

alone in this thick white heat
heavy over darkened asphalt

another diner USA
and mom's got another waitress flustered
over her request for soyu sauce
after they tear up the kitchen finding only worcestershire
which doesn't come close and sure ain't chinese
she realizes she happens to have a small bottle in her purse
just checking
just making sure
a few more folks
can dance
for us
i am holding on
hanging onto the overshellacked table
dying for something standard
regular and all-American
a treat only gotten
in special circumstances
cheeseburger, the child's plate
root beer, carbonated and foreign, its taste overdone
i am hanging on
hanging onto another red-checked tablecloth
plastic menu/smile
i wanna know
i wanna know
does this waitress
do these people
what do they think
what does it look like
do I look like anybody
do they wonder
do they think
i'm adopted?

FOUR MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT

I was born at four minutes to midnight one balmy September night in the Year of the Tiger. Close to the edge. My Chinese mother took one look at the soft down of my brand-new, seven-pound body, birthed from the cocoon of her flesh, and registered a shock of auburn. "That's not my baby!" she exclaimed in disbelief. "That baby has red hair. All my babies have black hair. That's not my baby!" And so it began: surprise, assessment, and disappointment. My looks weren't my only surprise, though.

One month before I was born, my father told my mother that they were going for ice cream. Eight months pregnant in the August heat and always an ice cream enthusiast, she left the house wearing a brightly colored, loose-fitting muumuu, her standard garb. They arrived shortly thereafter at a residence, which was filled with my mother's tittering female friends and coworkers, Caucasian women with bouffants and carefully pressed dresses, eagerly awaiting her surprise baby shower. Among the other games they played that day was one in which my mother was asked to pull a long black hair from her head and thread it through her wedding ring.

"Swing it!" her friends encouraged. "Go ahead!" As she held the hair, the women eagerly watched the direction of the pendulous ring, a popular predictor of birth sex in the days before ultrasounds were available. Swinging up and down, rather than left to right, the ring indicated the gender very clearly. The women cheered and congratulated her on her achievement, another baby boy. Later, in the still of night, after everyone

had gone to sleep and the house was dark, I gave her a swift kick to let her know that they were right.

When I emerged into the world, my parents were surprised to discover that I was not the boy they were expecting, or so they thought. Once I was on the outside, I began my fourth trimester, a bundle of reflexes and images, compactable and foldable like a plucked chicken. It was 1962. Parents didn't worry about all this child-centered nonsense of healthy environments, listening to children, and nontraditional identity development. A few months later, my mom went back to work as a first-grade teacher, returning hurriedly every day at noon to nurse me, totting cartons of cigarettes purchased for my chain-smoking caregiver, who insisted on keeping the doors and windows closed. Though my parents briefly considered the impact of secondhand smoke on their newborn, Mrs. Gerken charged only thirty cents an hour and, according to my mother, "she was a good babysitter."

My memories of my first years in smoky lockdown are dreamlike and visually hazy, like the ever-present smoke cloud itself. Splashing in the sink at the end of the narrow kitchen, I watched as the muted light from the window behind me offered small patches of illumination in an otherwise dark tomb. The warmth of the water, the firm sides of the sink, and the embrace of my smoking babysitter made me feel safe as I looked out on the cluttered counters from the height of my perch.

My parents had been ambivalent when they discovered that my mother was pregnant with me, a surprise child following three kids: my brother, age ten, and my sisters, ages eight and six. "We had already given away all the baby clothes," my mother recounted, describing the stress she felt about my impending arrival. They wondered how they would raise another kid when they thought they were done with having babies. But my sisters, Sunya and Su-Lin, were excited to care for me, so they spent many hours changing me and brushing my hair.

Whether it was my sisters, my parents, or my babysitter, people were always trying to put me in dresses and get me to play with dolls. I couldn't understand why. From as early as I can remember, I hated that stuff. One day, Sunya was trying to put me in a dress. I squirmed. I resisted. I pushed her. I grabbed the dress and threw it across the room, then tossed

a doll at her, as I often did, the strength of my determined physicality my only language in my preverbal toddlerhood.

* * *

I am hapa, a Hawaiian term that derives from the term *hapa haole*, which means "half white." The term *hapa haole* was originally used to describe people who were Hawaiian and Caucasian, but after the influx of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino people as guest workers in Hawaii in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it became commonly used to describe people who were mixed Asian and white. Currently, particularly on the West Coast, the term *hapa* is used to describe a broad spectrum of mixed API individuals.

My mother's family name, Chang, is the third-most-common surname in mainland China. There are two branches of families who go by this name; our people are referred to as the Tummy Button Changs.

According to family legend, as told by my mother, the first Chang who bore my mother's family surname was an old man who owned a large parcel of land in southern China. One day he went walking through his land and was invited to stay for dinner by a family along the way. The man of the house offered him one of his three daughters for marriage. As the man observed the daughters preparing dinner, one wrapped a piece of ginger in her shirt and pulled it up to her mouth to bite it, exposing her belly button. When this old dude got a glimpse of her belly, apparently he saw a childbearing future. He announced, "I'll take the ginger crusher." For this reason, our family name is called the Tummy Button Changs.

Many generations later, my mother's father journeyed to Sandalwood Mountain, as Hawaii was called, at the age of fourteen to "pick up the gold off the streets." One of his sisters was sold into slavery to pay for his journey. He started as a dishwasher and worked his way up until he had a restaurant. Despite going bankrupt three times, he was able to maintain his restaurant and regularly send his sister money. He learned that she had married another slave, but, sadly, he eventually lost touch with her and never knew her fate.

My mother's mother was born in Hawaii, though she spoke only Cantonese. Her feet were not bound, because foot binding had disabled

her older sister, who had an ongoing infection, experienced chronic, debilitating pain, cripplingly all the time, and couldn't walk. My grandmother escaped foot binding because it was her job to carry her older sister to the bathroom and wherever else she needed to go. The way my mother conveyed the story, the reason my great-aunt suffered so much was that they waited until she was eight to bind her feet, rather than mutilating them at age four. Since her feet were larger, they had to brutally break her feet in half and bend them underneath. I learned that, in actuality, the foot-binding process was conducted between the ages of four and nine and was the same process regardless of the age of the girl. This barbaric ritual was usually performed by an elder female family member who was not the girl's mother, since the mother might sympathize with the girl's tremendous pain and not be able to keep the bindings tight.

Since the ideal size of the foot was three inches, the toes were curled under and pressed forcefully into the sole, which broke them. Then the foot was pulled in line with the leg and the arch was forcefully broken. Bandages were wound tightly to press the sole of the foot into the heel. The bandages were frequently unbound in order to beat the sole of the foot to make the broken bones more flexible and rebind them more tightly. The toes remained broken for years and usually had ongoing infections. Since there was limited circulation in the foot, the toes would sometimes rot and fall off, which was considered a good thing. Thus, girls with toes that were fleshier had pieces of broken glass or tile bound into the feet in order to deliberately introduce infection. Not surprisingly, many experienced disease related to infection, and some died of septic shock.¹⁵

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The brother of Sun Yat-sen, the Chinese revolutionary and founding father of the Republic of China, came to Hawaii to look for a wife. He considered my grandmother because she was skilled at sewing and cooking but passed on her because her feet weren't bound. Though they emanated the foul odor of rotting flesh, "lotus feet" were considered intensely erotic and symbolized a higher-class status. Those who could walk did so very precariously, with a swaying gait. Foot binding limited mobility,

rendering women at home and dependent on their families, and made it difficult to participate in social life, politics, and the larger world.¹⁶

Don't even get me started about how the ginger crusher was mere chattel who didn't have a choice when she was married off to an old man, or the horrifying, dehumanizing cruelty that my great-aunts each suffered at the hands of their families. I feel thoroughly nauseated when I think of the intense pain girls and women with bound feet went through. I find it deeply unsettling to fathom a ritual in which older female family members initiate young girls into a lifetime of extreme pain and disability while telling them they are becoming beautiful and attaining a higher social status.

The experience of foot binding is only two generations before me. While cultural mores haven't been nearly as extreme for me as a third-generation, American-born, female-bodied individual, the subjugation of women that has been endemic to Chinese culture for eons was passed down to me and made an indelible imprint on my psyche.

* * *

On my father's side, my two great-great-grandfathers, Orson Pratt and Erastus Snow, were part of Brigham Young's caravan that crossed the plains in search of a place for a Mormon settlement. While Brigham Young was sick, Pratt and Snow used the "ride and tie" method to arrive in the Salt Lake Valley three days before Brigham Young's party on July 21, 1847.¹⁷ With one horse between them, one walked while the other rode ahead, leaving the horse tied and setting out on foot, so that the other person could ride once they reached the horse. When they arrived in the valley, they declared, "Hosanna! This is the place!"

Both were members of the quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Snow was a leading colonizer in the southwest and eastern US states, as well as in Scandinavia. Pratt was a writer, historian, and philosopher who made scientific observations during the expedition west, coined a wooden odometer, and later preached about the doctrine of plural marriage. Orson Pratt laid out Salt Lake City with wide streets so that one could turn a horse and carriage around without having to back up.

My father's mother was the youngest of ten children. She read voraciously, played cowboys and Indians, and grew up in a culture that centered white people as the norm. She fell in love with my grandfather, whose sweet whistle and jaunty levity announced him as he walked down the street to visit her. Together they left Utah and the Mormon church and moved to California in the 1920s. During World War II, she joined the new class of working women, becoming a proud Rosie the Riveter who worked at the shipyards in Richmond, California. An aspiring writer, she proudly published an article about this experience in the September 1943 issue of *Harper's* magazine, entitled "From Housewife to Shipfitter."

* * *

My mother grew up in the rural town of Wahiawa on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, the youngest and only girl in a family with four older brothers, who ridiculed her relentlessly and beat her up on a regular basis. She walked barefoot through pineapple fields to get to school, where she skipped two grades and read every book in the school library before discovering the public library. After school she chopped vegetables and served food in her family's Chinese restaurant. Few people went out for Chinese food in the pre-World War II era, but her family's business boomed once they got their liquor license, and the soldiers from nearby Schofield Barracks stepped out on payday. The family lived in the two-room apartment above the restaurant, where my mother slept over the blaring jukebox and the chaos of drunken soldiers. When she had to go anywhere, she walked down the middle of the street, staying clear of the soldiers as best she could. Most were gentlemen, but she had experienced harassment and the threat of sexual violence, which she escaped thanks to the kung fu skills her brothers had taught her. She studied hard and pushed against cultural barriers to become the first girl in her entire extended family to go to college.

My father is English, Irish, and Scottish, from the rugged country of Depression-era Oakland, when everyone in the hills was poor. The oldest of three and the only boy, he was the son of an accountant and a homemaker. He explored the local terrain, hungrily finding golden-delicious

apple trees, picking and eating every part of the fruit and chewing on the stem and seeds. My father's family pinched every dollar and coin, grew what they could in the garden, and raised chickens with limited success. In order to level the sloping hillside so they could garden, he sweated through lengthy sessions jointly wielding a well-worn handsaw with his father, carefully pulling metal to wood back and forth, sawdust flying, to chop down eucalyptus trees. During World War II, my father was drafted into the US Army. When he returned from military service, he attended college at UC Berkeley, which was free except for a \$37.50 administration fee.

My parents met in Berkeley in 1949, when my father was a student at UC Berkeley. Dressed in her usual slender satin Chinese dress and beehive hairstyle, my mother arrived at his low-rent men's co-op several blocks west of campus, a dinner guest of another resident. It was a Tuesday, my father's night to cook. With no cooking smells emanating from the kitchen, a few roommates were starting to pop in to assess his progress, which was somewhere between complete lack of preparation and panic. He asked my mother if she knew how to make stew. With soy sauce, ginger, garlic, red wine, stew meat, vegetables, and a hurried trip to the corner store, together they created their first of many satisfying meals, her presence toasted with the remaining wine.

My father took her to the beach at night on one of their first dates, where he gathered wood, made a campfire, and, to her delight, pulled a frying pan out of his backpack. He served her freshly prepared pork chops and red wine, which she found delectable and charming.

