

on reflection

Back then, I thought that if I tried hard enough—if I wore all the right clothes and curled my hair with that wand thing and painted my nails—I'd begin to see myself as a certain person and inevitably become her. But when I looked in the mirror, I saw someone I'd like to date, someone whose hand I'd like to hold and whose hair I'd want to brush my skin as she climbed on top of me, and now when I look back, I wonder whether I really thought I could hide, or if I had complete awareness that underneath it all, my six-year-old self stared back—hair wet from a warm shower and freshly cut short to match the red Power Ranger, beaming at my flat chest as I flexed my arms in different ways over and over. I wanted to look just like him—Jason, the red Power Ranger—with his black hair that never seemed to move when he beat up the Putties. I wanted to dress like him, move like him, protect people like him. At that time, I don't think it had even occurred to me that I *couldn't* be him—that would happen later. In those mirrors, though, I was him and every hero.

My preoccupation with fictional, dreamy and sometimes not-so-dreamy men who made it their life's mission to protect the people of a community, and often (most of the time) their capable but unwilling femme companions, began with Jason and extended well into adulthood. I might once have attributed this fascination to my natural inclination toward humanitarian pursuits or perhaps even a subconscious desire for recognition or praise, but now I know better.

What is it about age that situates us in a new vantage point? Sometimes I think it's as simple as the physical and physiological transformations of our brains that affects the capacity for self-awareness and reflexivity. Other times,

I think that as our own language grows, so too does our ability to investigate our own histories. But most times, I think that understanding depends so much on how we remember our own lives because *the way we think we are living our lives isn't the way we live them. The way we think we make decisions isn't how we make them*¹.

In those days, when my preoccupations began, my father still had his first shoe repair shop—the one he got right before he proposed to my mother—in Beverly Hills, which meant that on Saturdays we would visit him and I'd bring my Nikes there to clean after they got soiled all week from the playground at school. My father taught me how to do it once, and ever since, I'd kept every sneaker as close to pristine as I could. Sometimes it required only a wipe-down with a bit of soap and water. But other times I had to repaint them, which usually happened toward the end of my shoe's life when soap and water just wouldn't cut it anymore. Although I knew the end neared, I enjoyed very much the repainting process, especially after I finished one shoe and could compare it against the other to admire the restoration, the rescue.

My father also taught me to make leather wrist cuffs, which I loved to wear because they contributed to my boy-hero aesthetic. He came home wearing them one day and my eyes lit up; I had never seen leather like the one he used to make those cuffs—they looked as if forged from a sheet of metal. The following Saturday, after what seemed like forever in front of a cutting board and sewing machine, I walked out with my own pair. He had convinced me that if I wore them, I'd be able to grip everything with more strength. So the next Monday at school, I tested his assertion with a go at the monkey-bars, where I spent most of my time at recess and lunch, and found that I indeed could maintain my grasp of the bar for much longer than

¹Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh

I could without them, and, I was almost certain, I could do them faster, too.

That's how things were in those days. Osama would make up a fact, a harmless one, and I would believe it. Maybe I have him to thank for the conviction that I could be anything, anyone, that I wanted. Or maybe that's something to resent.

Maybe it's both.

How about this one?

My mother holds up another white puffy dress—the kind that looks like a miniature wedding gown—from a few feet inside of a cramped store, staggered and stacked ceiling to floor with children's formal wear, as I wait outside.

I give her the fuchi-face. She looks frustrated.

Because I don't want to seem at all interested in any of the clothing there, save for the suits, which I haven't yet realized could be worn by little girls, I refuse to go inside. Instead, I'd rather wait out front because next door is an equally colorful yet more appealing shop. In front of me, a mechanical frog swims in a plastic tub, which might actually be a cat litter box filled with water, and I watch as it bumps the other wind-up toys floating beside it over and over. I wonder when she'll stop asking.

Above the tub, knock-off Power Rangers toys hang on a metal grid-wall panel, and although they don't look as cool as the ones on TV, part of me wants to buy one anyway so that my collection covers all grounds. But, since my mom made it clear from the start that we'd come to the alley for my First Communion dress only, I don't bother to ask for one.

I've been going to catechism every Saturday morning for who knows how long now, but I already know all the stories and teachings because I go to a Lutheran school. I understand they're not the same, but they're the same enough that I often stop paying attention and let myself notice the carvings in the wood of the desks that I

sit in. Sometimes I get the one with the flower, sometimes the one that says J + S. It might look like it says Jesus, but I know it means something else.

