

ANDREA LONG CHU

On Liking Women

The Society for Cutting Up Men is a rather fabulous name for a transsexual book club

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Mae Elvis Kaufman, *Chuckles*. 2014. Digital Photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

ONCE A WEEK, for a single semester of high school, I would be dismissed early from class to board the athletics bus with fifteen teenage girls in sleek cap-sleeved volleyball jerseys and short shorts. I was the only boy.

Occasionally a girl who still needed to change would excuse herself behind a row of seats to slip out of her school uniform into the team's dark-blue colors. For more minor wardrobe adjustments, I was simply asked to close my eyes. In theory, all sights were trained on the game ahead where I, as official scorekeeper, would push numbers around a byzantine spreadsheet while the girls leapt, dug, and dove with raw, adolescent power. But whatever discipline had instilled itself before a match would dissolve in its aftermath, often following a pit stop for greasy highway-exit food, as the girls relaxed into an innocent dishabille: untucked jerseys, tight undershirts, the strap of a sports bra. They talked, with the candor of postgame exhaustion, of boys, sex, and other vices; of good taste and bad blood and small, sharp desires. I sat, and I listened, and I waited, patiently, for that wayward electric pulse that passes unplanned from one bare upper arm to another on an otherwise unremarkable Tuesday evening, the away-game bus cruising back over the border between one red state and another.

The truth is, I have never been able to differentiate liking women from wanting to be like them. For years, the former desire held the latter in its mouth, like a capsule too dangerous to swallow. When I trawl the seafloor of my childhood for sunken tokens of things to come, these bus rides are about the gayest thing I can find. They probably weren't even all that gay. It is common, after all, for high school athletes to try to squash the inherent homoeroticism of same-sex sport under the heavy cleat of denial. But I'm too desperate to salvage a single genuine lesbian memory from the wreckage of the scared, straight boy whose life I will never not have lived to be choosy. The only other memory with a shot at that title is my pubescent infatuation with my best friend, a moody, low-voiced, Hot Topic-shopping girl who, it dawned on me only many years later, was doing her best impression of Shane from *The L Word*. One day she told me she had a secret to tell me after school; I spent the whole day queasy with hope that a declaration of her affections was forthcoming. Later, over the phone, after a pause big enough to drown in, she told me she was gay. "I thought you might say that," I replied, weeping inside. A decade later, after long having fallen out of touch, I texted her. "A week ago, I figured out that I am trans," I wrote. "You came out to me all those years ago. Just returning the favor."

This was months before I began teaching my first undergraduate recitation, where for the second time in my life—but the first time as a woman—I read Valerie Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto*. The *SCUM Manifesto* is a deliciously vicious feminist screed calling for the revolutionary overthrow of all men; Solanas self-published it in 1967, one year before she shot Andy Warhol on the sixth floor of the Decker Building in New York City. I wondered how my students would feel about it. In the bathroom before class, as I fixed my lipstick and fiddled with my hair, I was approached by a thoughtful, earnest young woman who sat directly to my right during class. "I loved the Solanas reading," she told me breathlessly. "I didn't know that was a thing you could study." I cocked my head, confused. "You didn't know what was a thing you could study?" "Feminism!" she said, beaming. In class, I would glance over at this student's notes, only to discover that she had filled the page with the word *SCUM*, written over and over with the baroque tenderness usually reserved for the name of a crush.

I, too, had become infatuated with feminism in college. I, too, had felt the thrill of its clandestine discovery. I had caught a shy glimpse of her across a dim, crowded dormitory room vibrating with electronic music and unclear intentions: a low-key, confident girl, slightly aloof, with a gravity all neighboring bodies obeyed. Feminism was too cool, too effortlessly hip, to be interested in a person like me, whom social anxiety had prevented from speaking over the telephone until well into high school. Besides, I heard she only dated women. I limited myself, therefore, to acts of distant admiration. I left critical comments on the student newspaper's latest exposé of this or that frat party. I took a Women's Studies course that had only one other man in it. I read desperately, from Shulamith Firestone to Jezebel, and I wrote: bizarre, profane plays about rape culture, one where the archangel Gabriel had a monologue so vile it would have burned David Mamet's tongue clean off; and ugly, strange poetry featuring something I was calling the Beautiful Hermaphrodite Proletariat. Feminism was all I wanted to think about, talk about. When I visited home, my mother and my sister, plainly irritated, informed me that I did not know what it was like to be a woman. But a crush was a crush, if anything buttressed by the conviction that feminism, like any of the girls I had ever liked, was too good for me.

