

FARM USE

Joy Castro

After the divorce, my mother's first entrepreneurial effort fails. She opens a resale clothing shop and gives it a clever name: Encore. But in small-town West Virginia, people's used finery is a shabby thing. Her clientele has none of the chic-girl-down-on-her-luck wit the name deserves. Instead of Jean Rhys heroines, she attracts fat, bad-smelling women who slap their kids. There is nothing vintage to find. Her racks hold only the same clothes that once hung at Hill's and Heck's, the budget department stores. But they're dingier, with the smell of stale closets. At the counter, irritated women claim their things are worth more than my mother thinks.

Even in the black-and-white wedding photos, my mother's eyes have a touch of sleaze, a come-hither Joan Collins glint. My father's face is young, eager, shining; he looks toward her. She looks at the camera, chin lowered, one white satin toe pointed forward, eyes leveling their invitation.

Once she and some other stewardesses partied on a yacht with O. J. Simpson, she tells me when I'm nine. I think how much fun it would be: throwing footballs on the deck, eating cake all day.

His hands are furred black, his head bald and shiny, his gut a fat ball under graying T-shirts. He buys my brother Tonka trucks, buys me the radio I crave, buys my mother clothes and me a plum velvet blazer, very grown-up,

for wearing to the Kingdom Hall. "Won't it be nice," my mother purrs, "to use the child support your father sends just on school clothes and nice things, instead of bills?"

She's got us there. I'm sick of food stamps and government cheese and clothes discarded by strangers. Middle school is a bad time to be poor. And I'm tall for my age and pretty. At assemblies, eighteen-year-old brothers from other congregations flirt with me between sessions, ask my mother if they can take me out. They back away, apologizing, when they learn I'm twelve. I want a black leather clutch purse and combs for my hair.

But not this way. I argue with her, but things move quickly. He makes fourteen dollars an hour working construction. He's a respected brother; he's served at Bethel. A date is set. I'm to wear my plum velvet blazer. My brother, seven, is to give her away in the ceremony at our Kingdom Hall.

"Won't that be cute?" she says.

"No, not really," I say.

I cry in her room as she dresses, begging her not to do it, not to do it, but I have no evidence aside from the weird way he looks at us. She's patient for a while, going over the money he makes, the good reputation he has in his congregation—but finally she turns on me.

"I am just about fed up, you hear? Do you understand me? I've just about had it with your bellyaching." She swings the hairbrush in my face. "Why do you always want to ruin everything? Why? One good thing comes along, something that will actually make me happy for once, and you have to start your whining. As usual."

"He's not a good man." I'm still crying. She laughs angrily, throws the brush down on the bureau.

"What do you know about good men? You're twelve years old." Her voice is rich with disgust. "Do you think you know what a good man is? Do you?" She shakes me. "Well?" I just cry. "Do you think your father's a good man?" I look at the brown and green carpet.

"Yes."

She stares at me, then lets me loose with a final shake and turns her back. She steps into the silky fawn dress.

"Well, that just shows what you know." It's early in the day, but the wide straps of her bra are already gouging into her shoulders, scoring the red welts we see when she changes into her nightgown at night. She tosses her head, talks to the mirror. "You listen here. I'm getting married today, and there's nothing, absolutely nothing, that you can do about it. Do you hear me?"

"Yes."

"For your information, young lady, I am happy. You can be happy, too, or you can sit in the corner and snivel. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

When the elder asks, "Who gives this woman in marriage?" my brother, confused, must be prodded to speak. "I do," he says, worried, his eyes casting about to see if he's done the right thing.

The promised wealth does not materialize. Our stepfather visits numerous doctors until one agrees to sign the papers that say he has black lung. He has bullied our mother into selling her share of the store, into selling our house, into buying a trailer and moving hours away to a trailer park in a small town where we know no one.

The first disability check arrives. He stops working, stays home. He's constantly there, watching.

The money problems worsen. Our clothes are not replaced. We start the new school shabby, in castoffs. If we want clothes for school, he tells us, we can have a yard sale, sell our toys. Our mother urges us to comply; we'll feel so much better if we have some nice things.

