

READ
MY
LIPS

*Sexual Subversion
and the End of Gender*

RIKI ANNE WILCHINS



Firebrand
Books

Several selections in this book have appeared in earlier versions in the *Village Voice* and *Women on Women* 3.

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To Clare Howell

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*Whence come I
and on what wings
that it should take me so long,
 humiliated and exiled,
to accept that I am myself?*

Colette, *The Vagabond*

FOREWORD

FIRST OF ALL, SINCE I WEAR SEVERAL HATS (not to mention any number of ill-fitting dresses), I should point out I am not speaking in any official capacity in this book, nor on behalf of any of the organizations of which I am a member.

Second, in any underrepresented community, there is always the danger that the few voices that are lucky enough to be heard end up being cast as representatives. I face the same danger here. This is why I want to emphasize that my opinions are not to be taken as representative of the membership or board of GenderPAC, the coalition of advocacy groups of which I serve as executive director. In fact, few trans-identified folks will agree with everything that is contained in this book. Under the broad label of *transpeople*—which I am too quick to use myself—there is an extraordinarily rich and vibrant diversity. Our own margins, in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and even divergent sub-identities, are still silent and waiting to be heard from. Here's hoping it happens sooner rather than later.

In any case, the idea of being a spokestrans (or spokesherm)

has always seemed absurd to me. You lock three transpeople in a sealed room and they'll come out with five opinions among them. We are that opinionated and stubborn; we have to be to survive. So when you read some particularly bizarre sally of mine, rest assured that I am not a community spokestrans, nor do we all sit around discussing postmodern gender theory every night. All the opinions here are my own. Now that I think of it, the ones you like are mine; those you don't were suggested by my editor, or my publisher—probably both.

A WORD ABOUT GENDER ACTIVISM

This book makes no pretense of neutrality with regard to the events that are covered, or what is left out. For instance, the chronology could have started with Anne Ogborn, who, as far as I'm aware, originated the idea of a trans protest movement along the lines of ACT-UP or Queer Nation in 1992 and founded Transgender Nation. Or it could reach back to the first formal radical transorganizations like Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (S.T.A.R.), begun in the '70s by Marsha Johnson and Sylvia Rivera after mainstream queer activism had already begun to turn away from its own genderqueers.

But this book is about what I've experienced, a trajectory that took me from a camp in the woods outside the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival to—four years later—handing a letter signed by a dozen members of Congress decrying gender-based violence to an Assistant Attorney General of the U.S. Department of Justice.

My viewpoint is deeply influenced by those events I've either personally witnessed, or in which I've taken a direct part. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people involved in gender activism today, but this book mentions, at best, only a handful of them or their actions.

In addition, some early readers have come away with the conviction that in-your-face picketing-style transactivism originated with the Menace. That's not true, and this is a good place to set the record straight.

WILL YOU BE HAVING ONE S OR TWO WITH YOUR T?

When I was making my interminable way through the Cleveland Clinic's gender program many years ago, some of the Brits working there spelled *transsexual* with one *s*. I thought this at least made a single word out of it, since *trans-sexual*, the literal meaning of which I take to be "across sexes," has always seemed absurd.

Since I'd never liked the word to begin with, I stayed with the spelling I liked. This also seemed a way of asserting some small amount of control over a naming process that has always been entirely out of my hands—a kind of quiet mini-rebellion of my own. I think transactivist Dallas Denny captured the spirit of the whole enterprise: "Yeah, we'll change it to one *s* until they all start using it. Then we'll go back to two, or maybe to three." That about sums it up.

FROM C TO SHINING C

While we're on language, I might as well address the dreaded *C* words, both of which you will find herein: cock and cunt. It's not that I get off on being smutty-mouthed (of course I do), but in my experience it's the way people talk.

For those women who find their *C* word distressing, I can only point out that I came of age in a lesbian community in which we reclaimed and employed it with a certain insubordinate and affectionate abandon. I use it in the same spirit here.

ON CONSTITUENCIES: TRANSGENDER V. TRANSEXUAL

Who knows what to call transpeople these days? The dominant discourse in the transcommunity is at best a moving target. *Transgender* began its life as a name for those folks who identified neither as crossdressers nor as transsexuals—primarily people who changed their gender but not their genitals. An example of this is a man who goes on estrogen, possibly lives full-time as a woman, but does not have or want sex-change surgery.