It was in my junior year of college that I first read the *SCUM Manifesto*, crossing over the East River in a lonely subway car. It exhilarated me: the grandeur, the brutal polemics, the raw, succulent style of the whole thing.

Solanas was *cool*. Rereading *SCUM*, I realized this was no accident. The manifesto begins like this:

Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex.

What's striking here is not Solanas's revolutionary extremism per se, but the flippancy with which she justifies it. Life under male supremacy isn't oppressive, exploitative, or unjust: it's just fucking boring. For Solanas, an aspiring playwright, politics begins with an aesthetic judgment. This is because male and female are essentially styles for her, rival aesthetic schools distinguishable by their respective adjectival palettes. Men are timid, guilty, dependent, mindless, passive, animalistic, insecure, cowardly, envious, vain, frivolous, and weak. Women are strong, dynamic, decisive, assertive, cerebral, independent, self-confident, nasty, violent, selfish, freewheeling, thrill-seeking, and arrogant. Above all, women are cool and groovy.

Yet as I read back through the manifesto in preparation for class, I was surprised to be reminded that, for all her storied manhating, Solanas is surprisingly accommodating in her pursuit of male extinction. For one thing, the groovy, freewheeling females of Solanas's revolutionary infantry *SCUM* (which at one point stood for "Society for Cutting Up Men," though this phrase appears nowhere within the manifesto) will spare any man who opts to join its Men's Auxiliary, where he will declare himself "a turd, a lowly abject turd." For another, what few men remain after the revolution will be generously permitted to wither away on drugs or in drag, grazing in pastures or hooked into twenty-four-hour feeds allowing them to vicariously live the high-octane lives of females in action. And then there's this:

If men were wise, they would seek to become really female, would do intensive biological research that would lead to men, by means of operations on the brain and nervous system, being able to be transformed in psyche, as well as body, into women.

This line took my breath away. This was a vision of transsexuality as separatism, an image of how male-to-female gender transition might express not just disidentification with maleness but disaffiliation with men. Here,

transition, like revolution, was recast in aesthetic terms, as if transsexual women decided to transition, not to “confirm” some kind of innate gender identity, but because being a man is stupid and boring.

I OVERREAD, PERHAPS. In 2013, an event in San Francisco intended as a tribute to Solanas on the twenty-fifth anniversary of her death was canceled after bitter conflict broke out on its Facebook page over what some considered Solanas’s transphobia. One trans woman described having been harassed in queer spaces by radical feminists who referenced Solanas almost as often as they did Janice Raymond, whose 1979 book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* is a classic of anti-trans feminism. Others went on the offensive. Mira Bellwether, creator of *Fucking Trans Women*, the punk-rock zine that taught the world to muff, wrote a lengthy blog post explaining her misgivings about the event, characterizing the *SCUM Manifesto* as “potentially the worst and most vitriolic example of lesbian-feminist hate speech” in history. She goes on to charge Solanas with biological essentialism of the first degree, citing the latter’s apparent appeal to genetic science: “The male is a biological accident: the Y (male) gene is an incomplete X (female) gene, that is, it has an incomplete set of chromosomes. In other words, the male is an incomplete female, a walking abortion, aborted at the gene stage.” For Bellwether, this is unequivocal proof that everything *SCUM* says about men, it also says about trans women.