All Saturday we sit in the yard. Strange kids pick up my horse models, my brother's Matchbox cars and Tonka trucks. One by one the items go, my plastic family of smoke-gray Arabians scattered.

We make almost a hundred dollars. It can buy new shoes for both of us, new pants for my brother, maybe a sweater for me.

My stepfather takes the stacks of ones. There will be no clothes. Everything that's ours, he says, is his. Get used to it.

We go to school ragged, mismatched, hopeless.

* * *

red
welts

hopeless

In rural areas, the occasional truck has Farm Use painted on its sides, a special dispensation to relieve the family farm of the expenses of a license, insurance.

In the back, sometimes, gaunt children ride, their arms wrapped tiredly around their knees, hunched amid bales of firewood or piles of scrap. They stare dead-eyed into the car behind.

My brother and I are those children. Our arms are wrapped around our knees. Our stepfather drives our Farm Use truck all over town: to the post office, the grocery. We sit in the back, staring at children belted safely into seats beside their parents. Sometimes, they're children from school, children we know. They point, talk to their parents excitedly, stare at us in fascination and disgust.

My ass is a moving target. I cannot pass the couch without a slap, a pinch, a long stroke that ends in squeezing. I walk as quickly, straightly, as invisibly as I can. "This girl of yours sure does love to wiggle, don't she, Mother?" he calls to the kitchen.

"Yes, she does," comes a deadened voice.

As time passes, the rules intensify. Work is a punishment; after school, we clear brush until we cannot see to sickle. We carry wood. Dig ditches for the gas lines. Food becomes a measured thing. Each mealtime, my stepfather dishes himself up from the pots. Then my mother may help herself to half of what he has taken. Then, while he watches, she can spoon half of what she's taken onto my plate. A portion half the size of mine goes to my brother. If my stepfather wants one peanut butter and jelly sandwich, my brother gets one-eighth. If she gives us more than my stepfather calculates is correct, he beats us with his belt.

We sit at dinner, our eyes on our plates. If we look our stepfather in the eye, ever, without being told to, we're beaten.

"How those little titties of yours doing?" he says to me. "They must be sprouting pretty good right about now."

If I do not keep eating, I'll have stomach pains later, or I'll have to eat dry the packets of Carnation Instant Breakfast we all get free in gym and

which the other girls leave lying in their lockers.

After class, I try to make my voice casual. "Are you going to eat that?" I say, pointing.

They look at each other, grinning. Then back at me, their eyes cool and repelled. "No. My god. Take it if you want it."

You're supposed to pour it in milk, but I have no milk. On the school bus, I sink down so no one can see me and rip the top back, pour the dry grains in my mouth, chew. I learn to like it.

"Must be like two puppies. Isn't that right, Mother?"

"Yes."

"Two puppies with brown noses."

Something in my throat is clogging, but I chew, eyes down, head down. My brother keeps eating. I feel my mother's gaze like a beam of heat in my hair.

Doing dishes, I palm a steak knife from the kitchen, easing the drawer silently open, sliding it into my pocket. In bed, I slide it under the side pillow, practice grabbing it in the dark, my hand darting to catch its handle fast as a rabbit's dash.

He finds it, lying beside me in the darkness as he has begun to do, breathing, his whole body stiff and heavy in the bed next to me. First, on top of the bedspread. Now under the sheets.

I think of nothing. I do not pray. I lie there in a stillness so extreme I might be dead, each nerve a wire humming with still terror.

"What's this?" he says. He sits up. "Turn that light on." I do. The room jumps to brightness, and I pull my arm back to my side. Only my eyes swerve to see the knife gripped in his hand.

"What you got this for, girly?"

I look at the window, the door, long for my mother to appear. "It's so isolated here. I get afraid. Of robbers, I mean." My voice is strangled, unbelievable.

"Is that so?" His grin leaks slowly across his mouth. It's a good game, cat and mouse. "Robbers."

"Yes. It's isolated here," I say.