The term gradually mutated to include any genderqueers who

didn't actually change their genitals: crossdressers, transgenders, stone butches, hermaphrodites, and drag people. Finally, tossing in the towel on the noun-list approach, people began using it to refer to transexuals as well, which was fine with some transexuals, but made others feel they were being erased. These days, I keep getting asked about the *Transgender Menace*, and I have to correct the questioner. I know of at least one gay rag (which shall remain unmentioned) that interviewed me and then changed the name of the group in print, a new kind of censorship.

I secretly believe that *transgender* is so popular because people are more comfortable saying it out loud than *transexual*, which—if you hold the word up in the mirror and read it backward—has sex cleverly embedded in it.

Except where noted otherwise, I've used these terms interchangeably, sometimes throwing in *transpeople*, or, to stress the act of self-identification or social categorization, *trans-identified people*.

Although I still use both, during the time since this book was begun this practice has proven unfortunate. *Transgender* began as an umbrella term, one defined by its inclusions rather than its boundaries, coined to embrace anyone who was (in Kate Bornstein's felicitous phrase) "transgressively gendered."

Alas, identity politics is like a computer virus, spreading from the host system to any other with which it comes in contact. Increasingly, the term has hardened to become an identity rather than a descriptor. I recently had a butch tell me she didn't want to co-opt "my voice" and so only identified herself as "small *t* transgender." This is a woman wearing slacks, men's shoes, a man's vest, and so on. In later (and unrelated) incidents, others asked if it didn't make me angry that so-and-so was publicly identifying as transgender because she wasn't "really" a transexual, being "only" a drag person, or an intersexual, or a crossdresser.

The result of all this is that I find myself increasingly invited to erect a hierarchy of legitimacy, complete with walls and boundaries to defend. Not in this lifetime.

I have begun speaking simply of gender as a name for that system that punishes bodies for how they look, who they love, or

how they feel—for the size or color or shape of their skin. I do this not to collapse differences, but to emphasize our connections. Dana Priesing, GenderPAC's Washington lobbyist, increasingly tries to employ broad-based, inclusive terms like *gender-different* or *gender-oppressed*.

But at some point such efforts simply extend the linguistic fiction that real identities (however inclusive) actually exist prior to the political systems that create and require them. This is a seduction of language, constantly urging you to name the constituency you represent rather than the oppressions you contest. It is through this Faustian bargain that political legitimacy is purchased.

I only regret that I have succumbed to this very seduction in too many places. For this is not a book about identities, but about a common cultural machinery—one that repudiates, stigmatizes, and marginalizes many kinds of people. It is a book for anyone committed to changing that system.

ON APPROPRIATING EXPERIENCES AND ABSENT FRIENDS

To the extent that anyone feels neglected, or any readers feel I have misappropriated or misapplied their experience, I apologize in advance, for this was not my intent.

IN CLOSING

This book has been a labor of love, inspired by the many people whose wisdom and courage have helped save my life. I've tried to write the book I needed sixteen years ago. Please feel free to take what you like and leave the rest.

WHY THIS BOOK

THE FIRST TIME I'D SEEN WHITE CUFFS LIKE THESE was in my women's incest group. It happened that two of us were trans-identified. We'd kept fairly quiet out of fear, although, in truth, I was pretty much "out."

Our fears were not misplaced: after a year of unremarkable participation, the casual mention that one of us was "pre-op" blossomed quickly into weeks of acrimonious exchange. We looked on in silence, gripped by a kind of dazed fascination, as people we thought we knew discussed us animatedly in the third person, as if we weren't there. In a sense, we weren't.

While part of me listened to the argument over whether we were "women enough" to stay, another part quietly wondered how it was that only my identity and body were suddenly "in play." Who had made these rules so others got to vote on me in a way that I was not symmetrically empowered to vote on them? Why were their bodies a priori legitimate while mine was somehow the product of group resolution? And how was it that I knew, even if the vote went in our favor, we would have already been disempowered?

I did not know. I lacked the conceptual tools to understand anything about my situation except that it hurt. I wouldn't have any answers until years later.