Yet these are odd accusations. To call Solanas a “lesbian feminist” is to imply, erroneously, that she was associated with lesbian groups like New York City’s Lavender Menace, which briefly hijacked the Second Congress to Unite Women in 1970 to protest homophobia in the women’s movement and distribute their classic pamphlet “The Woman-Identified Woman.” But Solanas was neither a political lesbian nor a lesbian politico. She was by all accounts a loner and a misfit, a struggling writer and sex worker who sometimes identified as gay but always looked out for number one. The dedication to her riotous 1965 play *Up Your Ass* reads, “I dedicate this play to ME, a continuous source of strength and guidance, and without whose unflinching loyalty, devotion, and faith this play would never have been written.” (It was this play,

whose full title is *Up Your Ass, or From the Cradle to the Boat, or The Big Suck, or Up from the Slime*, that Solanas tried first to sweet-talk, then to strong-arm, Andy Warhol into producing.)

As for the matter of genetics, I suppose I ought to be offended to have my Y chromosomes' good name raked through the mud. Frankly, though, I have a hard time getting it up for a possession I consider about as valuable as a \$15 gift card to Blockbuster. The truth is, if it's hard for contemporary readers to tell men and trans women apart in Solanas's analysis, it is not because she thinks all trans women are men; if anything, it's because she thinks all men are closeted trans women. When Solanas hisses that maleness is a "deficiency disease," I am reminded of those trans women who diagnose themselves, only half-jokingly, with testosterone poisoning. When she snarls that men are "biological accidents," all I hear is the eminently sensible claim that every man is *literally* a woman trapped in the wrong body. This is what the *SCUM Manifesto* calls pussy envy, from which all men suffer, though few dare to admit it aside from "faggots" and "drag queens" whom Solanas counts among the least miserable of the lot. Hence the sentiment Solanas expresses through Miss Collins, one of two quick-witted queens who grace the filthy pages of *Up Your Ass*:

MISS COLLINS: Shall I tell you a secret? I despise men. Oh, why do I have to be one of them? (*Brightening.*) Do you know what I'd like more than anything in the world to be? A Lesbian. Then I could be the cake and eat it too.

Bellwether might object that I am, again, being too generous. But generosity is the only spirit in which a text as hot to the touch as the *SCUM Manifesto* could have ever been received. This is after all a pamphlet advocating mass murder, and what's worse, property damage. It's not as if those who expressed their disappointment over the tribute's cancellation did so in blanket approval of Solanas's long-term plans for total human extinction (women included) or her attempted murder of a man who painted soup cans. As Breanne Fahs recounts in her recent biography of Solanas, the shooting was the straw that broke the back of the camel known as the National Organization for Women (NOW), which despite its infancy—it was founded in 1966, only two years earlier—had already suffered fractures over abortion and lesbianism. As the radical feminists Ti-Grace Atkinson and Florynce Kennedy visited Solanas in prison, the latter agreeing to represent Valerie pro bono, then president Betty Friedan scrambled to distance NOW from what she viewed as a problem that most

certainly had a name, demanding in a telegram that Kennedy “DESIST IMMEDIATELY FROM LINKING NOW IN ANY WAY WITH VALERIE SOLANAS.” Within the year, both Kennedy and Atkinson had left the organization, each going on to found their own, ostensibly more radical groups: the Feminist Party and the October 17th Movement, respectively. Likewise, after the Solanas tribute was canceled in 2013, folks hoping to hash out the Facebook fracas in person held a splinter event called “We Who Have Complicated Feelings About Valerie Solanas.”

This is simply to note that disagreement over Solanas’s legacy is an old feminist standard, the artifact of a broader intellectual habit that critiques like Bellwether’s lean on. This is the thing we call feminist historiography, with all its waves and groups and fabled conferences. Any good feminist bears stitched into the burning bra she calls her heart that tapestry of qualifiers we use to tell one another stories about ourselves and our history: radical, liberal, neoliberal, socialist, Marxist, separatist, cultural, corporate, lesbian, queer, trans, eco, intersectional, anti-porn, anti-work, pro-sex, first-, second-, third-, sometimes fourth-wave. These stories have perhaps less to do with What Really Happened than they do with what Fredric Jameson once called “the ‘emotion’ of great historiographic form”—that is, the satisfaction of synthesizing the messy empirical data of the past into an elegant historical arc in which everything that happened could not have happened otherwise.