Last week we got to practice how to receive the Eucharist, which meant I finally got to taste the host and to be honest, I wished I could take home a whole sleeve because they taste really good and I liked how they melted away on my tongue. My teacher said to make sure we didn't chew them though—that's not allowed because they've been consecrated. That bummed me out because I love to crunch. But imagine that! Crunching on the Body of Christ.

It's been about fifteen minutes now, according to my Red Ranger watch, and my mom still hasn't found a dress we both can agree on, which I already knew would happen. The lady patrolling the front of the store starts to sweep away a pile of fruit that someone just spilled, and my mouth automatically starts to water when I notice a huge piece of cucumber with chile on it on the pavement. Before I could wonder where they got the bag of fruit, I look across the street and see the rainbow umbrella with the cart half-hidden by a white pickup truck. Maybe when Mom's done, we can go get some.

Eventually she finds one and calls me into the store. I walk over, silent and disinterested, only to see, in her hand, a less puffy version of what looked to me like the same dress she showed me earlier.

Isn't this one so pretty? she asks through a huge smile. I shrug and tell her I don't want to wear a dress, and especially not that one. She explains, as we walk over to the full-size mirrors, that I have to wear one because I'll be in front of the whole mass and I have to look nice and do I want to be the only one who doesn't look nice. She does not look at all pleased when I tell her I don't want to do my First Communion if I have to wear that thing.

She holds the dress in front of my white knock-off Nike basketball jersey to get an impression of how it will

look and then asks me to take off my hat and let my hair down. From behind me, I hear her telling the shopkeeper in Spanish that she will need a size smaller and could she get it for her. By the time she brings it, my mother has already located and escorted me towards a fitting room, and has asked me to try on the dress in my size. I hesitate before I snatch the outfit from her and stomp into the room, which is just a curtain in the corner of the store.

Since I don't want to undress entirely, I keep my shorts on and take off the jersey. But in order to slip my arms into the sleeves, I have to take off my right wrist cuff because the velcro keeps snagging the fabric. As I rip it off, it makes a loud sound and I want to scream with it, but I don't.

When I step out, both my mother and the shopkeeper exclaim how beautiful I look and I'm not sure whether to say thank you or repeat my disdain for the dress. Instead, I say nothing and my mother walks me back to the full-size mirror. I keep my eyes down and when I'm face to face with the glass, I stare at my sneakers. She says I'll only have to wear it once, that it's just out of respect for the Church, that I'll never have to wear it again and will I just do this for her. Even though I didn't know it then, that I'd have to re-wear it for my first piano recital the next year despite a huge argument, I release a deep sigh and nod in agreement.

As she walks away, my eyes follow her and when I look back to the mirror, this time I find my own and I wonder if she sees what I see.

For the fourth day in a row, my mother kisses me on the cheek goodbye as she leaves for the office and reminds me: *You are my eyes*. As she walks out of my bedroom, I peek through groggy, half-closed eyelids in time to see her turn back once more, make the sign of the cross in the air, and kiss her thumb. The door clicks shut, which causes my sister to stir next to me in bed, and

as I look over to gauge whether or not she will wake up, I notice that her eyelashes have grown back a bit since two weeks ago when she found a pair of scissors and gave them a trim. Her bangs, which she also decided to snip, lie lopsided and disheveled on her forehead. How she didn't cut or poke her eye—or any part of her face for that matter—is a mystery to me, especially since she's four years old.

I want to laugh when I remember the photo of her that my father recently hung in the hallway. In it she stands on a chair and holds something she made out of construction paper at pre-school—her hair in pigtails, bangs in a jagged line. It's pasted on a large cut-out of a blue tie with a generic Father's Day wish written by her teacher, signed with my sister's handprint. She has on one of those shy smiles she does when she has to do something that makes her uncomfortable, like pose on picture day, or sing with her classmates. I'm not sure if she learned it from me or our brother, but it's a familiar one.

Even though I want to pull the covers over my head to shield the early morning sun and doze off again, the summer air is warmer than usual today and it's hard to fall back asleep. So instead, I peel myself out of bed and as I tiptoe out the door, I remember that I have yet to beat the next level on *Super Mario 64* and suddenly I'm not so bummed I didn't sleep more.

Before I can make it to the living room TV, I first have to go downstairs and pass through the kitchen, which means I have to say good morning to our new babysitter, Lucero. As I descend the staircase, I can smell chorizo con huevo and my stomach grumbles, but I know I won't have an appetite for at least two more hours, which works out fine because by then my brother and sister should be awake and we can all eat together.