It was during this time, in the lull of an inexplicably calm Thanksgiving meeting, that a woman blew like a winter breeze through the crack in our door, folded herself onto the edge of the gunmetal gray chair nearest the exit, and, perching there, began quietly examining the linoleum floor as if it contained the key to the scriptures. By unspoken agreement, we shared in a "go-around" that night so she wouldn't have to raise her hand to speak.

We needn't have bothered. She bolted the room without a backward glance when her turn came, leaving a wraithlike hole where she'd sat. Then it was the rest of us carefully examining the floor, until someone quietly mentioned the white tape on her wrists.

There had been two others after that. One was my friend Hannah, a sculptor. She'd nearly severed her hand in a radial arm saw when she was eighteen. She swears she was lucid and calm at the time; yet she was also so desperate, lonely, and disconnected, she hoped it would kill her, or bring someone running—anyone—who'd finally listen to the pain inside her.

The other was Christine, a guitarist, writer, and sometime working-girl. Trying to escape from her life for one night, she stoned out on a mix of booze and PCP. Then, using the sharp blade of a sword, she severed the fingers of her guitar-picking hand right above the top knuckle, one-two-three-four, and didn't feel a thing until the next morning. The cops had seen this particular tranny in the tank so many times they didn't even try to have her fingers sewn back on.

And then, of course, there's Susan here. Her hands on the steering wheel look strong and capable in the bright Georgia sunlight. I have just come from addressing an indifferent Atlanta Pride parade audience on this hot June afternoon. She is winding her car along the endless freeways, expertly negotiating each turn and on-ramp, hauling me back to the air-conditioned Delta lounge and my plane to New York.

The baking heat must have made me more brain-dead than

usual, because only now do I notice her wrists. Around each, barely above the coffee tan of her hands, are two bands of surgical cotton gauze so immaculate and neatly taped they look for all the world like a matching pair of white shirt cuffs.

There is something peculiarly incestuous about trans-experience. It robs us of our bodies, our intimate moments, our sexuality, our childhood. It robs us of honesty, of open friendship, of the luxury of looking into a mirror without pain staring back at us.

It means hiding from friends and family, from spouses and children, as surely as it means hiding from the police car during an evening stroll, or from that knot of laughing boys down at the corner when we go out for a Coke. In the end, it is as tiring as a constant pain and as barren as the bottom of an empty well at high noon.

So why, with the surge of trans and gender theory flooding from the presses, does so little address or assuage our pain? Why is it mostly irrelevant to translives? Why have all the observations and theories been so utterly useless for transpeople themselves?

The earliest works were usually about people in rehab somewhere. The psychiatrists who wrote them inspected our fetishes, fixations, and gender confusions, producing carefully distanced narratives which were couched in the obscure, analytic language of dysfunction and derangement. We were patients.¹

Then came the feminist theorists who—while erasing our own voices, and without soiling their pages with the messy complexities of our lived experience—appropriated us as illustrations for their latest telling theories or perceptive insights. We had become examples.

Upon us now is the "transgender studies" anthology, a ticket to an academic grant and a book. These come from earnest anthropologists and sociologists who study us as if we were some isolated and inexplicable distant tribe.² Their gaze is firmly fixed on such pressing issues as our native dress, social organization, kinship structures, and relationship with the local gender witch doctors. They employ the objective and nuanced language of ethnography. We

have become “natives.”

Is there not something deeply immoral in the way these writers fail to help those whose lives they blithely mine for new insights and incantations? Do they never feel a twinge of guilt as their “studies” merely escalate the politicalization of our bodies, choices, and desires, so that, with each new book, while their audience enjoys the illusion of knowing more about us, we find ourselves more disempowered, dislocated, and exploited than before?

Aren't you still a male? Do transpeople reinforce gender stereotypes? Are you a “third sex”? Why do transpeople divide themselves up into men and women—shouldn't you be “gender-free”? Is sex-change surgery voluntary mutilation? Is transgenderism a pathology or mental disorder, and is it learned or genetic?

/// Academics, shrinks, and feminist theorists have traveled through our lives and problems like tourists on a junket. Picnicking on our identities like flies at a free lunch, they have selected the tastiest tidbits with which to illustrate a theory or push a book. The fact that we are a community under fire, a people at risk, is irrelevant to them. They pursue Science and Theory, and what they produce by mining our lives is neither addressed to us nor recycled within our community. It is not intended to help, but rather to explicate us as Today's Special: trans under glass, or perhaps only gender à la mode.

