

2024 Elie Wiesel Competition

2nd Place Senior Poetry

Sen Chan

High Bluff Academy (CA), Ellen Sullivan

Remembering Them

As a child, gender is trivial,
So easily changed.
I am a girl because I have long hair and wear skirts
But I can dress the opposite
And be no different from any other boy my age.
As a child, gender is a choice.

Turning 11 proves me wrong.
A victim of puberty, I now see
That gender isn't just
The fabric on my body
Or the hair on my head.
Gender is the slope of my chest,
The blood I shed every month,
Even the softness in my face.

--

When things were simple,
When "boys" and "girls" had the same boxy torsos and pixie faces,
I didn't mind being a girl.
So why is it so different now?
I just can't wrap my head around it--
The intense discomfort I feel when I go in for my annual checkup
And my doctor takes one look at me and says
Congratulations, Sophia! You're a woman now.
It's only natural that a girl becomes a woman, right?
So why
Do I feel tears prick the back of my eyes
My hands clenching into fists
Nails making their marks now on a "woman's" skin
And most of all
The overwhelming sense that it is all so very *wrong*.

I spend years stuck
With that feeling of *wrongness*.
I test the waters of the other side
But find no relief.
There's an itch under my skin;
An itch that no one else feels.
I begin to hunch over,
Shoulders reaching for my knees
As if there were magnets in my sockets.

Subconsciously,
My mind tries its hardest to erase its own existence, knowing
That its gears aren't made of this planet's metals.
That in this world of boys and girls
And men and women,
I have no place.

--

I sacrificed 4 years of my childhood,
A small number now but then, an eternity,
Thinking I was condemned to walk the Earth in
Shoes too tight.

Turning 15 proves me wrong.
My epiphany is the "in-between,"
That life isn't just two shades but
A spectrum of colors and hues.
That in this world of boys and girls
And men and women,
I am neither, so I make my own path.

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I'm 17, no longer a child,
Yet a child still
In my freedom of expression,
In my determination that I will not be confined
To society's belief in the binary.
But even now—unshackled, free—I fight the same
Fight as before, fight for my right of identity.
I am bombarded by "she" and "her" but
I have no bruises to show from it, no blooms of blue and purple,
Nothing I can point out to society and say,
Look what you did to me.
I have only
The invisible blackness of uncertainty growing in my mind
Trying to blot out the sparks of freedom
I've spent too long cultivating.

--

I didn't think
That identity is something
I must pull from the dark recesses of the soul
Something I must work to remember,
Maintain, polish, care for,
Lest it tarnish and fade away from view.
But that is what I must do.

I must tell myself that I am not a girl
And that doesn't mean I am a boy.
I must tell myself that my outward appearance
My love for makeup and beautiful things
Doesn't make me a woman.

And at the same time,
I must tell myself that my rough speech
And boyish manners
Doesn't make me a man.
I must tell myself this because
Binary thinking has been ingrained in society
In people, languages, media, cultures.
And if I do not remain vigilant,
I will be retaken by the always searching,
Always grasping, hands of The Norm.

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This is my reality, but
I wish for a future where a
Child like me, an adult like me
Is not forced to toe the tightrope of truth
With the threat
Of the all-consuming mob lying on either side of
Them.