Lucero doesn't know my stomach yet so as I walk through the kitchen and tell her *buenos días*, she asks *si quiero dos taquitos* and looks concerned when I decline. Even though I reassure her that I'll eat later, just like

yesterday, she seems dubious. But that's expected by now. My siblings and I are built pretty thin and everyone thinks we don't eat.

I'm about halfway through the second stage of the game, Whomp's Fortress, when I hear something fall and shatter in the kitchen sink. So I pause Mario, mid-jump, and scurry over to check on Lucero. We've had several live-in babysitter-housekeepers over the years who have tried to learn my mother's way of cooking and cleaning, so I feel nervous to find out what broke in case it means a strike against her.

A couple months ago, my parents let go of Angelita because, despite her best efforts, she would often break or damage things around the house. My mom would find marks on the white walls from her bumping into them with either the vacuum or the caddy full of cleaning supplies--and although I never really noticed those, I did notice when she broke the toaster-oven because that day I wanted to make a sandwich with the fresh bolillo bread that my mom had just bought from the panadería.

I had prepared all of the ingredients only to find the door wouldn't open, and then it had occurred to me that the night before, I kept getting distracted from my homework because I heard a bunch of noise coming from that general area. While I had thought she was cleaning the toaster, she was actually trying to fix it. So, when my mom came home that day, I had to relay the news that she had broken something else again. Out of all the mishaps, though, the last straw didn't come when she used my mom's white dish-drying towels to clean a spill on the floor during dinner, or when she burnt one of my school uniform shirts while ironing, but instead was when my mom came home to find my sister's make-over that happened on Angelita's watch.

As I walk into the kitchen, it turns out that a recycled glass cup had slipped out of Lucero's hands while she washed some dishes and I feel relieved to know she

neither cut herself nor broke anything of value. My mom likes to keep the containers that the pipián comes in so I'm glad it was that and not one of the crystal teacups that my grandmother gifted my parents for their wedding. Even though it has only been a few days since Lucero started this job, I get the impression that she cares in a way the rest of them didn't, -- and not only does it feel nice to be around someone like that, but I know my mom will be grateful.

Eventually my siblings wake up and come downstairs, and right away Lucero prepares the three of us each a plate. As we all eat together, I have a budding sense of responsibility that I haven't felt before. Sure, I've felt the impulse to protect them--that began the day I held each of them in the hospital. But responsibility? That's different.

Even after all these years that feeling hasn't left me and I wonder if that began with my mother's inaugural entrustment to me, or because of a sudden self-initiated awareness of common expectations of older siblings. *We seldom realize, for example, that our most private thoughts and emotions are not actually our own. For we think in terms of languages and images which we did not invent, but which were given to us by our society².*

Back then though, it didn't matter either way--all I knew was that I was my mother's eyes.

And, back then, that was enough.

It's easy to say that if it were up to me, this story would be linear because then cause and effect become relatively straightforward and it's easier to understand the relationship between and among events. But the reality is that it can't be told that way because stories are like webs--lives are like webs--and no matter what, as readers we are only getting a slice of it. Beside that, even if that wasn't true, I think in fragments, I understand in fragments, and

² Alan Watts

*following the “female aesthetic” will produce artworks that incorporate contradiction and non-linear movement into the heart of the text*³. Therefore, then, the assemblage of this story is inevitably messy and cyclical. But underneath all of it, beneath its fiction and its truths is a consciousness (Hello, it’s me, the narrator). And it’s a thinking one. Although it tries to sort through what’s real and what’s not, sometimes the lines blur because *when you’re living so intensely in your head there isn’t any difference between what you imagine and what actually takes place. Therefore, you’re both omnipotent and powerless*⁴.

Isn’t that the nature of a narrator anyway? We know things and yet we oftentimes have little control of what happens on the page. Like a subconscious thought made verbal, it just comes out.

I might have said at some point that I’ve never had a desire to tell stories. To be honest, I’m terrible at it; I mix up all the details and jump around and never quite get it right. But, I will admit I’m a great listener. In fact, I looked up my name when I was younger—it might have even been one of the first things I researched when my family got the internet in the nineties—and it turns out that’s what it means.

Maybe my name was some sort of prophecy and I was never even meant to tell stories anyway. Maybe what I’m doing is not even telling at all. Maybe, in the end, it really just is listening. Whichever it is, it doesn’t matter because right now I’m more concerned with the location of self in language. Or is it discovery?

Maybe it’s both.