Their interracial union was controversial at the time, as California had just repealed the antimiscegenation law in 1948, though antimiscegenation law wouldn't change on a federal level until 1967. When my mom called her mother to tell her, "Someone wants to marry me," her mother didn't disapprove that he was *haole* but simply asked if he met the qualifications of a good husband—kindhearted and able to provide. "Oh, yes," my mother assured her, neglecting to mention that he was a starving student. But, thanks to the GI Bill, they were able to put a down payment on a house for \$1. The mortgage was \$75 a month.

* * *

When I was a year and a half, I bent over on the front lawn of our house, assuming the toddler "downward dog" stance, and peered into a dark hole. "Do you see China?" my mother and siblings asked. "If you look hard enough, you can see China." They encouraged me to keep at it. I looked and looked but never did find China. I wondered why they had all seen it, and if I was the only one who couldn't.

At three, I wandered into my thirteen-year-old brother, Steve's, room, the new room they had converted from the garage. He was entertaining some friends. "Hey, show us your hairy chest!" Steve commanded. Dutifully, I raised my shirt over my face. Everyone had a good laugh.

By that time I had earned the nickname Squirrely because stuff from my brother's room had a way of disappearing and reappearing in the room I shared with my sister Su-Lin. He got all the good stuff—a baseball, a cap, a big leather mitt, cars, and trains. I never got cars or trains, no matter how much I asked for them.

I was playing on the floor at my mother's feet, listening to the shrieks of laughter as she told her friends about me as if I wasn't right next to her. "And I said, 'That's not my baby! That baby has red hair. All my babies have black hair. That's not my baby!'" She pointed at me, then said, "They got lighter down the line. This one is shark bait!" More laughter. I didn't know what that meant, exactly, but it made me feel like my skin wasn't strong enough or good enough.

One morning I walked into my parents' small, cluttered room. My mother lay asleep on the bed, wearing a long nightgown and a hairnet. I pulled her eyes open. Her eyes moved around; she mumbled something, then went back to sleep. I turned and walked into the bathroom. My nostrils flared at the pungent mold and bright pink tile. There, on the toilet, sat my mother's hair on someone else's Styrofoam head. This was new information. I wondered why my mother's hair wasn't really the hair I thought it was. "Mom, why is your hair on this thing?" I asked her when she woke up. She muttered something that sounded like, "Don't talk about that!" Was her hair wrong like mine was? How come I wasn't supposed to talk about it?

By age four, I knew how to tie my shoes and how to use chopsticks. I loved my dark blue vest and brown pants because they were the most

boyish clothes I had and I could be a cowboy. I had made a stuffed animal I named Horse, a crudely stitched, comfortingly soft flannel creature filled with old nylons, its shape the side view of a horse, with two legs, not four. I sewed it all by myself and slept with it every night. That and my hand-me-down, dingy white cotton bedspread with little, pokey bumps all over, which I loved to fiddle with while drifting off to sleep to the vibrations of my brother's band playing loud rock music in the living room. My dad kept telling them, "Keep it down!" but I loved the music. Who cared if it was late? That's when I practiced counting.

One night I lay in bed in the dark room with my two-dimensional horse and counted all the way to a hundred in Cantonese. Then I did it in English. "Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, tendy, tendy-one . . ." I ran out to ask my father what was after "tendy."

I could always rely on my father for measured, thoughtful answers to my questions about the world around me. My mother loved to walk around saying, "Your father is the Great White Hope. I am just the humble concubine. I shuffle my feet behind the first wife." I had no idea what a concubine was, nor what she meant about shuffling her feet behind the first wife, but I knew it wasn't as good as being the Great White Hope. That was definitely good.

One day I asked him, "Are all the people on money white men?" My dad paused as he always did, taking a minute to gather his thoughts, and responded, "Yes. They're all former presidents of the United States."

I thought about this information and my place in the world. I was a boy inside. My father was the Great White Hope, and my mother was a humble concubine. All the people on the money were white men. I was four years old and ready to make my first major life decision. I decided that I wanted to be white and male, and that I would work very hard to become that. That was the only way to become president, and the best way to get money and for people to think you were good. I was going to be white and male.

ALLERGIC TO CHILDREN

I was shivering in a majestic redwood grove at a kiddie birthday party for a spirited, red-haired five-year-old in my daughter's preschool class. His down-to-earth moms had rented a picnic area nestled in the brisk, natural air-conditioning of mature redwoods. I looked up to gaze at the beautiful maze of interlocking tree branches blanketing a blue sky, then reached for another greasy potato chip.

Outside the grove, the parking lot was sunny and twenty degrees warmer, with an elaborate play structure nearby. Surely it was time to shed this down coat and take the kids to the play structure. It was almost May, and I still had no idea who most of the people were, though presumably they were parents at my daughter's preschool. I knew the names of a few of the moms and kids, but I was largely out of the loop. Georgia had done most of the drop-offs and pickups that year, while I'd stayed home to read to our baby and put him down for his nap.

I looked over at my older son, who was busy wielding an enormous ten-foot stick. "Don't swing that near people," I cautioned. At least he was bonding with the four- and five-year-olds as they excitedly built a fort with the sticks they found. I was relieved I didn't have to listen to him moping that he was bored, begging to go home.

The brief conversations I had with the guys were limited to jokes about the meager food offerings. The women talked about the usual parenting topics: bedtime and screen time and sibling rivalry. I was bored out of my skull. With three kids, I'm at a kiddie birthday party almost every weekend, tossed into an intimate social situation with people I hardly know, won-

dering if I can find a single point of connection beyond parenthood. The recognition that I might have to work very hard to find a compelling topic of shared interest with these folks made me feel isolated and frustrated.

A few of the moms and kids gravitated to a small patch of sun that supplied a little warmth in this grandiose icebox. One woman asked me where I grew up. "On the peninsula," I replied.

"Me too. Where on the peninsula?" she asked.

"San Mateo," I responded.

Her too. What high school did I go to? Like Google Maps zooming in closer with every snapshot, we found ourselves describing the locations of our parents' homes, within a couple blocks of each other.

When I described where we lived, she said, "Wait, what's your family name?" When I told her, she said, "Mrs. Wilkinson is your mom?" I lit up. People who'd had my mom in first grade were always popping up, and their memories of this wacky teacher during their shy, formative years always made them smile. "She was my favorite teacher of all time. She made everyone feel comfortable. She was so loving. I remember when I saw her driving once and I said, 'That's not a camel!' She'd told us that she rode to school on a camel."

I laughed, thinking of all the tall tales my mom told her first-graders. That she lived in a tree house. Sometimes it was an igloo, or a mud hole, or a submarine. Her mode of transportation changed from year to year—a banana slug, a camel, a hippopotamus. That's why she was always late. The camel always got lost.

"One time," the woman continued, "she was putting water in the fish tank and I asked her what she was doing. She said she was giving the fish some water to drink. I thought that was so funny."

My mom painted grand pictures of her cartoon life, with her four kids jumping into her kangaroo pouch at the end of the day. When new students arrived in first grade, still adjusting to the school experience, she engaged them by calling them by the wrong name. "Magillicutty? Abercrombie? Josephine?" "My name is Sarah," a little girl would respond in a whisper. My mom had a way of warming the little buggers right up. Once they were ready to talk and came at her with questions, she'd back off, saying, "I'm allergic to children!"

Every morning she would hammer out songs on the school's aging, out-of-tune piano while the class mumbled the words off-key. She could play anything by heart and didn't need to look at the keys. She kept her gaze on the kids to be sure no one was getting into trouble. When the nores stumbled over themselves, she said, "The piano makes mistakes." In the minds of six-year-olds, it all made sense.

Which is why my experience as a child was entrenched in a decidedly odd sense of reality that slowly disentangled itself over time.

NAMING MY DESTINY¹⁸

Names announce us and tell our stories. The name I was given at birth was not right for me, so I chose my destiny by renaming myself at a young age.

It was the day after Thanksgiving, and I was watching TV in the living room with my siblings. We had spent the holiday at my grandparents', my father's parents, where they donned tall, buckled pilgrim hats that they'd crafted out of black and white construction paper. Kids ran around and under the table, and the adults enjoyed wine and cocktails. As usual, my mom brought Peking duck and chow mein to go along with the turkey, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie that my other relatives contributed. My father's mother complained that Thanksgiving was "getting too ethnic."

So my mother responded by standing in the middle of the living room the next day and announcing, as she often did, "Your father is the Great White Hope. I am just his humble concubine shuffling four steps behind him." I went back to watching *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* on our heavy black-and-white TV. The show was about a white guy, a widower played by Bill Bixby; his seven-year-old son, Eddie; and their accommodating Japanese housekeeper, played by Miyoshi Umeki, who won an Oscar in 1957 for *Sayonara*. For some reason that was never really explained, Mrs. Livingston, the Japanese housekeeper, had a *haole* last name, just like we did. She seemed to really care about the guy and his son, spoke with an eager-to please accent, and did everything for them. I was seven, just like Eddie on the show. I wondered, *If he has this Japanese*

lady doing everything for him, how come I have to make my own lunch? And our threadbare orange couch and nasty gray carpet didn't look anything like their house.

"Goo' mohnin', Meestah Eddie's fathah," Mrs. Livingston said demurely, bowing. She bowed a lot. I knew about bowing. You had to clasp your hands and bow when old Chinese people and relatives came around. "T'ank you vely much, Meestah Eddie's fathah." She shuffled off to happily provide for the needs of the widower and his son.

I knew about the "mister" thing, too. My mom's mother referred to my dad as Meestah Bop. He was Bob to everybody else, but to her he was Meestah Bop. And the family-relationship thing, too. Mrs. Livingston never called the guy by his name. It was all about his relationship to his son, just as my mother's family members' names, in line with Chinese tradition, were Son Number One, Aunt Number Two.

And then there was all the cultural misunderstanding. Even though Mrs. Livingston had a college degree, she was kind of slow on the uptake. She was dependable and philosophical but mostly a silly, confused foreigner who was struggling to understand the ways of this American family. My mother was confused a lot, too. "What do you mean, 'too ethnic'? Are the pilgrim hats too ethnic?" she asked my grandmother innocently.

Apart from the reflection of our family, however twisted, that I found in this show, I loved that Eddie's best friend was a young Jodie Foster, as dykey as ever. As his little tomboy buddy, she was way more butch than pampered, lily-livered Eddie, who could barely wipe his own nose.

* * *

My mother was named May-Blossom, according to her mother's distinct wish for a Chinese-sounding English name, though she has been known mostly as Blossom throughout her life. My mom wanted the same for me, so she named me after a popular Chinese actress, whose name easily anglicized into a common '60s girl name.

I hated how it defined me as a girl. People thought they knew something about me because my name identified me as a girl, and because there were two other girls in my class with the same name. It was supposed to be Chinese if it were said with a Chinese accent and intonation,

up and down, like a song I couldn't dance to. The rhythm wasn't right. The soul of who I was wasn't there, not in this name.

By the time I was six, I felt distant and disassociated from this name. The person with that name sparked surprise and discomfort and was inconvenient. The person with that name got their dinner food snatched by Mom, piece by piece, if they turned their head for a moment or didn't show enough focused interest, much like my mom's four older brothers had done to her because she was the "lowly girl child" and didn't need to eat as much food. The person with that name had a lot of questions.

* * *

At the age of nine, I was actively looking for a boy's name. In elementary school, we had a physical education teacher who called all of my siblings Wilkie, after our family name. Mr. Schogland used a wheelchair because he had had polio, so he enlisted eager volunteers to demonstrate whatever moves we were supposed to do. "Keep it up, Wilkie!" he called over to me, as I hit the pavement with a set of push-ups. I liked that he called me Wilkie. It made me feel connected to my siblings who came before me, and motivated me to push harder. Mr. Schogland was a well-loved PE teacher. He was confident and decisive and made everybody want to run or do calisthenics. And he was cool. At lunchtime he spun records so we could dance to songs like the ones in Sunya's stack of 45s: "Signed, Sealed, Delivered I'm Yours," by Stevie Wonder, or "ABC" by the Jackson 5.

I contemplated changing my name for months before I told my mother that I was looking for a boy's name. The day I told her, I was massaging her after school, like I always did. I enjoyed massaging her. It was a Chinese tradition that had been passed down in her family, and it made her happy. Sometimes she massaged me, too. She had taught me to walk on her back when I was eleven months old, a couple of months after I learned to walk on the ground. On weekend mornings she'd call my sisters and me into her bedroom to walk on her back and massage her "aches and pains" while she lay facedown, immobile, exhausted from the week.

