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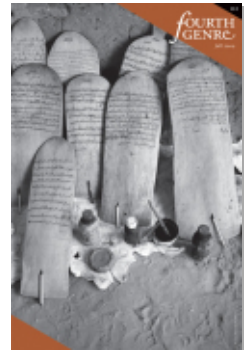
The Dressing Room

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The Dressing Room

DAVID TORREY PETERS

The message in my MySpace inbox read as follows:

There you are! I'm glad I found you again, I missed chatting with you. Your pictures are so hot! I love the one of you in the pink dress and the stockings.

I hope we can chat again :-)

I rocked back in my desk chair, perplexed. I stared at the screen for a moment, then leaned forward and clicked into the guy's MySpace profile page. He seemed to be a real person rather than a spambot; his pictures showed an attractive guy in his late 20s, olive-complected, with black hair cut short enough that the scalp peeped through. In every one of his photos, he was engaged in some activity typical of a 20-something guy—at a baseball game with beer in hand, or posed with his arm draped around a pretty blonde woman, or displaying his off-road-capable jeep. Many of his friends, including the blond girl nestled under his arm in the photo, had posted comments that attested to his great-guy attributes.

Perhaps, if you were like me, a 26-year-old male living five states away from the sender, you would have taken one look at the message and written it off as a hoax, or missent, then forgotten about the whole thing. But I couldn't do that. I had never seen this guy before in my whole life, never had any contact with him in any form, but I knew the message had been written for me.

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When I was age six, my mother left a box of small garbage bags lying around within my reach. I found one, cut the bottom off, and used the cinch-tie at the top to make a small, crude dress. I put it on and looked at myself in the mirror. I can't recall what I looked like; but as my reflection stared back at me, a surging wave of well-being swept over me, its rushing current plucking with it any real specifics of that moment. All that remained was a feeling of correctness, similar to finding just the right word to describe something, a reflection of myself as I knew myself to be, but had yet to see. The pleasure of that correctness left me with a sense of weightlessness, and I turned away from the mirror with a new sensation of beauty and lightness buoying my step. I descended the back stairs to show my parents, who sat in the enclosed front porch.

On the way, I passed through the kitchen, where a coffee cake stood on the counter. In my pervasive mood of satisfaction, I felt a sudden inspiration, a desire to be generous. Standing on tip-toes, I pulled the coffee cake off the counter and held it in my arms before me. In my garbage bag dress, I walked into the front porch and carefully placed the coffee cake on the coffee table. Hands on my hips, I announced to my parents, who stared at me with their coffee cups in hand, "I'm a waitress!"

There was a moment's pause, during which, but for the steam rising from their mugs and the sparrows flitting past the windows, time appeared to have been frozen. Then my mother shifted her glance to my father and the two of them burst out laughing. I held myself still, wearing only my underpants and the garbage bag, surrounded by laughter that abraded like sandpaper, confused because I felt beautiful and why couldn't they see that? The notion that I should be embarrassed crept up on me—and then, with the force of a physical blow, I was. I fled from the room, up the stairs, feeling the blood rush to my skin and the plastic of the dress cling to my suddenly hot form, tripping and sliding on the makeshift hem as I went. From behind me, misunderstanding everything, my father cried, "Oh, come on, there's nothing wrong with being a waiter."



My female side has always been with me, occasionally cropping up to confuse what would have otherwise been a fairly typical male childhood and adolescence; but I have only semiopenly identified as transgendered for the past two years. I am in love with the word "transgender" for all those qualities

in it that other people find problematic, vague, and confusing—hinting at a condition but avoiding specifics. Only recently invented, the term encompasses everything from transsexuals both pre- and post-operative, to hermaphrodites, to cross-dressers, to genderqueer, to intersex, to whatever gender variant you can think to invent for yourself. It's a political umbrella, created to give voice to all those people whose gender has split free from the standard male/female binary, a way to talk about being trans without having to rehash one's specific instance and feelings over and over. But for those of you especially interested in classification and taxonomy, let me break down how that identification might apply to me, Linnaeus-style:

DOMAIN: Human

KINGDOM: Transgender

PHYLUM: Male-to-Female

ORDER: Heterosexual

FAMILY: Cross-dresser

GENUS: One foot stubbornly stuck in the closet door.