"Well, no robbers are gonna get you. I'm here. I'm here to protect my little girl. You don't need this." He rises and moves around the bed to stand above me. "We don't want you cutting yourself by accident, do we? A sharp knife like this?" He holds the blade in my face. I push my head back into the pillow.

"No, sir," I whisper.

"Then I'll just take this back to the kitchen." Quick as a fox, his free hand reaches out and flips back the blankets, unzips my quilted pink nightgown, sternum to crotch, flips the fabric open. He stares down at me, my breasts, my hipbones, my white underwear. His eyes glitter. He grins down for a minute.

"So cover yourself up," he says. My hands fly to my waist, but the zipper snags, sticks, jerks upward. "Don't be so modest," he laughs. "Fathers have a right to see their daughters. It's natural." The corners of the room are thick with shadow. "And what am I?"

"My spiritual father," I whisper. I am a wax doll, empty, pliant, a cunning image of the girl who used to live here.

"That's right." The lamp clicks. The darkness becomes deeper darkness. "No more knives. You hear?"

"Yes, sir."

His steps shake the trailer as he moves down the hall.

The way to make my stepfather a pie is this. First, you make the crust, the light, flaking, curling crust he requires every day. My mother does this with her family recipe and sets it aside. I meet her at the table in the yard, each of us holding a small knife.

Then you peel the apples—the small, sweet ones, the kind he likes, I don't know their names, I'm not allowed in the grocery store—and then you cut them in half, top to bottom, straight through the center. Then you cut the halves in half. Then you scoop the core out with the knife, following the lines in the apple's pale meat. Then you slice the cored quarters. The slices will go into the crust, the dish will go into the oven, two pieces, hot, will go into their bowls, and his will get a scoop of Breyer's vanilla ice cream. Many times he tells us it's the best ice cream, as BMW is

the best motorbike and Nikon is the best camera. Both of which he has. "Bavarian Motor Works," he likes to bellow, apropos of nothing.

My brother and I do not eat pie. It is a punishment. "Five desserts!" our stepfather yells when we err, leaping triumphantly to his feet to make the little marks, //, on the sheet pinned to the wall for that purpose. When I run away, I am up to minus seventy-six desserts. We never get to zero. When we get close, he's more watchful. He loves to let us get to two or three.

It's fall. He's inside watching television. My mother and I sit in the yard, peeling, coring, slicing. The glossy apples disappear under our knives, emerge as neat pale slivers lying flat in the dish. I feel the slight resistance of the flesh, then the final quick *think* as blade hits board.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," she says in a low smothered voice. I carve a red curling spiral away from the flesh. She glances at me, sighs noisily. "I just don't know what I'm going to do."

"What about?"

"About him."

I think she's going to talk about running again. I'm sick of running, sick of waking up in the motel bed to hear her whispering into the phone, promising, apologizing, giving him directions. I'm sick of the pains in my stomach when we head back east again. Maybe she's starting to plan, I think. But we have no car to run in now. He sold it after the last time. We're ten miles outside a little town in rural West Virginia. We know no one but Witnesses.

And we've been through that, spent nights at elders' houses, the blood drying on her lip, her eye blacked, my brother bruised and shaking, the two of us huddled silent on a strange couch. They send us home. It's a family situation, a private matter. They acknowledge the rule my stepfather holds over her like a swinging blade: Except in cases of adultery, a wife cannot divorce her husband. It's a sin. We go back.

But leaving isn't on her mind.

"I don't know what it's going to take." My quarters fall into clean fans of slices, which I gather and drop in the dish.

"What what's going to take?"

"What it's going to take to satisfy him."

My knife steadies itself against the board. "Meaning what?"

"He's never satisfied." Her voice drops to a whisper. "Nothing I do." She pushes a long lock of gray back from her face. All the curl's fallen out of it since he's made her grow it out. "Three, four times a day he wants it."

I cut my last apple through its center.

"You're a big girl. You know what I mean."

The halves into halves. The half-moons of the cores, the pith and seeds into the pot of waste.