That particular afternoon, when my mom and I were alone, as my toes pressed incrementally down the sides of her spine, she asked me why

I wanted to change my name. I told her that I wanted a name that was a boy's name because I was a boy. The room enveloped me with its silence.

I was done with that girl name that had never been right. I told everybody that my name was Willy now, that I was no longer that other name. Most people refused to call me Willy, but my fourth-grade teacher did sometimes, with a slow Southern flair that made it feel extra special. It was such a relief.

My sister Su-Lin, who was in high school, understood that my name was Willy. My brother and his girlfriend got it. My relatives on my father's side didn't have a problem with it. But my Chinese cousins thought it was all a big joke, like my "shark bait" skin. Most people didn't understand that I was serious. This wasn't some nickname that I was going to forget about when I was done with it, like some forgotten toy. This was my new name. I really did not want to hear that other name, but people insisted on using it anyway.

* * *

In sixth grade I got in trouble when I put a bunch of banana slugs in a boy's locker over the weekend. It was a wet winter Saturday, and the slugs had come out in full force in my backyard. I used two sticks as chopsticks to gather about twenty of them in a plastic bag, then took them to school to release in this kid's locker. I did it for my friend because she wanted to get him back for "liking" her. By Monday, the slugs had crapped and made slug scum trails all over his binder, books, and locker. I thought it was hilarious, and so did my friends, but my humanities teacher, who usually called me Willy, made a point of announcing to the class how pissed she was at me by using my girl name.

The boy responded by giving my friend a card with a dead frog glued onto red construction paper, with a speech balloon that said, "I love you." I thought it was really cool—like, *What a find: a dead frog!*—but she thought it was gross.

A few of my friends asked me, "Willy, when are you going to get a sex change?" I wore my Charlie Brown sweater and hunting hat every day. My mom named my sweater that not because it had anything to do with Charlie Brown, but because I never took it off. I had bought it at

a thrift store for fifty cents right before sixth grade started. Even though I changed the shirt I wore under it every day, no one ever saw that. It started to look kind of ragtag. In the beginning of the school year, the sweater was a clean white acrylic blend, with a blue-and-red design across the chest, but by the end of the year it was pilled and dingy gray.

My hunting hat was red and black corduroy, with a big bill and earflaps. I made a cut on the lining inside the top of the hat and stitched Velcro so it could close. I hid money in it, like Tatum O'Neal in *Paper Moon*. I loved that hat and didn't take it off for a couple of years.

One weekend, out with my parents, we ran into a pleasant coworker of my father's.

"Oh, this must be one of your sons," she acknowledged warmly. "Uhh . . . yes," stammered my father, "this is my son," then identified me by my girl name for comic effect. As soon as the coworker was out of earshot, my exasperated mother angrily commented, "I thought we had three daughters!"

At school there were four female aides who worked with our history and humanities teachers. They all wore so much perfume that I was overcome with intense sneezing fits and couldn't breathe half the time. One time the history teacher leaned back on his high stool and made a broad gesture to clasp his hands over his neatly crossed legs. His shag haircut and long, reddish-brown mustache pointed to his wide black collar and black polyester slacks. He made a point of addressing me by my girl name, like he always did, then asked, "Didn't I see David Hazelwood wearing those same pants?" He grinned mischievously, pointing to my faded brown cords with light blue patches on the knees. A bunch of kids laughed.

That's how things were throughout my K-12 experience—a few supportive teachers and friends, and a whole lot of taunting and resistance. Most of my teachers, like a lot of my peers, emphasized my girl name repeatedly, loudly, and extra long. In high school, there was one male Spanish teacher who wore pink shirts and socks, gave me lots of A-pluses with smiley faces, and never had difficulty calling me Willy. But my haughty high school English teacher, who taught us to critically analyze literature and for whom I produced carefully thought-out and well-structured essays that earned me school wide English awards, addressed me very em-

phatically by my girl name throughout high school. Even three decades later, at my thirtieth high school reunion, he made a point of putting me in my place by dramatically referring to me by my girl name.

But back in sixth grade, there was one art teacher whom I'll never forget, a soft-spoken, gray-haired woman who eyed the ceramic bowls and line drawings I created with warmth and appreciation. She consistently called me Willy. She never questioned me for being me. Never did I feel as if she couldn't see me, or as if she needed to insist that I was someone other than who I said I was. Later, I learned that she lived with another teacher at the school, a woman, for many years. She shines in my childhood memories because she was a teacher who looked at me with the same appreciation that she had for art. Rather than seeing a flaw that needed reshaping, she saw the beauty and art form in human diversity. It's my memory of her, and the way her heart was in the right place, that makes the profound liberation of legislation like AB 1266, California's School Success and Opportunity Act, which took effect decades later, in 2014, resonate with me.

* * *

AB 1266, the School Success and Opportunity Act, was signed into California law by Governor Jerry Brown in 2013 to provide transgender students the right to access public school settings in accordance with their gender identity and expression. While there were no systems in place to educate my family or support me in the public school system back in the '70s, there is now. The first of its kind anywhere in the country, AB 1266 requires staff at public schools in California to address trans and gender-nonconforming students by the appropriate name and pronoun, provide access to gender-specific settings, such as restrooms and sports teams, update records to reflect name and gender, and ensure the safety and well-being of trans students.

The opposition tried to gather enough signatures in 2014 to impose a referendum by spreading the misconception that this bill was going to give boys license to torment young girls in the bathroom. School administrators in San Francisco and Los Angeles and parts in between spoke out about how they have been implementing these trans-affirming policies

for years without incident. Fortunately, the opposition didn't succeed, and now trans kids in California public schools have legal backup to be respected for who they are.

Laws like AB 1266 give trans and gender-nonconforming students the respect, relief, and systemic support that I couldn't get as a young trans kid growing up in the Bay Area in the early '70s. I fully support the efforts to implement this law in California and the ongoing efforts to pass similar legislation in other states around the United States.

It's for people like Pat Cordova-Goff, who transitioned in high school while her family struggled with homelessness. After being excluded from sports because of her trans status, she became one of the first transgender athletes to benefit from this legislation when she made the girls' varsity softball team, an accomplishment she worked very hard to achieve. She founded her Los Angeles County school's Gay-Straight Alliance and, at just seventeen, gave a well-articulated keynote speech at the Transgender Leadership Summit in Southern California in 2014.

AB 1266 is for people like Ashton, who wasn't allowed to use the student restroom at his Central California school and was required to wait for someone to unlock a staff bathroom, which always made him late to class. Because of his gender identity, he wasn't allowed to participate in physical education classes, which he needed to graduate.

This critical legislation protects students like Jewles Gutierrez, who was penalized when she fought back against the bullies who had tormented her repeatedly. Her Bay Area school ultimately used a restorative justice model to address the conflicts that arose in association with her trans status. Jewles was one of the grand marshals at the 2014 San Francisco Pride Parade.

AB 1266 is for my daughter's dear preschool friend, a sweet Mexican-Nicaraguan American boy who rocks cat ears and pink sparkly outfits and prefers to wear his hair long. And it's for his parents. Despite coming from a traditional cultural framework and having never thought about gender identity before the issue presented itself in their child, these beautiful people have supported their child every step of the way. When he rejects boys' clothes, they take him to the girls' department. When he wants to be a fairy princess for Halloween, they make it possible for him

to be who he is. Parent to parent, I admire the pure grace with which they show their unconditional love.

The passage of this legislation sparked increased attacks on trans youth of color, so a coalition of organizations—including the Transgender Law Center, Gay-Straight Alliance Network, and American Civil Liberties Union, among others—have built a network of organizations to ensure that the education work relating to this legislation has a racial justice lens. So many of our young people, including these individuals I've mentioned, are bravely fighting for their right to be themselves on their own terms. These trans youth of color show the strength, leadership, and resilience of our future—young people who are naming themselves and standing up to systems that have a responsibility to protect them.

* * *

As a trans kid who dared to be myself at a time when personal choice for a female-born individual was not often honored, and when there was no understanding of trans identities, I experienced a certain out-of-control helplessness, a violating, unpredictable humiliation that was a constant in my life. I spent my childhood years pushing in every way I could to assert my new name and to bury the old. Too many people pushed back, and way too many people taunted me with the old name. Family members put me in my place for having the audacity to name myself and to present my masculine self. Too many teachers, school officials, peers, and community members resisted. Over the years, men assured me that I had no right to claim a masculine name, and women questioned my loyalties.

In 1998, Georgia and I got married. At the engagement party, the few non-LGBTQ people—family members and high school friends—found each other. And there, in their whispering, snickering corner, they disclosed to my new in-laws what my name used to be. There was a duty to inform, apparently.

There are trans people who will readily, and without reservation, share what their old name used to be; I am not one of them. I don't want to be asked about it; I don't want it dug up; I don't want anyone announcing it. People who knew me back in the day get no special status

for having this knowledge; there is no bravado in parading this insider information for the curious objectification of others.

My old name was hurled at me to punctuate every masculine moment, every spark of individuality, independence, and creativity. "Mom, I figured out what I want to major in," I announced excitedly, after contemplating mathematics and psychology in my first year in college. I had found an interdisciplinary major that gave me an opportunity to exercise social analysis. "I'm majoring in women's studies, with a minor in biology. I'm taking this Introduction to Feminism class."

"Feminism? Does that mean being feminine?" she responded, eyeing me sideways, with her signature coy pseudoinnocence, and using my girl name for emphasis.

* * *

Fifteen years after I changed my name, when I was twenty-four, my mother finally got with it. Not consistently, but she finally came to an understanding that this was my name. After all, I was changing it legally. The name Willy was not going away.

In the '80s, a name change was not the extensive ordeal it is now, post-9/11. I changed it through common usage, notarizing a document I found in a Nolo Press book, then started with the Social Security Administration and worked my way through all the government systems. A few years later, when I needed a passport, I went through the court system.

At the time, some of my African American friends were losing their "slave names." Mary became Imani, and Sue became Shakira. My mixed friends were changing *haole*-sounding names to something more ethnic. People with names like Cindy Hanson took on names like Luna Gonzales; Jennifer Hamilton became Jennifer Chung. A lot of lesbians were ridding themselves of their father's names by eliminating their last names and just going by their first and middle names, or coming up with something else altogether, like Dykewoman or Blackwoman. I included my Chinese middle name in some of my writing at the time, but after a while my whole name became too tedious and I just went back to being Willy Wilkinson.

Later, I met a lot of trans guys trying to find the right name for themselves, often choosing formal, multisyllabic names like Sebastian or

Hamilton, which reminded me of the Winston Lees and Jackson Chans I went to school with, or my uncles Humphrey Chang and Gordon Chang, who had substantial English names to balance out their monosyllabic Chinese names.

Over the years, banks and utilities refused to discuss my account information with me, insisting that I wasn't Willy Wilkinson or that he was my husband. Many people on the phone had trouble hearing my name when I said it very clearly. Because I articulated "Willy" but had a female voice, people heard what they wanted to hear, insisting on turning it into a girl name.

But some people, especially black people, saw it as a name that women had. I met a lot of black women named Willy, and that gave me some leeway. And yet the name is distinctly male, with a certain homeboy ring to it in some circles.

A lot of Asian people have had issues with my name, first and last, and assumed that somehow my cultural experience and knowledge were diminished because of my name. Many refused to believe I was Chinese because of my name, except one time, when I called a local auto insurance agent to explore buying a policy; he said he knew I was Chinese because of my name, Wei Lee.

But once the wave of hapa people who were born in the late '60s and early '70s exploded onto the scene, assumptions about me by Asian people, based on my name, started to change.

When I came out as transgender in the mid-'90s and found the FTM community, even though I felt out of sorts culturally, one of the most profound aspects of that experience was that no one had an issue with my name, and that was a huge relief.

