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English Composition

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Gearhead

My head is filled with moving gears, controlling different parts of me. My language, my identity, my body working in sync. Components and parts working together to move something, create a force. A force fueled and ignited by my desires and beliefs. Refusing to be contained by a conservative society who thinks women only belong in a kitchen. Sometimes breaking down, only to be rebuilt better than before to handle the increase in stress and heat with ease. Sharing a language only fellow gear heads understand.

A language that is a mix of technical dialogue and street slang. Humor used to cover up the struggle when working on the vehicle becomes a huge challenge. Working with the guys in the shop is kinda like a really good episode of the Office. Constantly playfully taunting each other and trying to not hurt ourselves, a momentary distraction from a not always so fun job. Non gear heads are kept away from the shop, not for their safety but that they would be appalled by the verbiage that is thrown around. The words "dumbass" and "shit" fly out of my mouth and bounce off the walls at lighting speed. Not a space for the easily offended. A fun work environment created to cover up the hardship of the job. Vehicles are not easy to work on as a simple issue could be caused by 100

different things. Technical terms are used in the understanding and describing the complex systems used in vehicles. A non gearhead would complain or ignore the odd smell emitted from their vehicle. The gearhead wants to know why. I have a compulsive desire to fix and diagnose the vehicle. I enjoy fluently explaining my findings, that the motor has blown a head gasket due to a bad piston ring, allowing compressed air through the cylinder walls to pressurize the crankcase. Forcing oil and coolant past their seals. Creating a sweet smell of burning coolant as the fluid oozes out, dripping onto a hot metal manifold, sizzling.

I was born to be in the garage, working and fixing and definitely not giving a damn about getting my hands dirty. The language of the gearhead is in my blood. As a child I took great joy riding along in my fathers 1972 Chevelle, strapped in my car seat, the roar of the motor making me giggle in excitement. As most do, I outgrew riding in the backseat and found myself behind the wheel. But I was not your typical teen driving to parties or the mall. After getting my license my after school activity was sneaking my mother's Ford Mustang to the drag strip on ladies night. The drag strip offers a legal place to race, a place for gearheads to meet, smack talk, and then let their vehicles finish the conversation. The owner of the vehicle that runs the fastest $\frac{1}{4}$ mile is respected for their hard work and knowledge of pushing a motor to its limit. Though not said in words the vehicle's performance speaks for them. A wordless establishment of the pecking order. When I pull up, I know very well I haven't modified this car and am new to the scene, let alone the only female racer. The guys walk around like wolves, eyeing their competition. But I hold my ground, filled with excitement and itching to show them what

I got. They announce my name and before I know it the light turns green, I'm gone. Everyone in the window becomes a streak of light. Overcome by the sound of the motor revving out, my smile wide but not as wide as the gap I just put between my opponent and I as we speed down this stretch of road in the middle of a farm field.

Little did I realize how such a thing influences my identity. A lifestyle of constant problem solving, risk taking, and getting my hands dirty. This lifestyle is communicated to others when I speak and how I act. In high school I was often greeted with raised eyebrows whenever I went on an excited driven tangent about my latest weekend of working in the garage. Eyes bright, as I squealed about the newest part I installed. Saldy, my peers did not understand my excitement. Pushed to the side and labeled an oddity by my sports interested peers and fellow females who were more interested in what boys thought of them. This ground the gears in my head as I tried to figure out what I should do. My conversations began leaving out details about my garage filled weekends. Trying to fit in and learn their language, I became frustrated, constantly conflicted, and hateful towards my peers. I then isolated myself, for even when I played their game I could never win. My jokes were not funny, my knowledge was boring. I spoke without passion and my demeanor was closed off. The shop helped me diagnose my internal turmoil and remove that muffler. I took automotive shop classes in highschool and found a group that understood my language. In the shop I was free to swear (when the teacher wasn't listening), laugh at myself, learn, and make mistakes with my peers. I felt useful, making a motor run and learning about the inner workings of it. My peers in the shop became family, embracing our culture and a shared passion. My peers found me funny, helpful,

and full of knowledge in contrast to my non gear head peers who just never understood. My voice was loud, and I wanted everyone to know how much time and effort was spent on these machines, my identity truly empowered.

My language only continues to evolve. No longer spending my days drag racing behind the wheel of a Mustang, a young adult freshly graduated, I purchased a diesel truck that would take me from the lakes of Illinois, to the mountains of Utah, and back. What I drove was a way of communicating. My hard work hung on the front of it, a handmade custom grill, a thundering exhaust you'd have to be deaf to not hear, and a Rosie the Riveter decal proudly displayed on my back window that attracted fellow gear heads and strong females along my journey. Rolling our windows down on the highway, using sign language of a thumbs up and pointing at the window. The wind whipping my hair everywhere as we exchange shouting words out the windows: "WANNA RACE?", "I LOVE YOUR TRUCK!", and the good ole comment "IS THAT YOUR TRUCK OR YOUR BOYFRIENDS?". That comment always got responded with "ITS MINE" and a middle finger. Other comments leading to races against strangers initiated with a head nod or the honk of a horn, the terms "SEND IT", "HELL YEAH", and gibberish yelps of "YEE YEE" thrown out the windows of both vehicles as we speed up. Such un-academic terms coming out of the same mouths that could accurately explain the steps of tearing apart their prized vehicles piece by piece along with the applied sciences of horsepower and torque. Oh how people call us "garage monkeys" when we are truly geniuses disguised under all our dirt and grime.

My identity and knowledge were strengthened by the communities I attracted through my language. I met other strong females who valued the hard work put into building something over how they themselves looked or what silly boys thought of them. Other women in the car scene are hard to come by. So used to hanging with the guys, unrestricted burps, conversations consisting of "cool bro", "yeah", "I dont know". Commonly messy , their tools laying all over the place. I love the guys , still like brothers. But I was always so excited when other women got involved, our conversations usually full of details and interest. Us women gearheads were educated and hard working, you had to be in order to be seen in a mostly male dominated industry. Persevering through the initially doubtful looks of other male mechanics and constant questioning of your knowledge of cars. For the first time I found I could communicate with people of my gender, female peers in highschool always treated my lack of society defined femininity with distaste. At a large automotive trade show called SEMA I met a lovely group of women gearheads. High pitched giggles followed shrieks of laughter as we talked about mistakes we had made working in the garage, sharing funny stories, describing our builds, the vehicles we drive, and sharing our hardships and fighting inequality in the workplace. So different from the laughter that taunted my thoughts in highschool. Women who could rock heels and steel toed boots. Women I couldn't find in highschool and who I look up to for inspiration now as a college student. A community of gearheads I would have never found had I not embraced my language. I hope that my language will continue to attract the people who share a knack for working in the garage,

that those younger than me will become fluent in it and allow our paths to cross. To share knowledge, experiences, and our passion for all things with an engine.