"I could lose my mind," she says, her voice breaking. I stop cutting and look up. She's crying, but her hands don't stop moving. I can hear the creek. My brother is scything weeds in the distance. "I think it might kill me or something." She keeps her eyes on her apple, her knife. The trees rise dark up the mountain behind her. "He needs some other kind of—some kind of outlet." The only sound is her knife hitting the board as the slices separate.

I stare at her, at the wide dark bowl of the valley we live in. She glances up at me, then at the dish of apples.

"Here, have one," she says, fishing out a slice. Even though apples have been forbidden to my brother and me for months, I can remember their taste, their sour springing juice. She shakes it at me anxiously, glances at the trailer windows. For him to see this would mean a beating—for me, at least, if not for her.

"I think I'm done," I say, and stand up.

DIRTY GIRL

Tara Hardy

"When the ax came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us."

—bumper sticker

The dispute between femmes and feminists is about class. We get stuck with one another because we disagree about which practices feed, or are born of, the patriarchy. Feminists judge femmes from the perspective of class.

My personal experience with feminists has been complicated. One of the complications involves how quickly feminists attempt to snatch the ideals they espouse out of my hands when I apply them to my right to express femininity. I get asked a lot by feminists, either out loud or with the nonverbal once-over, "Why are you wearing that skirt, that make-up, those shoes?" More than once someone has actually said out loud, "I thought you were a feminist." When this happens, I pause to think about my aunts and cousins, my hometown friends who still don't look like the girls at college did when I got there. I remember that at one point, neither did I. And what I want to say is, "Because I'm homesick."

In spite of what anyone might think about the whys and ways of femininity, I have to be honest: I don't feel cleaner when I'm unadorned, scrubbed, uncovered. I feel dirty and ungended. I feel like the animal of

thoughts

Interesting

reproduction I was meant to be as a working-class woman, existing to spawn the next crop of sturdy workers. Girls like me were born to labor, not to have sexualities—except maybe as farm animals. We were raised to service the landowner without question or compensation. We were also raised to service the landowner's wife, so she could remain unsmudged, uncalled, and monochromatically pale.

In response to the above, as an act of resistance, my working, noncon-
sensually degenerated ancestors created a sexuality, a femininity, that is loud and unmistakable. It's offensive to your middle-class sensibilities because it's supposed to be.

The logic of wishing I'd just lay down my femininity and stop fouling up the feminist movement is flawed. Our definitions of liberation, of revolution, profoundly differ. Calling me a tool of the patriarchy does nothing but objectify me. The real tool is shaming the working class—patriarchy doesn't swing just on sexism, but on all kinds of oppression: classism, racism, ageism, and ableism, to name a few. And because our locations on the map of oppression differ from one another, so too will our definitions of gender liberation.

But they keep asking. These feminists, these daughters of lawyers, professors, engineers, and doctors ask me, incredulously, why I think they're the enemy. Here's why.

When I was eight, my pediatrician found evidence of my father sexually abusing me. My vagina was growing together where the friction from him was leaving it raw. It was growing together to keep him out. Instead of reporting it, the doctor told my mother I wasn't washing properly. He said I was dirty. That's when he put his thumbs on either side of my vagina and yanked me apart.

To him, I wasn't worth saving. None of us were. To him, we were all dirty, despite showering with Dial every day. Having watched television, we'd taken its advice for how to get clean. The doctor approved—he prescribed Dial soap in the wound every day, followed by Vaseline. There were child-abuse laws in 1972. But it was easier for the doctor to call my family dirty, to send me home diagnosed "unclean" instead of "raped."

dirty.

The intersection of class with this horrible moment is what puts me over the edge. I've successfully lived through the pain, the tearing, the hot throb of tender skin—I'm still living through "dirty." When I should have been wrapped in tissue paper and hurried to safety, I was, instead, stamped: Filth.

In addition to class, race collides with this moment. Because if we hadn't been white, parental rights would more likely have been swiftly snipped. I'm under no illusion that I would have been escorted to safety; rather, I would have been raped, dirty, and stolen—a modern echo of an earlier practice. But I know my father, at least in part, got to keep me because he's white. I don't think I would have benefited from being taken away, but I do think I would have benefited from the doctor doing the work necessary to intervene in my small life.