To say, then, that these stories are rarely if ever “true” is not merely to repeat the axiom that taxonomy is taxidermy, though it cannot be denied that the objects of intellectual inquiry are forever escaping, like B-movie zombies, from the vaults of their interment. It is also to say that all cultural things, *SCUM Manifesto* included, are answering machines for history’s messages at best only secondarily. They are rather, first and foremost, occasions for people to feel something: to adjust the pitch of a desire or up a fantasy’s thread count, to make overtures to a new way to feel or renew their vows with an old one. We read things, watch things, from political history to pop culture, as feminists and as people, because we want to belong to a community or public, or because we are stressed out at work, or because we are looking for a friend or a lover, or perhaps because we are struggling to figure out how to feel political in an age and culture defined by a general shipwrecking of the beautiful old stories of history.

So when Bellwether condemns the *SCUM Manifesto* as “the pinnacle of misguided and hateful 2nd wave feminism and lesbian-feminism,” this condemnation is a vehicle for a kind of political disappointment that feminists are fond of cultivating with respect to preceding generations of feminists. In this version of the story, feminism excluded trans women in the past, is learning to include trans women now, and will center trans women in the future. This story’s plausibility is no doubt due to a dicey bit of revisionism implied by the moniker *trans-exclusionary radical feminist*, often shortened to TERF. Like most kinds of feminist, TERFs are not a party or a unified front. Their beliefs, while varied, mostly boil down to a rejection of the idea that transgender women are, in fact, women. They also don’t much like the name TERF, which they take to be a slur—a grievance that would be beneath contempt if it weren’t also true, in the sense that all bywords for bigots are intended to be defamatory. The actual problem with an epithet like TERF is its historiographic sleight of hand: namely, the erroneous implication that all TERFs are holdouts who missed the third wave, old-school radical feminists who never learned any better. This permits their being read as a kind of living anachronism through which the past can be discerned, much as European anthropologists imagined so-called primitive societies to be an earlier stage of civilizational development caught in amber.

In fact, we would do better to talk about TERFs in the context of the internet, where a rebel alliance of bloggers like Feminist Current’s Meghan Murphy and GenderTrender’s Linda Shanko spend their days shooting dinky clickbait at the transsexual empire’s thermal exhaust ports. The true battles rage on Tumblr, in the form of comments, memes, and doxing; it is possible, for instance, to find Tumblrs entirely devoted to cataloging *other* Tumblr users who are known “gender critical feminists,” as they like to refer to themselves. But this conflict has as much to do with the ins and outs of social media—especially Tumblr, Twitter, and Reddit—as it does with any great ideological conflict. When a subculture espouses extremist politics, especially online, it is tempting but often incorrect to take those politics for that subculture’s beating heart. It’s worth considering whether TERFs, like certain strains of the alt-right, might be defined less by their political ideology (however noxious) and more by a complex, frankly fascinating relationship to trolling, on which it will be for future anthropologists, having solved the problem of digital ethnography, to elaborate.

OF COURSE, feminist transphobia is no more an exclusively digital phenomenon than white nationalism. There were second-wave feminists who sincerely feared and hated trans women. Some of them are even famous, like the Australian feminist Germaine Greer, author of the 1974 best seller *The Female Eunuch*. Few TERFs curl their lips with Greer's panache. This is how she described an encounter with a fan, in the *Independent* magazine in 1989:

On the day that *The Female Eunuch* was issued in America, a person in flapping draperies rushed up to me and grabbed my hand. "Thank you," it breathed hoarsely, "Thank you so much for all you've done for us girls!" I smirked and nodded and stepped backward, trying to extricate my hand from the enormous, knuckly, hairy, be-ringed paw that clutched it. The face staring into mine was thickly coated with pancake make-up through which the stubble was already burgeoning, in futile competition with a Dynel wig of immense luxuriance and two pairs of false eyelashes. Against the bony ribs that could be counted through its flimsy scarf dress swung a polished steel women's liberation emblem. I should have said, "You're a man. *The Female Eunuch* has done less than nothing for you. *Piss off.*"

Little analysis is needed to show that disgust like Greer's belongs to the same traffic in woman-hating she and her fellow TERFs supposedly abhor. Let us pause instead to appreciate how rarely one finds transmisogyny, whose preferred medium is the spittle of strangers, enjoying the cushy stylistic privileges of middlebrow literary form. It's like watching Julia Child cook a baby.

Then again, Greer has long imagined herself as feminism's id, periodically digging herself out of the earth to rub her wings together and molt on network television. In 2015, she made waves when she criticized as "misogynist" *Glamour* magazine's decision to give their Woman of the Year award to Caitlyn Jenner, then fresh off her *Vanity Fair* photo shoot. In response to the backlash, Greer released this gem of a statement: "Just because you lop off your dick and then wear a dress doesn't make you a fucking woman. I've asked my doctor to give me long ears and liver spots and I'm going to wear a brown coat but that won't turn me into a fucking cocker spaniel." More surprising is when a second-wave icon like Atkinson, onetime defender of Solanas, trots out TERF talking points at a Boston University conference in 2014: "There is a conflict around gender. That is, feminists are trying to get rid of gender. And transgendered [sic] reinforce gender." That Atkinson's remarks

arrived at a conference whose theme was “Women’s Liberation in the Late 1960s and Early 1970s” only encourages wholesale dismissals of the second wave as the Dark Ages of feminist history.

Yet consider the infamous West Coast Lesbian Conference of 1973. The first night of the conference, the transsexual folk singer Beth Elliott’s scheduled performance was interrupted by protesters who tried to kick her off the stage. The following day, the radical feminist Robin Morgan, editor of the widely influential 1970 anthology *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, delivered a hastily rewritten keynote in which she unloaded on Elliott, calling her “an opportunist, an infiltrator, and a destroyer—with the mentality of a rapist.” Morgan’s remarks were soon printed in the short-lived underground newspaper *Lesbian Tide*, where they could enjoy a wider audience:

I will not call a male “she”; thirty-two years of suffering in this androcentric society, and of surviving, have earned me the title “woman”; one walk down the street by a male transvestite, five minutes of his being hassled (which he may enjoy), and then he dares, he dares to think he understands our pain? No, in our mothers’ names and in our own, we must not call him sister. We know what’s at work when whites wear blackface; the same thing is at work when men wear drag.

This is where reports of the conference usually end, often with a kind of practiced sobriety about How Bad Shit Was. Yet as the historian Finn Enke argues in an excellent article forthcoming in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, many accounts leave out the fact that the San Francisco chapter of the national lesbian organization Daughters of Bilitis had welcomed a 19-year-old Beth Elliott in 1971 after her parents rejected her, that Elliott had been elected chapter vice president that same year, that she had been embraced by the Orange County Dyke Patrol at the Gay Women’s Conference in Los Angeles, and that she had been *a member of the organizing committee* for the very conference where her presence was disputed by a vocal minority of attendees. As for the vitriolic keynote, Enke suggests that Morgan’s attacks on Elliott were born of the former’s insecurity over being invited to speak at a conference for lesbians despite her being shackled up with a man, whose effeminacy she often tried, unsuccessfully, to parlay into a basis for her own radical credentials.