SPECIES: Dave/Tori

All of which is to say, sometimes I present myself as female. I don't think that I'm a woman. I just think that parts of my psyche are female, resulting in a deep-seated need to act that out. For simplicity's sake, think of gender as a continuum, rather than a binary. I'm somewhere in the vicinity of here:



On a warm afternoon in the early autumn, my father and I waited hand in hand for a stoplight to change in downtown Chicago. I don't know how old I was, but I remember my hand hung in his at just below the level of my eyes. As we waited, a very pretty man wearing a beautiful green dress and long dangly earrings crossed with the green light towards us. I smiled at him as he passed and he smiled back. I felt very taken with this man and looked to see if my father had noticed him, but my father held his gaze fixed to our red light.

"How come he gets to wear that?" I asked my father.

"I think he's gay," my father replied, without glancing away from the spotlight.

I looked at the dress. As the man walked away from us, the click of his heels fading into the drone of traffic, the afternoon light shimmered off the satin fabric so that the dress shone liquid. I imagined how it would feel to touch.

For much of my childhood, I knew nothing about what it meant to be gay, yet had observed that the word "gay" surfaced whenever I introduced the topic of pretty clothes. After we crossed the street I asked, "Can I be gay?"

My hand, clasped in my father's, was jerked slightly. My father stopped walking but did not look down. His face was calm, but there was an uncomfortable quality to his body language that I remember finding disquieting, like the time he took me sailing and didn't want to let on that he had gotten seasick. "Your life," my father said, finally, "will be much easier if you are not."

In many of my childhood dreams, my hair was long and I wore gorgeous dresses, soft fabric and tresses so abundant they spread out from around me and melted into the scenery like the red clay-rich water of a tributary flowing into the clear blue of a bay. No line divided the beautiful creature I felt myself to be from the surrounding world, and the question of whether I was girl or boy did not figure into the logic of the dream. In the mornings, I awoke wrapped in my Marimekko "cars and trucks" bedding and wondered if the previous night's dreams meant I was gay, wondered if being gay meant I might one day wear a satin green dress of my own.



What's up girl? Why the silence? We had a good thing going. I thought we turned each other on. Shoot me a message . . . I'm still interested.



When puberty hit, I found myself seriously attracted to girls and not at all to boys. In my case, the standard pulse of attraction, upon reaching the object of my desire, twisted back upon itself to form a two-way conduit—each new alluring attribute I discovered in girls was one I found lacking in myself. The agony of a typical crush deepened under a paradox: the more I wanted a certain girl, the more desperately I wanted to be like her, but the more I let myself emulate her, the less attractive she found me.

As a freshman, I remember Ashley Wolf flirtatiously propping her fragile

and carefully shaven ankles up on my desk. The sight of her bare legs little more than a foot from my face triggered a bout of internal schizophrenia. The white dot of consciousness attempted to split itself, to simultaneously focus on both the aching desire to touch her legs and on the sad longing to have my own legs admired with equal ardor. Short-circuited, I sat in silence. After a minute, she shrugged and put her feet back on the floor.

Other times, the swell of her breasts under a faded T-shirt conjured up a procession of daydreamed sex: that curious half-smile of hers as she sat on a bed, her hands reaching behind her to unclasp her bra, the slight dip when her breasts fell free . . . and then the reverie took its sudden and inevitable left turn and I'd be imagining her showing me how she put on a bra in the first place, and maybe then also discussing with me the pros and cons of the various styles she favored, and wouldn't it be great to go shopping together?



