What You Will
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I have always been drawn to the character Viola from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night, or What You Will.* I first read the play in eighth grade, and it has repeatedly inserted itself into my life every so often in the years since.

More accurately, I have always been drawn to the character that is Viola/Cesario.

Viola is female, and Cesario is more complicated. Cesario is Viola disguised, how we see Viola through all but the very first scene of the play. Cesario dresses as male, but every word they say is a thinly veiled revelation—that they are an in-between space. They are constantly asserting their femininity within the masculine.

I am all the daughters of my father's house/And all the brothers too, Cesario says, and it is a joke, because this is the Renaissance and it's all boys and men in disguises, anyway, but my favorite way to read this play is at its face value.

I am all the daughters and the brothers. I am not either one entirely. *I am not what I am.*

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Getting dressed is, often, a negotiation.

I'm out of sports bras. I'm down to only an old push-up bra and I don't have time to do laundry. So I put on the bra and a t-shirt and I look in the mirror and I know immediately that *I can't do this right now. I can't look this way without being internally panicked as long as I'm wearing this.*

I hate what I see. I hate it and I'm freaked out and it's also kind of muted, a disconnect. I do not feel ownership or belonging towards the person I'm staring at. *If this is me then I must not be myself.* The brain is wired to make things make sense, and mine is only able to do this by stepping slightly outside of itself so that I'm not quite who I see in the mirror. It's not a dramatic shift, but it's one I know I'll remain in on and off all day, disconcerted, if I do not wear something else. If I do not fix it. So it's either re-evaluate how dirty all my sports bras really are, or wear too many layers. Or drink, sometimes drinking helps.

At times I think that I'm just being dramatic, with all of this gender anxiety, and then I remember that thoughts like this run through my head. *I could drink so I feel okay with looking female today. I could throw my fist into the wall until I recognize this body as my own.*

Other days, I am fine. I am totally and completely okay with whatever I wear, with wearing a dress, lipstick, something lowcut, all the things we as a people have decided are feminine. My body is my own, for no reason at all.

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I do not remember having complicated thoughts about my gender as a child. It just was; I just was.

You used to love pink, my mother tells me. *You were so girly. You loved pink and purple, and ballet.* We're talking about when my siblings and I were little kids. To my mother, it seems my childhood was defined by femininity. Her words feel like an accusation.

I know they aren't, though. Years ago, when I was in high school and first started shopping in the men's sections of thrift stores, I tried on a blue short-sleeved button down and asked her what she thought. *It's a boy's shirt*, she said, and then she was quiet for a minute, before asking me, *do you want to be a boy?* Her voice subdued, gentle. As if she had been thinking the question for a long time before she said it. As if it would have been okay if the answer was yes.

That wasn't the answer, though, and it still isn't, and I know now that it never will be. Back then I didn't know there could be any more complexity than that. I just told her no. And she sort of believed me.

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On the spectrum of masculine to feminine, I am inconsistent. I am yes, and no, and neither, and both.

I was enthralled the first time I read Judith Butler. Finally, someone else who seemed to recognize how elaborately performative everyday life could be.

I am at all times painfully aware of the performance within every single gesture I make, of how it could all be read as variously gendered. Where I put my legs when I sit. The tone of voice I use. My posture. The way I cuff my jeans. If my shoes do not give me away as something I am not sure I am, then I'm sure my backpack does, or my glasses. At times I feel like Cesario—like everything I say and do is being observed by an audience, graded for inconsistencies and contradictions. Like they all see me and think I'm just Viola, wearing someone else's clothes and pretending. Like gender is in the eye of the beholder, and so I can never quite be the master of mine.

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> *I like it when I look*
> *Like neither*
> *Girl nor boy,*
> *When my reflection stares back*
> *Sharp and short-haired,*
> *When I am a question.*

I find this poem scribbled down from a few years ago, when I search for the word 'gender' in the notes tabs on my phone where I keep track of most of my musings. I am surprised by the

timestamp attached to it. The date is from well before I thought I had really started thinking about my gender. I guess the thoughts have been there much longer than I can remember.