In 1972, women were being "liberated." When my father lost the only real job he'd ever had, organizing for the United Auto Workers, my mother had the "privilege" of putting her infant, my brother, into day care and going to work. Unlike the women in the suburbs who could choose the age at which they'd leave their children nestled with nannies in their comfortable homes, for my mother, being liberated did not mean the "opportunity" to get a job. For her, true choice would have meant the option to stay home with her new baby without having to wean him. At first, my mother tried to make it to the baby sitter's during her breaks, but my brother was too hungry in between. Left no other choice, she spent night after night rocking him back and forth, trying to get her desperate baby to take the bottle. She was desperate herself by the time he finally did. During all of this, I was desperately home alone with my father.

So, excuse me for not trusting the feminists. For not trusting the bourgeois movement of those with enough time on their hands to actually feel dissatisfied. My mother didn't have time for dissatisfaction—she had time for labor. Far from being fulfilled at her job, she was imprisoned by it. And so, by association, was I. We were trapped, at least in part, because I wasn't clean enough to be saved, and because my mother's labor wasn't valuable enough to be paid properly. "Equal pay for equal work" means between

men and women doing similar jobs, laborers or not. What equal pay for equal work should mean is the same wage for an *hour*—pushing a broom, pushing art, pushing pills, or pushing around money.

What galls me is that the modern-day offspring of the feminists who coined the “equal pay” phrase in the first place are still calling me dirty—in much more sophisticated terms, but still dirty. What it sounds like today is accusations of my expressing an abhorrent “traditional femininity.” What I have to say about that is, Check your traditions.

Some of us who are claiming what has been mistaken as “traditional femininity” are doing so precisely because it was *not* part of our cultural or familial traditions. Those of us who aren’t middle/upper/owning class, who don’t wear suits or don pearls with our New York haircuts, and who haven’t had the privilege to buy our genders at fucking Nordstrom. Those of us who have cleaned other people’s shit off their walls, and I’m not speaking metaphorically here, in exchange for a wage that forces us to ruin that ledger of moral character known as the “credit rating,” because we can’t afford the cost of living and have the gall to need a phone, heat, or a pair of goddamned shoes anyway. It would also include those of us whose mothers could not afford the latest understated, tasteful, college-bound tweed skirt and penny loafers. Not to mention the notebook filled with aspirations that you really *can* be what you want to be when you grow up, that even if you slip up, you’ll be welcomed back into the fold and not labeled “slut” forever.

It is on purpose that I am rejecting your guidelines for femininity. Let me say that again—it is precisely your ruling-class, understated femininity I’m rejecting. Your subtle, no-one-would-mistake-me-for-a-slut-even-though-I-might-be-a-bad-girl-in-secret femininity. (By the way, we all know those boarding school girls have been giving as many blowjobs as we have.)

I don’t think it’s any kind of coincidence that rich girls and feminists all look so scrubbed. Which is not to say I don’t believe in working-class feminism. But a caution to any feminist: If what you’re doing is making the dirty girls ashamed of ourselves, then whose agenda are you really fulfilling? If what you’re doing is making you look back at your poor, duped,

uneducated ancestors and think they’re stupid, I challenge you to look deeper at their ways of resisting. Because I’m not so arrogant as to reject their traditions of resistance, I’ll just keep whacking off my leg hair and painting myself with loud lipstick and putting on bright colors. I will not be a pale, muted thing to serve anyone else’s idea of “liberation.”