* * *

In the late '80s, I was the coeditor of *Phoenix Rising*, the newsletter of the Asian lesbian community in the Bay Area. When I took over the role of editor, I was not impressed that the articles focused on softball, recipes, and gossip about who was dating whom. During my time as editor, a small group of dedicated individuals transformed the newsletter from a short, awkwardly typewritten rag into a visually beautiful, computerized, political

forum. I wrote about the politics of Asian lesbianism, the necessity for us to articulate our issues and organize ourselves, to self-identify and smash the dragon lady and lotus blossom stereotypes. I wrote about my dreams of visibility, community building, and empowerment. I saw that the newsletter primarily served Chinese American women; I worked with Filipina, Indian, Japanese, Hawaiian, and mixed women to organize a broad base of Asian and Pacific Islander lesbians. In the fall of 1987, a group of twenty-eight Asian lesbians descended on Doreena Wong and Jenny Pizer's house in Washington, DC, for the March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. I ran all over that march, giving the newsletter to every Asian lesbian I could find, to network and build a nationwide readership.

I got a lot of positive responses to my articles and the work I was doing with the newsletter. One night back in San Francisco, I was at a party. When a tall, inebriated Chinese American woman discovered that I was Willy Wilkinson, the editor of *Phoenix Rising*, she said, "You're Willy Wilkinson? I always thought Willy Wilkinson was a white man!" As if a white man would have written all those Asian lesbian empowerment pieces.

I had long since abandoned my dream of becoming a white man, not just because I came into my identity and pride as a woman of color but because I identified with African American boys and men. Their energy, anger, rhythms, and poetic language spoke to me in ways white men never did.

Over the years, people often thought I was black on the phone, especially black folks, because it was second nature for me to code-switch into a manner of speech that resonated with black people. My word choice, intonation, and/or vibe would change as I spoke, and that felt familiar to a lot of people. When I first started working with an organization that did capacity building in communities of color, the work was all on the phone, because they were in Sacramento and I was eighty-five miles away in Oakland. I was working closely with the youth program coordinator to provide LGBTQ training for youth service providers. When she found out I wasn't black, she couldn't believe it. She kept asking me, "Are you *sure* you're not black? You have a black stepfather or something?"

The training was a huge success, so she and the executive director drove down to Oakland to meet me. When the executive director asked

me to be the researcher on a statewide African American HIV-prevention capacity-building contract, a job I never would have applied for, I responded, "You know I'm not black, right?"

She smiled and said, "You don't have to *be* one to *help* one." I took the job and watched the surprised looks on people's faces when Willy Wilkinson showed up to present the findings. For whatever reason, I worked with many black folks who repeatedly renamed me Willie Wilkerson. My 1099 tax statements, bios on their website, and articles I published often saw this amusing, yet uninvited, name change.

At one point, long before I medically transformed my body to male, I booked a massage at a health club. When I met the massage therapist, she breathed a sigh of relief, because in her mind the job wasn't going to be as demanding as she thought it was. "I thought Willy Wilkinson was a big black guy," she explained, looking at my small, female-bodied frame. Then, with the sure confidence of someone who could really see me, she smiled and said, "But Willy Wilkinson is a small Asian guy."

I felt elated to be witnessed, grateful to have named my destiny.

FINDING MY VOICE

"It's about realizing, painfully, you've kept that voice inside yourself, locked away from even yourself. And you step back and see that your jailer has changed faces. You realize you've become your own jailer."

—Tori Amos¹⁹

When people ask me how I became a public speaker on LGBTQ issues, I tell them that it was not something that came easily. It took me years to find my voice, because I was raised to believe that my voice didn't matter.

When I was growing up—and really, this went on well into my thirties, when I spoke at the dinner table—it was as if I wasn't there. As the family gathered around our pockmarked wooden table, I would ask my parents, "May I please have some more rice?" The silence in the room expanded so much that you couldn't move or breathe or speak. Everyone averted their eyes, looking down as they ate. It was as if I were in a room alone, because not one of my family members—my mom, dad, older brother, or two older sisters—would acknowledge that I had spoken. After a while, my mother would address my father, "Does the child want more rice?" At the dinner table, and often in other situations, she never spoke to me directly or used my name, just referenced me in third person as "the child."

As a young kid, I learned to say nothing. But as a teenager coming into my anger, I would shout, "Why don't you ask me yourself?" Still

I got no response, no verbal or physical reaction. From anyone. Every night the game was the same. My mother would speak to my father, who would then ask me, "Do you want more rice?" Diminished, I would hold out my plate so he could serve me.

Since my mother refused to speak to me directly, she used my father as a conduit, and my father was complicit in the ritual by playing his role without any deviation from how it was assigned. My siblings were well trained to condone this behavior with silence; they knew very well that to speak up meant that they themselves would become a target. I had no choice but to be silenced into submission, into nonpersonhood. There was no breaking through. It was clear that I was not worthy of being responded to, that my words fell on deaf ears, and that there was no way I could convince anyone that I was indeed living and breathing right in front of them. That I was fully human.

If I didn't eat my food quickly enough, my mother would reach out and steal it, especially my meat. If I briefly looked the other way, she would likely take a few bites of beef, reminding me again that the "lowly girl child," to use her words, did not need to eat as much as the others. That was the cultural training she had been taught. I was the youngest, and female-born, and clearly gender nonconforming. I was smaller than everyone else, so I probably didn't need to eat as much anyway, and we wouldn't want any of it to go to waste.

* * *

My mother was proud that she could feed a family of six on a dollar. She could buy a cheap piece of beef for fifty-nine cents a pound, tenderize it by beating it into submission with a wooden mallet, marinate it in a soy sauce concoction, cook it, and call it steak. I was well into my teenage years before I learned that "steak" did not mean some hard, fatty, grisly slab.

"You don't like steak?" my neighbor queried with surprise. I was a junior in high school when our neighbors invited us over for steak dinner, which was apparently a really big deal. As I chewed tender morsels and discovered that I actually liked steak, these nice white people chatted with my jovial parents and asked me about myself. It was very different from dinner at home, which felt so pinched, so full of ritual and tension.

Back home, my mother would literally count the green beans. This was how we learned math as a tool for managing our limited resources. "There are thirty-six beans and six of us, so how many beans do we each get?" she would ask. It's no wonder I wanted more rice.

As a young adult, I learned to hold my plate away from her, or just to get up from the table with my plate in hand and go to another room, so I could eat in peace without the constant snatching of my food out from under me. But as a young child I didn't feel so empowered. If I needed to go to the bathroom, or if I ran to answer the ringing telephone, I would surely return to an emptier plate.

It's no wonder that I struggled with food addiction as a young adult. Once I left home and headed for college, I felt liberated to eat as much as I wanted without the stress of needing to protect my food. After rugby practice my first year in college, I would load up my tray in the cafeteria with meat loaf and mashed potatoes, all that American food that others found boring but I found enticing. A burden had lifted. But it wasn't long before I was overindulging in food as a way to swallow my feelings. I watched as my dorm's resident bulimic piled up her trays at the cafeteria, snacked in her dorm room at all hours, then quietly stepped out to throw up in an out-of-the-way bathroom. I knew her struggle, but I never threw up, just stuffed and swallowed it all—my anger, isolation, and unworthiness. I read *Fat Is a Feminist Issue*, Susie Orbach's classic 1978 book that proposed that women eat to take up more space in a sexist social system, but felt confused that I never gained weight, which just added to my list of shifting realities as a racially ambiguous, gender-transgressive person.

* * *

In high school I had very demanding English classes that required class participation as a percentage of the grade. I was terrified of one hard-nosed teacher in particular, Mr. Drawback, as we called him, because he was harsh with students who didn't speak in class. It was deeply painful to watch him make the quiet Asian girls cry, like Betty Wu, a Chinese girl who was my friend. She broke down as he relentlessly berated her for not speaking up, asking the question again and again with greater volume.

leaning over her with nasty breath, and calling her a “ninny” and other names for not answering.

I averted my eyes and looked down. My heart ached as she crumpled into her seat, tears streaming down her face. I knew her pain. I knew exactly why, no matter how smart she was, she couldn’t speak up in class.

These were public school honors classes, and we were all driven, college-bound, honors students with teachers who were celebrated for their skills. We worked extremely hard to complete every assignment with flying colors. We read every old-time, crusty piece of English literature. We wrote every five-part essay. But some of us were not comfortable calling attention to ourselves or taking up any space at all in class.

I wanted to hide, especially when Mr. Drawback asked a question I knew the answer to, one to which I could surely provide an in-depth response if it were on a written test. My heart raced in fear that I would get called on, that I would be faced with the unbearable discomfort of demonstrating my knowledge, then sighed with relief when a big white guy with no trauma about speaking up would stretch out at his desk and comfortably shoot off some half-assed answer. It seemed like white people were not worried about speaking up in class. They did not have the cultural conditioning we suffered from—that to speak up was to die a little every time. That to speak up was to be reminded, one more time, that they were not meant to be seen or heard. That their voice didn’t matter. That they had no voice at all, because it didn’t really exist.

Needless to say, Mr. Drawback laid into me, too. He was supposedly teaching us to speak out, but he seemed to really enjoy making students squirm, especially the Asian girls. As far as I remember, I never cried in class, but I know I disintegrated into intense panic. I knew the smell of danger. I flinched in his presence. I was in a state of fight or flight for the classroom hour, as long as it took to get in and get out, terrified that I would be the one on the receiving end of his harassment this time. But no amount of harassment was going to make it any easier for me to speak up in class. It did not help me rise above my terror. My family training taught me that to speak up was to be punished in front of my family, all well trained to condone the behavior with their silence. And in school I

learned that *not* to speak up was to be squashed into a terrified puddle in front of my peers, who were also disciplined into silence.

* * *

Now, when people ask me how I got into this line of work, conducting LGBTQ and transgender-specific cultural competency trainings, I have to say that it was not the destiny I ever would have imagined for myself. I always knew deep down that, despite the relentless silencing, despite decades of active dehumanization, I did indeed have a voice, and that my particular path in life carried an important perspective. But my fight-or-flight response was so ingrained, so beyond my control on a physical level, that I was well into my fourth decade in this world before I began to break through. Prior to that time, whenever I was at an event, or in a meeting—even the most homey, comfortable, kicking-back-on-someone’s-couch meeting—I was terrified of speaking in a group. One-on-one was easy, but in a group I got profoundly nervous, my stomach flipped, my heart raced, and I worked extremely hard to manage my breathing so I could speak without sounding like a nervous wreck. Often I was too paralyzed, and my body’s functions too overcome by my terror, to hide it.

When I began to stand in front of groups of strangers to speak about what some considered a controversial topic, I was terrified. I was uncomfortable with the exposure of me as an out, butch lesbian. I was nervous about the exposure of me as an out trans person, too. I was very aware that people always saw me coming, that they looked me up and down. I was concerned about the consequences of exposing myself to others’ ignorance and biases. But most of all, I was freaked out that I had the audacity to take up space by standing proudly in front of a group of people and educate them about how to treat us as equals.

Training after training, as I prepared to begin the session, my heart jumped as I attempted to modulate my breathing. I reminded myself that I was breaking the rules by pushing against inequality. I doubted my knowledge and questioned my ability to speak without looking nervous. But once I began the training, the physical symptoms stopped and I found myself relaxing into the experience.

Ultimately, it wasn't any particular therapy approach, or a witchy ritual to vibe out the silencing and humiliation, that helped me arrive. It was the act of training itself. It was the years that became decades of speaking to groups of people so that they could provide better services for marginalized populations. It was the hundreds of training events, the tens of thousands of participants who listened to me, cared about the topic, asked questions, and engaged in meaningful discussion. That is how I found my voice.

PROFESSIONAL TRAVELER

As a student at UC Santa Cruz in the early '80s, I experienced both an awakening and a boiling-over that filled me with the urge to run. As Ronald Reagan won the presidency in the fall of 1980, I found the academics in my first year both easier and harder than high school—easier because I didn't have to do as much work, or so it seemed, but harder because I was required to stretch in ways I never had before. No longer beholden to a grading system, I was to outdo *myself*, rather than others, to uncover hidden talents, question social hierarchies, and explore complex thoughts—achievements that instructors assessed and documented in written narrative evaluations, instead of grades.

I felt isolated and on unstable footing in my dorm, which seemed to be dominated by rich *rah-rah*s from Southern California with outgrown Farrah Fawcett wings and daddies who bought them shiny new cars. In my first year, I played rugby with strong, vivacious dykes, slept with my first woman, and came down with a severe case of mononucleosis as I struggled to process it all. I had to come to terms with the fact that I was female, even though I had never seen myself that way.