The location of self in language implies that space for selfhood already exists in language while the discovery of self in language suggests that the self can only be understood *through* language. But what if the words don’t exist yet? Where does one find oneself then? Is it even

³ Rachel Blau DuPlessis

⁴ Chris Kraus

possible to create an identity without the words to create them with? Or is identity a narrative—stories and more stories? But even those have words. Maybe, then, identity is a feeling. But don't we understand emotions through language?

Do you understand what I'm saying now? About the circles?

All that I can be certain of is that *without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula*⁵, which means that I too am yet uncharted.

So let's continue.

You want to look nice, my mom tells me as I rifle through my younger sister's closet for something to wear to a day trip in Laguna Beach with my new boyfriend's family. As expected, she encourages that I wear a dress so that I make a good impression on his parents, even though I've already met them. Part of me wants to roll my eyes because I know what she really means and another part knows that I wouldn't be back at my parent's house looking for an outfit if I didn't, to some degree, think that she might be right.

Even though it's been a decade since junior high, when I would go shopping with my mom for the many school dances, I suddenly feel like I'm thirteen years old again looking for ways to grow into a proper adult. Since I've never been seriously interested in a man before, let alone had a boyfriend, my first instinct is to look toward my parents, and especially my mom, as an example. Sometimes I think it's because we look so much alike that I feel I have no choice in who I'll become. It will be three years from now that I'll shave my head of my waist-length hair in an effort to strip myself of that prognostication. Even then it will take two and a half more years after that to shave my head once more in an art film to make that

⁵ Ferdinand de Saussure

declaration public. That's the thing about queerness: it's a perpetual peeling away of expectations and guilt and shame and a life-long commitment toward affirmations and coming out and reinvention.

But for now, I'm in this closet sorting through outfits to hide all of that because I don't yet know my partner will love me anyway, almost a decade later, through my questions of what and who I am. I don't yet know that it's okay to be neither/nor *and* both/and. I don't have to choose and I can thank my father for telling me, from so very young, that I can be all of it. Because if I'm being honest with myself, *it's not that I thought I'd grow up to be a man / I just never thought I'd grow up to be a woman either*⁶, and even though maybe we both didn't realize the weight of his words back then, we understand it now.

Eventually I settle on a blue dress with stripes on the upper half. The next day he and his family tell me how beautiful I look, and because this time it was my choice, albeit out of insecurity, I say thank you and hide my disdain and embarrassment.

This will happen over and over for the next three years until at some point, I will begin to believe that I've finally done it: I'll have learned to curl my hair and paint my nails and wear tight dresses and heels and let myself be called by my birth name and as far as the world can see, I'll have become her.

But you can only bury yourself for so long before you start to suffocate.

Maybe it's the alcohol or maybe it was nostalgia, but like she used to do when I was three or four years old, my mother kisses me on the lips after I show her that I've found her wedding and engagement rings in the disarray of my parents' new apartment. It had been a long week—long few

⁶ Andrea Gibson

weeks actually—of moving everything that could fit from the two-story house they'd owned for thirty years into a two bedroom unit, and she had forgotten where she hid them during the move. This was no surprise on account of her lifelong suspicion of unfamiliar handy-people in her home and her equally long habit of hiding her valuables so well that she would lose track of them for a while.

On the other hand, with only a few clues, this was the first time I had found them myself, which may have contributed to her surprise. As a kid, though, usually I would ask her a handful of questions to jog her memory and eventually, like two detectives, we would find our way back to the hiding spot. Although I didn't like that it caused her stress to lose them in the first place, I felt proud that she could and would depend on me to help her—I felt important.

I knew you'd find them! You are my eyes!

As familiar as these words were, I'm not sure I am ready for them, not because I am tired of them or didn't want the responsibility anymore, but because I haven't heard them in thirteen years. Instead, *I don't know you anymore* took their place.

The first time she made that assertion, I was fourteen and had traded my teenage haute couture for baggy pants, sweatshirts, and Chuck Taylors. At the time, I had just begun attending an all-girls Catholic high school and I had recognized early on the opportunity to reinvent myself once more—this time to my own taste—especially because I knew no one there. The group of girls I befriended a couple weeks into my first year showed me acceptance in a way that only irreverent teenagers could. Like a mirror, they reflected my own values and desire for freedom, and the closer I got to myself—the person I wanted to be—the further my mother pushed me into being someone else. Eventually, I would meet my first girlfriend and by then, just like all the handy-people in her home, I became a stranger to my mother.