I’ve had lots of conversations with educated women about things like the “dominant discourse” regarding shaving, in which I struggle to come up with language to defend my choices about my own body. (Is anyone missing the irony of respecting my right to choose whether or not to reproduce, but not whether or not to shave?) During these conversations, I find myself translating my arguments into a tongue that is not my primary language. I am expected—as are other women like me—to come up with a perfectly justifiable argument. But there’s no recognition for what’s being lost in translation. Nervously, I’ll say something like, “Acknowledging the dominant discourse about shaving, I still hold that I’m not giving in to the patriarchy by removing the hair from my legs. Rather, I’m honoring the tradition of gender expression that has been passed on to me by my ancestors.” A sentence I’m capable of constructing, at least in part, because I went to college. But in my original tongue, this same sentiment might sound something like this: “Whatever. Fuck that. I get to shave if I want to. My mother raised me to do it, and it makes me feel like a girl.”

I recently had a conversation with a middle-class, feminine, queer friend who’s getting her law degree. She had her first day in court, and while there was much to report, she zeroed in on the court clerk, who was wearing a shimmering silver top with a too-short skirt and “way too much make-up.” My friend thought she made the courtroom look “unprofessional.” This is the same friend who’s offered to show me how to put on make-up that doesn’t look like you’re wearing it—my thought is, What the hell for? If I go to the effort, do I want it to be invisible? I guess that’s what she wanted from the clerk—invisibility, or to “blend,” as they say.

My question is this: Does it ever occur to the privileged that we don’t actually want to emulate you? My god, the staggering arrogance! Does it ever occur to you that we think *you’re* filthy? And maybe, just maybe, we don’t ever want to be mistaken for one of you?

As queers, we know this argument for why we look different. We know it from defending ourselves from the line of questioning that goes, "Why are you so tattooed, shorn, 'alternative'?" What I'm advocating is that we broaden the meaning of "alternative," that we recognize the "outside" that is the everyday for working people. I'm talking about those who, by any means necessary, get their children fed. When it comes to a working-class, outsider femininity, I think of *Erin Brockovich*. Although believing Julia Roberts as working-class is a little beyond me, when Erin is asked, in the film, "What makes you think you can just waltz in there and get [such incriminating evidence]?" she replies, "They're called boobs."

Once, when my butch lover was sick, we went to the emergency room for a visit we never intended to pay for—not because we'd spent all our money on partying, but because it was a cold winter and we needed the heat more than our credit rating. My lover needed an expensive antibiotic; the cheap ones had failed to clear up the infection in her lungs. The doctor wrote the prescription and instructed us to fill it at the hospital pharmacy. Faced with the knowledge that her infection was likely to get worse, I did a little "leaning" over the counter, and the doctor "found" some samples.

From that moment on, my lover took up the habit of asking me, "Baby, will you go in and lean?" when we badly needed something we couldn't afford. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. But this is precisely the kind of femininity I was taught to use to defend my loved ones.

A few months ago I was touring with a rogue band of poets and rap artists. In Las Vegas we were booked at a biker bar, most of whose patrons talked over us—poetry, I guess, not being their favorite form of entertainment. While one of the performers was on stage, he was verbally assaulted and physically intimidated by one of the bar's drunk, male patrons. The guy called him a "faggot" and threatened him. When it started, immediately, the feminine dykes were on our feet—our bodies in between the threat and the person we loved on stage. The harasser didn't stop right away, but he eventually did back down.

I think he backed down for a number of reasons. One, he was more reluctant to hit girls. (We knew this, which is why we put ourselves in the

way. But, for the record, if it had come to it, none of us would have hesitated to fight back.) Two, he backed down because we were speaking working-class, a language he understood—fuck with someone we love, and you'll get swarmed. Three, he backed down because none of the masculine-identified people confronted him, so he didn't have to defend his masculinity. In my opinion, this was a case where sending in the girls was the most effective thing we could have done.

Later, when I said something to one of the dykes who'd leapt to her feet about the power of femininity, her response was, "Yeah, it made me sick to sell out like that; he should have backed down when Vinnie asked him to." She was right, he should have. But her comment also broke my heart. First, I don't think I, or any of us, were selling out our queerness, our loved one, or our femininity. We were being strong. It was a moment in which femininity could be seen for the bad-ass weapon it truly is.