Until the age of eighteen, I was fueled by deep, internalized misogyny, despite my intense, close relationship with my high school girlfriend Kristie, the hippie "best friend" whom I spent long hours with on the phone and frequently slept with in the same bed. She would call me to ask if I could come over so she could play me a love song, which she dedicated with "if only you were a boy, Willy." We loved each other but didn't dare express our love for each other sexually.

But most of my high school friends were guys, because I related to them and because I developed a strong dislike for women, especially Chinese women. In the '70s, women were not often listened to, valued, taken seriously, or considered leaders. Women were often mocked. Asian women were not regarded as having anything important to say. As I observed my mother's Chinese friends sipping tea in our living room, describing the mundane details of cooking and cleaning for the men and boys in their lives, I formed an early resentment toward them. They seemed to accept, without question or struggle, their supposed inherent inferiority. I hated them for listening to men even though men didn't listen to *them*. I hated them for accepting the ways in which men disregarded and derided them. I hated them because I received ample messages from society that women were not to be trusted. I hated Chinese women because they seemed as weak and unimportant as everyone said they were. I rejected them as a reflection of me.

But in Santa Cruz, something shifted. I began to realize and accept that I was a woman, that I was attracted to women, and that I was a woman who loved women. It was no simple process, but the unraveling of years of disdain for women was profoundly liberating.

I felt uneasy on the first day of Introduction to Feminism, the now-legendary course taught by Bettina Aptheker. It was a hot September afternoon in 1981. The room was packed with two hundred women and a couple of men, with one black woman in a sea of white faces. As someone who lacked clarity about both my gender and my race, I wasn't sure where I fit in. But as I listened to Bettina discuss the women's and civil rights movements, I found myself riveted to the topics she addressed and the connections she made. I realized that somehow there was a place for me in this conversation; the social, cultural, and historical perspectives that came with feminist analysis turned me on and refocused my narrow lens.

I began to embrace my experience as a woman. I educated myself about the subjugation of women in the United States and elsewhere, and the ways in which women had fought back. I was struck by the overwhelming male domination in health care systems; books like the seminal *Our Bodies, Ourselves* taught me and a generation of women how to control our own bodies and center our health care experiences. I par-

ticipated in Take Back the Night marches alongside women who claimed their right to walk safely at night.

I began to come out not just as a woman or as a lesbian, but as an Asian woman, which felt unfamiliar and exciting yet lonely. I wasn't like any other Asian women I had ever known. Though I grew up with a lot of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipina friends, I had never seen another Asian woman who was even remotely androgynous or gutsy. But there was something very soothing about beginning to view my life within a sociopolitical context. I discovered Ruthanne Lum McCunn's book *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, a fictionalized account of Lalu Nathoy, later known as Polly Bemis, who was traded at age thirteen by her father in China for two bags of seeds, brought to America to be a sex slave, and later won her freedom in a poker game. I began to understand the implications of race, gender, and class that had shaped my own experience, as well as that of women who came before me. Though written documentation about Chinese and Asian American women was limited, and work by Asian American lesbians was virtually nonexistent, I began to piece together a social and historical framework for these collective experiences.

I took a class called Women in American History, which was really just about white women with means. In an effort to counteract the erasure of women who did not fit into this slice of American history, I worked with a group of students who researched the history of women of color and what were known as "passing women"—women who lived as men. Like the others on their respective projects, I provided a thorough bibliography so the instructor could include the history of Chinese women in America the next time she taught the class. Sadly, she shoved that rich information in a drawer, never to see the light of day again, and continued to teach that course about white women for decades.

* * *

When I came out as a lesbian, it was messy. I had some parting sexual experiences with men that were less than empowering, and relationships with women that were imbalanced and complicated. The first woman I slept with went home to Southern California over the holidays, at which time her high school girlfriend collapsed while running and died of anorexia. I

moved across campus, and my new roommate, who was bipolar, and I had an attraction to each other as we both struggled to come out. Not long afterward, she had a breakdown and was locked up in a mental institution by her psychologist parents.

All the lesbians I knew were white, and I couldn't reconcile my mother's expectation that I be a good Chinese girl with the lesbian I was discovering inside. When I rode the bus or walked through the redwoods on campus, people stared at me. Apparently, people were stumped or fascinated by my race, and sometimes by my gender. A lot of people asked me, "What are you?" People stopped me on the street to *tell* me that, not ask me whether, I dyed my hair, in reference to a shock of auburn up front.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you look like Yoko Ono?" asked my neighbor. As someone who was frequently on the receiving end of unsolicited assessments about my race, which varied widely, I did not have a clear picture of what I looked like. My first response was, "Really? Do you think I look Asian?" Only later did I realize that the comment was offensive because I didn't look anything like Yoko Ono.

When I hung out with dudes from school, they told me that tofu was invented in Santa Cruz. People got up in my face with weird questions about "Eastern philosophy." When I went to a lesbian support group or planning group, women stared at me, then told me, "I'm so glad you're here." I hadn't said a word. I quickly learned that when I single-handedly integrated the lesbian scene, it made them feel better, more important, like they got more cool points and their status improved. My closest friend affectionately called me Willy Tofu Monkey Face, which she frequently yelled from across the room, because, as she explained it, my face "looked like a monkey's face." I felt miserable and restless but couldn't articulate that being enthusiastically and repeatedly told that I looked like a monkey was deeply unsettling. I just knew that I had to get the hell out of there.

I knew I couldn't go home to my parents, whom I couldn't talk to, and the soul-deadening 'burbs I had been so desperate to leave. So the first summer of college I lived in the woods. I hid a flashlight in a hole at the base of a redwood tree at the edge of campus. When night fell, it was completely dark around the grove, but I got to know the terrain well so I could

find the tree in the obscure night. Once I found my light, I hiked through brambles and tall redwoods to the underbrush where I had stashed my backpack and sleeping bag. I slept under this low canopy of brush, not a soul in sight. I didn't eat much, mostly nuts, crackers, carrots, and peanut butter, and an occasional hot meal with a five-finger discount at the school cafeteria. I never cooked and didn't want to spend money on prepared food. I got really spaced out from being hungry all the time but found my thrill hiking to a river and skinny-dipping in it. That's how I bathed. The economy in Santa Cruz was very depressed, and jobs were hard to come by. Toward the end of the summer, I finally got a job working graveyard at the local tea factory but still never got enough to eat.

The following summer, I was a camp counselor at a Girl Scout camp up the coast, near Lighthouse Point. It was vibrant with badass, fun-loving dykes. They exhibited the kind of kinship the '80s term "family" referred to. In the '80s, gay people were *family* because it often wasn't safe for us. We had to look out for one another. I loved their "women can do whatever we want" energy, and that they weren't afraid to be themselves. As a counselor, I loved leading the energetic camp songs that all the counselors and campers grew tired of, and taking the kids on backpacking trips through the wooded state parks nearby. I really enjoyed supporting the tortured baby-butch campers, still in high school, who didn't yet realize who they were.

I had affairs with a couple of the camp counselors, who were older than I was, with stable housing and cars, and who made me feel connected to a temporary place of home. These women were white and couldn't begin to understand my kind of crazy, but they were a little damaged themselves, so we found each other. While they didn't know the isolation I felt as a woman of color, they knew what it was like to struggle with demons and feelings of low self-worth because they had been mistreated. I discovered the deeper bonds of lesbian sisterhood.

I went back to school my junior year. As much as I embraced this new, lesbian culture, I felt culturally stranded. I connected with an African American lesbian, and that helped me feel less isolated in this monolithic, Birkenstock wearing, oddly seasoned, tofu-eating, crunchy-granola scene.

I made plans to get the hell out of dodge. I hadn't finished my degree, but I just couldn't be in Santa Cruz anymore.

In March 1983, as my departure date neared, I attended an event for International Women's Day, where I met Aly Kim, a Chinese/Korean American lesbian who was selling records for a women's recording label. There she was, smiling broadly and sporting an '80s dyke 'do—a business-in-the-front, party-in-the-back mullet of straight black hair. I was so surprised and thrilled to discover that she was a lesbian, I excitedly introduced her to Dafna Wu, a Chinese/Brazilian/Jewish American lesbian whom I had recently met on campus, proclaiming, "Now we are three." Two weeks later, despite having finally found other Asian lesbians, I was on a bus to Mexico.

* * *

As a young child, I decided that I should learn Spanish because it was an essential skill to have as a resident of California. In high school I studied with great enthusiasm, honing my accent until my *d*'s softened, my *p*'s mixed with *b*'s, and my *r*'s curled off my tongue with ease. When I headed for Mexico, the dollar was robust against the peso. I had a couple thousand dollars left from slinging greasy wings at the Kentucky Fried Chicken in San Mateo and from my entrepreneurial endeavors in the suburban street economy.

My mom had taken me to get a bank account at age six, so I could learn about the importance of saving. My tiny hand had reached over the counter to give the startled teller my allowance and the silver dollars that my grandfather had pressed into my palm. Over the years I went hungry at lunchtime so I could save sixty cents, the lunch money I got two or three times a week, and then ran home starving to eat at three o'clock. I had been saving my money my whole life so I could run away.

Though there were many happy moments with my family during my childhood years, I was also deeply pained and exhausted from the relentless ridicule and silencing and the disregard for my name change. I planned to run away from the time I was six, and even made some half-assed attempt then. By the time I was ten, I was studying how to survive in the woods, in case it came to that. I absolutely loved the book

and movie *My Side of the Mountain*, about a boy who runs away to the Catskill Mountains, making his home in a big, hollowed tree and persevering through winter storms in his pursuit of independence, adventure, and freedom. In middle school I felt the pang of hunger so deep in my stomach it was concave, but I kept my eyes on my goal as I jingled another sixty cents in my front pocket. During my high school years I had recurring, tortured, Sisyphean nightmares about my parents and eagerly landed a job at the Kentucky Fried Chicken as soon as I turned fifteen and a half. Ultimately, it was my girlfriend and my drive to excel in school that kept me home.

But now, at age twenty, I knew the time had come. I packed my backpack, went to San Mateo, and told my mother I was never coming back. As we embraced in the driveway, she clutched me tightly until her fingernails dug into my side. When I looked up, I saw tears streaming down her cheeks. I was completely dumfounded, thoroughly surprised by her reaction.

I caught a ride to San Bernardino with a fellow student, a sweet straight girl with long springy hair with whom I had had an affair. I stayed overnight with her and her parents, and her father drove me to the bus station late the next night. After being poked awake by a bus station worker, who was checking to be sure I had a ticket, I caught a middle-of-the-night bus to San Ysidro and walked across the border early the next morning. It wasn't the first time I had been to Mexico; I had gone to Puerto Vallarta with two friends in college and had fallen in love with the ocean, people, food, and language. Alone this time, I was excited to be there again and to use my Spanish.

I got on a train for Guadalajara. Standing on the outside back perch of the train's last car as the countryside blew by, I felt my widened eyes tearing from the wind. After chatting it up with Mexican passengers and eating *tortas ricas* and drinking sodas from plastic bags, brought onboard by local women at station stops, I retired to the skinny little bed in my sleeper car. Life was good.

I was sporting an asymmetrical '80s haircut, crafted late one night by a giggling friend. My hair was buzzed on one side and "preppy" on the other, short but styled, with a long, skinny braid in the back. Children

MAH-JONGG ACCEPTANCE

I grew up playing mah-jongg with my family as a central expression of cultural and family connection, and we continue to play when we find the time. With much snacking and goofing around, we nickname all the tiles, laugh a lot, and create a cacophony together as the hard tiles collide when we mix them after each hand. We have our own set of rules, which are apparently a combination of Chinese from Hawaii-style and our idiosyncratic family rules morphed over time.

Also known as *mah-jueck*, mah-jongg is a Chinese game that is played around the world. It's similar to the card game rummy, in that players try to get three or four of a kind in a particular suit. In the United States, mah-jongg is played by a spectrum of API folks, and since its introduction to Americans in the 1920s, it has enjoyed popularity among Jewish folks, especially on the East Coast.

Growing up, we played with a plastic set that looked like lime-green and white-almond gelatin. Sometimes we played with a special bamboo-and-ivory set, made before it was illegal to poach elephants for their tusks. My mom illustrated colorful cheat sheets so new players could keep track of the three suits, the three dragons, and, of course, the four winds: *doong, nam, sy, buck*. East, south, west, north.