Many theorists agree that gender is mostly performance. If that's so, my male performance throughout high school might not have been deemed a Tony-worthy turn, but I would have at least garnered a few positive reviews in the alt-weeklies. Early on, I sketched out for myself a matrix of masculinity that amounted to a decree of manhood by omission: by leaving my masculinity unaddressed, it was assumed to be as evident and inevitable as a heartbeat. For after all, isn't it a little unmanly to discuss manliness?

With nondisclosure and assumption as my *modus operandi*, I found myself included in a group of guys who, as far as concerns the generic high-school markers of popularity, considered themselves pretty cool. By sophomore year, I played varsity baseball and led the team in stolen bases. I had a string of girlfriends and lost my virginity at age 15. I said "dude" a lot. I tried not to back down from fights.

I shrugged in agreement when the few effeminate boys in my school were declared gay, and laughed along with my friends when they were ostracized.

Oddly enough, that laughter came without guilt or even a sense of hypocrisy. Sex researchers often complain about the frustrating nature of interviewing closeted heterosexual transgendered people, because when asked a question, they give two different answers—one for each gender. What's your favorite color? Blue and Pink.

By the time I reached senior year of high school, I had so compartmentalized

my female and male performances that I began to see one as having nothing to do with the other. I could laugh at an effeminate boy because I had grown to see my boy presentation as a fully formed identity independent of my girl presentation. In fact, for a long time, while presenting as a boy, I had trouble recalling places I had been or things I had seen while presenting as female.

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Hey, I've seen you before. Are you into older guys? Because I'm old enough to be your father. I bet you'd like a daddy-type tho, LOL.

This time, the message came from a gray-haired man with only a grainy cell-phone shot for a photo, no personal information, and no links to any other friends. I erased the message and tried to forget I had seen it.

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I'd like to air a contention. For transgendered people born after, say, the late 1970s, the process of coming out consists of two steps: (1) You come out on the Internet, and then (2) you come out in real life. Among the transpeople I've met, the younger ones, those who had access to communities online with whom they could discuss their gender during their teenage years, have found the process of coming to terms with their gender much less traumatic than the generation just before mine, who in their search for community slunk around alternative bars or social clubs scanning for signs of gender variations hidden beneath the drab exterior of their fellow patrons.

By contrast, I had established a small presence for myself on the Internet by about age 17. I had a Yahoo profile, a few pictures of myself in drag, and the beginnings of a female persona. I named myself *Tori*, a respelling of my middle name.

Online, in-the-closet transpeople had carved out their own Internet space where they could practice attempting to interact with each other in their chosen gender. A lot of the interactions I found among my fellow transfolk were somewhat transparent caricatures of femininity: they called each other "hun" and typed in emoticons for giggling. But behind the caricatures lurked more nuanced discoveries: slightly different sentence constructions, more emotive expressions, and carefully phrased teasing and flirtation. I won't argue that creating a female persona online taught me to be female, but the exercise did delineate between femininity as viewed by people socialized as

men, and what most women think it means to be female. The male gaze acting out femininity in instant-message form.

More importantly, though, as I went online every night and broadcast my transgendered identity to the world, I had to come up with a way to deal with my bifurcated and compartmentalized gender. How many times do you have to type “I am transgendered” in a little box before you start saying it in casual conversation?

Maybe you thought that last question was rhetorical. It’s not. The correct answer is: a whole bunch of times.

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As a little kid, the idea of adulthood remained amorphous in all aspects but one: I would finally have the space and privacy to be female. My first year at college, the first time I had a room with a lock on the door, I withdrew \$500 from my savings. I went to a salon that employed a drag queen who lived part-time as a woman. After a few shy, vague attempts to explain why I stood before her counter, I blurted out, “I want, well . . . everything I need to look like you.”

Her face hardened like she thought I was making fun of her. But she must have seen the blush spreading up from inside my chest, because she dropped her shoulders and eased her face into a smile. “Oh, honey,” she said, in a tone that was kind but sparkled with mirth, “It takes *work* to look like this.”

“I can work,” I said, fixing my gaze to a blemish on the counter to avoid the interested stares the few other women in the salon cast my way. I could feel their eyes probing at my back. “I want that work.”