I'm still not sure how to bridge the gap of silence between my friend and me, which grew from that point. I wonder now if she thinks my "brand" of femininity is dangerous to her. Although I'm familiar with what the feminist response would be, I want to tell her it was chicks and our chick-ness that defused that situation. Instead, I'm left feeling, somehow, that the distance between us means the patriarchy wins.

The instant—and I mean instant—I heard the term "femme," I started making sense to myself. It was 1987, I was standing in Connie and Cheryl's kitchen, and one of their rugby friends said to me, "You can't be a dyke, you don't look like one." Someone else said, "Tara? She's a femme." She was standing behind me and to the right, about six feet away, right by the jade plant.

I swiveled instantly and asked, "What? I'm a what?"

"A femme," she answered. The rest of them laughed.

Regardless of their laughter, that was the first time I knew there was a name for me. Which brings me to labels. While labels feel constricting for some, they've been liberating for me. Years after hearing the term "femme" for the first time, when I found what little has been written about our precious and vast femme history, I found this to be true: Femme is the

Labels

keyhole I put my life into and turn, my experiences finally making sense. How many butch or androgynous girlfriends have I had who heard "lezzie" on the playground and knew it was what they were? Language can be used to oppress, but it can also liberate.

People will say that times have changed since that day in the kitchen. And they have—femmes are organizing, talking, writing our histories down. But they haven't changed all that much. I challenge you to wear a short skirt (not as a joke, but seriously) to the next dyke march. Wear that sucker down the street, on a bus, all day at work—see what it takes to sport femininity in the world.

Some of you will ask, if it's so much trouble, why wear it in the first place? And my answer is, Because it's as important to who I am, to honoring my gender, as your piercings, work boots, tattoos, or tie are to you. Because my brash femininity is the cornerstone of my resistance to a history that would have had me sexless except for reproduction.

This brings me, reluctantly, to urban hip fashion as a frequent co-optation of working-class culture. I've become beyond sick of the fashionably downwardly mobile who constantly treat us as theater. Donning the isn't-it-ironic, tongue-in-cheek gas station attendant jacket, formerly owned by the person whose name appears on the patch. Who just last week checked your oil, and you should have been ashamed to wear that thing in front of him. Please, take that jacket off, along with whatever else you're co-opting from the working class, and your—unless you have a cultural claim to them—tribal tattoos, fake bindis, and rearview-mirror dreamcatchers. Go ahead and return that sacred cloth you use as your curtain to its rightful owner, and unlock your hair unless you understand "dread" to mean something other than what you feel if the cops drive by when you're toting weed.

Many people in my town have long sported cool by wearing shirts that say "Mac" or "Joe" on labels sewn by someone's loving partner (could have been my cousin). The inception of this practice coincided with scores of people claiming trans identities and searching for masculine markers. While I celebrate such flagging, such external clues of internal identities, I'd like to caution us to be careful about whose masculinity we're adopting,

and to ask ourselves whether we have a right to it. Working-class masculinity has long been sexualized by the upper classes, so it's no wonder that in modern-day gender fuck we find it so appealing. But the person who wore it before you is not a fashion wet nurse to be suckled by those hungry for cool.

A few final words for the feminists: I'm not asking you to paint yourselves, raise your hems, or shave off what your hair means to you. I am asking that you stand beside me fighting for my right to do so. My resistance doesn't look like yours. It never has. So create what you want, but know where it comes from. I do. Because the landowners made a mistake—they let us read. But not without being forced to. Remember the labor movement? Without it I'd be wasting away with my aunts on the Chevy, Ford, or Pontiac lines, which, maybe you didn't know, were modeled after slaughterhouses. Instead, I am here, using old tools in new ways. Because the new way is in our heads, in our powers of redefinition. I challenge you to try it. Otherwise what kinds of traditions are you breaking? Trying to make the dirty girls ashamed of ourselves isn't one of them.

Your label of "traditional"—I reject it. Because I'm not so arrogant as to reject the ways of resisting my ancestors fashioned, I'll just keep whacking off my leg hair, whether or not it's all right with you, and smearing my lips with loud lipstick. You see, I've inherited it, this fine tradition of resistance.