This is to say two things. First, the radical feminism of the Sixties and Seventies was as mixed a bag as any political movement, from Occupy to the Bernie Sanders campaign. Second, at least in this case, feminist transphobia

was not so much an expression of anti-trans animus as it was an indirect, even peripheral repercussion of a much larger crisis in the women's liberation movement over how people should go about feeling political. In expanding the scope of feminist critique to the terrain of everyday life—a move which produced a characteristically muscular brand of theory that rivaled any Marxist's notes on capitalism—the second wave had inadvertently painted itself into a corner. If, as radical feminist theories claimed, patriarchy had infested not just legal, cultural, and economic spheres but the psychic lives of *women themselves*, then feminist revolution could only be achieved by combing constantly through the fibrils of one's consciousness for every last trace of male supremacy—a kind of political nitpicking, as it were. And nowhere was this more urgent, or more difficult, than the bedroom. Fighting tirelessly for the notion that sex was fair game for political critique, radical feminists were now faced with the prospect of putting their mouths where their money had been. Hence Atkinson's famous slogan: "Feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice." This was the political climate in which *both* Elliott and Morgan, as a transsexual woman and a suspected heterosexual woman, respectively, could find their statuses as legitimate subjects of feminist politics threatened by the incipient enshrining, among some radical feminists, of something called lesbianism as the preferred aesthetic form for mediating between individual subjects and the history they were supposed to be making—call these the personal and the political.

So while radical feminism as a whole saw its fair share of trans-loving lesbians and trans-hating heterosexuals alike, there *is* a historical line to be traced from political lesbianism, as a specific, by no means dominant tendency *within* radical feminism, to the contemporary phenomenon we've taken to calling trans-exclusionary radical feminism. Take Sheila Jeffreys, an English lesbian feminist recently retired from a professorship at the University of Melbourne in Australia. In her salad days, Jeffreys was a member of the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, remembered for its fiery conference paper "Political Lesbianism: The Case Against Heterosexuality," published in 1979. The paper defined a political lesbian as "a woman-identified woman who does not fuck men" but stopped short of mandating homosexual sex. The paper also shared the *SCUM Manifesto's* dead-serious sense of humor: "Being a heterosexual feminist is like being in the resistance in Nazi-occupied Europe where in the daytime you blow up a bridge, in the evening you rush to repair it." These days, Jeffreys has made a business of abominating trans women, earning herself top billing on the TERF speaking circuit. Like many TERFs, she believes that trans women's cheap imitations of femininity (as she imagines

them) reproduce the same harmful stereotypes through which women are subordinated in the first place. “Transgenderism on the part of men,” Jeffreys writes in her 2014 book *Gender Hurts*, “can be seen as a ruthless appropriation of women’s experience and existence.” She is also fond of citing sexological literature that classifies transgenderism as a paraphilia. It is a favorite claim among TERFs like Jeffreys that transgender women are gropey interlopers, sick voyeurs conspiring to infiltrate women-only spaces and conduct the greatest panty raid in military history.

I happily consent to this description. Had I ever been so fortunate as to attend the legendarily clothing-optional Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival before its demise at the hands of trans activists in 2015, you can bet your Birkenstocks it wouldn’t have been for the music. Indeed, at least among lesbians, trans-exclusionary radical feminism might best be understood as gay panic, girl-on-girl edition. The point here is not that all TERFs are secretly attracted to trans women—though so delicious an irony undoubtedly happens more often than anyone would like to admit—but rather that trans-exclusionary feminism has inherited political lesbianism’s dread of desire’s ungovernability. The traditional subject of gay panic, be he a US senator or just a member of the House, is a subject menaced by his own politically compromising desires: to preserve himself, he projects these desires onto another, whom he may now legislate or gay-bash out of existence. The political lesbian, too, is a subject stuck between the rock of politics and desire’s hard place. As Jeffreys put it in 2015, speaking to the Lesbian History Group in London, political lesbianism was intended as a solution to the all-too-real cognitive dissonance produced by heterosexual feminism: “Why go to all these meetings where you’re creating all this wonderful theory and politics, and then you go home to, in my case, Dave, and you’re sitting there, you know, in front of the telly, and thinking, ‘It’s *weird*. This feels *weird*.’” But true separatism doesn’t stop at leaving your husband. It proceeds, with paranoid rigor, to purge the apartments of the mind of anything remotely connected to patriarchy. Desire is no exception. Political lesbianism is founded on the belief that even desire becomes pliable at high enough temperatures. For Jeffreys and her comrades, lesbianism was not an innate identity, but an act of political will. This was a world in which biology was not destiny, a world where being a lesbian was about what got you woke, not wet.