Our performance of gender is invariably a site of contest, a problem which—if we could but bring enough hi-octane academic brainpower to bear—might be “solved.” The academician's own gender performance is never at issue, nor that of the “real” men and women who form the standard to which ours is compared. Through the neat device of “othering” us, *their* identities are quietly, invisibly naturalized. How nice to be normal, to know that the gender-trash is safely locked in the Binary Zoo when they turn off the word processor at night.

No one bothers to investigate the actual conditions of our lives or the lives of those we hold dear. No one asks about the crushing loneliness of so many translives, or about sexual dysfunction. Nor does anyone question why so many of us have to work two

minimum-wage jobs and suck dick on the side so we can enjoy the benefits of a surgical procedure theorists and academics are casually debating for free.

No one does an exposé about people like my friend Sarah, who was busted for soliciting. Aware that they had no case and that the judge would let her walk the next morning, the cops tossed her—high heels, make-up, short skirt, boobs and all—into the men's tank, and closed the stationhouse door behind them as they left. She was forced to have sex with forty-two men just to survive the night and, by the time the sun came up, she did walk without having to see a judge. But then, she had already served her sentence.

No one writes about the scores of us who lose our children in custody battles, or the trans-teens who contract HIV by sharing dirty needles because insurance doesn't cover hormones and their parents have thrown them out on the streets. No one researches the special struggles of transpeople of color, or documents the life of my friend Francis, who transitioned in a wheelchair and had bricks thrown through her windows at night.

Nobody inquires why so many transpeople are survivors of incest, child abuse, and outright rape, or what might be done to remedy these crimes.

No one writes about the names we cannot forget, names we still hear in the night—like Christian Paige, a young woman who moved to Chicago to earn money for surgery and ended up brutally beaten, strangled, and then stabbed in the chest and breasts so many times that her family at first thought her body had been intentionally mutilated. We don't hear about Marsha P. Johnson (drowned), Richard Goldman (shot by his father for crossdressing), Harold Draper (multiple stab wounds), Cameron Tanner (beaten to death with baseball bats), Mary S. (fished out of the trunk of her car—beaten, stabbed, and drowned), Chanelle Pickett (strangled), Brandon Teena (raped, beaten, stabbed, and shot), Deborah Forte (strangled and stabbed), Jessy Santiago (beaten, repeatedly stabbed with box cutter, screwdriver, and knife), or her younger sister, Peggy, also transgendered, who was killed just three years earlier.

I carry with me a small slip of paper from Camp Trans, “the

educational event across the road from the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival," as a reminder of what is really at stake in the struggle over translives. Out of thirty of us at Camp Trans, twelve were trans-identified. We were mostly white, mostly middle and working class, from big cities and small towns, many with at least a year or two of college. In other words, except for being trans-identified, there was nothing exceptional about us.

Whenever I see such courage and determination I assume there's a lot of survivorship at work and so, on a hunch, I did a makeshift poll, walking casually from person to person as they munched down cold cereal and hot eggs in the morning mist. After a while, folks started coming up, peering over my shoulder to check the growing tally. Their jaws would tighten, but none looked particularly surprised.

I make no pretense at formal validity, but based on a population of twelve, here are the results:

Incested	5 (40%)
Sexually abused as a child	9 (75%)
Physically abused or beaten (as a child or adult)	12 (100%)
Raped	6 (50%)
Shot	2 (16%)
Stabbed	3 (25%)
Arrested	6 (50%)

In addition, one of us had been burned and one of us had been horsewhipped.

You won't find any of this in the next trans or gender studies book because the real challenges of our lives aren't perceived as relevant to anyone's theory.³ It is far easier to invest *us* as a topic of study than the depredations of the gender regime which marginalizes and preys upon us. As if one could analyze any ghetto in com-

plete isolation from the conditions and forces that create and maintain it.

Trans-identity is not a natural fact. Rather, it is the political category we are forced to occupy when we do certain things with our bodies. That so many of us try to take our own lives, mutilate ourselves, or just succeed in dying quietly of shame, depression, or loneliness is not an accident. We are supposed to feel isolated and desperate. Outcast. That is the whole point of the system. Our feelings are not causes but effects.