The game can go on for hours if you have the time. We relax into our silliness as we experience the uniqueness of our cultural fabric, understood without question or explanation. We munch cuttlefish and chocolate-covered macadamia nuts, rub the raised tiles with our fingers, and play it cool during strategically tense moments.

If we haven't played in a while, we rediscover our favorite tiles like long-lost friends, which we announce in Cantonese and English as we set them down for all players to see. There's Stabby, or *Hoong Joong*, the red, swordlike, heavyweight tile that is the character for "central," or "central country" (China). There's Family Camp Stove, *Sei Toong*, four in the circle suit, which looks like multicolored concentric circles on an electric stove. And there's *Baht Mon*, which means eight in the character suit—sung, of course, with a familiar superhero theme song: "*Duh duh duh duh duh duh duh duh*, Baht Mon!"

When we get three of a kind, we yell, "*Poong!*" Sometimes, on closer inspection, we are amused to discover that one of my dad's tiles in his so-called *poong* is similar to, but not exactly like, the others. Once, my dad had a *poong* of the five in the circle suit, known as *oong toong* in Cantonese. The word for "grandfather" in Cantonese is *gung gung* (pronounced *goong goong*). My clever nephew, Weston, a teenager at the time, exclaimed, "Gung Gung *poonged* on an *oong toong!*" which Georgia and I memorialized on a T-shirt that we gave to him the following Christmas.

And when we win, we yell out, "Mah-jongg!" and do a happy dance and collect our multicolored chips. My sister Sunya famously jumps up and bangs on the walls.

* * *

When I was growing up, my mom always said that each one of us kids would get a mah-jongg set when we got married. She looked high and low for four special sets with the numbers only in Chinese. She didn't want any "haole numbers"; she wanted us to know the Chinese numbers. Over some period of years, she found four sets that met her criteria and tucked them away as special gifts for each of us at the time of our matrimony. As a child, I wasn't sure what the future held, but I knew that I had always broken the rules and would likely not live up to this expectation of marriage, which might mean loss of my culture and family togetherness.

In 1984, I was about to publish the article, "Asian Lesbianism as a Political Identity," in *Sojourner*, a women's newspaper out of Boston. I knew it was unlikely that my parents would ever see this newspaper, but I felt that since I was publishing, I should come out to them.

I was living in Boston at the time and came home to visit my family in June 1984 on the occasion of Weston's Red Eggs and Ginger party, the Chinese tradition to celebrate a new baby. "It's just a little piggy!" my people would say for the first few months after a baby was born, keeping the baby's birth a secret so the evil spirits wouldn't steal it away. Since infant mortality was so high in China, it was cause for great celebration when the baby made it a month and was likely to survive, at which time its birth was revealed and the baby was welcomed into the family and community with a Red Eggs and Ginger party.

Soon after my arrival in the Bay Area, I had dinner at my parents' house with my siblings. Not usually one to drink much, I uncharacteristically slugged back a glass of wine as I nervously attempted to eat dinner. When my dad asked me questions, I gave stilted, one-word responses. I was distracted, tense, and not particularly friendly. Awkward.

Finally, my sister Su-Lin pulled me into the bathroom, put her hands on my shoulders, and eyed me close. "You have to tell them. Mom thinks you don't like the food. You have to tell them soon."

I went back out there and began. I was so nervous and freaked out, I couldn't breathe. I was about to burst out in tears or flames. "Mom, Dad, I'm a lesbian." As if they couldn't see by looking, as if they hadn't known me my whole life.

In anticipation of this conversation, my brother had said, "They're not the kind of people who are gonna run you out with a shotgun." But I had been gripped with a terror that knotted my stomach and kept me at a distance from them. I had no idea what to expect. As it turned out, we had a conversation unlike any other conversation I had ever had with my parents.

It was dead quiet as they gathered their thoughts. My dad responded in his measured, soft-spoken way. "I've known that for some time on an intellectual level. Now I have to process it on an emotional level." Surprised to hear his words, I let myself breathe.

My mom asked if I was sure, if I thought this feeling was going to change. I responded that it wasn't a phase. Then she shared with all of us that she had read *The Well of Loneliness* as a teenager and wondered if she was a lesbian because she was different. I couldn't believe my ears.

I showed my dad my article, which he read on the spot and said was good.

That night, as I slept at my brother's flat in San Francisco's Cole Valley, I felt a profound sense of relief. It was Saturday night, and I could hear the loud music playing below at Maude's, the famous and now-defunct dyke bar. As I listened to Anita Ward belt out the lyrics to "Ring My Bell," my body finally let go of the stress I had harbored for years and I drifted off to sleep.

The next day, back at my parents' house, I spoke to my mom in the kitchen. "Mom, I'm never getting married." Never say never, right? It was 1984. I couldn't imagine that people of the same sex got married, or that I would ever want to do that. Marriage equality was not imaginable back then. I followed that statement with something I'd been longing to know. "Can I have my mah-jongg set?"

She shook her head. "No! No! No!" was her response, as she shuddered and changed the subject. We both knew that the mah-jongg sets were supposed to be special wedding gifts. I guessed that meant that I was never going to get one.

I returned to Boston and began organizing Asian lesbians in Boston and the greater New England area. In September 1984, three months after my trip to the Bay Area, I came home to discover a hefty, rectangular package on my doorstep. Surprised that my parents would have spent the money to mail something so heavy and costly, I eagerly ripped it open. There, on the steps of my apartment building, I gulped as I took in the gift. It was my mah-jongg set, complete with instructions and colorful, hand-drawn cheat sheets.

Sometimes gestures speak so much louder than words. My parents aren't the kind of people who would tell me they loved me with words, but there it was. It was my twenty-second birthday, and I was holding in my hands the most profound gift a parent can ever give to a child: family acceptance. Two years later, my mother began to call me Willy.

FAMILY PRIVILEGE

"When you heal yourself, you heal seven generations back and seven generations forward."

—Ligaya

In October 2014, I had the opportunity to perform spoken word for a wonderfully savvy, diverse audience at Vassar College. During the Q-and-A period after the show, they engaged me in thought-provoking discussion. A Latin@ transmasculine individual asked me to "speak to the myth that people of color are less supportive of trans family members." His choice of words seemed to imply that he had an agenda, that he wanted me to shatter what he believed was a common misconception. As I responded, I thought about the many layers of complexity I needed to address in my reply. Of course trans people of all colors and backgrounds struggle to be appreciated, recognized, and affirmed by our families of origin. We want to feel loved with our families by our sides. Who can say that folks of color are less supportive of their trans family members than white folks? It's unfortunate that we even have to make the comparison.

But the larger question in my mind was this: What is family acceptance, exactly? And what does that look like for trans people of all colors, cultural experiences, religions, and geographic locations? Some of us are fortunate to receive unconditional love and support. Some of us experience loss of family that is absolutely devastating. Some of us are simply

tolerated, rather than truly accepted. Many of us live in the complicated, blended space between acceptance and disrespect.

For many trans and gender-nonconforming people of color, family relationships and community ties hold tremendous importance. In the United States and other nations where we locate our experience outside the mainstream cultural framework, our families reflect our social, cultural, and community experience as people of color within a dominant culture that wields racial, economic, and gender-based power.

To be sure, some cultures affirm transgender experience. In locales such as Thailand, Hawaii, Samoa, India, Pakistan, and the Yucatán region of Mexico, there are indigenous traditions that recognize and appreciate gender diversity, particularly among male-to-female individuals, though the existence of female-to-male individuals is less often acknowledged. Stigmatization and marginalization of trans people still persist in these societies, but people in these regions have a heightened awareness of the existence of transfeminine individuals.

Yet many trans people of color hail from traditional cultures that attach considerable stigma to gender-transgressive behavior. Families and communities exert pressure to adhere to cultural mores. When we don't follow the rules, our families may reject us to varying degrees. For people of color who are living in countries where we are not part of the dominant culture, family rejection can impact us as a devastating loss of cultural context, and of our literal and figurative homes.

While trans folks of color are unique as individuals, many of us view our experience not as individualized, but as rooted within our families and community frameworks, even if we have experienced rejection, harassment, and abuse at the hands of our families of origin and/or communities. In an effort to maintain these ties, many trans people of color, like other queer and trans people, create families of choice. These relationships can be especially important for people whose cultural traditions place great value on family and interdependence. Service providers, community support organizations, and educational institutions can build rapport by acknowledging and honoring these family relationships, and by not making assumptions that these folks view themselves solely as individuals, when they instead might see themselves as part of a larger community structure.

But connections with our original families often give us our most fundamental sense of home. Many trans people of color have maintained relationships with our families of origin, though we may not feel fully respected as trans people. Still, we are at family gatherings enjoying deep cultural connections with multiple generations.

* * *

When I was a child, the Chinese side of my family had a harder time supporting me as a trans person than the Caucasian side of my family. I know that my parents were doing what they could with the resources they had. When I came out as a trans kid in the early '70s, there was no public awareness, support organizations, or appreciation for trans people. There was no community, no trans-affirming policies, and certainly no visibility of transmasculine people. There were no visible Chinese trans people, though the goddess Quan Yin, who my mother believes helped her find my dad, was originally depicted as male, a part of Quan Yin's story that's not often acknowledged. There was nothing to help my mother integrate the reality of a gender-expansive child with the teachings of her culture. Even now, while we have come a long way and many support organizations value diversity, very few resources exist to support families of color with trans and gender-expansive kids.

True, my mother had difficulty accepting my gender expression. But, as I explained to the Vassar audience, I got other things from my mother: a rich, multicultural experience; a sense of tradition; cultural and spiritual values; and connection to family and community. My mother educated the world around her about Chinese culture. She taught her first-grade class how to use chopsticks and took them to Chinatown. She educated her friends when she greeted them: "In Chinese culture, you never come empty-handed and you never leave empty-handed," she'd explain as they graciously accepted a small gift. Our legendary Chinese New Year parties were a festive opportunity to share our cultural traditions. I am grateful for the gifts she has given me.

I also feel grateful to have a kind, thoughtful, emotionally accessible father who showed me that masculinity can be capable and caring. Though my dad is of a generation that did not value women as equals, he never

embodied his father role in an overbearing way. He was always organizing activities for us, including lots of outdoor exploration. When we went backpacking he would rise before dawn, catch fish in the creek or lake, and fry them on the fire. He'd make oatmeal or bring freeze-dried eggs to life and boil water for hot chocolate or tea. Then he would bang his tinny aluminum Sierra cup to announce that breakfast was ready, as we'd poke our sleepy heads out of our warm sleeping bags, completely unaware that he had been up orchestrating it all for us.

* * *

A week before I traveled to Vassar College, I was honored to receive the Vanguard Award from Transgender Law Center. My parents, at ages ninety-two and eighty-eight, attended the event, a demonstration of family acceptance in itself. In my speech I had the opportunity to thank them not only for showing me the beauty of community, but for teaching me the *power* of educating our community about our cultural frameworks. That is a gift that guides me as a writer and public health consultant every day.

Family acceptance is a privilege that many queer and trans folks don't have, and its absence has a significant impact on our health and well-being. Research conducted by the Family Acceptance Project at San Francisco State University found that highly rejected gay and transgender people ages twenty-one to twenty-five had lower self-esteem, were more isolated, felt hopeless, and were at high risk for physical and mental health problems. These young people were eight times more likely to attempt suicide, six times more likely to report high levels of depression, more than three times as likely to use illegal drugs, and more than three times as likely to be at risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.²²

Family dynamics are entrenched. People of all colors and cultural experiences, including those assigned male at birth, have been adversely impacted by cultural misogyny that polices and denigrates gender expression that steps beyond what is considered the norm. Many queer women and transmasculine people have to undo generations of female subjugation in order to succeed at living our lives authentically and finding our own agency. Even years after medical transition, many transmasculine folks continue to live with the sexism and misogyny that have been directed at

us across our life span. Trans guys say that their brothers are accustomed to telling them what to do, and that their fathers ignore them when other male family members are present. They describe a dynamic in which everyone in their family disrespects their name and pronouns.

Certainly, trans people from myriad cultures, whether they are of color or not, feel strongly aligned with their family cultures and larger community structures and navigate families with varied levels of acceptance. In my experience, I've observed that for Asian and Pacific Islander transmasculine people, the concept of family acceptance is layered and not singularly defined. We may be at the table, eating our traditional food with everyone else in the family, but our families' responses to our gender identities and expressions vary. Some families don't talk about it; some recognize it but are unable to update our names and pronouns. When our parents or other older family members misgender us, whether deliberately or absentmindedly, many of us struggle with whether or not to correct them, because we have been trained to respect our elders. We weren't raised to stand up for ourselves and assert our right to be respected for who we are.