Only heterosexuality might not have been doing it for Dave, either. It seems never to have occurred to Jeffreys that some of us “transgenders,” as she likes to call us, might opt to transition precisely in order to escape from the

penitentiary she takes heterosexuality to be. It is a supreme irony of feminist history that there is no woman more woman-identified than a gay trans girl like me, and that Beth Elliott and her sisters were the OG political lesbians: women who had walked away from both the men in their lives and the men whose lives they'd been living. We are separatists from our own bodies. We are militants of so fine a caliber that we regularly take steps to poison the world's supply of male biology. To TERFs like Jeffreys, we say merely that imitation is the highest form of flattery. But let's keep things in perspective. Because of Jeffreys, a few women in the Seventies got haircuts. Because of us, there are literally *fewer men on the planet*. Valerie, at least, would be proud. The Society for Cutting Up Men is a rather fabulous name for a transsexual book club.

BUT NOW I REALLY AM OVERREADING. That trans lesbians should be pedestaled as some kind of feminist vanguard is a notion as untenable as it is attractive. In defending it, I would be neglecting what I take to be the true lesson of political lesbianism as a failed project: that nothing good comes of forcing desire to conform to political principle. You could sooner give a cat a bath. This does not mean that politics has no part to play in desire. Solidarity, for instance, can be terribly arousing—this was no doubt one of the best things the consciousness-raising groups of the Seventies had going for them. But you can't get aroused *as an act of solidarity*, the way you might stuff envelopes or march in the streets with your sisters-in-arms. Desire is, by nature, childlike and chary of government. The day we begin to qualify it by the righteousness of its political content is the day we begin to prescribe some desires and prohibit others. That way lies moralism only. Just try to imagine life as a feminist anemone, the tendrils of your desire withdrawing in an instant from patriarchy's every touch. There would be nothing to watch on TV.

It must be underscored how unpopular it is on the left today to countenance the notion that transition expresses not the truth of an identity but the force of a desire. This would require understanding transness as a matter not of who one *is*, but of what one *wants*. The primary function of gender identity as a political concept—and, increasingly, a legal one—is to bracket, if not to totally deny, the role of desire in the thing we call gender. Historically, this results from a wish among transgender advocates to quell fears that trans

people, and trans women in particular, go through transition in order to *get stuff*: money, sex, legal privileges, little girls in public restrooms. As the political theorist Paisley Currah observes in his forthcoming book, the state has been far more willing to recognize sex reclassification when the reclassified individuals don't get anything out of it. In 2002, the Kansas Supreme Court voided the marriage of a transsexual woman and her then-deceased cisgender husband, whose \$2.5 million estate she was poised to inherit, on the grounds that their union was invalid under Kansas's prohibition on same-sex marriage. The sex on the woman's Wisconsin birth certificate, which she had successfully changed from M to F years earlier, now proved worthless when she tried to cash it in.