The regime of gender is an intentional, systemic oppression. As such, it cannot be fought through personal action, but only through an organized, systemic response. It is high time we stopped writing our hard-luck stories, spreading open our legs and our yearbooks for those awful before-and-after pictures, and began thinking clearly about how to fight back. It is time we began producing our own theory, our own narrative. No one volume can hope to achieve all this. At best, this is a rough set of beginnings.

I intend to wage a struggle for my life. I intend to fight for my political survival. And until other authors wade down into the deep end of the pool and confront the challenges we face every day, until their gender is seen as just as queer as mine, then they are simply another part of the system I seek to overturn.

So this book is dedicated to those who have shared some of this experience: this having one's body and life captured and held hostage, made to bear witness against one's own deepest meanings, this abduction in broad daylight. It is to trans-identified bodies, incested bodies, aging bodies, fat-identified bodies, intersexed bodies, differently abled bodies—to any and every kind of body which has been stigmatized, marginalized, and made to bear unbearable meanings—that I write.

And it is to the people with the neat white cuffs that I speak. Some wear them on the outside, some on the inside. In the end, only they will judge my success or failure.

17 THINGS YOU DON'T SAY TO A TRANSEXUAL

1. There is an excellent term in medicine for this kind of practice: *iatrogenic*. Iatrogenic medicine, such as blood-letting by leaches or treatment with arsenic, actually creates disorder and disease, sometimes the very one it is intended to treat. I believe any categorical system of knowledge that creates and maintains people like me as a “pathology” ought to be described as an iatrogenic epistemology and named for what it does: i.e., naturalizing some bodies by creating mine as a kind of disease.

2. My anthro-apologist friend David Valentine has coined the verb *to tribify* (TRÍ-beh-fi) to name this propensity of social scientists to naturalize their own gender and genitals while treating mine as if they were the product of some quaint practice by an “exotic” or foreign tribe.

3. For a wonderful counterexample of engaged and relevant academic inquiry, see Ki Namaste’s remarkable “Genderbashing: Sexuality, Gender, and the Regulation of Public Space” in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14 (1996): 221-240. She mines the critical issue of transviolence, but only to tease out and interconnect wider issues of all gender-based violence. In addition, she does so without stigmatizing her transgender subjects. The focus of her study is the workings of the gender regime itself—the ways violence is used to regulate gender in public space—and not just transpeople as (detached) subjects.

DON'T #1. “I WAS JUST TALKING TO A CHANGE THE OTHER DAY AND...”

To me, this suggests that you are having strange conversations with your pocket money. No one IS a change. One can ask for change, own change, *exchange*, change tires, change clothes, change sides, change to a minor key, and have a change of life, but one cannot BE a change.

DON'T #2. “YOU LOOK JUST AS GOOD AS I DO.”

Of course I do. And this is precisely the state of grace to which we all aspire. But more than likely, you do both of us an injustice.

DON'T #3. “WELL, I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT I CERTAINLY CONSIDER YOU A WOMAN.”

It is a never-ending source of wonderment that well-intentioned, and otherwise very well-brought-up people say this to me, with a light of total sincerity shining in their eyes for which any self-

respecting cocker spaniel would kill.

Unfortunately, this assurance turns on at least four assumptions which, upon closer inspection, prove to be unfounded: (a) my gender is a subject about which reasonable people might be expected to reasonably differ; (b) my gender is a topic that is currently open for discussion; (c) my gender, and your perception of it, is something about which I suffer rather a great deal of anxiety and about which I am seeking some reassurance; and (d) you, since you are a nontranssexual, are in just the providential position of providing me with this reassurance I so desperately seek.

DON'T #4. "I THINK YOU'RE AS MUCH A WOMAN AS ANY OF MY FRIENDS."

What a treat for them. Especially your male friends.

DON'T #5. "I WOULD NEVER HAVE GUESSED YOU WERE A TRANSEXUAL."

This phrase is usually accompanied by a look of the utmost incredulity, followed closely by a searching, penetrating, and largely sotto voce reappraisal of all the things you thought you knew about me (or, perhaps, only all the times we slept together). Unfortunately, this utterance assumes that your credulity, no doubt a topic of endless fascination to you, is of equal interest to me. Since there are tens of thousands of us (maybe in your building alone!), the fact that some of us can "pass" (a nasty concept if ever there was one) as nontranssexuals only prophesies that, wedded to the entirely fragile notion that you should be capable of identifying all of us on sight, you are destined for a life of more or less unending private humiliations.