She pushed her long hair back with perfectly manicured nails and appraised me with the kind of expert squint I had previously imagined to be reserved for art dealers or museum curators as they mentally price a work of art. Finally she gave a little nod and asked, “How much do we have to work with?” I gave her everything in my wallet, plus whatever I could put on my credit card. In the long run, it was cheaper than a gender therapist.

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Tori, if you ever want to talk to a REAL man, let me know.

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In the spring of my second year of college, I wrote a short story. It featured for its protagonist an unnamed young woman who pretended to be blind. Her perceived blindness turned her into a walking confessional—her dark glasses the lattice through which penitents whispered the sins or hopes they burned to share but couldn’t bear to reveal without the anonymity afforded by her affliction.

I based her character upon myself. A few months before I wrote the story, I began to present myself socially as female. Not around anyone I knew; even at my notoriously liberal college, I couldn’t bear to let my identities overlap. I met with transgendered people and visited other cities *en femme*. An interesting dynamic prevailed in those early social forays presenting as female. The sort of people who wanted to associate with a 19-year-old boy dressed up like a girl made for a demographically varied but uniformly repressed group. It was as though the people I met, especially the men, felt nothing could possibly be more shameful, less dignified, than my position. Perhaps the secrets and shames they harbored struck them as minuscule compared to the vulnerability of this feminized boy who looked to them for validation. They seemed freed to share whatever they pleased, to allow themselves to finally be that which they kept frozen in the submerged floes of ice that surface only when the conditions are just right.



“I’m a businessman.”

“Yes, you said as much. What kind of business?”

He smiled and sipped at a tumbler of whiskey. “We deal with money markets, mostly. Kind of technical and boring really.”

“What do you mean? Do you work for a company or a bank?”

“Yeah, you could think of me as a banker—banker is fine. Basically, I spend all day on the phone, consulting, you know? I make money, sure, but I’ve hardly got the time to spend it.” He took a breath and said, “You’re lucky to be a student; that’s the good life.”

He didn’t look like a businessman. He looked like a blue-collar guy in a suit. His hands were rough, nails lumped and cracking, and his face sun-cured. He slid in and out of a heavy western Massachusetts accent.

“It’s not so easy being a student,” I said.

“Oh, sure it isn’t; I remember studying my butt off.” He paused and gave

me a once-over. “But it looks to me like you’ve still got plenty of time to keep yourself dolled up and pretty.” A wink followed.

I thought about leaving. If I thought he had actually been a businessman, I would have left; but the businessman act struck me as so transparent, so clichéd, that I felt a sudden kinship with him. A week earlier, he had contacted me online. He said that he had questioned his gender when he was younger, but as he grew older, those feelings morphed into an admiration for people courageous enough to be trans. He said he just wanted to meet me and talk.

Instead of leaving after his wink, I tilted my head and tried out a coy look that I had practiced in the mirror. “Have you ever met a trans-girl before?”

He adjusted the cuff of his shirt, then looked up at me with a shy smile, one devoid of the bravado plastered over his previous smiles; for a brief moment his somewhat amorphous features slid into place with a silent click. In that instant, he could have been a different person. “No,” he said. “You’re the first.”

In the interactions I’ve had with other transpeople, there reigns one unspoken rule: you don’t call me out and I won’t call you out. At times, the distance between how someone looks and the outward expression of how they feel can appear ridiculous, even obscene—a ruffled pink miniskirt on a man built like a Clydesdale—but with a modicum of empathy, one sees past the ridiculous to glimpse an intrinsically human process: fantasy and imagination made exterior.

I didn’t ask that man if he was only pretending to be a businessman; I didn’t probe for cracks in the illusion, even though I felt sure I would find them. In fact, I’ll even grant the possibility that he was a businessman, and that only his inability to articulate the specifics of his work and my class biases murmured otherwise. Still, I prefer to think of him more romantically, as I did that evening. I saw him as someone inspired to reinvent himself, maybe for my benefit, maybe for his own, and maybe only for a night. I let him get me a drink, and I let him put his hand on my thigh, and I sat and I thought how lovely it was that two people, transvestites both, one gendered, the other classed, could shrug off the identity foisted upon them by circumstance and slip into selves sewn from the bright cloth of their imagination.