Now, while I stand in the kitchen with her and take in what she's said, I look toward my now-husband to see if he's noticed a shift in my demeanor as I don't want to bring attention to what this moment means to me yet. Like I'd hoped, he sits at the table smiling at the tender interaction between my mom and me, and I try to shake off the surprise of the sudden shift in our relationship.

Even though it's my mother's fifty-sixth birthday today, my father blasts disco, his music of choice for any occasion, through the tiny speakers of his phone, and when I ask him for the third time to let Mom select the music, he waves away my request and insists that I stop asking because she likes these songs, too. I look at my mom to check whether or not this is true, and she shrugs her shoulders and rolls her eyes in concession.

Although my siblings are also tired of listening to this music, no one budes to make a change, so when my father steps away from the kitchen counter to go dance, I grab his phone and look for a song my mother will enjoy. As Lauryn Hill sings the opening lines to "Killing Me Softly," my mother raises her glass of pomegranate juice and vodka and lets out a shriek that I know means she can't believe her ears.

Back when I was in eighth grade, my father had closed his shoe repair shop in Beverly Hills because the landlords doubled his rent, and instead of relocating, he decided to pursue financial services full-time, which he had until this point only been doing a few times a week. A few months later, once he started to make a significant income in his new career path, he wanted to retire my mother from her job at the law firm. I remember her reluctance and how she voiced her concern over leaving him with the full burden of earning enough for our family of five, and at the same time her delight at the prospect of staying home to raise her children. Not only would it bring her joy, but it would also mean no more strangers in our home.

After some time of my father's persistent encouragement she eventually agreed and they let Lucero go. But, of course, the house still required upkeep and that meant that now I could take on the responsibility of learning how to clean. Over time, we made a ritual of doing housework on Saturdays and to mark the start of each one, my mother would alternate between blasting The Fugees and the *Evita* soundtrack through the house on my father's stereo.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if my mother overrode his pressure to quit her job. Maybe we would still have our house. Maybe she would have been so preoccupied with work that she wouldn't have noticed the ways I changed. I could get lost in speculation. At the heart of it though, despite my resentment toward his stubbornness, I know he wanted to protect her. I don't blame him.

At the sound of the music change, my father throws up his hands in annoyance at having his dance session interrupted and reprimands me for having touched his phone. Although I've learned over the last couple years to ignore him when he gets angry, right now I am too overwhelmed to stay silent and I call him out on his highjacking of my mother's birthday gathering.

Like every time I stand up to him, I feel the familiar rush of blood to my face and sudden restlessness that accompanies my rising temper. And like every time this happens, I kick myself when I realize that despite my numerous attempts to emulate my mother, I am, whether innately or learned, just like my father.

As I stand opposite him, our mutual indignation face to face, I recognize all the freedom I've aspired to have and it hits me that even though he said I could be anything-- anyone-- I wanted, that does not mean I could ignore the implications of those choices. That does not mean I could disregard the responsibility of that freedom and of knowing who I may hurt in the process. But that's the nature

of disappointment—it implies there was an expectation. So why this desperation to break through from those boundaries? *A boundary is not that which something stops but, as Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing*⁷.

Even though in this moment I don't know it yet, one day the idea will strike me that maybe this whole time I haven't been trying to break through confines, but rather trying to recreate *the self-imposed equivalent of what social rites of passages traditionally have been for males: entrance ways into adulthood, into manhood in the sexual sense, into extra-familial love and work*⁸. Maybe I have been trying to mark *the need for individuation and autonomy in female terms: the need for definition achieved rather than accepted, chosen rather than enforced, made rather than born. Identity has become, for me and many women, the personal translation of emancipation: the political made personal, not suffered like a decree or a fate*⁹.

And even so, one day it will occur to me, despite all of this, maybe the circles I go in aren't even about locating an identity at all. Maybe, after all of this, I just wanted to protect the people I love.

Maybe it's both.

That's the thing about queerness: it's not only about the self—it's also about family, whether chosen or by blood.

But until then, I'll savor the now and shake off my anger. I will give my father a hug after our stare-down and we will laugh as we recognize simultaneously, for likely the hundredth time, our resemblance. In those moments, when we laugh together, I know he sees me and he knows I see him. In those moments, when we laugh together, I am grateful.

⁷ Martin Heidegger

⁸ Elisabeth Young-Bruehl

⁹ Elisabeth Young-Bruehl

As we both watch my mom sing along to her songs,
her cheeks flushed and pulled into a smile, I finally feel that
tonight, I am Cuqui's eyes again.
And tonight, that's enough.