* * *

In January 2012, when I told my parents that I was medically transitioning, my dad said that he now had to understand that he had two sons. My mom asked, "Are you still gay?" In 2015 my parents often still refer to me with female pronouns, out of habit, not malice, but what's important is that they have taken my medical transition in stride. They accept me as the trans person I am today, and for that, I am extremely grateful. They have helped me financially when times were lean. They have helped me build my dreams, and they believe in me. They have taught me the meaning of family privilege.

LGBTQ people's family experiences vary widely. Many say that the relationships they have with their families of origin can be challenging, layered, and sometimes unhealthy, yet, if given the option, many choose to actively engage with their families even when they question the impact on their psyches. While all LGBTQ people need family support, queer and trans folks of color who reside in countries where we do not represent the dominant culture have a particular need for family connectedness.

The idea that all communities of color do not accept their queer and trans kids is certainly a myth. Many of us experience family acceptance that is from the heart, though sometimes not completely satisfying. Yet many of us appreciate being at the family table, as we challenge ourselves to work to improve our family dynamics so we can experience more respectful interactions. For family relationships are our lifeline to the past, a remembrance of our ancestors, a cultural congruence for our souls—however messy and imperfect they may be.

Providing Support in Communities of Color

I have worked with a number of community-based organizations that effectively give trans folks a place of home and family. An outstanding example is the Asian & Pacific Islander Wellness Center in San Francisco, an organization I'm proud to have worked with over the last few decades as staff member, board member, consultant, and volunteer. Its Trans Thrive program gives trans folks of all colors, many of them homeless or marginally housed, a taste of home where they can meet up for food, peer support groups, caring and responsive wraparound services, referrals, and skills-building opportunities. Like so many other support organizations that care for trans people around the world, Trans Thrive is a healing force for the homelessness of our bodies, minds, and spirits.

Trans Thrive works in partnership with the Transgender Economic Empowerment Initiative (TEEI), a program of the San Francisco LGBT Center. The first program in the nation to address critical trans employment issues, TEEI helps trans and gender-nonconforming people develop life skills, identify career goals, update resumes, navigate the interview process, and connect to trans-friendly employers. I've enjoyed working with TEEI in varying capacities, including launching the pre-employment workshop series, and providing transgender cultural competency training for employers. I am continually impressed by the ways that TEEI helps address the perva-

sive, systemic inequality that impacts the lives of marginalized trans folks on a daily basis.

Brown Boi Project empowers young masculine of center womyn, two-spirit people, trans men, queer and straight cisgender men of color, and allies by providing opportunities to develop leadership skills, work towards economic self-sufficiency, encourage self-care, and transform the privilege of masculinity into a tool for social change. With a commitment to racial justice and gender justice, Brown Boi has transformed the lives of thousands of queer and trans folks of color through leadership summits, workshops, and conversations that challenge misogyny, examine privilege, and focus on healing. Brown Boi is an Oakland gem that has taken its dynamic and powerful work to a number of cities across the nation, providing opportunities for people of color to embrace their masculinity without shame, build self-confidence, and create family with each other.

I'm privileged to have worked with Asian Women's Shelter in San Francisco, an organization that was one of the first domestic violence organizations to address LGBTQ, and particularly trans, issues. It serves all self-identified women, provides annual staff training on LGBTQ issues, and offers client education on LGBTQ issues quarterly. Its Homophobia Busters program trains allies to address homophobia, heterosexism, and transphobia within API immigrant and refugee communities in order to reduce isolation and create social support for API LGBTQ people. It is the role of the Homophobia Busters, as allies, to stand up for LGBTQ clients, staff, and advocates, rather than place responsibility on the shoulders of LGBTQ people. In addition, Chai Chats is a multiple-session program of training, dialogue, and skills building on healthy relationships in API LGBTQ communities. Since its inception in 1991, Asian Women's Shelter has been rooted in a social justice framework that normalizes and advances LGBTQ issues.

OLD LADY/YOUNG BOY

Snapshot: 2002

The first time I shopped in the boys' department, I was overwhelmed by a complete and utter thrill like nothing I had ever experienced in my young life. I was nine years old. It was a special moment when my exasperated father finally did what my mother and grandmother could not bring themselves to do. My mom's frequent complaint, with all the martyrdom of a hardworking Chinese mother, was that she *thought* she had *three* daughters, as if I had gone missing after spilling out of our Rambler on a sharp turn. She had the most trouble seeing me when she was looking right at me. My grandmother faithfully sent me huge red tents for dresses in the unwavering hope that they would bring me great joy on my birthday, insisting I'd like them as much as the train set I wanted but never got. My *haole* grandmother had a hard time recalling just how small I was and figured if I was eight years old, then I must have been a size 8, not a petite 6X, and that at the sight of the pretty little thing I would snap out of my raging aversion to dresses.

But my dad understood me. It was a simple act, really—giving up on trying to make me like those little flowered prints in the girls' department and crossing over to the land of stripes. I was relieved beyond words. I ran, exhilarated, through dark-colored racks of rough-and-tumble wear, each calling my name in a language I understood. I had found my fashion planet, and what a joyous celebration it was.

That was the year I changed my name from a name I'd always hated to a name that spoke my truth. And whom should I find in the boys' department, ready to party with me? Why, Billy the Kid, of course—the first pair of pants that ever hugged me and told me it was all going to be okay. These rugged, soft cords—the kind of light brown that blended well with dirt—were the coolest. But the best part was that they were emblazoned throughout in dark blue lettering with the words “Billy the Kid” in a Western motif. I wore those pants through patches on the knee and until the words and pictures rubbed bare.

* * *

Decades later, having not grown too much bigger than I was in those Billy the Kid pants, I still shop in the boys' department, trying to express my manly, *GQ* fashion sense in a department littered with cartoon-character footie pajamas and too many bright colors in a single article of clothing. It's not an easy task reconciling the holy trinity of mind, body, and fashion.

I drool over the men's ads in the Sunday paper, wondering where I can find a basic button-down shirt with a subtle, classic print that doesn't scream *clubhouse* or *bug collecting*. And yet I jump at the opportunity to express my conflicted inner adolescent. Swaggering in my long, hooded jacket, baggy jeans, and Vans, I'm used to that startled, cutting look from upper-class white ladies who walk quickly away from me. I am so much more than the narrow vibration of an adolescent male, and yet there I am at the intersection of decades of female wisdom and everything that the Target boys' department has to offer.

One night the group that I run for people of color on the FTM spectrum met in a local queer center's youth space. (The youth were kind enough to overlook the fact that some of us were well over the age limit.) The youth program had recently tricked out the place with a large-screen TV and video games. Everybody was all the way into the hands-down, absolute favorite, the Tony Hawk skateboarding video game—not for the skateboarding head rush, but because you get to create your *guy*, your avatar. You get to choose your height; your weight; your skin tone; your goatee, or not; your head wrap, tank top, Jams, tattoos, striped socks,

boots—whatever you want. We spent half the night conjuring up our adolescent male alter egos on a video screen. It was *Cosmopolitan's* virtual makeover for the FTM set.

I wear a boys' large, 14–16. According to the size charts, I'm the size of a twelve- or thirteen-year-old boy. Kids are getting bigger and bigger, and so are the clothes. I find myself getting younger and younger as I reach for a medium. But now that I've hit forty, I've got this old lady/young boy thing going. Mammogram-ready, lurching toward perimenopause, approaching middle age, I'm wondering where this will all take me as the gray hair sets in. Hell, I'm old enough to be my own parent.

And yet I long for ways to express the *man* inside me, cuz that forty-year-old transmasculine individual is certainly no boy. I need to convey the *suave bolo* who brings his lady one long-stemmed rose and sweeps her off to a candlelight dinner of gourmet delectables. How do you construct a man's image when all you have to work with is a simple palette of children's crayons?

Easter is my time of year. There's an influx of boys' dress wear—and it's on sale. I fit a size 16 perfectly. To think I spent so many years buying ragged stuff at the thrift store and hemming and taking it in. But when I put on a nice boys' suit, it's like it was made for me. Maybe I have a career in modeling after all.

Back in the day, I got my suits at the Burlington Coat Factory in downtown San Francisco, before I graduated to Nordstrom. Burlington is a huge, three-floor warehouse full of winter coats and cheap threads. The boys' suits have that slippery polyester feel, but the price was always right for my broke ass. Burlington has always had a special place in my heart. Me and my butch Filipino bud, who was even tinier than I am, loved the place. “Never tell anyone where you get your clothes,” my friend would advise, as if our tacky threads bore no resemblance to our top-secret locale. As I shopped or asked that a dressing room be opened, the straitlaced Filipina salesladies would hover, attentively scrutinizing my tie choices. “How old is the boy?” they would inquire with mock innocence. As if it hadn't occurred to them that they were looking right at him. “Thirty two,” I'd respond. “*I'm* the boy.”

* * *

In my quest for adult male stylings, I walk a tightrope between juvenile rags and this icon of male clothing—the suit. Yet it's really the middle ground I most prefer. Sometimes I find that rare gem—the perfect pair of chinos or a thick, ribbed cotton sweater.

But shopping alongside children has never really bothered me. With most of the stuff under ten bucks, I can get a whole wardrobe for the price of one pair of my wife's jeans. And with tighty-whities at \$3.79 for a pack of seven, who needs to do laundry? I'm completely sticker-shocked at the sight of adult prices. But that's cool. So far nobody's pulled the alarm cuz there's an old lady in the boys' dressing room.

One time I was cashing in on a back-to-school sale while my wife browsed. "Get these," she suggested, pulling a nice pair of dress socks from a nearby display. I threw them into the cart, and together we approached the register with my new \$30 wardrobe. The cashier never looked up.

"How's school? Do you like your teacher?" she asked, with that saccharine-sweet, talking-to-a-child voice. Georgia and I both looked at each other and burst out laughing at the sudden, twisted revelation that if I were a kid, that would make Georgia my mother. Then I laid down my platinum credit card.

The thing is, I don't really know how I'm perceived. People call me sir, or they call me ma'am. It's a rare occasion when someone addresses me as if I were a kid. Maybe it's the wrinkles, or the spot of gray, or the telltale survivor vibes of someone who has lived through a lot.

I guess I'm the male counterpart to Britney Spears, back in the day. Remember that song "I'm Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman"? I'm not a boy, not yet a man. Just an old lady/young boy stepping over the puppy-dog tails as I navigate my way through life.

REVELING IN OUR AUTHENTICITY

It was a sunny summer day when I took my wife out to brunch for her birthday at an outdoor café. Our sandy-blond waitress presented our respective plates of food, then freeze-framed with a piercing stare and, in the absence of any finesse one would presumably adopt for tipping customers, demanded, "Are you part Asian? The Asian always takes over!" She then turned to my wife and proceeded to complain about how her half-Filipino kids didn't look anything like her. As my food began to cool, it occurred to me that holding my Asian face responsible for her issues with her family was not a strategic way to get a decent tip.

Our family language was English peppered with Cantonese and Hawaiian, and everything tasted better with soy sauce. As a family we celebrated our multiculturalism. And yet, throughout my life, my features have been picked through, my cultural knowledge evaluated based on my looks or last name. "I didn't think you would know how to use chopsticks, because you have brown hair." My loyalties have been decided and my membership questioned. It hasn't been just "What are you?" but also "What are you doing here?"

Similarly, as a trans person, I embrace and celebrate my unique gender journey. But for most of my life people have been as confused about my gender as they have been about my race, struggling with their need to categorize me. You know the drill. Their eyes bug; their mouth wrangles in an awkward attempt at gendered salutations. Pronouns fail them. They pause in midair without realizing it. "Sir? Ma'am? Uh . . ."

Like many trans folks, many people of mixed heritage are not easily defined or fathomed. People who are mixed are assessed based on their facial features, body type, skin tone, cultural knowledge and mannerisms, values, language, communities, and loyalties. And not just from white folks, but from every direction. There's an authenticity check, just making sure you are who you say you are.