Are you the same Tori I talked to on the phone that one time? You have the same pictures, but your page seems different from when I saw you the other time. If you

are the same and you remember me, we should talk again, I really would like to meet a gurl like you, and plus you said you liked guys in uniform.



Sometimes I think if I had continued to go out en femme, to meet people, to interact as Tori, the concrete dam that held my boy and girl presentations separate would have crumbled and cracked, girl seeping then gushing into boy until both identities flowed together so smoothly as to be singular. A few years on, one might have walked the river and been reminded only by the stray bits of concrete debris washed up along the banks that the current had once been impeded.

That's not what happened. Instead, my college awarded me a research grant. I moved to Cameroon and fell in love.

The day I arrived, I met Melissa, an American woman who worked with an NGO that taught preteen mothers the skills needed to eke out a living. Three weeks later, in an over-air-conditioned hotel room, I pulled her warm body across the bed and pressed her to me, establishing a pattern that lasted for the entirety of our time in the country. I initiated; she acquiesced. I protected her; she cared for me.

In my memories of Cameroon, a sense of deprivation and menace pervades. I needed Melissa's care, and at times she asked for my protection. Destabilized by the culture around us, I played strong man to her soft woman; me Tarzan, you Jane—a year-long drama in which neither of us knew the other was an actor. In deploying an ultramasculine role as a bulwark against the harshness of our surroundings, I began to forget that I was acting. The theater became the world, the character my identity.

In the evenings, I often sat with a beer in my rented room in the Kolndongo area of Yaoundé. Peering beyond the slats of the Florida-style windows to the dusty street below, I might occasionally see a woman throw back her head to laugh and the sudden recollection of Tori would shimmer before me. It struck me as implausible that I had been her only months before; her disembodied identity seemed an illusion of time refracted by the prism of memory. Yet, even as the beer washed down my throat, I was building an identity that would eventually join Tori in the realm of the disembodied. When Melissa and I returned to the United States, we were both surprised to find that the hard man that I had been in Cameroon had refused to make the trip—he

abandoned my body at the airport and took up residence in Yaoundé, where, presumably, I would find him were I ever to return.



Without relinquishing her grip on a Taco Bell Gordita, Melissa abruptly crumpled into tears. We were spending Melissa's lunch break as we often did, sitting side by side on a metal bench in the shadow of one of the mid-size, glass-over-cement, luxury condominiums that had been popping up like acne across Northern Chicago. I had been happily watching and commenting on a little squirrel's attempt to drink from the building's fountain/attempt at public art, when I heard Melissa inhale sharply. I turned in time to see her body collapse on itself as though it had been scooped hollow from the inside.

"What, the squirrel?" I said lightly, even as a sick feeling rose in my chest like a bubble through oil. I knew full well the squirrel had nothing to do with it.

"Three years!" she moaned. "We've been together three years! How could you not tell me?" Her voice came out thick and wet with emotion, and she let her head fall into her hands, her hair spilling across her arms, so all I could see was the way her back shook as she sobbed.

Two days earlier, after checking her email, she had noticed an online transgendered support group cached in my Web browser. I could have laughed it off or explained it away, as I had hundreds of other telltale signs throughout my life, but at that moment, when she rotated the laptop towards me and asked with a raised brow, "Um . . . what is this?" I felt an incredibly fast-moving exhaustion sweep over me, traveling across my body like the shadow of a plane flying above.

She stared, expectant.

"That's me," I said, quietly.

It took her a moment to understand what I was saying, and she cocked her head so that her long, straight bangs fell across one eye. She gave me a yeah-whatever-you-say smirk, waiting for the punch line. An hour and a half of explanation later, the punch line still undelivered and no signs it would be forthcoming, she fell into a chair, her lips pulled taut.