DON'T #6. "CAN YOU HAVE AN ORGASM?"

Yes, but only when I'm asked this question.

DON'T #7. "CAN YOU HAVE AN ORGASM?"

DON'T #8. "CAN YOU HAVE AN ORGASM?"

DON'T #9. "YOU MUST HAVE HAD A LOT OF COURAGE TO FACE SURGERY."

To have the actual surgery, I just had to be able to breathe deeply, count at least partway backward from one hundred, and fall asleep with some semblance of dignity. In all of these tasks I was reliably aided by enough anesthesia to subdue a small water buffalo. It would also have helped had I ten-to-twenty thousand dollars in spare change (see #1 above). Unfortunately, while I was thus drifting majestically off to sleep, I found I also had to be able to watch my friends, most of my lovers, all of my family, and any lesbian who used the term *politically correct* in any context other than a Lily Tomlin joke, fade out of my existence forever. Also, I found that I woke up to endless refrains of DON'Ts #1-8, above. That is the hard part. The surgery I could probably do again before breakfast.

DON'T #10. "I DON'T THINK IT'S ANYONE'S CONCERN WHAT'S BETWEEN YOUR LEGS, UNLESS THEY'RE SLEEPING WITH YOU."

Well, yes. But you, like me, might be surprised at the profound lack of fastidiousness some people display to even this tender area, as my weekly trips to the accoutrement racks at the Pleasure Chest and Eve's Garden confirm. In any case, I'm quite certain that whatever is between your legs, even during those hot, sticky, yucky days of summer, is totally above reproach and perfectly charming, while what's between mine, even on the very best of days, is, well, let's just not talk about it.

DON'T #11. "I THINK TRANSEXUALS ARE JUST MEN IN DRAG."

Of course you do, and you're entitled to your opinion. You can even be justifiably proud to think so. Do not, however, voice this sentiment while surrounded by a room full of men who really *are* in

drag (for instance, at the next Fantasy Ball). Also, be certain to note the exception to this rule, which is, of course, female-to-male transexuals, who are really, well, just women in drag. We all know how naturally distasteful it is when men wear dresses or women wear pants. Do not, however, voice this sentiment while surrounded by a room of S/M dykes in full leather and studs.

DON'T #12. "I HEAR YOU'RE A TRANSEXUAL. WHEN DID YOU HAVE SURGERY?"

Yes, and I hear you're a homosexual: when did you first suck cock? Ohhhh—it's not about sex.

DON'T #13. "I THINK OF TRANSEXUALITY AS A KIND OF BIRTH DEFECT."

So do I. I was born into the wrong culture.

DON'T #14. "HOW DID YOU KNOW YOU'RE A WOMAN?"

How did *you* know you were a woman? Ah-hmm: breasts and vagina. Well, I can introduce you to some very handsome, bearded, muscular young men of my acquaintance who began life with the very same equipment, so that's not particularly compelling evidence, is it?... I see, inside YOU just know. Call me sometime, we'll have lunch.

DON'T #15. "IS IT TRUE THAT TRANSEXUALS ARE 'WOMEN TRAPPED IN MEN'S BODIES'?"

Yes, that's right. In my own case, they had to call in both the Fire Department and the EMS and even then it took them hours to cut me out. Luckily I had my Walkman and some wonderful Judy Garland tapes, so it wasn't too awful a wait.

DON'T #16. "YOU LOOK JUST LIKE A REAL WOMAN."

How splendid, especially when you recall I'm composed almost

entirely of compressed soy by-products. And you look just like a REAL transexual. Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't realize that was an insult.

DON'T #17. "ISN'T IT AMAZING, YOU'RE THE ONLY TRANSEXUAL I KNOW."

Yes, and isn't it amazing that when you came out to your mother, you were the only homosexual she knew. Ho-hum. The fact that I am the only transexual you know only emphasizes that: (a) you probably know a few hundred of us but you don't know you know us, and we won't tell you that you do; (b) there are tens of thousands of us, and more all the time; (c) we are secretly plotting to take over the planet Earth, and infiltrating your prevailing non-transexual culture is just the first step; and (d) while we are waiting to take over your planet we are amusing ourselves at your expense by seeing just how much we can fuck with your heads.