> *I want to wear androgyny*
> *Like a second skin, like it is*
> *My skin*
> *Might be my skin*
> *I want to stop negotiating with myself*
> *Into gender*
> *Only as I feel it is allowed.*

I am not male, and I am not quite female, and I don't think I am neither. I think gender is made up, and then I feel like a dumbass for letting something that isn't even real dictate so much of me. I do not know how to properly explain myself, so usually I do not bother trying.

I look at pictures sometimes and I truly do not recognize the person that I know is somehow me. I mostly avoid mirrors when I can, when it gets bad. It comes and goes. I'm out eating dinner with friends one night, sharing chips and talking and laughing, when I receive an email with the headshots I just got taken and this person, these pictures are so strikingly *not me not me*, and then I'm dissociating in a Chili's.

It's okay. We all have bodies, one of my friends says, sometime during my sophomore year, while she is tripping hard on acid.

What I take this to mean is, there's no escaping.

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All of freshman year, a boy in my choir (who is in the LGBT+ community, which I say not to excuse him, but to show that in all fairness he's had a very different experience of gender than mine) says *It's so weird seeing you in a dress. I've never seen you wear a dress before. It just looks unnatural.* Every time I wear a dress. All year. Every time.

And I guess this is what I am afraid of. That I will be seen either as not yet having figured out I am male or as having disavowed everything that is feminine, that is not masculine, or across-the-board androgynous. If I use they/them pronouns and then one day wear a dress, I must be a liar.

I am happiest when gender is not something I am even thinking about. When I am a void, an ambiguous space. When there are no pronouns being given to or asked of me. My body a mystery, a compilation, an unknown. Unconnected to personhood. I don't know if I want to lose weight because my body is fat or because it is female. I have never in my life had the energy or willpower to unpack either part of that incredibly troublesome statement.

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About a year after he starts transitioning, a friend tells me: *I used to think the gender stuff wasn't that important, that I didn't really need to deal with it, not like my depression.* I haven't seen him

since I went off to college, and I'm struck by how much happier he looks now. *I totally didn't see that they were related.*

My body rebels, as I write this. I get stomach pains, my teeth chatter. I feel feverish. I can't eat because I know if I do, I'll anxiety vomit. I have to take frequent breaks so I don't have a panic attack. I feel stupid, and silly. They're just words.

If I don't talk about it then it isn't real. If I don't talk about it then I'm just being dramatic and don't have to really think about it. If I don't talk about it then it isn't a big deal.

Some species of animals have adaptive sexes. They will change from male to female or the other way round if it gives them a better chance of staying alive, or of passing on their genes. Many species of snails are both male and female simultaneously and can choose to mate as both or as either one, some butterflies are literally one half of each and cannot be defined as anything other and are breathtakingly beautiful. And it is biology, it is sex not gender, but it is also the closest thing nature has that parallels this make-believe binary system people made up once upon a time as a way to keep some people in power and others powerless.

Throughout nature, or gender, or sex, whatever you want to call it seems intentionally and inextricably linked to survival.

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At the end of *Twelfth Night*, Viola's disguise is revealed, and Duke Orsino asks her to marry him—provided, of course, that 'Cesario' really is no more than a disguise. The Duke repeats this conditional twice, making sure that before the curtain falls, the audience knows the rules of how gender must operate. Cesario, we know, is doomed. They are far too complicated for the Renaissance. Only the more straightforwardly gendered Viola could ever really have been allowed a happy ending.

During winter break of my senior year, I go clothes shopping with my mother and sister. I am looking for something I could wear to a job interview. My mother finds this dress, that is plaid and kind of vintage-y, and tells me I should try it on and I do because 'kind of vintage-y' is pretty much my whole style, and sometimes I can lean into femininity and feel okay, even nice in a dress, so I try it on and I look *horrible* in it.

But then my mother says I look *amazing*. And my sister says I look *really great.* They tell me *you can't look that good in a dress and not buy it*, so we buy it, and when I show it to friends back at school they say *it looks so good on you* and *damn* and so on. And through all of this I keep looking in mirrors, confused, seeing what I see and knowing that either I or all of them are wrong and feeling foreign to myself.

That's what it's like for me. Gender. Somebody is lying to me, but I can't tell who and it might be myself. And in the meantime, the dress is still in my closet, untranslatable.