"It'll be okay," I said. "I'm the same person. Nothing has changed."

"Okay. I believe you."

I wanted to say that it wasn't a question of belief, but she got up and walked into the bedroom, her back arched, shoulders back, as though there

were a crowd of people watching her leave and she wanted her exit to be as dignified as possible. I cooked dinner for her and we didn't talk about it, continued not talking about it, until two days later, when she tried to cry and eat Taco Bell at the same time.

"You're not the same person!" Her words slurred into a low, painful wail. A Taco Bell wrapper blew away in a gust of breeze coming off the lake. I watched it go, afraid to move. She went on, "How can I even pretend to say I know you? I mean . . . a transvestite? What else don't I know? What kind of life are you hiding from me?"

My arms hung limp at my sides. The squirrel was no longer funny to watch. "Nothing; I'm not hiding anything. I don't want to hide anything. I'm the same person, the exact same person. If you loved me before, you should love me still, because I wouldn't be who I am without that side of me." I paused, knowing I shouldn't go on but unable stop myself. "And, I don't think transvestite is really the right word; it's not, like, just some sexual fetish for me."

She looked up from her tear-speckled lap, incredulous. "Oh, I'm *so sorry!* Am I not being fair to you?" Her voice rose, changing tone, the sarcasm rolling off in streams. "I guess I was being selfish, huh? I shouldn't be upset thinking about how you've hidden everything from me, right? Maybe I should have gone and done my research, so that I would know all the PC terms . . . so that I could be cool and *sensitive* for when my boyfriend told me"—her voice continued into a harsh crescendo—"he was a *fucking transvestite!*"

"Please." My eyes stung. I was crying. "Please, it will be okay."

She looked ready to continue, inhaling, gathering breath to go on, but she saw me tremble and exhaled wordlessly, her shoulders lowering as if by deflation. Quietly, she said, "Tell me again."

"Please, it will be okay." I reached my arm out to rest my hand on her shoulder and she flinched. I felt a rush of terror pour like a stream of cold over my heart—terror that she would shrug me away, terror that physical rejection would communicate what could not be spoken, that I should walk away, that it was over.

But she let me touch her, let my hand settle onto her shoulder. We sat like that for what felt like a long time, my arm stretched out to reach her, the smell of congealing taco grease wafting up from where it had spilled on the

bench. The Old World clang of a church bell echoed from a few blocks away and Melissa stirred. “My lunch break is over,” she murmured.

“Yes.”

“Tell me again.”

I pulled a strand of wet hair away from her eyes and tucked it behind her ear. “It’ll be okay.”

For months it wasn’t. But then, after a year had passed, it was, and we saw that it had been for a while.

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Hey, I didn’t think you were into guys, but it comes as a pleasant surprise. Why didn’t you just tell me? You know I would have been cool with it, I understand how these things go.

This guy I did know. We had emailed back and forth and met for coffee once. He was another young cross-dresser from my area, socially active as both a boy and a girl and eager to introduce me to the local transgendered scene.

My reply: “What are you talking about?”

His response came a day later: no words, just a link to a website. A click of the mouse and my computer screen transformed into a sort of fairy-tale mirror, one of those magical sheets of glass that reflects a secret hidden from you until the moment you find yourself gazing into a strange version of your own eyes. That is to say, on a site targeted specifically to transpeople, Tori had placed a personal ad for herself—or rather, someone else had placed an ad using her identity.

The details of the ad were exact: my age, my location, the music I liked, books I had read, even a link to my MySpace page. The center photo showed a shot, taken by Melissa in her old apartment, of my body clad in a pink dress and a black gauzy shrug, stockings marred by a vertical run, and a pair of heels. My eyes had been made up simply but effectively: white powder under the brow, pink on the lids, brown in the crease. I had posed lounging on the couch and stared into the camera, neither smiling nor frowning, an expression of blankness.