WHAT DOES IT COST TO TELL THE TRUTH?

I WAS TWENTY-SIX WHEN I LEARNED I was very tall. For most of my life I had been considered normal height. But at twenty-six, suddenly, strangers in elevators began leaning toward me conspiratorially and asking, “How tall are you, anyway?” as if we’d been having a conversation on the subject. There were delivery men who inquired, “You play roundball?” and even one man on a motorcycle who slowed alongside me to exclaim, “You must be a volleyball player!”

Although I had never before worried about my height, I began studying myself in mirrors. I began *seeing* myself as tall. In short order, I became self-conscious about the length of my body. I stooped fashionably while walking down the street, tried not to stand up too straight in bars or at parties, and leaned against walls and pillars when speaking so I wouldn’t appear to be towering over shorter people.

WELCOME TO GENDERHELL

I learned a lot of other things about my body as well. My voice was unnervingly deep. My hands were too large, my shoulders too broad,

my hips too narrow, and my feet much too big. The same size basketball sneakers I'd been wearing for over ten years suddenly looked ridiculous, even to me. People made public jokes about my "boats." I stopped wearing them, even stopped shooting hoops. Although I'd been slender for decades, since I was now "too big," I stopped working out at the gym as well.

I was obsessed with how I looked and was perceived. I became a ferocious shopper, lusting after any clothing that would hide my height and shoulders. I bought winter gloves and dress shoes a size too small. My pinched hands and feet went along with the higher voice I practiced when speaking on the phone.

Over a terrifyingly short period of only one year, my entire perception of my body changed to match the social truths everyone else read there. The mirror, formerly a friend, turned into a deadly enemy. I felt humiliated, ashamed, each time I looked in it, weeping quietly in dressing rooms and loudly at home. I appeared ridiculous to myself because I was seeing what I was told was there: this absurdly tall person with large hands, ungainly feet, wide shoulders, a deep voice, and a masculine manner. Need I go on? What is most remarkable is that I had been about the same size and shape since I was fifteen.

READ ANY GOOD WOMEN LATELY?

What had happened was that I'd started being read by others "as a woman."

That my body became the site of all kinds of social inspection and pronouncements didn't surprise me. But the virulence did. I was accosted from every direction: from the men who hissed at me on street corners; to the man on the train who leaned over and said, "Nice tits," as I boarded; to the construction workers who whistled or yelled, "Faggot!"; to the driver who rolled down his window at a crowded intersection, the very first time I went out in a dress, to shout, "God, you sure are uuug-ly!"

In many ways I imagine that what happened to me is not much different from what happens to many teenagers once their bodies

hit puberty and are seized by the cultural machine. In my case, though, I already had a stable body image, and I was an adult, fully aware of what was going on. It shocks me to this day how quickly I learned to make my body over, to embrace the various social truths about it, and to see on it what I was told. I knew what people were thinking when they looked me up and down, stared at my body parts, and inspected my face.

TELL ME HOW I LOOK

"People being introduced to me no longer make eye contact—they make crotch contact," a friend, just starting to be read as a woman, told me.

My body, like hers, heretofore just a place to put food, carry out certain operations of pleasure, and get me from point A to point B, had overnight become an armed camp which I surveyed at my peril. It hurt to be me, and it hurt to see me.

I am reminded of a recent meeting with a transexual female friend of mine. She had begun living full-time as a woman, and eagerly showed me pictures of herself in make-up and various outfits. Again, this is much like any teenager would do. What particularly struck me was that, as she anxiously scanned my face for a reaction, she said, "I have to depend on other people to tell me how I look because I don't know how to see myself yet."

How strange that she was soliciting this information from someone who customarily walks around with a short, butchy haircut, wearing no make-up, dressed in blue jeans, sneakers, and a large black Transexual Menace T-shirt. Which is to say that I do not, at first blush, inspire confidence as the best possible judge of such matters. I could not care less how either of us is read by nontransexuals.

NO ADMISSION TO LIFE WITHOUT A VALID GENDER ID

How does it happen that the human subject makes himself into an object of possible knowledge, through what forms of rationality, through what historical necessities, and at what price? My question is this: How much does it cost the subject to be able to tell the truth about itself?