Ah, authenticity—that beautiful thing that we trans people continually strive for. The right not to just live, but to unquestionably revel in our own unique authenticity, even when that expression makes people uncomfortable, curious, and confused. Our masculinity and femininity are measured for realness. Our ability to be perceived as the gender we identify with is evaluated. We are resisted even when we assert our true selves repeatedly.

As trans people, we have experienced the world in different shoes, different realities, different bathrooms. We speak a different language, about T²³ and getting clocked and transfeminism.²⁴ We use gender-transgressive pronouns and in-house words. We've stepped beyond the expectations of our families, communities, and societies. Many of us know what it's like to live as both female and male at different times in our lives, or at the same time. Some of us are perceived in different ways from moment to moment. Some of us are perceived as clearly one gender or the other yet locate ourselves in the gender galaxy beyond, whether in the present or in the past. And even if our identity or presentation is not ambiguous, our truths, and those of our loved ones, are layered. We may be keenly aware of them every minute of the day, or they may fade from our daily thoughts, but these complexities are there, behind our eyes and under our skin.

That, to me, is where trans experience and mixed-heritage experience intersect: in the ambiguities and complexities, the layers of cultural experience that don't meet the eye, and the difficulties that people have acknowledging and accepting them. The gifts are beyond measure, the opportunity to put a unique lens on the world, to see the views that others don't have eyes for. I view trans experience through a mixed-heritage lens because both are cross-cultural experiences, adventures outside easy categorizations. Living this life means experiencing more than one reality

at the same time, code switching into different languages and norms of behavior, cranking up the brightness and color. And in order to thrive unapologetically as mixed people and as trans people, we harness the confidence and courage to defy exclusion and revel in our bold authenticity.

FACIAL INCONTINENCE

Snapshot: 2007

I pulled off my shoes and slammed them into the gray plastic bin, along with my jacket, belt, cell phone, and man bag. Agents in stuffed white shirts and dark blue pants, badges and yellow stripes, sniffed out my belongings under the glare of their monitors. I dutifully held out my boarding pass to the commanding, gesticulating official and slowly walked through the blinking doorway to our collective imagined safety. The place echoed of colliding heavy plastic and smelled of boredom, regulations, and hurry. Like most of the other sleepy weekday travelers, I had the routine down. Getting from one point to another at this moment in time means that you must partially undress in the company of strangers while bossy people charged up by national fear and the power of the uniform tell you exactly how they want you to do it and where they want you to put it.

I sat down on a dull-gray bench to put my shoes back on, then strode up the escalator, got a quick read of the departure monitor, and hustled to my gate. A little out of breath, I came to a stop between the seats in the waiting area and the check-in desk and realized that my flight wasn't even boarding yet. I was cool.

Then I looked down at a woman seated nearby. Her face registered a look of horror, like she was caught in alarm at the sight of the ghost of Saddam Hussein. Her eyes bugged; her mouth dropped. Her face became

loose like gravity undone. Though she was upright and clearly awake, she didn't appear to be breathing. She was frozen in time and fright, and staring dead at me—just another random, nicely dressed businessman on a weekday jaunt from the Bay Area to Southern California. Apparently, she had an attack of facial incontinence.

You'd think that I had failed to notice a quarter-size, angry-red zit barreling out of my chin. Or maybe when I'd changed the baby's diaper I'd absentmindedly wiped my exhausted forehead with the back of my poo-poo-soiled hand. What could be so alarming to set off the red lights and sirens at this point in the security check-in process?

Flight or fright, the Homeland Security Advisory System is in effect, the Culture of Fear an indelible part of the fabric of our everyday being. As a nation we are caught in a loop of paranoia, circling from yellow (elevated risk) to orange (high risk) to red (severe risk) and back, with no justification of changes to the threat level. I circle through yellow (*he's a clean-shaven guy with a recent haircut but a very small build*); eyebrows raise; to orange (*wait a minute, what the fuck is it?*); eyes bug, breathing slows, head cocks to the side; to red (*He sounds like a woman. Are those boobs?*); jaws unhinge, pupils dilate, head spins off its axis.

And so it goes, every day, as I mind my own business; everywhere, people in my presence are completely losing control of their facial muscles. Like incontinence of the mind, or of basic social skills, this failure of muscular engagement is uncontrollable, messy, and apparently unprepared for. There are no diapers for this. No training pants with Velcro sides, no extra-absorbent padding.

Even though this has happened thousands of times, I still forget that I freak people's shit. I'm not bad-looking. There's nothing about my presentation that begs for attention, like wildly colored hair or odd tattoos or piercings. In my travels my clothes are about as *GQ* business casual as you can get—dress leather jacket, polished shoes, smart button-down shirt, and Dockers. I iron my clothes. They match. I'm presentable. But the problem here has nothing to do with what I wear or how well groomed I am. It has to do with my incongruity—my mere existence as a transgender person makes people uncomfortable. This day and every day, this experience will happen to me about eight more times. And I'm not just talking

about bathroom drama; it also happens during innocuous activities like buying food, getting a seat on the plane, traveling while transgender.

* * *

Later that day, on the return flight from SoCal, I handed my ID and boarding pass to the first security pooh-bah and she took a good look at it. "Thank you, sir." Her voice tightened and got higher and faster. "I'm sorry! Ma'am. No, I mean sir. Did I get that right? Yeah, that's right." As she delivered her monologue, presumably glancing at the "F" gender marker, I realized the woman was deep in conversation with herself and not really talking to *me*. As she assured herself that she was okay—she'd gotten it right—it was as if I weren't actually there, or the stage I stood on was too far away to be within earshot.

Navigating between reads on my gender every day is a different kind of traveling, unlike traditional tales of faraway destinations and cultures. Embarking on new soil often means that I *myself* am the culture being visited, an oddity to explore by unsuspecting tourists who arrive unannounced. I am a new food, an exotic cuisine that incites and startles the palate. I am an unusual custom, a hand gesture, a hard-to-pronounce multisyllabic word. I am a natural wonder, shaped into life by the power of the divine, to be gawked at in awe.

Even when I've barely left the house, it's an adventure. There are regulations and unexpected turns, different peoples and cultures, to discover. The rules of engagement dictate that I must be flexible and open to the ways and languages of others. I enter a store, and one salesperson calls me ma'am and the other calls me sir. I respond by lowering my voice and covering my boobs with my jacket. They ask me a question. I abbreviate my answer and don't let my eyes rest on women for too long. They say something that concerns or excites me. I try to modulate my response so I'm not too emotional or effusive. I never know how I will be perceived, so I respond in the moment and try to avoid messy facial incontinence or apologetic freak-outs.

Even though my experience feels extreme at times, I know that everyone experiences some degree of otherness, depending on the situation. And as much as we try to be multicultural, embrace diversity, and be

down with folks who are different from us, there's a point where each and every one of us, no matter how hip to the trip we may try to be, has a moment. Deep down we're all wired to be certain that we're the ones who are normal and the other guy is the weird one. And ain't it a good time when someone else is the oddity.

* * *

A few years back, I had this odd little experience, another unexpected adventure. My wife said, "Let's go to the mall." I thought, *Oh, man, I don't feel like shopping*. Working me with the urgency of a good deal that comes only a few times a year, she pleaded, "The boys' dress suits are on sale." I reluctantly agreed. We drove out to the 'burbs. Oops, wrong turn off the freeway, and there, like a reverberating glow from Mecca, was a red-and-yellow In-N-Out Burger sign. Giddy and hungry, we pulled open the door and I thought we had walked in on the teenage cast of *Witness*. In the parking lot and throughout the joint were about thirty youth, white with country and innocence like corn-fed folk from the heartland. The boys wore shirts that buttoned up to cut their breathing off at the neck and zipperless, high-waisted blue jeans that were too blue, with two big buttons that held hiked-up suspenders. The girls wore *Little House on the Prairie* bonnets and dresses with some kind of apron deal, all made out of the same pattern, yet with their own, individual drab prints. I kid you not.

It was the day after Halloween so I really didn't know if folks were just trying to eke out as much as they could from their costumes, the school play had just let out, or someone was having a barn raising. I leaned in to my wife and whispered at a safe distance, "What the fuck is this?" As far as I know, I didn't lose control of my face, but when it comes to incontinence of the mind, self-awareness is not primary. For once, it wasn't my turn to be a tourist attraction when I barely left the house for a bite. The woman next to us, who had an Irish accent, which added to the *Twilight Zone* effect, since we were in a 'burb called Dublin, said these folks were Mennonites. So maybe they *had* worked up an urge for a burger at the barn raising.

All I know is, when they called my number and I took my leather jacket, urban ass up there to claim our burgers, and a group of three

suspended boys turned and gawked at me good, doing that bug-eyed, facial-incontinence thing, our eyes locked for a moment and it took everything I had not to bug 'em back, look them up and down and say, "What are *you* looking at?"

SO FAR

Snapshot: 2008

On the strong, small back
Of my mother's mother, my *popo*
Her older sister rode daily
feet broken and bound
and bent underneath
like delicate, crushed lotus buds

Sewing buttonholes on shirts
five down the middle
two on the sleeves
fifteen cents
for a dozen shirts

Turn of the last century
my mother's father, my *gung gung*
arrived by boat
His sisters sold into slavery
To pay his journey to America
My mother chop chop chopping the vegetables
in the family restaurant

steering clear of drunk soldiers
 sleeping upstairs
 above the jukebox

And I
 I in my privilege
 turn of this century
 tried to decide
 should I transition
 become a full-time guy

Female-born folks in times before us
 lived as men
 to survive
 get an education
 or a job denied
 who knows how many of the sons
 on Gung Gung's boat to America
 were born female

Had I been born twenty years later
 I would have transitioned
 no doubt
 But that collective journey
 of feminism as survival
 stayed with me
 I found peace with my
 mixed heritage, mixed gender ambiguity
 Fought too hard, too long
 to change this body now

Young folks
 working it out in conversation
 not that different from my own
 twenty years ago

trans, genderqueer
 How can I make things right so I can be me
 break the rules forced upon me
 transgress
 different language, different options
 same ideas
 Biology is not destiny

I ask them what about feminism
 They look at me like I am
 truly crazy
 Have we come so far that we really can't remember?

TURN OF THE HEAD

Snapshot: 2008

Turn of the head
I am ma'am
And back of the head
I am sir
And top down I am
What are you?
And face on I am
No where do you *really* come from?

Shape shift eyes
No connection
Shape shift nose
Misconception
Shape shift size
Not deception
Shape shift
Shifting perception

'Tone of the voice
I am ma'am
And style of the threads

I am sir
 And texture of skin I am
 What's your mix?
 And flash of the eyes I am
 There's something going on there

Shape shift
 No attention
 Give them
 Presentation
 Shift
 All those opinions
 Shape your own
 Damn dominion

Stories unseen
 No connection
 Trans folks
 Misconceptions
 Mixed folk
 No deception
 Gender fabulous
 No correction
 Disabilities
 Shifting perception

Turn of the head
 I am sir
 And back of the head
 I am ma'am
 And top down I am
 Invisible
 And face on I am

THE QUEERING OF CFIDS

On March 25, 1992, it hit me over the head when I didn't see it coming. I was young, able-bodied, and strong. I was invincible and too busy for the lessons in store for me. I had no idea I was going to be forced into early retirement at the age of twenty-nine.

I went into the women's room at the end of my workday, washed my lunch dishes, and leaned over the sink to splash water on my face. Down came the thick fluorescent light fixture from above, swiftly whacking my head, neck, and back. My dishes crashed; I was dazed. And everything hurt.

I had a severe concussion. I was in constant pain. For weeks afterward, people would talk to me and their lips would move, but I had no idea what they were saying. My vision blurred. I became extremely fatigued. I would work all day and then come home and fall into bed until the next morning, then drag myself out of bed and do it again. I went on like this for two and a half months after the accident, until my battery flickered out and I had no choice but to stop. And when I finally lay down, when I finally stopped working, I began to realize how sick I really was. Once I lay down, I couldn't get up.

I became a person who could not get out of bed. I studied the cracks in the ceiling, searching for clues, road maps, patterns. I wondered if I was dying. I had compartmentalized my life into race, and gender, and sexuality, and point of view—and yet the real deal was nothing like that. I had been reduced to that basic human place: survival. I wanted nothing more than to get up in the morning, be able to make myself something to eat, and leave the house. But I couldn't. Leaving the house became a