The personal ad recreated the Tori identity exactly as she had shaped herself into being throughout my life, expressing her tastes and hopes just as I had felt them. In fact, the page might have belonged to the Tori I felt myself

to be, but for one key detail—the Tori of the personal ad wanted phone sex with dominant men.

“Are you upset?” Melissa asked, when I told her about the stolen photo and ad.

“No,” I said. “I find it really freeing.”

Her big, dark-lashed, amsonia-blue eyes take up a large part of her face, so when she rolls them, as she proceeded to do, it’s quite a gesture. “Of course. So you’re telling me you’re flattered by an impersonated phone-sex ad.” She giggled. “How did I end up with such a funny boy as you?”

For a while I had mentally composed mean letters to send to the email address on the personal ad; letters in which I would accuse my imagined recipient of stealing my photos, of besmirching the identity I had so painstakingly created, of being all-around pervy. But as I wrote these letters, I began to picture my recipient, and in that imagining, I felt a growing sense of sympathy. I saw a teenager—too young, or poor, or repressed to build his own identity, and having clutched at mine, lying alone and ashamed in a body he hates and wishes he could change, holding a cell phone to his face while he whispers dirty words to an anonymous man and confuses the stream of abuse that spills from the handset with love.

How is it right that I try to take Tori from him? Who is Tori? Is she an entity that I own, that is mine to bestow upon those I choose? Or in making an ad for her, did not this imagined teenager (that’s simply the version I like; you can choose your own) take a share of responsibility for the construction of her identity? Maybe Tori’s history is not merely what I have experienced with her, but also what others have experienced and will experience with her. Perhaps she has a life apart from me, and while I disapprove of her phone-sex habits, must accept them with a shrug, as would a mother who is dismayed to learn her grown son is a smoker. I had thought of her identity and my body as two hydrogen molecules covalently bonded to one another forever, but maybe my closeness to her kept me from seeing that she isn’t a hydrogen molecule at all, but instead an oxygen that can bond herself to more hydrogen than simply the one molecule of my body. I grew up surrounded by the notion that bodies and identities come in 1:1 ratios; we get a body and an identity. But from as early as I remember, I had a body that did not line up flush with a single identity but instead slipped this way and that so that it lined up with

Tori at one point, or the hard man of Cameroon at another, or any one of the many selves I've deployed throughout my life.

The discovery of the personal ad flipped a switch in the dark, revealed in stark relief that the slippage I had experienced occurred not only on the side of body, but on the side of identity as well, so that Tori might slip from one body to another, just as I slipped in and out of various presentations of identity. Once recognized, the logic struck me as obvious, a happy and symmetrical discovery. I pictured body and identity as a string of colors sliding back and forth across each other to create a series of flashing patterns and effects exceedingly more fascinating and wondrous than red aligned with red and blue with blue, held in mute stasis until the passing of time bleaches them all to the same death's-head white.

I don't mean to pretend that somehow, body and identity have been cleft free from one another, or that we live in a world where body has no relevant bearing on identity and vice versa. After all, those pictures of Tori showed my body—my arms, my face, my ears, that mole on the cheek next to my nose. Yet, the very possibility of play and slippage exhilarates me. Somewhere in the hinterland of the Internet, some other person had claimed one of my identities, an identity born of my body, but one that transcended skin, muscle, hair, fat, and bones as she moved through electronic space until she settled upon the imagined teenager, his body becoming hers, her voice speaking through his throat to the anonymous man on the other end of the phone.

And I love that, for Tori's escape is mine as well. When someone else can link their body to mine through the bonds of a shared identity, they loosen another knot in the constraints of the flesh. We are not separated from body, but we are granted an opportunity to breathe more easily, having found a little play, a little wiggle room, in the rope that tethers body and identity together. There are a thousand ways to read that personal ad, but I choose to see it as an illustration that none of us are constrained quite so much as we imagine. I see it as an affirmation that all of us, whenever we discover an inch of slippage here, a centimeter of slack there, can, by dint of will and imagination, raise miniature empires in the little bit of space we've managed to acquire.