day, when I leave my house and head out to get on with life, I am acutely aware that I am in a state most others find frightening. That my truth is far more frightening to them than my silence, my secrets, my existence as it was a few years ago, is astonishing to me. I am a man born female and that is somehow perverse. Misery is not. It is expected and accepted.

What I find most interesting is that those who know me now, newly, and see me in their gender perceptions an ordinary man, seem to enjoy me and respect me without thought. As I move through their lives without undue friction, I realize that it doesn't matter as much as I wish it did that they see me as an ordinary man. I know I would have a completely different reception if they knew my truths, and somehow that makes me almost as sad as I was when I lived in my own mind, far removed from everyone in so many ways, a secret boy in the body of girl, a secret boy all alone.

Of course I am grateful for the surgeries I have received, the way the hormones have changed my body into one that feels so much better for me to live in. Of course I am grateful that I can live in most respects as the male I have always been in my brain, my heart, my soul.

But there is something much larger at stake here in this life; perhaps because of my condition, I have come to be acutely aware of it. I am aware that differences are seen as much more powerful than they really are. That race, class, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, various physical and emotional conditions, differences in general, are somehow seen as the



most of a person or persons, and not as the truly small bit that they are.

This puts us all in danger of rejection, humiliation, oppression, and abuse. It causes us to move through life under a veil of fear rather than one of love and trust, causes us to approach each other with hesitation rather than with intent to embrace. This is huge. This is so much bigger than I or you. It is so much bigger than penises or lack thereof. As long as we define our world by our fear, we move ever closer to our own imminent demise as a species.

The secrets don't just kill people like myself. They kill even the greatest of us, the most powerful. They kill us all.

In my own existence, there

that I am alive as much as the trees, the plants, the dog. You cause my hesitation as I cause yours. It is our undoing.

When will we move past this place that stinks of death? This is what I ponder most. The fact that I am transsexual has only been a door for me. I see that now. In the opening of this door, I have seen far more than I might have wished to or chosen to if there had been any other way for me.

Now I wonder where your door is.

I wonder where you exist.

And I wonder where are "we?"

And where are "we?" ▼




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