Now I'm not saying I think that this woman transitioned to get rich quick. What I am saying is, *So what if she had?* I doubt that any of us transition simply because we want to "be" women, in some abstract, academic way. I certainly didn't. I transitioned for gossip and compliments, lipstick and mascara, for crying at the movies, for being someone's girlfriend, for letting her pay the check or carry my bags, for the benevolent chauvinism of bank tellers and cable guys, for the telephonic intimacy of long-distance female friendship, for fixing my makeup in the bathroom flanked like Christ by a sinner on each side, for sex toys, for feeling hot, for getting hit on by butches, for that secret knowledge of which dykes to watch out for, for Daisy Dukes, bikini tops, and all the dresses, and, my god, *for the breasts*. But now you begin to see the problem with desire: we rarely want the things we should. Any TERF will tell you that most of these items are just the traditional trappings of patriarchal femininity. She won't be wrong, either. Let's be clear: TERFs are gender abolitionists, even if that abolitionism is a shell corporation for garden-variety moral disgust. When it comes to the question of feminist revolution, TERFs leave trans girls like me in the dust, primping. In this respect, someone like Ti-Grace Atkinson, a self-described radical feminist committed to the revolutionary dismantling of gender as a system of oppression, is not the dinosaur; I, who get my eyebrows threaded every two weeks, am.

Perhaps my consciousness needs raising. I muster a shrug. When the airline loses your luggage, you are not making a principled political statement about the tyranny of private property; you just want your goddamn luggage back. This is most painfully evident in the case of bottom surgery, which continues to baffle a clique of queer theorists who, on the strength and happenstance of a shared prefix, have been all too ready to take transgender people as mascots for their politics of transgression. These days, the belief that getting a vagina

will make you into a real woman is retrograde in the extreme. Many good feminists still only manage to understand bottom surgery by qualifying it as a personal aesthetic choice: *If that's what makes you feel more comfortable in your body, that's great.* This is as wrongheaded as it is condescending. To be sure, gender confirmation surgeries are aesthetic practices, continuous with rather than distinct from the so-called cosmetic surgeries. (No one goes into the operating room asking for an ugly cooch.) So it's not that these aren't aesthetic decisions; it's that they're not *personal*. That's the basic paradox of aesthetic judgments: they are, simultaneously, subjective and universal. Transsexual women don't want bottom surgery because their personal opinion is that a vagina would look or feel better than a penis. Transsexual women want bottom surgery because *most women have vaginas*. Call that transphobic if you like—that's not going to keep me from Chili's-Awesome-Blossoming my dick.

I am being tendentious, dear reader, because I am trying to tell you something that few of us dare to talk about, especially in public, especially when we are trying to feel political: not the fact, boringly obvious to those of us living it, that many trans women wish they were cis women, but the darker, more difficult fact that many trans women *wish they were women, period*. This is most emphatically not something trans women are supposed to want. The grammar of contemporary trans activism does not brook the subjunctive. Trans women *are* women, we are chided with silky condescension, as if we have all confused ourselves with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, as if we were all simply trapped in the wrong politics, as if the cure for dysphoria were wokeness. How can you want to be something you already are? Desire implies deficiency; want implies want. To admit that what makes women like me transsexual is not identity but desire is to admit just how much of transition takes place in the waiting rooms of wanting things, to admit that your breasts may never come in, your voice may never pass, your parents may never call back.

Call this the romance of disappointment. You want something. You have found an object that will give you what you want. This object is a person, or a politics, or an art form, or a blouse that fits. You attach yourself to this object, follow it around, carry it with you, watch it on TV. One day, you tell yourself, it will give you what you want. Then, one day, it doesn't. Now it dawns on you that your object will probably never give you what you want. But this is not what's disappointing, not really. What's disappointing is what happens next: nothing. You keep your object. You continue to follow it around, stash it in a

drawer, water it, tweet at it. It still doesn't give you what you want—but you knew that. You have had another realization: not getting what you want has very little to do with wanting it. Knowing better usually doesn't make it better. You don't want something because wanting it will lead to getting it. You want it because you want it. This is the zero-order disappointment that structures all desire and makes it possible. After all, if you could only want things you were guaranteed to get, you would never be able to want anything at all.

This is not to garner pity for sad trannies like me. We have enough roses by our beds. It is rather to say, minimally, that trans women want things too. The deposits of our desire run as deep and fine as any. The richness of our want is staggering. Perhaps this is why coming out can feel like crushing, why a first dress can feel like a first kiss, why dysphoria can feel like heartbreak. The other name for disappointment, after all, is love. +